On the Rock

Katja and Adam Thom's cabin, on an exposed postglacial archipelago in Canada's windswept Georgian Bay, is more than eight miles from the nearest road. The building, quite literally off the grid and far from inland neighbors on a long and slender granite outcrop, is only accessible by boat—or perhaps by seaplane if you're aerially inclined.

The region itself is an aquatic maze of pine-covered shoals and islands that were scraped into existence by the gigantic ice sheets that once covered the northern half of this continent. There are, in fact, two kinds of islands here: an irregular network of relatively sheltered rocky outcrops on the shores of inland lakes and the islands of the bay's open waters. This topography, with its deep scars from a more rugged phase of planetary history, is a sublime place in which to locate a summer cabin.

Adam Thom knows the region well. When he was a boy, he and his family visited the bay almost every summer; they'd rent a different cabin each year, hopping from island to island. Each island, Adam says, presented its own set of experiences—even jumping one island over could feel like another world. It only made sense, then, that after he and Katja were married and began a family of their own, they would seek a retreat in the long evening light of the north.

Adam, a Toronto native, and Katja, from Denmark, met while studying at the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc) in Los Angeles. Both had backgrounds in sculpture, and the architectonic skills and abstract formal ideas that they picked up at SCI-Arc go into all of their architectural projects as Agathom Co., a firm they cofounded in Toronto eight years ago. The cabin in Georgian Bay is a particularly strong articulation of their basic design philosophy. The house is powered only by solar panels; it uses a graywater system, attached to the home's only sink; and there is a composting toilet. At night, the Thoms heat their bed with rocks warmed beside the wood-burning stove and fireplace—and the ambient heat that these generate keeps the home's temperature within a comfortable range.

When asked about the construction process—especially in relation to the remote site—Adam laughs. "It was tedious," he says. "Everything had to be brought in by boat, and the construction season is very short because of the weather. The guys would be working on the house—and then, suddenly, there would be a thunderstorm. So they'd have to get back in their boats and go back to their houses, and whole days ▸

Story by Geoff Manaugh
Illustration by Mark Giglio

The shape of the Thom's cabin is as much a factor of the couple's architectural aesthetics as it is of the local weather: The winglike dips in the roofline situate and hold the house against the region's brutal winds. As the outdoor chairs attest, lifestyles here pass easily between inside and out; a long hike and a good swim are always just steps away.

could go by without getting anything done." Nonetheless, he adds, the result is remarkably solid.

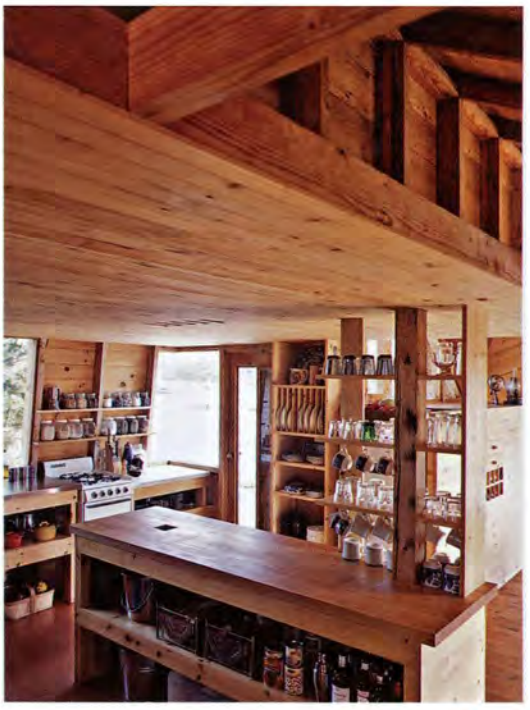
The house is built atop a system of stone piers, to which it is strapped down roughly every ten feet with steel bars. This effectively locks the building onto the granite bedrock—although there is enough space between the house and its earthly anchorage to let the region's often-violent winds blow under and around the structure. That's all part of Agathom's larger siting strategy: "The house steps down to follow the contour of the landscape," Katja explains.

