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Cottage Life

ARCHITECT JAMES IRELAND COMBINES THE RUSTIC WITH THE SOPHISTICATED, CREATING STRUCTURES THAT SIT LIGHTLY ON THE LAND

BY CAROLYN LEITCH

The cottage started with an extraordinary piece of Muskoka landscape, “the likes of which I’d never seen,” says architect James Ireland. The client, a pioneer of cable television in the United States, had recently exchanged some of his network holdings for 100 acres on Lake Rosseau.

Most unusual for Muskoka, it was a large, sandy bay with a great arc of beach, says Ireland, who has spent the past 12 years clambering over the archetypal jagged terrain of northern Ontario as he designs cottages and country houses for the mavens of Bay Street and Wall Street. During that time, he has worked with investment bankers, billionaire CEOs, the owner of a National Hockey League team, a celebrity author and a succession of brothers from one of Canada’s most storied business dynasties.

The people who come to Ireland have a shared understanding of what a cottage can and should be, the Toronto-based architect believes. What he’s not doing is designing large suburban houses and transplanting them to cottage country.



Photos courtesy of James Ireland Architect Inc.

Instead, he aims to make the most of the building's perch in the landscape without detracting from the beauty of the terrain. The habits of cottage life are more relaxed, less self-conscious. People put on less of a show than they do in the city. They crave comfort and take pleasure in the texture and rusticity of stone and wood.

"Those are things that many of us want from our holiday places whether they're big or small and it's often what distinguishes a cottage from a city house," says Ireland. "Some people will say that as soon as a cottage gets larger it's not a cottage anymore. But if it gets larger it doesn't [have to] turn into a house—or at least not if you do it the right way."

At the Lake Rosseau property, a six-thousand square-foot cottage now sits on the curve of the bay. Behind the building lie woods and meadows, forest glades and dramatic cliff top trails. In front is a panorama of shimmering lake and uninhabited islands.

Late in June, the cottage sees a whirl of activity as the staff prepare for the arrival of the American executive and his family. Outside, the caretaker rakes twigs from the beach while the housekeeper distributes heaps of cushions to dining chairs and chaise longues. When the wind sends a massive inflatable raft skidding down the beach, she wades into the water and tows it back.

At this unusual site, the land is low and flat so there was no reason to build up. Instead, Ireland saw an opportunity to allow the building to spread out so that its considerable size is diminished in the landscape. "As there's more and more building in places like Muskoka and Georgian Bay, it's really important that these buildings be done quietly."

This quiet cottage required about \$2.5-million to build. Needless to say, that doesn't include the cost of the land or the three-slip boathouse.

And even the most ardent nature lovers do seem to want their dose of luxury amidst all that wilderness. The slamming-screen-door shacks of years gone by have virtually disappeared from the shores of Muskoka as cottagers require spa bathrooms, dining pavilions, and guest cabins. Wine fridges and commercial-grade Wolf ranges are standard equipment in the kitchen. That's to say nothing of getting



to and from the cottage, which often calls for a whole array of speedboats, sport utility vehicles and a float plane, or perhaps a helicopter.

The TV exec's cottage is centred around a lodge-type great room with a soaring timber-framed ceiling and imposing stone hearth. "I think the great room has an interesting openness in two directions—so that it faces out to the water but it also faces inland," Ireland says. "That makes it an interesting place to be in the course of the day [as] the sun moves around." The children have their own wing with each bedroom opening to the verandah, the parents have a sumptuous suite with a private view of the lake

and gardens, and guests have yet another enclave.

A screened porch overlooks the water and provides a sheltered living and dining area surrounding the kitchen. Nothing more than a few columns, a roof and some screening, it is finished in natural materials so it does seem truly outdoors.

Rising over the kitchen is a great, pyramidal skylight which adds an element of surprise and drama to the room. "It gives a vertical dimension to a building that is otherwise spread out and

land meet to talk about another cottage currently under construction.

"The immediate distinguishing feature is that it's a dramatic, rocky point. And it just shows what fabulous variations of landscape we can find because the great arc of beach is very beautiful in its way and yet a few kilometres away is something vastly different," Ireland says.

In this case, the architect had to place the new building far enough out on the promontory to take advantage of striking views but not



horizontal," says Ireland. "It's bringing light into the building in a completely different way than the windows do and a particularity that I think is important. If you're making a series of rooms and spaces it's wonderful to give each of them quite a distinct character."

For builder Robert Goltz of Windermere, Ont., the cottage afforded an opportunity to rejuvenate a neglected piece of property without spurning the conventions of traditional Muskoka. Ireland, in his experience, seems to respect the tradition of screen porches and cedar shingles.

"Every architect has his calling card," the builder says. "He wants the cottage to be subtle and to blend in. He's always going back to that: 'we want to save the trees, we want it to disappear,'" despite the fact, Goltz says, that the cottage is of such significant size and craftsmanship that it gave a boost to the local economy.

The flat land surrounding the executive's cottage offered Ireland a rare tabula rasa and an opportunity to make the building appear interesting from many different aspects. More often, the building is wrapped over and fitted into the complicated landscape of northern Ontario. Just around the shore on Lake Rosseau, Goltz and Ire-

THE SLAMMING-SCREEN-DOOR SHACKS OF YEARS GONE BY HAVE VIRTUALLY DISAPPEARED FROM THE SHORES OF MUSKOKA.

so far as to spoil the point as a place to be and enjoy the outdoors.

"The trickiest regulation was the height of it because in this rugged topography it was difficult to fit it into the height limit and at the same time kind of drape it over the landscape."

Ireland, who graduated from the University of Toronto's School of Architecture, cites Sir Edwin Lutyens as a lasting influence. The British architect of the early 20th century was renowned for houses in the English countryside that combined rustic materials with very sophisticated classic details. That tradition connects at least to Palladio and probably the Romans, says Ireland. "It is interesting that what we're doing with these cottages has a very significant, long tradition that's certainly not local."

At the same time, Ireland does see an opportunity to maintain aspects of local tradition in his



roof lines, porches, and the sizes and shapes of the windows.

"We don't need to be slavish about that, but there are reasons why people like some beautiful bits of traditional Ontario cottage country and it's not just the landscape. It's also some of the more traditional ways of building there."

Farmland also has its own pleasures for Ireland and he draws on the customs of England, France, and Italy when designing country houses. Clients who prefer country to cottage often want a year-round house that allows them to enjoy winter activities as well as summer.

"One of the most exciting possibilities with a country house is to integrate it with a garden." Especially in the spring, summer and fall the garden is a very, very important adjunct to the house, Ireland says. "It's not something that's added on later but should really be envisaged right from the start. As with a cottage, you're not just designing a box that you plunk down somewhere, you're really designing a much larger area of where you live."

And while city houses may come and go, Ireland finds that his clients are often building cottages and country homes that they hope will remain in their families for generations. The stone fireplace is in many ways emblematic of the intended permanence of these places.

"There's certainly in so many cases an interest in permanence in the country building and obviously a significant hearth is almost the centre point of that permanence."

As for his own legacy, Ireland hopes that his cottages and country houses sit lightly on the land, with the rocks and trees and natural beauty at the forefront. "I'd like to think that I do them with some sensitivity to the landscape and that I keep the best aspects of the landscape." ■