Modern Caledon Cottage Has A View To Wake Up To!

So often the house built as a Canadian ‘cottage’ contradicts my English notion of a quaint country adobe, whether it be a ramshackle little cabin – no roses around a picturesque doorway there – or extravagant five-bedroom mansion, bigger than most folks’ main home.

And so it was when I took up the invitation to visit a new cottage in the Niagara Escarpment: a rural retreat on its own private lake, no less. I guess that fact alone should have given the game away! Built on the site of a former cottage, this 8,000-square-foot house is a second, or maybe even third, home for its owner: a ‘little’ place to pop to when a moment of quiet seclusion is required. But, the house’s size and its undoubtedly exorbitant cost most definitely contrast any notion of a bolt-hole or weekend get away that I might have. And, the generosity of design, the aura of opulence, is light years away from that romantic little cabin in the woods.

The master bedroom and its view of the lake. The architects described their task as ‘sweating the details to maximize lake views.’ That took the form of full-height, floor-to-ceiling glazing, glass handrails and a cantilevered banquette in the kitchen to minimize view-obstructing legs.

Designed by Peter Berton and Tom Wilson of +VG Architects, the house is tucked into the hillside above a 24-acre lake that holds a protected breeding population of brown trout. Jutting roof lines crown façades clad in plate glass cut through by heavy stone walls. At dusk, lights glow from within, the home twinkling like a gaudy jewel set within the deep green of the coniferous forest that surrounds it. The house is a monumental addition to the perfect seclusion of this protected landscape. The disparity between ultra-modern man made and the natural setting is immediately evident: It could even be seen as offensive.

But, for all of the size and extravagance, the house does fit into its surroundings. Fixed to the steep hillside site via a technique...
called soil nailing, often used in B.C., the building’s structure is a mix of contrasting materials and textures. Cold concrete is tempered by the warmth of the Douglas fir columns and beams, some up to six metres in length. Slick floor to ceiling glazing plays foil to the rough-hewn limestone blocks of the fin walls, which split the house into sections – kitchen/dining, living, sleeping. The colours and textures soften the building’s form, hinting at nature and connecting with the landscape.

Internally, the spatial design is influenced by a number of pivotal elements. “Rooms flow openly,” says Mr. Wilson, “one to the next, in the best traditions of open-plan Modernism; while the plan aims to maximize views of the lake.”

Spaces, from the Bulthaup-clad kitchen to gallery-like living room and even the bedrooms, each with a wall of windows, seem expansive enough to comfortably throw a football, and yet, wonderful artworks and tasteful interior styling, by Toronto firm Made, bring the spaces back down to a human scale.

Working to accentuate the connection with nature, Mr. Berton and Mr. Wilson describe their task as “sweating the details to maximize lake views:” from using full-height, floor-to-ceiling glazing and glass handrails on balconies to installing a cantilevered banquette in the kitchen to minimize view-obstructing legs. The result is an interior flooded with natural light, an inside thoroughly allied to the outdoors. All apart from one room.

The library, a cozy little nook amidst the grand open spaces, is a place to hide away or to take your after-dinner port. It is dimly lit in comparison to all other rooms, enveloped in bookcases and a wall of white birch logs, a quirk – peeling bark on untreated boughs – that’s the antithesis of the glossy smooth reclaimed elm floors and regimented stripes of the timber-clad ceilings.
“The idea came from the owners,” explains Mr. Wilson. “We were looking at a way of separating the space without completely closing it off and they suggested a rustic log wall. The logs were harvested from the property and they give it a real Great Lakes, St. Lawrence feel.”

Rustic is not a word that you would immediately associate with this property, but look out from the building and the diminutive boathouse is just that, a rustic cabin clad in half round timbers: a playful addition that intentionally contradicts the serious Modernist aesthetic of the main home.

Its clever design becomes more evident on examination; from the rooftop diving platform to cedar flooring that runs continuously inside and out onto the deck, and, large folding doors that completely open the front façade to give a beautiful view of the lake. Décor within, again sourced by Made, takes a different tack to the cool chic of the main house. Here, converted electric Coleman lamps provide lighting; there’s a sofa upholstered in red and black buffalo check wool; and, side tables come in the shape of upturned logs.

The boathouse plays foil to the main building. “It is a grand folly on the lake. A witty reference to the beloved tradition of log cabin boathouses in cottage country,” says Mr. Berton.

Almost as big as what I imagine a cottage to be, the boathouse is certainly a delightful contrast to the main home. Standing on the deck looking first down the lake and then back at the house there comes a realization. While grandiose in many ways, the principal property is intriguing: a series of conflicts, opposites and juxtapositions that together form a harmonious whole.

Still, this English journalist could never feel comfortable calling it a cottage.

+VG Architects is a full-service architectural firm offering new design, expansions and heritage restorations for cultural, educational, municipal, justice, healthcare, residential and recreational facilities. Our staff of +50 operates in four offices in Ontario, in Brantford, Kitchener, Toronto and Belleville.

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