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Rustic elegance

A Toronto family's new cottage is designed for spending time together

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY BEV MCMULLEN

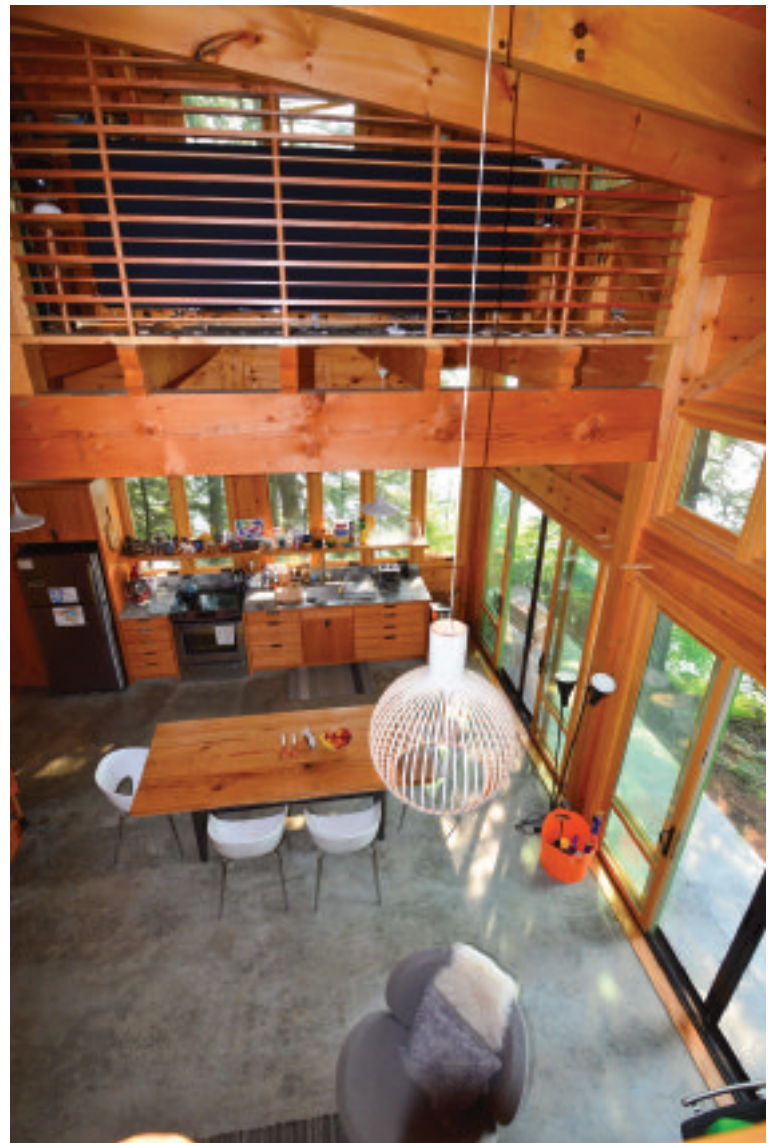
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The art and craft of building timber frame homes dates back more than 300 years ago. Using large heavy timbers, cutting arches out of a solid piece of wood, and using mortis and tenon joinery, a technique that strategically secures the giant wood pieces together and compensates for any twists, curves or irregularity in the timber. It was the common way of building up until 100 years ago, before the building industry switched over to using wood studs and nails, according to Brad Johnson, president of Portico

Timber Frames out of Dorset.

"It evolved after the Chicago fire in 1840 when they had to rebuild the city quickly. Timber frame building sort of fell into obscurity until about 30 years ago when some craftsmen in the U.S. started looking at old buildings and analyzing how they were made," he says. "They catalogued what they found and started copying it. Now it's huge again, especially in high-end construction."

Portico, which operates out of the old Langford Canoe company building, is a general contractor that manages large and small projects, but timber frame



construction is its specialty. And while it's built many luxurious structures using its expertise, when a young Toronto family approached the company about building a cottage on Hardwood Lake, just outside of Dorset, it turned out to be the most intricate, complicated frame Portico has ever done.

