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THIS COTTAGE IS

He wanted rustic, she wanted modern. They compromised to build a log cabin, reimagined

SUPER COOL

By Vanessa Farquharson Photography Alexi Hobbs



IN THE MIDDLE

of a particularly frigid night during the winter of 2009, Pauline Pariser awoke to dripping on her forehead. She knew immediately what it was: the ceiling of the yurt in which she and her husband, Howie Abrams, were sleeping had formed a sheet of condensation, and the chilled droplets had succumbed to gravity. When the couple erected a yurt on their property two years earlier, it was an upgrade from a tent—at first, it seemed indulgent to have any kind of built structure. “But I had just turned 60,” Pariser recalls, “and the water was dripping on our heads and getting on our sleeping bags, and I thought, Okay, we’re too old for this, it’s time to build a cottage.”

The Toronto-based physicians found their 37-acre lot in January of 2006. In an area known locally as “Wild Muskoka,” the property was not what you would expect to find in this popular region of cottage country: a large swath of land hidden deep in the woods, with a south-facing view over a quiet, motor-restricted lake and 1,300 feet of undeveloped shoreline. Long-time canoe trippers, Pariser and Abrams were happy living simply and were in no rush to build. They camped for a while before they upgraded to the yurt, which was complete with a woodstove that let them enjoy winter visits to the lake. “Keeping it small works for us,” says Abrams. “We really believe in having just enough.” {Continued on page 60}

Pauline Pariser and Howie Abrams prepare dinner at the large kitchen island. The island was a must-have for Pariser, who loves to chat with guests while preparing meals. But first on the Toronto couple’s wish list was a traditional feeling within their thoroughly modern cottage. Architects Meg Graham and Andre D’Elia of Superkül used cedar and pine to execute this contrasting vision. The cottage’s exterior features cedar shakes—traditional—with flat cedar boards flanking

the entrance (previous pages). The most strikingly modern element of the exterior is the “wood screen” that wraps around three sides of the screened porch. It’s made from cedar slats spaced just a few inches apart, a design that allows air and light through while maintaining a sense of cozy intimacy. It also forces those inside to focus their attention through the opening (opposite), towards the lake.

THE CABIN'S KEY

INGREDIENT IS WOOD

Bright green Navy chairs from Design Within Reach add a punch of colour to the main living space's neutral palette. Made from recycled Coke bottles, the chairs were a feel-good purchase, as was the dining table, constructed from salvaged barnboard. The cottage's three bedrooms are off a hallway a few steps from the kitchen (opposite).



When the architects from Superkül first visited the property, they spotted an overturned boat, which eventually inspired the uniquely shaped sloping roof of the cottage. The shape suits the structure's modern sensibility, a style that Pariser chose in part to house her impressive art collection, including a wire sculpture called Peter The Diver (below) by the German artist Rainer Lagemann and Sanctuary, a globe fashioned out of twisted, wrought-iron branches that sits at the entrance (p. 53), by Camilla Geary-Martin. It's unusual to see such an extensive modern art collection in a cottage, but the pieces help to bring the open

spaces together and also personalize an otherwise minimalist interior. Like most other cottagers, Pariser and Abrams spend much of their time outside. They are avid kayakers, cyclists, and sailors. And, of course, swimmers. Pariser swims at least twice a day, often for 45-minute stretches. The first dip is usually as soon as she wakes, "even if it's 11 degrees outside," says Abrams. To warm up, they rely on their high-efficiency fireplace from Stuv (below), which vents exhaust air underneath the concrete floor to supplement the cabin's heating system.





The cottage, named Stealth Cabin, won the Ontario Association of Architects Design Excellence Award in 2014, “for the architects’ ability to create a project with a small footprint and a recognizable character. The embrace of the context of the cabin within the trees, high above a lake, speaks to the memory of the cottage experience.” The entire structure was designed specifically to suit Pariser and Abrams’ lifestyle. “By thinking so much about the site,” says Pariser, “we were

able to get an idea of the vantage point we wanted—there’s a rise in the land that offers a better view of the water, for instance—and we got a sense of our natural access points too, like the easiest way down to the lake or, when we come in from cross-country skiing, where we naturally tend to undress. We figured out where the sun sets, so that we could always see it from the dining room while we ate dinner.”

But when the yurt gave in to Wild Muskoka, Pariser and Abrams agreed that it was time for something permanent. And that’s where the agreement ended. “I pictured a traditional log cabin,” says Abrams. “Not quite a dirt floor, but close. That’s what I always imagined a cottage to be.” As for Pariser? “A log cabin was the furthest thing from what I wanted.”

