

## LUXURY LIVING

# Nature IS PART OF THE DESIGN AT MODERN Muskoka cottage

LINDA WHITE  
Special to Postmedia Network

Modernists herald it as the “new Muskoka,” and revel in its ability to meld into the landscape. Traditionalists lambaste it as out of place, with at least one armchair critic labelling it a “hideous, tasteless monstrosity.”

The 8,500-square-foot cottage — or perhaps “mansion” is a more apt name — is located on an 11-acre private island in Lake Muskoka. Love it or hate it: all can agree the property has sparked plenty of debate over the past few years. Its architect takes it all in stride.

“My ambition was to create a modern house that was just structure and 100 per cent opening window walls so that Lake Muskoka itself was an extension of the living space and the key feature of the design,” says James Pitropov, principal architect at Lakeside Architecture Inc., a firm that designs luxury homes, cottages, boathouses and resorts. “When the window walls are open, all you see is the lake.”

The cottage boasts six bedrooms, six bathrooms, a gourmet kitchen with lake views, cold plunge pool, resistance pool, hot tub, Finnish dry sauna, Turkish steam room and wine cellar. Three oversized folding glass wall systems offer panoramic sunset views. It’s also home to four wood-burning fireplaces, including a stainless-steel fireplace on an expansive cedar deck. A 1,200-square-foot, two-bedroom guesthouse features a full kitchen. The property is also home to a boathouse.

Pitropov drew inspiration from late Canadian architect Arthur Erickson. “West coast houses like the Graham House were revolutionary in the way they were sited in difficult locations and had exposed structure. It had parts that were built into the hillside and also parts that appeared to float over the water,” he says. Fallingwater, a house designed by late American architect Frank Lloyd Wright in 1935, was also inspirational. “It used structural engineering to cantilever levels of the house over a natural waterfall. It’s all about the site and nature.”

Still, Pitropov appreciates traditional architecture. “You really have to understand the human qualities of wrap-around porches, old-style dining rooms, Muskoka

rooms, dormers and the cozy corners the classic traditional architecture creates,” he says. “There’s a social aspect to old-style lodges and cottages on Lake Muskoka, Lake Rosseau and Lake Joseph that Scottish and Irish settlers, as well as early American cottagers, really understood and developed. Thousands of memories have been built around this type of humanistic architecture.”

Traditional architecture, however, relies on classic architecture form, Pitropov reminds. “We now have the opportunity with new structural technology to have longer-span beams, enabling larger window areas that open up the structure more to the lake environment and make nature itself part of the design.”

Modern design blends into the landscape much better than traditional design, he maintains. The cottage is built into the landscape in terraces and has subtle roof lines and reflective glass instead numerous walls. “You see big Douglas fir timbers and the trees and lake reflecting in the glass instead of siding, turrets, dormers and giant roofs,” he says.

The original owners hailed from overseas and wanted a very private and spacious retreat where they could entertain international clients.

“They regularly visited truly exotic locations around the globe. They were true modernists and adventurous with ideas,” Pitropov says. “They started importing things from around the world, a lot of which just don’t fit into Lake Muskoka. They brought in marble from the Middle East and tiles from Italy, for example.”

The current owners are passionate about interior design and have been renovating and modifying the property for several years. “They get that Muskoka is a land of rock, water, reflections and light that changes throughout the day, so they don’t want heavily-tinted windows. The stone from the Middle East is out. They want authentic materials that are from Muskoka. They’ve been doing a ton of work to make it truer to its roots.”

Pitropov remains confident there’s room on the lake for more than one style. “Let’s take the best ideas of both architectural worlds,” he says, “and move forward so each generation has fresh architecture on the lake they can live with.”



The cottage was constructed on Bass Island over four years beginning in 2010 and boasts more than 2,700 feet of water frontage. Cottagers see it when cruising off Walkers Point to the main part of Lake Muskoka towards Port Carling.