"Part of the influence in designing like this was the way that the older cottages were built here before power boats, when everything was even more of a struggle," she continues. "We had long conversations with the engineer to get everything as precise as possible—to make true two-by-fours, with square edges, and to get all the alignments right. We also had to get the strongest woods for the spans."

"And we've been in some absolutely furious storms," Adam adds.

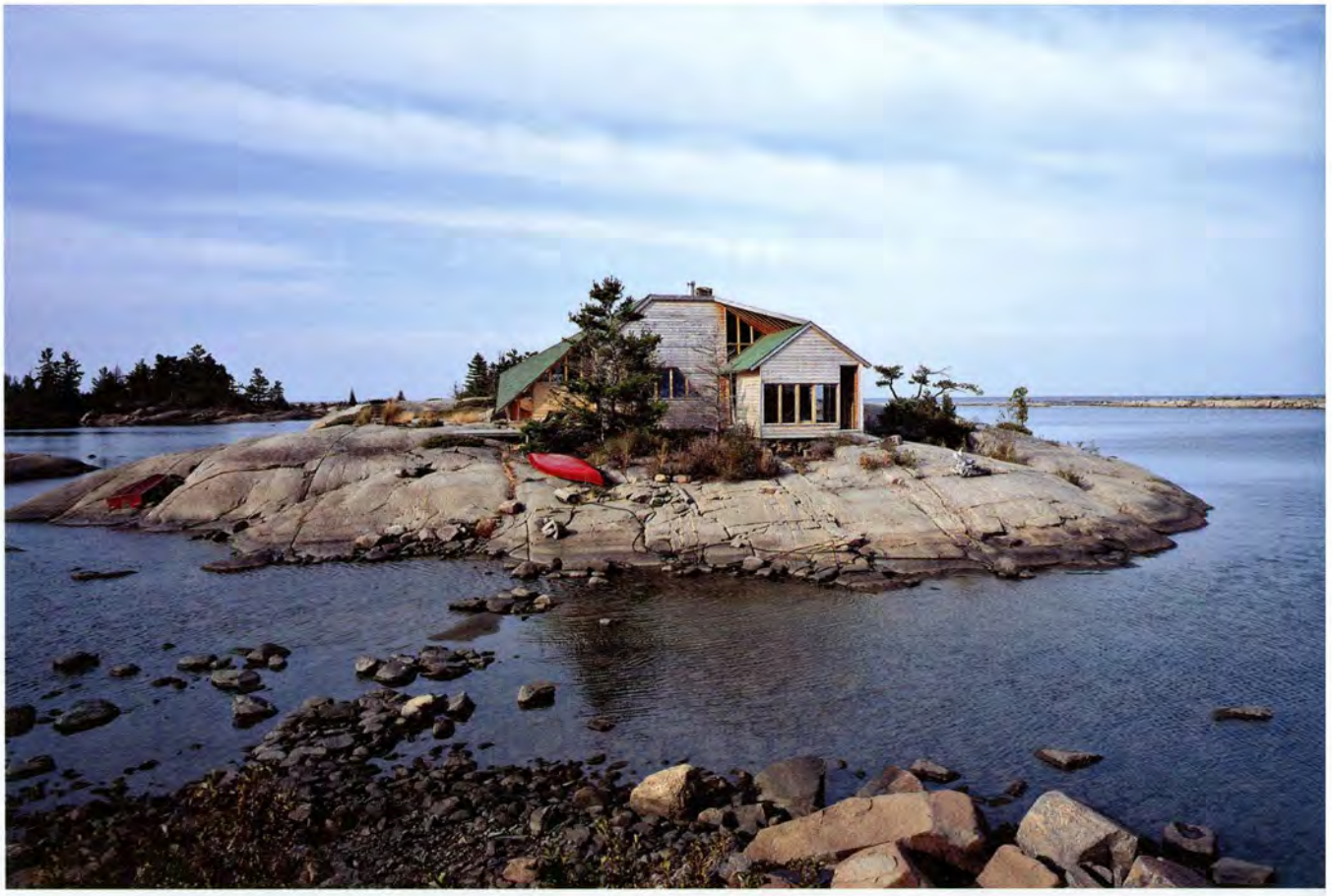
Katja agrees, but seems to have a healthy sense of humor about it. "The house does not move," she says. "It doesn't even squeak." Their enthusiasm for the accomplishment can be heard in Katja's voice.

