

# REAL ESTATE

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## CRADLED BY THE ROCK

Molly's Cabin, designed by Adam and Katja Thom, sits easy on the Canadian Shield ■ H4

Tilly, left, and May Thom relax in the loft of Molly's Cabin, which is located on an island in Georgian Bay near Pointe au Baril, Ont. When it was built more than 10 years ago the 1,000-square-foot cottage received acclaim from architecture magazines all over the world. AGATHOM CO.

### THE NEXT MOVE

After a slow spring, the housing market in suburban Toronto shows signs of life ■ H2

### BRITISH COLUMBIA

Experts say Vancouver needs to change its piecemeal approach to rezoning ■ H6

### HOME OF THE WEEK

Heritage home in rural Ontario turned into a charming bed and breakfast ■ H7



May, left, and Tilly Thom, with dog River, explore the lagoon side of the island that Molly's Cabin is located on. PHOTOS BY AGATHOM CO.

## Cottage life at its finest

On the shores of Georgian Bay, a modestly clad cabin has a big reputation to live up to. After more than a decade, how has the architectural gem designed by Adam and Katja Thom aged?

DAVE  
LeBLANC  
ARCHITOURIST



POINTE AU BARIL, ONT.

It's no wonder the Group of Seven's J.E.H. MacDonald put brush to canvas here. It's raw. It's quiet. It's powerful. Whipped by constant wind, the jack pines bend over like old, arthritic men. Long chunks of craggy Canadian Shield break the shimmering water's surface; in their cracks and crevices, junipers and hens and chicks plants fight for drops of dew. At night, a million stars hide behind the Milky Way's veil and a million mosquitos hunt for blood.

And it was here, at Pointe au Baril, Ont., that the then-fledgling young architecture firm of Agathom Co. built Molly's Cabin on their own chunk of shield more than a decade ago.

As reported by Carolyn Ireland in these pages in 2009, and as John Bentley Mays's two-time "cover girl" for both *Cottage Life* and *Azure* magazines (in 2007 and 2008), the modestly clad cabin with the tent-flap-inspired roof as designed by Adam and Katja Thom for Mr. Thom's mother, Molly, was a modernist nod to Georgian Bay cottages of old, with exposed rafters, hard-wearing surfaces, a stone fireplace, bug screens aplenty and gaslights, flashlights and candles to illuminate the inky night.

The off-grid, 1,000-square-foot cottage was so compelling, it quickly became an international star also, with glowing write ups in U.S. powerhouse *Dwell*, Turkey's *Konsept Projeler* and the Netherlands' *Objekt International*. These were followed by entries into books.

And that's why, a few weeks ago, my stomach filled with butterflies as the Thom's boat was unhitched and the choppy, half-hour chug across the channel began. On this rainy day, I would finally lay eyes on Molly's Cabin ... would it live up to its reputation?

I suppose before I reveal that, a little background is in order. In the 15 years I've been writing as the Architourist, many of the architects, designers and builders I've profiled have become acquaintances. A handful of these — the ones I've broken bread with — have become much more than that. And a very few, such as the husband-and-wife team, the Thoms, have become dear

friends. This adds pressure to what I report, especially when others have done it first and better. Also, Molly's Cabin is no longer a fresh-faced cover girl; she has been weather-beaten, sun-blistered and beat upon by rambunctious children for a dozen summers.

But I needn't have worried. While her sunny yellow hair, er, siding may have turned silvery-grey, she still packs an architectural punch ... but not right away. As the boat approached, Molly's Cabin presented herself as a humble, hipped-roof building with few windows. But, having seen so many photographs, I knew as I walked its circumference, I'd be rewarded with an origami-like roof, trapezoidal windows, a full window-wall and woodcuts so precise, decks and skirting look as if they were grown against the granite.

Speaking of which, the siting for the cabin's long living room, Mr. Thom tells me, was informed by a protected area at one end of the island: "Because this is such an exposed site, we found this one vertical rock-face to be really compelling — you see the storms here and they're unbelievable, right? — so the idea that this room has a long, train-car quality to it was to mirror the natural rock face." There's also a slight bowl-like depression here, so the building is cradled by the rock rather than lords over it. "We didn't want to be flying off the land," Mr.



Thom confirms.

As someone who is much more comfortable surrounded by concrete, asphalt and human-imposed order, I appreciate this thoughtfulness. I also appreciate that the building's "courtyard" has been placed on the opposite side, where there are lagoons and shallow water. I feel safe — and that's what "home" is all about.