SUPPLIED



Even the indoor pool has a view.

SUPPLIED



The large window walls facing the lake are completely non-structural.

SUPPLIED

## Demand for cottages continues unabated



ROYAL LEPAGE LAKES OF MUSKOKA - CLARKE MUSKOKA REALTY

This 3,900-square-foot cottage in Gravenhurst in Lake Muskoka was listed this spring at \$3.495 million. Granite steps lead to the lakefront, which offers deep water off the docks.



ROYAL LEPAGE LAKES OF MUSKOKA - CLARKE MUSKOKA REALTY

This property in Oro-Medonte in Kempenfelt Bay was listed at \$12.9 million. It's located on 17.5 acres and features an infinity pool with a swim-up bar and a hot tub located on 725 feet of pristine waterfront.

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Last year’s demand for cottages was unprecedented, with buyers scouring cottage country in search of a lakeside haven. This created a seller’s market, and the industry is expecting more of the same this year.

“There’s a fervour in the desire to own a piece of the cottage country,” says Phil Soper, president and CEO of Royal LePage. “It started last summer and has run consistently through the winter and into spring.”

Some realtors showed properties on islands accessible only by snowmobiles or by walking across a frozen lake. Some buyers purchased properties unseen. With demand for recreation properties up across the country, Soper calls it “a national phenomenon.”

Demand is highest in Ontario and that’s reflected in price increases.

“Not just in the double digits but in the 20 per cent range,” Soper says, “which is very high and is compounded because we saw that kind of increase in 2020 over 2019.”

### PANDEMIC-ACCELERATED DREAMS

Shawn Woof, senior vice president of sales with Sotheby’s International Realty Canada, agrees the Canadian dream of having a cottage is stronger than ever.

“If people can’t travel, they want to know they have

somewhere else to go. For most, having a cottage offers a feeling of escape and luxury,” he says.

For many, the pandemic accelerated their dream of owning a cottage. Others expect to be able to continue to work from home once the pandemic is over.

“If they find good internet and a year-round opportunity, they’re on the move full time,” Woof says.

The number of cottages and cabins on the market is “relatively low” and agents are accepting multiple offers on properties “both above and below the \$1-million price tag, both lakefront and riverfront, and even off-water properties,” he reports.

Markets like Haliburton, Georgian Bay and the Rideau Lakes close to Ottawa are experiencing “unusually high price appreciation” but demand is “fairly consistent across the board,” says Soper. “There is moderation in recreational condominiums. Prices tend to be rising at a normal rate — in single digits to high single digits.”

Realtors in Atlantic Canada and to a lesser extent in B.C. are reporting significant demand from Ontario.

“People have long known the south shore of Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and parts of Newfoundland are beautiful places to buy inexpensive recreational property and what holds them back is the distance,” Soper says. “The distance seems to have been less crucial over the last couple of

seasons, probably because people think of that kind of recreational property not as a getaway for a week or two on vacation, but as a place they’ll go to work remotely for at least part of the year.”

### COMPROMISE IS KEY

If you’re committed to buying a cottage this year, be willing to compromise on the ideal property, which is typically turnkey, located on a lake with southwest exposure on a fairly level lot, and offers year-round access.

“If you’re looking for something like that, chances are you’re going to be competing with a lot of other buyers,” Woof says.

If you’re willing to consider a riverfront property, an island property or an off-the-water property that’s close to a lake, for instance, you open yourself up to opportunities others might not consider. In fact, a growing number of prospective buyers are willing to drive further to achieve their dream of cottage ownership.

“A lot of people have moved to smaller lakes past Huntsville because they’re not getting in on the lake that they were once able to buy a cottage for \$500,000 — that doesn’t exist,” says Re/Max broker Leah Ambler.

Interest is also growing in small pieces of recreational farmland in areas like Prince Edward County, Belleville and Kingston.

“People are simply seeing it as a way to get a few acres and get away from the city,” Soper says.