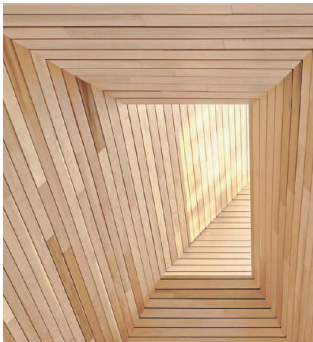




## AT EASE IN THE LANDSCAPE

Lake of Bays cabins by architect Brian MacKay-Lyons are all about the relationship between structures

■ H2



Halifax firm MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple was selected to build 40 modest cabins around the golf course on Bigwin Island in Ontario's Muskoka region. PHOTOS BY DOUBLESAPCE

### BRITISH COLUMBIA

Aging population, rising property values threaten Vancouver's Chinatown ■ H4

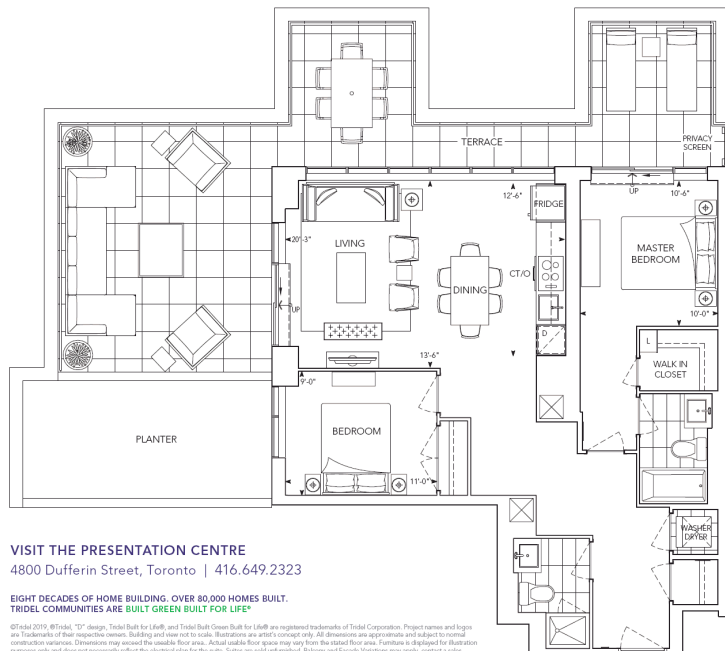
### MONTREAL

Development in Mount Royal raises ire of its neighbours, environmentalists ■ H9

### THE NEXT MOVE

House hunters rush to put bids in on dilapidated house in Toronto ■ H7

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# KIDS' PLAY

Architect Brian MacKay-Lyons wooed his prospective client with a hands-on presentation reminiscent of Lincoln Logs

**SIMON LEWSEN**  
BIGWIN ISLAND, ONT.

When tourists visit a city or streetscape they like, they often say it has “character.” North Americans typically use this word in reference to Europe. As a descriptor, it’s borderline meaningless. (What is character? Arches and colonnades?) But we know it when we see it.

I suspect that when we talk about “character,” we’re often referring to a sense of aesthetic consistency. When a region has character, the buildings seem as if they belong there. They are at ease in the landscape – and in each other’s company.

Character also implies folksiness. It’s a description more often applied to fishing villages than master-planned suburbs. “Vernacular building traditions around the world have this quality, like snowflakes,” says architect Brian MacKay-Lyons, a partner at the Halifax firm MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple. “They work through theme and variation. In Tuscany, for instance, everything goes together well.

Mr. MacKay-Lyons has devoted his career to studying vernacular building traditions, seeking what lessons these folk cultures can offer and incorporating them into his work. One such insight is that residential design isn’t only about individual structures; it’s about the relationship be-

tween them. The job of situating homes relative to one another (i.e. the work of “planners”) is really architecture by another name. It’s all about materials, volumes and the creation of space.

In 2014, MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple Architects Ltd. was invited to submit a project proposal for Bigwin Island, located on the Lake of Bays in Muskoka District of Ontario. The island has a golf course designed by landscape architect and avid golfer Stanley Thompson, who was famous for incorporating rugged nature into his fairways and greens. Investment banker Jack Wadsworth bought a stake in the property 25 years ago and acquired the entire island over the decade and a half that followed. In the past, other stakeholders had considered putting a 250-room hotel on Bigwin to accommodate club members who’d otherwise have to travel to the course by ferry. Mr. Wadsworth opted for a less intrusive development: 40 modest cabins to be integrated into the surroundings.



The site plan is based on the way buildings aggregate in Nova Scotia to create a microclimate. In the Maritimes, a shed, a farmhouse and a barn might demarcate a courtyard that is protected from the wind.

