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Thin edge of the wedge

Thoughtful modernism inches its way into cottage country



A Haliburton-area cottage Charles Gane designed for a nature-loving couple to take advantage of the views.
Core Architects

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Charles Gane never intended to get into the cottage business. After all, the principal of Toronto-based Core Architects has more than enough on his plate.

Over the past two decades, Gane and his partners have designed 150 condominium projects (50 in downtown Toronto), master planned communities, private homes, sports clubs, hotels, stores and offices in Canada and the U.S. They've also netted big-name projects overseas, including the Dubai Marina on the Persian Gulf, the flagship branch of

Dubai Bank, the design of several Caribbean resorts and numerous condominium projects in Dubai.

That didn't leave time for Gane to consider building in the woods. But when his family's intriguing 2,000-square-foot, 70-foot-wide cottage on Georgian Bay made headlines in several publications last year, calls started coming in from outdoorsy types eager to recreate the look.

"I was always pissed off with the level of — or lack of — design in cottages so I always said to myself, 'If I ever get a cottage, I'm going to try to do something that makes sense, something that's modern and something that uses the landscape,'" Gane says. "This is what I felt I had to do. The good spinoff is that it brought out three other projects from like-minded people who were having the same dilemma. They had their cottage, they'd been living in it, but it didn't expand on the views. It just didn't work. Then they saw [mine] and they thought: 'That's the kind of thing I want.'"

That "thing" is modernism-meets-minimalism. Much like crossing a ranch bungalow and the boxy modern homes sprouting up all over Toronto lately, think horizontal cottages that are long and lean with flat roofs, walls of floor-to-ceiling windows, and loads of Douglas fir to bring the outdoors in. They're perched on rock or nestled into the landscape, with porches that extend out to, or overlook, the water and bask in the scenery. It certainly ain't your grandfather's cottage or your dad's architecture, and it's anything but a Muskoka McMansion. According to Gane, it's simply a new way of looking at the typical Canadian cottage.

"There's a whole new market of people who want simple, modernist expressions," he says. "They're just sick of the old little windows that don't overlook the view and cottages that sit on stilts way up in the air. ... What you get from this one is that it tries to get into the landscape, it tries to get in low. And it also opens itself up to the views."

Gane is excited about the cottages that are now on his To Do list: two in Georgian Bay's Cognashene area and one in Haliburton. He says all three owners were inspired by the design principles in his own cottage: The extensive use of floor-to-ceiling glazing, the strong horizontal expression, the transition spaces that blur the distinction between inside and out, and the simplicity of using few materials. Each interpreted those design principles differently, he adds, yet the thought process was the same. Construction focuses on just three materials: Douglas fir for the structure, cedar shingles to give te

"There are architects doing all kinds of crazy sorts of things, but I think somebody who wants just peace in their lifestyle, simple, I call it minimalism," he says. "Once you see

roofs shooting in all directions and all crazy forms, it looks good for a while. But this is really dumbed-down simple modernism. ... It's just classic. It's not trying to scream, 'Look at me, I'm such crazy design, Frank Gehry shooting around.' It's just reserved. It'll be very calm."



Charles Gane in his converted warehouse offices in downtown Toronto.
Peter J. Thompson/National Post

The Haliburton project is a perfect example. The owners, both design professionals in their 50s living in a downtown Toronto townhouse, have spent the past decade enjoying their 40-year-old, 800-square-foot, one-bedroom cottage from spring to fall. Situated on 48 acres and surrounded by 100-year-old red and white pines, the cottage is "charming," says one of owners, but not big enough to entertain properly and not conducive to year-round living once they retire. And, most important, it doesn't take advantage of the spectacular scenery.

Next year, though, the couple will be ensconced in a 2,000-sq.-ft., 100-ft.-wide, three-bedroom dwelling that sits right on the rocks. It will be simple but sleek, Gane gushes, “like a long, thin wedge in the woods” and “a floating horizontal glazed pavilion” when seen from the water. The living and bedroom spaces will be arranged into a long, thin bar-like element “that will slip through the forest.” The interior will feel like a continuous loft-style space that is 11 feet high, with polished concrete floors and radiant heating. A large screened porch will span the width of the cottage, with a slightly lowered stone terrace off the main living space.

“It’s contemporary, but it has a warmth and a character that we still think is really important to fit into the landscape of the Canadian Shield,” says the owner. “There’s simplicity as well as a sophistication that we were really drawn to. What we don’t want is to build a city house in cottage country, but at the same time we want to have a more traditional cottage type of structure. The whole idea is of this sliver in the woods but it is going to be focused on the view. We’re doing a lot of glass on the lake side [because] view and light are very critical to us.”

Minimalism extends to the natural materials that blend into the environment.

“We’re looking at radiant-heated concrete floors, Canadian fir, glass, and as little drywall as possible because we don’t want that city slickness, we want it to be calm,” says the owner. “And neutrality of colour palette as well, with natural woods, stone colours, that sort of thing.”

Still, there will be a bit of an industrial feel to the cottage (the owner prefers to call it “an edge”), thanks to the commercial-grade windows commonly found in condo towers. Given Gane’s usual day job, that’s not surprising.

“The [condo] projects I’m most happy with incorporate exotic materials,” says the architect, citing 500 Wellington West’s combination of wood, zinc, dark charcoal brick and a wrapped frame as one of his favourite projects. “It’s better when you have a view and give a frame for people to look at. That’s how my condo architecture has spilled over to residential.”

Gane encourages would-be modernist cottagers to get cozy with their property well before building. At \$400 to \$500 per square foot and a year to build, getting it right from the get-go makes sense. He and his wife, Robin, and teenage sons Finn and Oliver spent several years camping on their four-acre property before sketching their dream cottage.

Says Gane: “Inspiration comes from the land and the views. You have to be on it to know where the wind is, where the sun is, where you want to stay.”

Gane says his neighbours expected to hate his cottage because it wasn't a traditional design, but once they saw it they accepted it for what it was. Things like wood and shingles are materials that they're used to, he explains, and it sits low on the landscape.

“It's like the first time somebody built a Victorian home where there were only Colonial homes — they must have freaked!” he says. “As long as they're using good material, that's good for our business. Cheap modernism is giving us a bad name. With cottages, if you're respectful of the siting and the trees and the views, it shouldn't really jump out and stand out the way a Muskoka mansion would.”

Gane says he's not trying to shake things up with his minimalist leanings. But he likes the idea of fewer rules, of doing what moves you. There was a time when status equalled a 5,000-sq.-ft. condo, he says, but no one wants to clean or heat that anymore. He suggests we've reached a tipping point thanks to the legions of young condo dwellers looking for something new.

“We've always thought of downtown as floor-to-ceiling glass, you have concrete ceilings, luxury space, and then do you want to pull up to an old crappy cottage that's falling down? Maybe we're at a point where all our new clients are going to want modernist cottages.”

His son, Finn, is a case in point. At first the 14-year-old found the modern cottage embarrassing because his friends had traditional ones built decades ago. He also worried it was too expensive and he would break something. But he's getting over that, claims Dad, because “he's realizing that the girls like it!”