

Cottagers Peter Schneider and Richard Almonte took inspiration from the barns on Wolfe Island, Ont., for their minimalist cottage design.



The sway by the bay

Framed by tall grasses, this unassuming cottage on Lake Ontario is a mix of old decor and new design (and it's kind to turtles) By Matthew Hague

Living space
1,575 sq. ft.

Why we love it
Minimalist design; light environmental footprint; thoughtful decor

ALEXI HOBBS



Points of view

"There are no windows onto the road," says architect Meg Graham. "That makes it feel more private. Instead, all the views are focussed on Lake Ontario."



This chair is one of two that Peter bought at a Toronto antique store in 1990. "They were the first pieces of real furniture I bought when I finished university," he says.

WHEN Peter Schneider and Richard Almonte started looking for a cottage in 2008, Peter's dad, George, gave them some important advice. The couple lives in downtown Toronto, where Richard is a professor and Peter is a lawyer; they were considering a property more than 4,000 km away, in northern B.C., where George has a place on a secluded lake. George appreciated the thought, then told them to think again. "He said, 'If you're going to find a place, it needs to be near to where you live,'" says Richard. "He said we needed to start our own story."

The question is, how does someone start a cottage story without a long family history in a place, and without childhood memories echoing in the walls of a long-beloved cabin? Peter and Richard figured it would be easier to begin with a vacant piece of land—they wanted their narrative to unfurl across a fresh, blank page.

The two decided on a lot on Wolfe Island, in Lake Ontario, a 20-minute ferry ride from Kingston. Partly, the decision was pragmatic. Kingston is a manageable two-and-a-half-hour drive from Toronto, and its real estate is less expensive than Ontario's better-known cottage spots. And partly, the decision was gut instinct. Peter and Richard went to scout out their half-acre site on Labour Day weekend in 2008, packing their swim trunks just in case there was a nice place for a dip. Getting off the ferry, they felt like they had travelled back to a quieter, more restful time. Both were charmed by the old farm houses, tumbledown barns, and tall, swaying grasses. "We went for a swim off the property," says Richard. "It was glorious. We decided to buy on the ferry ride home." >>



Inside story

"The living area is double height," says architect Meg Graham of Superkül. "A lower ceiling would have felt less expansive."



Other design features at work give the two-bedroom cottage, which was completed in 2010, a capacious air. "The horizontal lines of the barnboard on the walls draw the eye along, making rooms appear longer," says Graham.

In building their cottage, the couple wanted to capture the breezy calm that they felt on their first visit. Peter sent an email to architect Meg Graham of Superkül, whose work he and Richard had spied over the years in Toronto. "I described the tall grasses," he says. "I sent photos of the old farms. I talked about the jazz and classical music I wanted to listen to, the cocktails I wanted to sip. I think she was really tickled."

She was. "I left our first meeting thinking, I hope they pick us," says Graham. "They had such an open, generous spirit. I knew we would have a great time working together."

Graham's aesthetic is relentlessly modern—pared-down shapes, an achromatic palette, no unnecessary frills. Surprisingly, Peter and Richard's barn inspiration shots were a perfect starting-off point for the 1,575 sq. ft. two-bedroom, two-bath cottage. "I admire the stillness of those buildings, and how they sit in the landscape," says Graham.

"Some of our neighbours actually thought we were building a barn," says Richard. From the road, their cottage appears unassuming, a long box under a pitched roof. The exterior cladding, which repeats inside, could be mistaken for barn-boards. "It's a cement-based product," says Graham. "It lasts for years, doesn't peel or chip. I've used it on my own home."

"We wanted something no-maintenance," says Peter. The couple also wanted the cottage to be light on the land. Literally. "There is a turtle nesting area across the road at Big Sandy Bay," says Richard. "We raised the whole cottage on piers to ensure the turtles could maintain their migration route." ("The piers also help mitigate the risk of flooding," adds Graham.)

Peter and Richard knew they weren't building a big place, so Peter had a solution to make sure it didn't feel small. "From the living room, you can't see the front entrance or any stairs," says Peter. "When you don't see doorways or exits, the rooms don't seem finite. As you walk through, it keeps opening up."

Throughout the cottage, there are deep personal touches. One example? The couple brought back ceramics from a trip to Jaipur, India, and Peter's father George, a tile setter, inset them in the bathrooms. "He was invaluable to how this place came together," says Richard. "On many levels."

The couple are avowed minimalists, and have eschewed excessive decor. The pieces they have chosen add warmth and character, such as their four living room chairs from Toronto's now-closed Wellesley Hospital. Peter and Richard found them for \$5 each at an antique store and recovered them. Some of the pieces are imbued with memories of them connecting to the area. They found a 1930s art deco dresser for their guest room at a Kingston antique shop. Their own bedroom dresser is around 180 years old. They spotted it at the Odessa Antique Show soon after buying their property. "The piece was originally built in Eastern Ontario," says Richard, "which was important to us because we had just found ourselves in Eastern Ontario, where we didn't previously have a family connection. Having this very old piece helped ground us, gave us a feeling of ownership of the place." 🐾

A personal touch

"We wanted to participate in the build too," says Richard. He and Peter (below, with Lucy) installed the insulation in the cottage themselves.

