Camp Style in the Thousand Islands

Birch-bark ceilings, a sleeping porch and plenty of fireplaces harken back to an earlier era

BY DIANA P. GRATER

Between Lake Ontario and Montreal on the St. Lawrence River lie the Thousand Islands. During the last century, summering in the Thousand Islands became a family tradition. Today, third and fourth generations of families are beginning to renovate and build their own retreats on the river. Hoping to recapture the magic of their childhood, my clients bought property on Oak Island to build a summer cabin and to give their children the river experience their parents had given them.

Alison hoped to re-create a modest, rustic cabin like the one she spent her childhood summers in. She wasn't interested in electricity or modern appliances. In fact, Alison allowed us to install only two light fixtures in the entire cabin. She wanted her children to reach for a flashlight rather than a light switch. Above all, she didn't want this camp to look extravagant or new.

Alison's husband, on the other hand, wanted a lodge—something large enough for the entire family, with a quiet nook for a retreat when things got chaotic. His idea of a rustic camp was something built with logs, wood walls and stone fireplaces. My firm had a tall order: Design a large house that could accommodate plenty of guests while retaining the intimacy of a cabin, and build a new house that looked old.

Setting up camp on an island

Located on a 380-acre island, the house occupies one of eight 5-acre building sites. The rest of the island is protected as "forever wild" in a conservation easement. Previously a quarry, the site was peppered with stone debris, making part of it difficult even for walking. It was obvious that this area, already disturbed, would be the best location for



DESIGN LESSONS FROM A SUMMER CABIN

On a rocky island site, the architect's mission was to blend the new building with its natural surroundings. Photo taken at A on floor plan.

1 Preserve the best parts of the outdoor space by putting the house on the worst part of the site.



Drawing facing page: Dan Thornton



2 Encircle the house with a shed roof to lower the appearance of the two-story walls.

3 Save large trees and natural stone verandas to make the cabin appear to have grown out of the island.

4 Include the colors of the landscape and the shapes and textures of the trees in the exterior of the house.





Room to cook. *Butcher-block countertops, a deep soapstone sink and a large pantry make the rustic kitchen a great working space. Photo taken at B on floor plan.*



Views in every direction. *Not only does the sitting room have panoramic views of the river, but it also offers a long view across the interior of the cabin and a ceiling made of twigs and birch bark. Photo taken at C on floor plan.*

Large, open spaces & small, quiet places

the house. The finished cabin takes advantage of natural stone terraces on the shoreline as usable outdoor spaces and preserves mature trees for privacy and for screening the house from the river (photo p. 69).

Building on an island is challenging. Without machines to move the debris, we decided to build on top of it, anchoring concrete piers to bedrock to support the frame. Assuming we would run into problematic field conditions and tree roots that we hoped to spare, we used a steel frame for versatility. Steel beams can span longer distances than wood and therefore require fewer piers. Also, with steel beams, pier locations are more flexible, which allowed us to dodge roots and other challenging conditions.

Keeping a low profile

Including two screened porches, the cabin is 3800 sq. ft.—not huge by contemporary standards, but not easy to hide, either. To make the cabin appear smaller, we created some optical illusions. First, with an L-shaped footprint, the entire cabin cannot be seen from any one view (floor-plan drawings, facing page).

Topped with a gable, the second floor sacrifices space to help make the cabin appear smaller. Midway between the first and second floors, a shed roof encircles nearly the entire house. This lower roof visually interrupts the two-story wall, lowering the perceived height of the house.



Smaller forms such as the gabled entry porch and circular sitting room also divert attention from the size of the main structure.

In addition, the texture of the cedar shingles, the color of the trim and the stonework blend with the surrounding landscape. So despite the cabin's size, its presence is subtle and quiet.

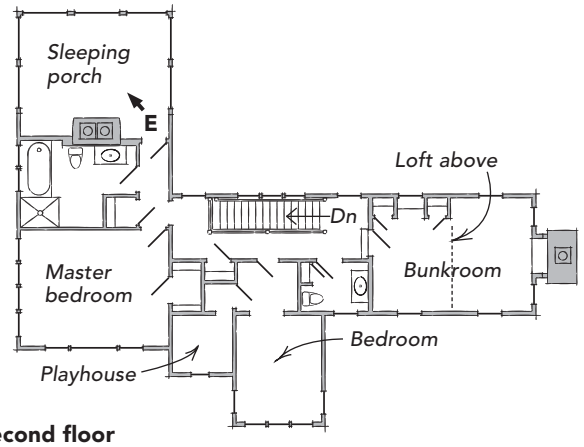
Balancing community areas and sanctuaries

The main living areas in the cabin are interconnected for family and friends to come together comfortably. The kitchen is big enough for many cooks to work side by side (photo above). A large island, a separate pantry and an alcove for a breakfast table spread the kitchen over a wide area so that people are not in each other's way when the whole camp comes together for a meal.

The six-burner Heartland stove and deep soapstone sink are helpful during preparation of big camp-style meals. While most of the colors and textures of the house were chosen to blend with the site, the kitchen-cabinet color was definitely not. This intense lemon yellow is there simply to energize a room that nurtures plenty of activity.