He wanted rustic, she wanted modern. Clearly, it was time to call in a specialist. Enter Superkül. Pariser had met Meg Graham and Andre D’Elia, the principal architects at the firm, years earlier and had admired their work ever since. Superkül is known for creating sleek, modern structures that are at once stunning and humble—its buildings are designed to blend into the surrounding nature, rather than stick out from it, and there is always an overarching focus on durability and sustainability. Abrams was slightly nervous when it came to signing on with Superkül (there were no log cabins in its portfolio) but was reassured by Graham’s and D’Elia’s low-key, down-to-earth personalities. “Extremely talented but very flexible” was how friends had described the pair, which sounded promising. He was further reassured when, in 2009, he and his wife invited the architects to visit the property to offer preliminary feedback. Rain poured down, but Graham and D’Elia happily paddled across the lake to examine neighbouring properties and stayed for dinner in a damp kitchen tent, ducking out every now and then to take notes on the landscape’s {Continued on page 111}



THIS COTTAGE IS SUPER COOL

{Continued from page 60}

key features. "That had an impact on Howie, I think," says Pariser. "It showed they were committed, had a similar value system, and understood our love for the outdoors."

When it came to reconciling the two visions, the architects at Superkül weren't fazed—they deal with conflicting demands all the time. In fact, Graham says, it's all part of what makes the process fun. "Clients always come to us saying, 'We don't agree.' In this case, we immediately turned our attention to Howie and asked ourselves, 'What does he really want?' And ultimately, he just wanted something warm and simple. It was very easy, then, to marry the traditional warmth of a log cabin with the clean lines Pauline wanted—the key ingredient was wood."

With rsc-certified cedar covering nearly every wall of the cabin, both inside and out, the place has a distinct woodsy smell and a feeling of being wrapped in nature. At the same time, Graham points out, cedar easily lends itself to a cleaner, modern aesthetic if it's cut and positioned in the right way. "There are no extra trims or superfluous details," she says.

Still, as much as he appreciated the versatility of the material, Abrams was skeptical about other aspects of the plan, in particular the layout and the dimensions. Traditional cabins appeal to him because of their seminal place in northern Ontario culture and their distinctly rural aesthetic, but he's also drawn to their intimacy and homey niches. "I really didn't want something that looked like it belonged in the city," says Abrams. What Superkül was proposing was a modern space with vaulted ceilings. "Those initial designs scared me a little," he says. "I thought the main room was too narrow compared to the tall height of the ceilings, sort of like a bowling alley. It was hard to appreciate that this would one day be something cozy, something I'd want." Still, his wife had faith that Superkül could tackle this dimensional issue and ultimately satisfy them both.

"I remember the architects asking us, 'What's your concept of comfort?'" says

Pariser, "and Howie said he liked feeling enclosed." To create this sense of snugness, Graham and D'Elia proposed ceilings that slant up and down, in acute and obtuse angles, offering more vertical space in areas such as the open-concept kitchen-living-dining room and less in the bedrooms. They also included a hidden nook in that "bowling alley," where Abrams could read, work, and daydream. "We tend to nap in that window seat by the kitchen," he says. "I love it."

As conversation and speculation finally turned into a physical structure, Abrams was able to relax, while Pariser got excited, if not a little anxious. With any building project, there is always a level of stress, and in this case the stress resulted from concrete floors that weren't installed correctly, a fireplace that had to be moved from its original spot, and a slower-than-expected installation process for all of those meticulously laid cedar boards. But, eventually, Pariser learned to cede control to Superkül and to trust that Graham and D'Elia would handle everything that needed to be handled. "Meg and Andre both listened so deeply to what we were asking for," she says, "and it became clear that our disparate visions would actually come together into a beautiful building."

Completed in 2011, the cottage has officially been dubbed the Stealth Cabin, partly because the structure is so hidden from view, and partly because it's untreated cedar exterior will fade to grey, allowing it to blend in even more with the surrounding forest. On sunny days, the flood of light pouring in makes the Stealth Cabin feel as though it's completely open to nature and, on rainy days, there's nothing more comforting than sipping a hot chocolate in one of Abrams' little nooks. "Every time we come up, he gets happier and happier," says Pariser. Best of all, when the couple finally does curl up in their double bed on a cool, damp night, they get the pleasure of falling asleep in a space that's designed especially for them—and, one must admit, that's substantially more appealing than a leaky yurt. 🐾

Vanessa Farquharson wrote about a Georgian Bay restoration in the Fall '14 issue. She regularly visits her family's cottage in Not-So-Wild Muskoka.

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