

The 100-year cottage

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FROM FRIDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL

Karen Boyd donned knee-high rubber boots for an entire week the first time she stayed at the abandoned fishing camp that would become her family's cottage on Georgian Bay.

"People told me there were snakes everywhere," she says of her first visit in 1989.

Ms. Boyd and her husband (who asked that their real names not be used) had just purchased the dilapidated building on a rugged point near Pointe au Baril, about a 30 minute drive north of Parry Sound.

Back then, the property was piled with rusty bed frames and discarded junk. The cottage had no electricity, and the only source of water was a 170-litre oil drum that sat on the roof to collect rainwater.

Still, Ms. Boyd ventured out to spend a week alone with her two small boys while her husband returned to the city to work.

It was several days before the neophyte cottager summoned the courage to fire up the motor boat. A few days after that, she dispensed with the rubber boots and learned to co-exist with the wildlife.

"It took about a week to get comfortable with all the ways of the cottage," Ms. Boyd says. "Within a very, very short time, I couldn't wait to be here."

Seventeen years later, the Boyd family has expanded to include four sons, and their base camp has spread to 20 acres with a 4,900-square-foot central cottage and four smaller cabins.

The major transformation of the property was made possible about four years ago, when they were able to negotiate the purchase of a neighbouring cottage. The couple hired Toronto-based Stark Ireland Architects Inc. to turn their camp into a family compound that they hope will keep their children — and possibly their grandchildren ensconced at Pointe au Baril for years.

"This isn't a decision about today. This was really a decision about the next 30 or 40 years of our lives," Mr. Boyd says.

On the recommendation of architect James Ireland, they decided to tear down the old neighbouring cottage and erect a new main building in its place.

The Boyds told him they wanted a place that would allow them to entertain their own friends and those of their children, but they also wanted the opportunity to retreat. "It was very clear that they wanted a cottage generous with space but they weren't building to impress," Mr. Ireland says.

When he and his partner, John Stark, arrived at the property, they found beautiful trees and rocks that they didn't want to disturb. The best way to avoid disruption was to set the new building on the footprint of the cottage that had been there for 100 years.

"Where the cottage was originally is often where you want to be," Mr. Ireland says.

"The perch up here gives you quite a magnificent view."

The architect also had to be mindful of the relationship between the main cottage and

the docks, bunkies and beach house.

"There's a network around the island that this has to respond to."

Once Mr. Ireland had a feel for the land, he drew an image in pencil depicting a commodious cottage that didn't overpower its natural surroundings. For the architect, a picturesque sketch has become the key to conveying not just an image of a finished building but a feeling. It's also a concept that clients can grasp much more readily than they can a slick, computer-generated set of plans. For the Boyds, virtually nothing changed from the image in that first sketch to the building completed this summer.

"I was so pleased with that very first rendition he did; it was so exciting," Ms. Boyd says. "It's exactly what I wanted but it's so much more."

In fact, she collected the sketches as they became increasingly detailed depictions of the interior — down to the brackets supporting the upper cabinets in the pantry.

"I kept them all," she says. "I didn't even want to see the architectural drawings."

A great room and kitchen surrounded by screened porches provide inviting places for people to gather at different times of the day. The design creates privacy by placing a bedroom wing away from the main living spaces, as well as more openness and unobstructed views in the principal rooms.

The design also had to deal with the jagged ground. "One of the challenges is the varied topography," Mr. Ireland says. "We had to find a way to make the building drape over the landscape."

The architects and homeowners spent a great deal of time on the positioning of the various levels on the rocks, Mr. Stark says. His partner wanted the floor levels to be high so that they could see over the rocks to the water.

"He did not want [them] to miss out on those wonderful views," Mr. Stark says. The architects persuaded the owners to lift the cottage just enough to take in the sunset and the bay while still allowing the landscape to form part of the scenery.

"The view of a distance is often more interesting if there's some foreground," Mr. Ireland says. "If you can't see everything from the inside, there's more impetus to go outside and walk around. It does leave something to discover when you go outside and stand on the edge."

The architect also aimed to echo the typical Georgian Bay cottage of 100 years ago.

Such cabins were often charming, simple and square, with a verandah looking out on the water.

They were not as self-consciously stylized as those in Muskoka.

"Muskokans in 1904 could be hiring a New York architect to design a cottage, and that's pretty much unheard of in Georgian Bay."

To reflect that simple style, Mr. Ireland designed a classic hip roof and low eaves that belie the spaciousness inside. So while the building appears to cling to the rock, the kitchen ceiling is actually 25 feet high.

The homeowners love the kitchen for its large size and easy flow that allows friends and family to surround the cook.

The family can also spread out in the surrounding buildings. Their former cottage has become a guest house and a bunkie provides more living space. Just down the path from the main cottage, a beach house offers a place to enjoy life next to the best swimming spot on the point.

"The idea was that it was sort of a pleasure pavilion," Mr. Ireland says.

For their part, the cottagers enjoy having the space to accommodate four boys and all of their friends.

As soon as they moved in this month, the family invited more than 20 people for a celebratory meal in the main cottage.

"We had our first dinner and we talked about 100 years of dinners to come," Mr. Boyd says. "We really think it will be a 100-year cottage for our family."