The Toronto couple (who wishes to remain unnamed for this feature) and their three children have spent many years at their extended family's cottage on the opposite side of the lake, which has all the amenities of a home, is open year-round and is always full of people. "The idea was to build our own private getaway, as opposed to another family cottage," says the wife. "We wanted to create a space that was intimate, quiet and uniquely our own. It was also important to us to do as little damage possible to the environment

during the building process."

To design this custom cottage the couple worked with close friend and Toronto architect Shawn Freeman over the past couple years. "And we chose Portico because we have a close personal relationship with Brad Johnson and we loved the idea of building a timber frame structure," she says. "Portico's work is magnificent."

The finished cottage has an extraordinary roofline—mixing Japanese and Scandinavian architecture. It's a three-level, open concept structure that's perched on a 600-square-foot cement footprint overlooking the lake.

"Since the property is water access only, the cement was very hard to pour. We brought all the aggregate over by barge and had to hand mix it with a machine," says Johnson. "The roof is all over the place, the rafters are curved. It was hard to visualize on two-dimensional paper so





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"I love having exposed shelves," says the wife, pointing to one that extends the length of the kitchen."

we made a three-dimensional model to see what was going on."

The curved, steel roof was custom made using a template that Johnson developed, and the Scandinavian influence can be seen in the exposed carved wooden timbers peeking out from underneath.

The couple loves exposed, natural wood, and – as the cottage is not insulated – every piece of wood used to build it

was like a piece of trim. "It's visible from both the inside and the outside," says Johnson.

They brought the giant Douglas fir support beams across the frozen lake during the winter. And since they couldn't get a crane to the property, Portico came up with a method of pulleys and cables to lift the timbers – some of which weighed up to 700 pounds.

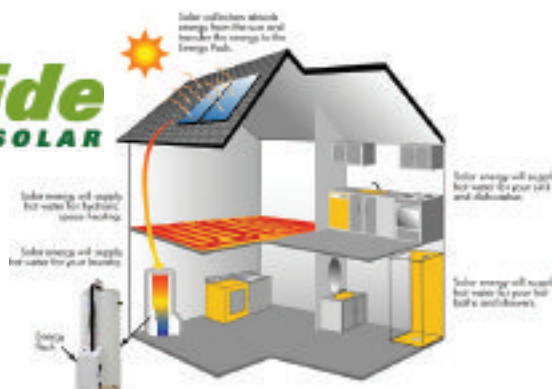


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"It's not big, but very visually interesting," says the husband, a writer who spends a lot of time at his new summer retreat.

Inside the cottage there are no doors or walls and all of the furniture, cabinetry, and shelves are built into the structure. The cement slab doubles as the main level floor and deck – glass doors open up the open-concept kitchen and living area to the outdoors. "I love having exposed shelves," says the wife, pointing to one that extends the length of the kitchen, which holds dishes, glasses and other cooking items.

To separate the upper levels of the cottage there are staggered sleeping lofts. The many windows on each level offer stunning views of the surrounding trees and lake. There's even a five-foot-by-five-foot crows-nest-like room at the very top of the house where the children play or have sleepovers.

While the cottage has a fully functional kitchen, the couple decided to forgo having an indoor bathroom. "We built an outhouse instead to minimize the need to cut down trees," says the wife. On the side of the cottage there's a small outdoor



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shower and just steps away, a cedar-lined sauna, which the couple cross-country skis to in the winter months. “We wanted to retain the feeling of our cottage not being a regular house. The idea was to create our own private getaway, an intimate space where we can all be together while we are there.”

The vision this couple had for their retreat was certainly achieved. The amount of details – hidden electrical wires within the wood beams, integrated storage and shelving, curved rafters and even a three-inch spaghetti-like banister following the staircase from the bottom floor to the top – creates a rustic, yet sophisticated flow. And the exterior colour scheme, which features lime green trim, perfectly camouflages the cottage so that it’s hardly visible from the water.

“Shawn is an amazing architect and artist, and working with this combination of people made the whole process of designing and building our cottage a deep pleasure,” says the wife. “Our love for this lake and our friendships with the people who built and helped design it make it feel very special.”



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