While the Thoms met at architecture school in California, they started their artistic careers, independently, as sculptors. This means they approach things a little differently. There are five doors puncturing this little building — it consists of living area, dining area, kitchen and master bedroom on the main floor, and a kid's bedroom on a partial second floor — so that different experiences can be enjoyed. The ceiling is low and sheltering in some places

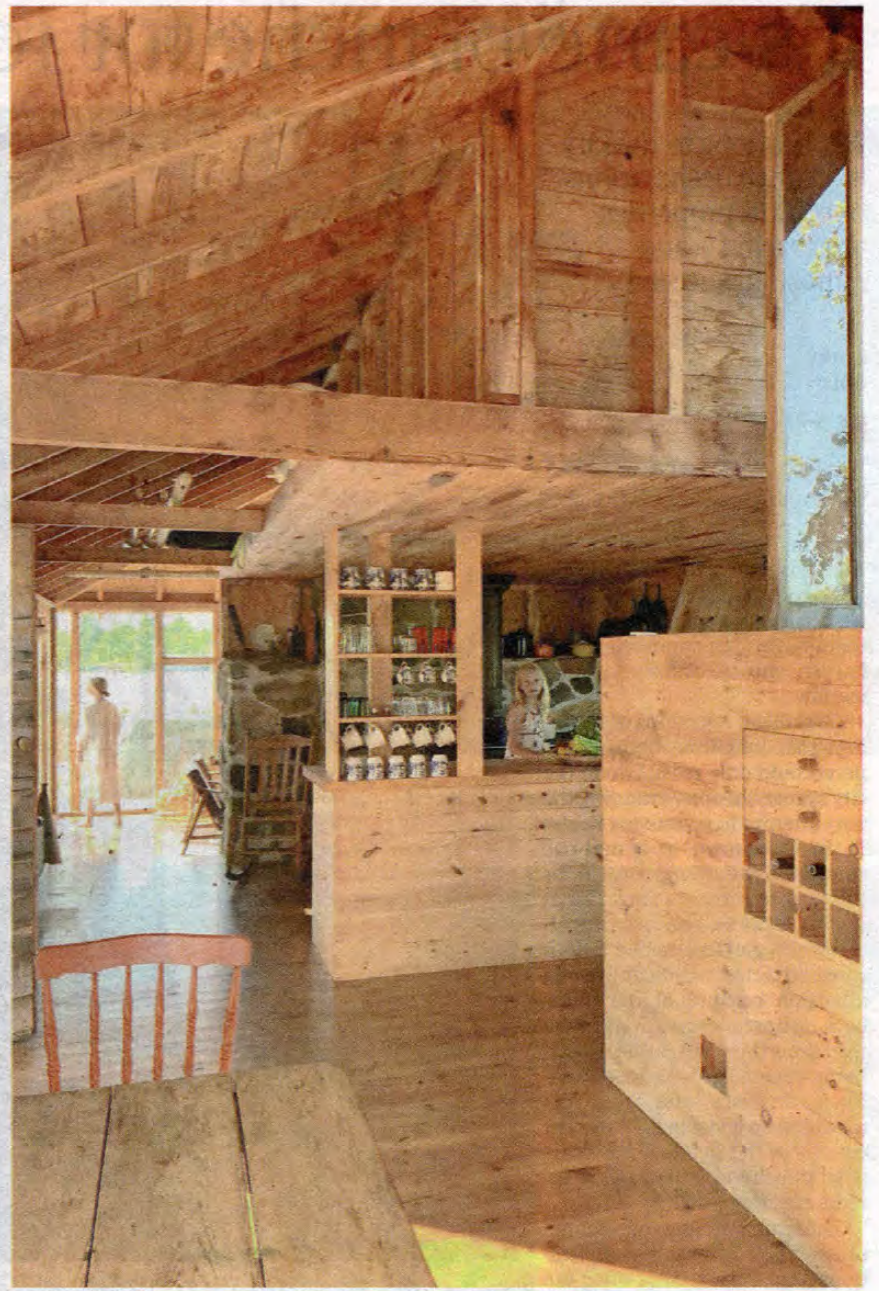
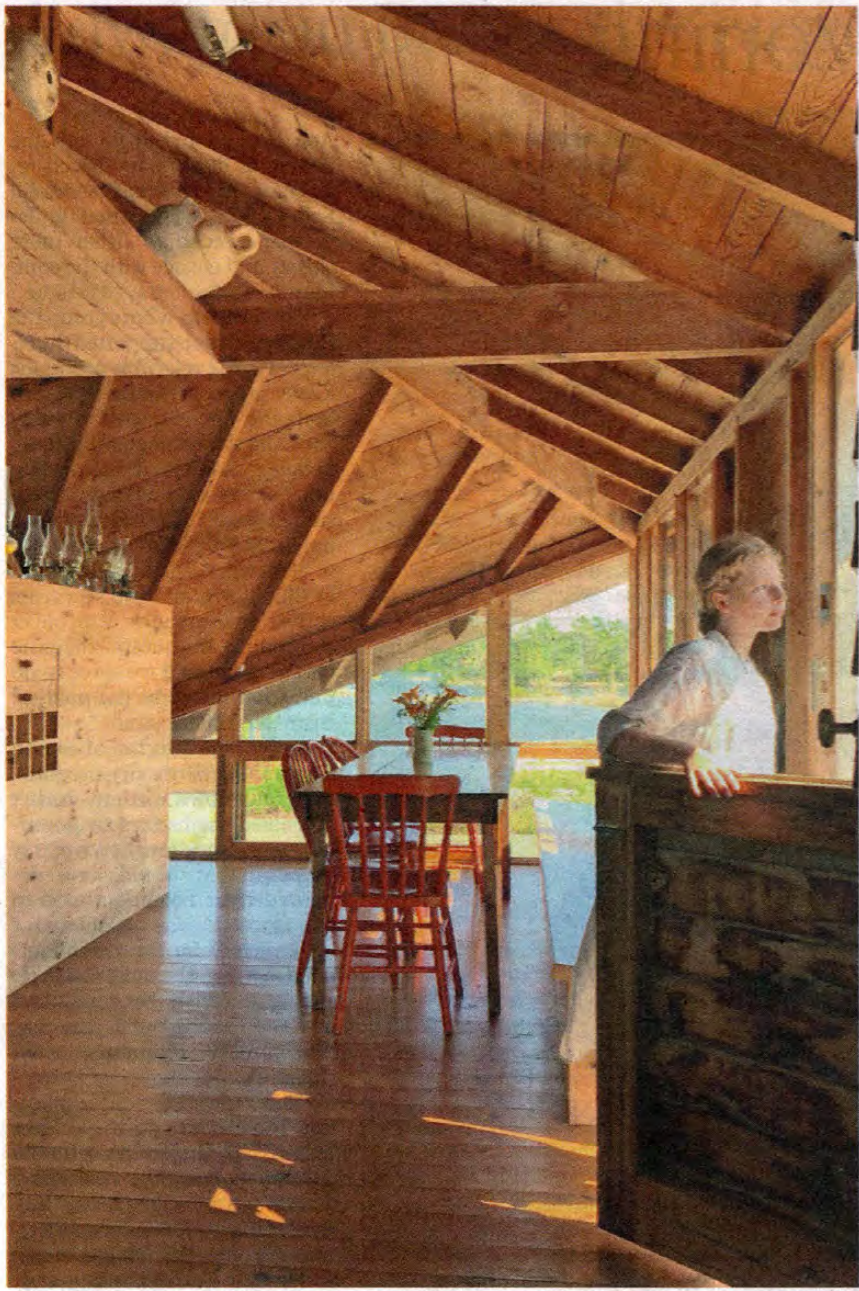
and in others it zooms upward to meet clerestory windows bursting with light. Rafters have been left exposed for geometric interest, but the floors are plain Janes (necessary for the traffic they endure). In the kitchen, there is cozy-clutter vis-à-vis pots and pans hanging on the wall, Mason jar soldiers lined up in a shelf and a piece of First Canadian Place marble (the stuff that was removed in 2010-11 from Canada's tallest building) sits snug against the propane-powered stove, ready for egg-cracking and pie-crust kneading; in the dining room, that tent-flap roof creates a sheltered space that encourages conversation, while the living room and master bedroom shake hands with light, air and the waters of Georgian Bay.

Unlike a static cover girl, life's messiness lives here: Windbreak-

ers clog an area beside a weathered and resin-stained door; sloughed-off bathing suits drip puddles onto the floor; a piece of trim sports River's claw marks (their dog); and thumbed-through books sit unshelved. But, look a little closer, and the big and little details that garnered all that international attention shine through: that intricate roof; the odd-shaped staircase inspired by the one at the Pointe au Baril Lighthouse; and the dining area's bumped-in storage/servery that, on the exterior, creates a tool-storage area.

These are the things that make my heart sing and almost crave cottage life. And if your heart sings, too, use that inspiration to pick up your paintbrush, or take a road trip, or call your realtor about a little piece of land on which to build.





Dave LeBlanc, above centre, visited the Georgian Bay cottage designed by Adam and Katja Thom. The off-grid building was a nod to Georgian Bay cottages of old, with exposed rafters, hard-wearing surfaces and a stone fireplace.

