

## ARCHITECTURE



An interior view of the Georgian Bay home designed by Adam Thom and Katja Aga Sachse Thom for Mr. Thom's mother, Molly. PAUL ORENSTEIN

## Designing a perch to witness nature

New portfolio of vacation homes shows the world's best – including one Georgian Bay beauty



### JOHN BENTLEY MAYS THE PERFECT HOUSE

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For thousands of Torontonians, the oncoming winter is but a long prelude to the all-important Victoria Day weekend, when cottages open and the Friday night treks up the 400 begin.

Most cottagers already know where they're going to spend their summer holidays. But for those who are still dreaming of acquiring a getaway or who are thinking of involving an architect when they build their dream cottage, I've found an interesting book worth leafing through during the holiday season. It's called *Arcadia: Cross-Country Style, Architecture and Design*.

This 260-page annotated portfolio offers a panoply of new and recent hideouts, bunkies, farm houses, country villas, chalets and secluded luxury resorts, and the furniture to go in them, by 136 architectural and design firms in Europe, Asia, Australia and North and South America. The breathtaking places where these creative people have worked similarly span the planet, from the magnificent drowned landscape of Ontario's Georgian Bay, through the Rocky Mountains and the Alps, to the deserts of Spain and the forests of Japan, Scan-



Exterior of Molly's cabin, perched on an iconic cottage-country outcropping. PAUL ORENSTEIN

dinavia and New Zealand. Whatever the merits of this or that project portrayed in it, this collection is a remarkable overview of the ways contemporary architects are responding to the long-standing human desire to find a safe, comfortable perch from which to enjoy the beauties of raw nature.

As you may expect to find in such an omnium-gatherum, these responses vary widely in their appeal and applicability. I really don't like the flamboyantly experimental house by Japanese architect Kotaro Ide, for example: It looks like a big chicken wrap dropped in the woods. Nor do I have much time for the Swedish forest hotel that resembles a corner of a mirrored-glass skyscraper stuck halfway up a tall tree. The more successful build-

ings here are by architects who take seriously the contexts (both natural and cultural) of their projects and who avoid making any greater impact than necessary on the shoreline or mountainside or forest glade where their buildings stand. The Scandinavians, by and large, are good at respecting both human nature and nature in general. So are the Canadians and many of the Americans.

I was struck, for example, by a curious extension to an existing cottage deep in a Swedish nature preserve, for which the architects used cedar shingles to create a low, billowing roof that blends in perfectly with the forest floor. The same respect for surroundings is evident in a Norwegian coastal cabin, "shaped," a note tells us, "like a mountain fox curled up

to avoid the wind." Local building traditions are echoed in this structure and with good reason: The same harsh gales that battered the old villages along the coastline also sweep over this handsome contemporary house, which is ready for them.

But nothing in this book embodies more wisdom about its environment and its occupants than the featured Georgian Bay house known as Molly's Cabin. (Reporter Carolyn Ireland visited the cabin and wrote about it in these pages earlier this year.)

Designed by Adam Thom and Katja Aga Sachse Thom, principals in Toronto's Agathom Co., this fine 1,000-square-foot building occupies a stony island thrusting out from the shoreline toward open water. Instead of springing the cot-

tage wide toward Georgian Bay, where the savage storms come from, the Thoms have turned a largely featureless wall in that direction. The cottage's other three sides allow views of the more docile nature round about, though the emphasis throughout is on protection from the elements, not the provision of natural spectacle. A sharp plunge in the roof edge – it looks like a tent flap pulled down – allows a peek, but not a panorama, beyond. Even the widest prospect here, off across the channel toward rough bush above sheer stone drop-offs (with a glimpse of Georgian Bay), is still framed mindfully.

The result is a humble Muskoka cottage that's had a complete makeover by a sensitive modernist beautician. The rustic simplicity, the solid build, the straightforward manner that everyone found so attractive about her in the first place have not been styled right out of her. But she's contemporary now, with everything updated – the cut of her profile, her posture in the landscape – to suit the best sensibilities of the present age.

The Thoms's excellent reinvention of the old cottage-country house is something many designers could learn from. *Arcadia: Cross-Country Style, Architecture and Design* is full of still more hints and suggestions for building wisely and beautifully in the wilds. It's a book to put on a bedside table and occasionally dream on until summer and Victoria Day arrive at last.

Special to The Globe and Mail

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## On tap: 'An enormous surge of new life'

Over the coming two years, Mr. Carras predicts we will see about 47,000 new condo suites become available to their owners – 27,000 of them next year.

Ben Myers, executive vice-president of Urbanation Inc., is more conservative in his estimates. He says the Metro Census Area will see about 17,000 new condos finally occupied in 2010, and 10,000 reach the same stage in 2011.

(A word of explanation here: RealNet tracks the GTA, which is larger than the CMA because it includes cities like Burlington and Oakville. Mr. Carras says his 2010 figures represent 114 projects, which builders say will be ready for occupancy during the course of that year. Mr. Myers says the CMA area has 84 projects expected to be in the same condition.) Numbers aside, what they do agree on is that the next two years will not only see neighbourhoods such as downtown west, the Sheppard corridor, North York west and Mississauga city centre become heavily populated, but also experience an economic and business boom.

"There is going to be an enormous surge of new life in many areas of the GTA," says Barry Lyon, president of N. Barry Lyon Consulting Ltd. "Residential drives retail, so that means the influx of all these people will spark a whole wave of new retail and service businesses in those areas."

"It will also be a boom time for moving companies, furniture stores, hardware stores – even dog-walking services. People moving into new homes need all these things, and when they are concentrated into specific neighbourhoods you can be certain business in those neighbourhoods will boom."

The importance of this great migration cannot be underestimated, all three men say.

Take the availability of rental suites downtown and the price you have to pay for one. Mr. Lyon suggests that up to 40 per cent of the new condo suites will be investor-owned and immediately put on the rental market.

That means almost 10,000 new suites will become available by the end of 2011. Right now, the vacancy rate for downtown condos is at or less than 1 per cent. Mr. Myers says: "The new suites will not only ease the shortage, but also see landlords competing for tenants."

"That will likely mean rents may even ease somewhat in the shorter term," Mr. Myers says.

Major retail chains are already taking note of the demographic shifts and planning new outlets to meet the needs of new residential populations, Mr. Carras says.

"Companies like Plaza Pizza track housing trends carefully and base their trading areas for each new location on what they see happening," he says. "You can bet they are already planning new outlets in places like downtown west and along Sheppard in North