Muskoka Impressions

If you only had the blueprints for this angular, villa-style cottage on Lake Rosseau, in the Muskoka region of Ontario, you might be forgiven for wondering how on earth it would fit in with the natural rocks and woods of its setting. But, the clients had seen the work of A/E Architects principal Peter Berton and his team before, and knew enough to place their faith in him. With its soft blue-grey walls, interplay between interior and exterior spaces, wide-angle and close-up views, and natural and man-made surfaces, you could almost say it's an architectural portrait of the Muskoka landscape itself.

The design is all the more remarkable when you consider that part of it actually occupies the existing footprint of an older cottage that had been on the same spot for many years. The couple originally bought the land from their parents. While the old cottage held its share of...
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The design consists of four discreet but connected pavilions arranged roughly in a pinwheel, connected by glassed-in breezeways and open trellised walkways. Creating a series of interconnected structures, rather than a single enclosure, allowed the architects to multiply the spans of glass walls and sliding doors in the design, creating a wealth of views and ‘moments’ that arise continually as you walk through the cottage.

The journey starts at the stone steps leading from the drive to a flagstone path. On the left is the first and smallest of the structures: a stone-clad storage shed, inset with large open bays for storing fireplace logs. From a practical perspective, it provides a convenient (and dry) place to store and access wood for the cottage’s three fireplaces, but it also has a quite deliberate visual purpose. He says, “The stacked wood really gives you the feeling that you’ve left the city and traffic behind, and arrived at the cottage.”

The walkway continues past the shed, and the kids’ bedroom pavilion on the opposite side, to a pergola that shelters the next section of flagstone path, between the main glazed in breezeway and a grassy garden with its own signature rock outcropping.

The breezeway provides sheltered access between the bedroom wing and the main living/dining pavilion in the centre of the site. Its glass doors can be opened to take full advantage of a cool lake breeze, or slide shut if bad weather threatens.

The main pavilion is the largest of the four structures, with dining area and kitchen on the woods side and, down a few steps, an open living space with a vaulted, Douglas fir-clad ceiling, maple floors and woodwork, and a waterside view on three sides.
expansive floor-to-ceiling windows in this room is interrupted only by a big, classic Moundola stone fireplace. "It’s an exact replica of the fireplace in the old cottage, which they loved," Berton says. He goes on to point out that the construction of this room, with its expansive wood floor and open interior, had an unexpected effect that only became apparent after it was built. "The clients are music lovers, and the house is often filled with music. The floor has a heated crawlspace underneath, which behaves exactly like the soundboard on a piano. It sounds like a concert hall in there. It's absolutely beautiful."

Sheltered on either side by the bedroom and main cottage wings, the main patio is divided into two sections. Closer to the cottage is an alfresco dining area under a second, larger trellis, which houses a retractable roof, offering protection from a sudden summer rain or the hot afternoon sun. Down a few steps to the patio, large enough for entertaining a large number of guests from the city for the weekend, or simply basking in the sun and the breeze from the lake below.

The breezeway continues past the main pavilion and turns on an angle towards the last of the four sections, a private and expansive master bedroom suite. The master suite features its own stone fireplace, private deck and a cupola view of trees; but the abundance of glass, as is the rest of the space, allows for near-360-degree views straight through the main pavilion clear down to the lake.

With all of the oblique angles that characterize each of the disparate structures, there’s an ever-changing variety of views: woods, lawn, patio, and of course the ever-changing moods of the lake.

"As you walk through the cottage, there's a kind of narrative," Berton says. "It tells a story that starts at the drive, and ends at the bedrooms master suite at the other end. It seems like it's rambling and abstract, but there's a very deliberate sense to the design. The geometry of the wood, the angles, the joinery of the pergolas – it actually was very precisely designed to create this overall cohesive composition. And it works exactly the way we planned."