**JENNIFER ESPOSITO**  
ARCHITECT

Mr. MacKay-Lyons was one of six finalists to present a full-fledged proposal to Mr. Wadsworth and his advisors. “Brian brought a box with building blocks inside, kind of like Lincoln Logs,” Mr. Wadsworth says. “We sat across the table putting them together into any configurations we wanted. It was kids’ play, but it was also a brilliant architect’s statement about what he planned to do.” (Mr. MacKay-Lyons got the commission and the project is cur-



rently under construction.)

Each of the Bigwin cabins will have three main components, represented, during the proposal, by three custom blocks: a rectangular great room with hemlock floors and wraparound glass windows; a cedar-clad “bed box,” with bedrooms, bathrooms and mechanical

fixtures; and a hipped roof with large overhangs that sits, protectively, over the entire assemblage. (The other pieces in Mr. MacKay-Lyons’s kit comprised a golf cart, a deck, a hearth and a Muskoka room, or what people in the rest of the world call a screened-in porch.) The blocks may be basic, but you can combine them into many permutations, each a variation on a common theme.

To say that the cabins are simple is not to say that they’re generic or thoughtless. The soffits, for instance, sit nine feet above the floor, roughly the height of the deer grazing line on the island; they create continuity between the roof overhangs and the surrounding tree cover. And while the gabled roofs are low slung and expansive – as they are on your typical Muskoka boathouse – the interior ceilings taper at a sharper angle; each living area sits beneath a high, narrow vent reminiscent of a bell tower.

“I call it a centring skylight,” says Jennifer Esposito, a former design associate at MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple who was the



The Bigwin Island cabins designed by Halifax firm MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple are built around three main components: a rectangular great room, a “bed box” and a hipped roof with large overhangs. The blocks can be combined into many permutations.  
PHOTOS BY DOUBLESAPCE





project architect on the Bigwin development. "It helps define a gathering place in an open-concept room."

This feature - a sculpted atrium embedded within a wider roof - is, of course, an affectation, although it's the kind of experimental flourish for which Mr. MacKay-Lyons is known. He likens the concept to St. Paul's Cathedral in London, which has a large exterior dome and a smaller interior one. "What feels good inside is not necessarily what looks good outside," he says.

Most of the time, Mr. MacKay-Lyons prefers unfussy, transparent design, but he's also partial to a little tickery. I get the sense that he's spent his career balancing competing impulses: folksy minimalism versus a need to try out crazy new things. The results are consistently fascinating. Previous MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple buildings resemble barns that have been torqued or elongated at the hands of a giant; others are like fishing shacks in the sky.

Compared with these projects, the Bigwin cabins are relatively simple, but the work is nevertheless ambitious in scale. When you're commissioned to do 40 buildings, you must figure out where to put them. The art is in the arrangement.

A key consideration was public versus private space, a critical challenge when your main rooms have floor-to-ceiling glass. "When residents are in one living room, they're close to somebody else's," Mr. MacKay-Lyons says. "So the trick is to strategically place the hearth or a big overhanging to create privacy between the buildings."

He also considered how different kinds of structures fit within a landscape. The Bigwin cabins come in three types. There's a linear unit, where the bed box and great room sit adjacent, forming a single rectangular volume. These buildings are discreet and easy to cluster, so they'll be arranged on prime land with ample views of the lake.

There's a configuration resembling a "skew" Tetris block, where the great room and bed box pinwheel off each other. (This shape is difficult to describe; you might picture two fish swimming side-by-side, one slightly ahead of the other.) Because these dwellings have near 360-degree sightlines, they'll be located on a meadow secluded from public view.

Finally, there are the L-shaped cabins in the woods, which, when grouped in pairs, will bracket off a quadrangle. "The site plan is based on the way buildings aggregate in Nova Scotia to create a microclimate," Ms. Esposito says. "In the Maritimes, a shed, a farmhouse and a barn might demarcate a courtyard that is protected from the wind."

The Bigwin cabins are comprised of building blocks. But also, they are building blocks; they are the basic units from which community is made. When you design dwellings, you also design the space around them, and when you cluster them together - assuming you do so thoughtfully - you transform a location into something more like a neighbourhood.

There's another MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple project under construction in Utah: 30 gabled stilt houses, ranging in size from 1,000 to 2,500 square feet, with a pioneer cabin in their midst. They'll be arranged in quads, around which residents may host cookouts or grow their own vegetables. Mr. MacKay-Lyons has other, similar multiunit projects on the go. He sees such endeavours as a return to an earlier era in design, before the rise of an avant-garde culture obsessed with one-off masterworks. "As architects," he says, "we've forgotten how to make villages."



To say that the cabins are simple is not to say that they're generic or thoughtless. The soffits, for instance, sit nine feet above the floor, roughly the height of the deer grazing line on the island; they create continuity between the roof overhangs and the surrounding tree cover.