Almost all of the wood they used was reclaimed from old Ontario barns, making many of the joists and floorboards several hundred years old. If you look closely you can see the peg holes; these are what Adam calls the boards' "memory from an earlier life." Anything that did have to be built specially for the project, including some long structural spans within the building, was made only with trees sourced from within a 200-mile radius. The wood is both resilient and durable; ⫸



The kitchen (top right) reveals the detailed precision with which the Thoms assembled their home: Exact cuts, joins, and cantilevers bring the whole house together.

A view through the house (bottom) shows not only how the roofline folds down across the interior, letting in air and sunlight, but also how beautiful reclaimed wood can be.



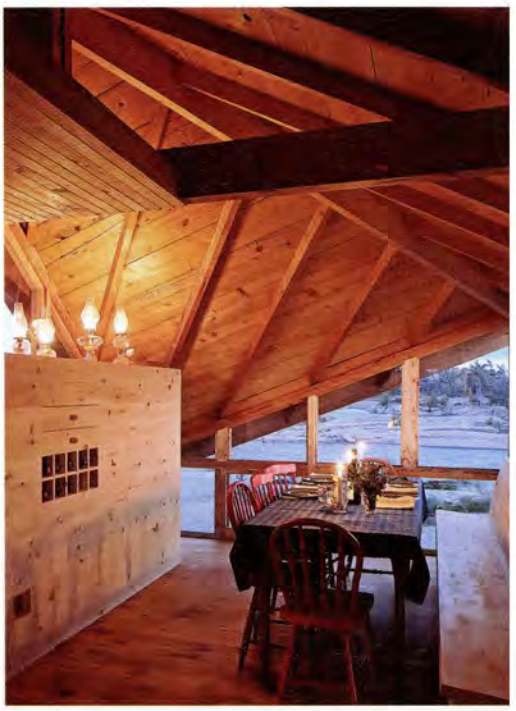
the exterior siding, for instance, has simply been left to weather, a decision that was as much aesthetic as it was sustainable: The architects explain that they "did not want any paints, solvents, or preservatives" involved with the project. Katja points out that, over time, as the boards are transformed by exposure to the elements, they will attain a silvery, autumnal sheen.

The whole undertaking seems much more impressive when you learn that Adam's extended family, including his mother and his sister, also regularly visit. To house them all comfortably without building an off-the-grid mansion, the Thoms, who have a daughter and another child on the way, decided to keep two other, much smaller sleeping cabins on the island; these were originally built in the 1940s.

"We had always stayed on the islands in scattered sleeping cabins that were spread quite far apart from each other," Adam says. "That was part of the experience. After dinner, you'd grab a flashlight, and off you'd go to your own space."

As the sun sets, the house cuts a distinctive profile against the huge northern sky, looking out over the quick-to-storm waters of the bay. Beneath a panoramic view of incoming clouds, the roofline seems to put its shoulder down as if to muscle its way through the weather. The well-angled roof forces even gale-strength winds around the house like an airplane wing. "Being out on the tip of the rock here," Katja points out, "right on the open bay, we have direct access to water on three sides—but we're also more exposed to the weather." Adam laughs. "It can be a pretty wild place," he adds.

Luckily, their cabin is prepared for these circumstances—off the grid and anchored there, standing still in its own glacial solidity.



The house (top) is perched in the midst of an astonishing landscape. The rocky islands here were violently scraped clean by glaciers more than ten thousand years ago.

Angled openings in the roofline (bottom right) function as both windows and vents, allowing views and cross-breezes. A dining table completes the nearly all-wood room.