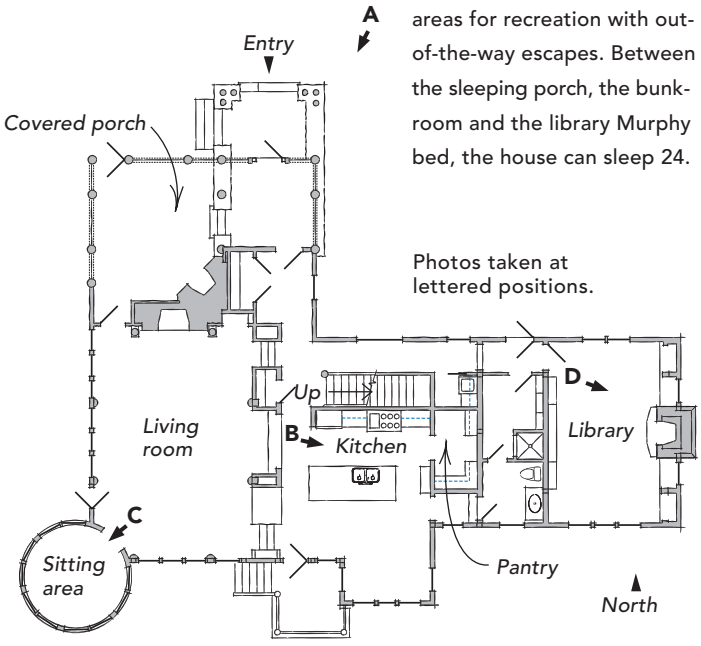
The kitchen overlooks the living room, which has plenty of space for activities around its fireplace, a community center when the sun goes down. An adjacent sitting area off the living room provides

FINDING A PLACE FOR EVERYONE



Second floor

The architect met the owners' wish list by combining open areas for recreation with out-of-the-way escapes. Between the sleeping porch, the bunkroom and the library Murphy bed, the house can sleep 24.



First floor

SPECS

Bedrooms: 2, plus sleeping porch and bunkroom

Bathrooms: 2½

Size: 3800 sq. ft., including screened porches

Cost: N/A

Completed: 2001

Location: Oak Island, Hammond, New York

Architect: Grater Architects, PC

Builder: Steven White General Contracting, LLC

Floor-plan drawings: Paul Perreault

GREAT IDEA

THE WEATHER STOPPER

POLYESTER WINDOW COVERINGS PROTECT PORCHES FROM THE ELEMENTS

When Jack Stopper moved to the Thousand Islands region of New York, his intention was to learn the canvas boat-covering business. That he did, and it wasn't long before he found himself the owner of The Weather Stopper, a custom marine-coverings outfit. Around 1985, a customer had a request for Jack: design and fabricate covers to winterize a screened porch. The idea caught on, and today, Stopper devotes a few months of every year to making porch-window covers.

The covers are made of woven polyester, the same material used for boat covers, and attach to the windows with twist-to-lock clasps called "common-sense fasteners." Although typically fastened to the exterior of the house in the off-season to keep the weather outside, here it made more sense to put them on the inside for nightly use on the sleeping porch. Covering a window or two can mean the difference between a peaceful night's sleep and a windy, noisy one. Stopper says that many of his clients have been able to extend their season on the islands with the extra insulation the covers provide.

For more information, contact The Weather Stopper at 692 Riverside Drive, Clayton, NY 13624; (315) 686-4392.

—*D. P. G.*



Convenient storage makes these covers practical. *Straps hold the rolled-up covers in place above the window when they are not in use. Letting them down on a windy or rainy night keeps the porch available for sleeping even in bad weather.*



FIRELIGHT AND RIVER BREEZES



In the library, log columns and stone fireplaces bring the look and feel of the island inside. Photo above taken at D on floor plan. The sleeping porch captures the river breeze and offers a night of natural slumber. Photo left taken at E on floor plan.

panoramic views and a quiet place to relax (photo left, p. 70). To keep a feeling of connection in the living area and to preserve views, there are no walls or doors between the kitchen, living room or sitting room.

When the adults need to retreat, the library is their refuge (photo above). Nestled in the back of the cabin, a fireplace supplies evening reading light in the library. Similarly, a secret room off the children's bedroom allows kids a carefree play place to hide away (floor plans, p. 71).

The cabin has only two bedrooms but plenty of sleeping room. The children's room of choice is the bunkroom, also known as the fort. It sleeps 10 and has a loft with a view of the river. The sleeping porch is another favorite and always has a few occupants (photo left, facing page). Even the library has a Murphy bed hidden in a custom cherry cabinet. On a full night, the house sleeps 24.

It looks like it has always been there

We used recycled woods and indigenous materials where possible to give the house its lived-in, informal look. The wood interior is durable, low maintenance and forgiving. The naturally finished wood interior includes traditionally face-nailed wide-plank pine flooring, sugar-pine walls and pine trim; in many places, the wood is face-nailed for effect.



Birch bark, log columns and twig work such as the stairway railings, the drawer pulls and the towel bars embellish the simple wood interiors (photo right). The use of birch bark goes back to the earliest settlers of the Thousand Islands region. Local builders today carry on these traditions and have added their own finishing touches. In this cabin, the builder used a recycled beam for the bathroom vanity to complement the indigenous, natural materials traditionally used in cabins.

Times have changed since the first summer cabins were built in the Thousand Islands, and building and architecture have come a long way. Although tradition is evolving, the Thousand Islands and the summer cabins they are home to continue to provide a genuine river experience to a new generation of families. □

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