

Architect John Stark has become accustomed to some good-natured teasing from his clients about the expanses of glass that accompany his stunning island designs. “They say, ‘We don’t have any walls, we can’t hang any paintings,’” he laughs. “And I always ask, ‘Why are you here?’ The buildings I’ve designed are simply a framework to experience the natural beauty: the rocks, the trees, the wind, the water, and the sunsets.”

For 30 years, Stark has successfully made his case, developing a devoted following for his summer cottage projects in Ontario, Canada. In island-rich Georgian Bay on Lake Huron, he’s put his stamp on 100 designs, ranging from renovations to accessory buildings to 5,000 sq ft vacation homes. About 30 other projects are scattered across the lakeshores of Muskoka and beyond. No two are alike, but they all adhere to the same vision: integration into their environment. Soaring wood-beamed ceilings evoke the area’s windswept pines; stone fireplaces take cues from the rocky terrain.

“When someone approaches me to build on an island, the first thing I do is visit the site. That’s the starting point, and also where it ends for me,” says Stark, who in 1995 moved with a few of his top people from the large architectural firm he founded to his own small firm, Stark Architects, to focus only on passion projects. “You can’t build just anywhere on an island. You want to be removed from the shoreline so it’s not too visible, but yet you want to be completely experiencing the waterfront setting at its best. Whenever possible I want the buildings to look like they’ve always been there.”

The Toronto-born architect’s deep roots in the region provide an added layer of connection to his cottage work. His grandfather started the family on their private island path in Georgian Bay’s Go Home community in the mid-1920s, and his parents followed suit. In 1978, Stark and his wife purchased their small island, Mid Nias, in Georgian Bay, and he constructed his own homage to the terrain: a low-slung, triangular home with glass walls that snuggles comfortably into its granite perch. One of his brothers and his two sons own islands less than five miles away, within sight.

John Stark





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"I've been a Georgian Bay islander my whole life," says Stark, recalling childhood summers spent on the family isles and more recent volunteer work with the Georgian Bay Land Trust. "There's something here that's hard to describe that appeals to a certain type of person. My clients come from Australia, Singapore, England, the United States – by no means are they all Canadians. Georgian Bay is different from other cottage areas. There's a magical quality to the light and the color of the water. It's got an open feeling like ocean; it's such a large expanse of water. It's extremely attractive. The landscape is also very fragile even though it's very rugged."

Finding the balance between architecture and these delicate local ecosystems informs his design process. Siting is critical in Georgian Bay, where continuous slabs of rock and sparse tree cover are the norm, making any new construction highly visible; Stark received the Ontario Association of Architects Residential Design Award for a project where he maneuvered the building plan at the last minute to prevent cutting down six trees. He also points out that extreme build up of heat on rocky, shade-free outcrops and strong winds over large stretches of water create added construction challenges. "I often design what I refer to as 'one-room-thick buildings' where you don't have corridors because you want to look from the protected side of the building right through to the exposed side of the building and still have those views," he says.

The Muskoka islands that dot the lakes farther east present a different set of hurdles, given their softer, tree-lined shores. New buildings require tree removal, making choices of material and color even more important to fully meld with the landscape. Boathouses are especially difficult given their need to sit right on the waterline. Stark is currently developing a family compound on Lake Rosseau on one of Muskoka's largest private islands and facing this conundrum head on. "The two boathouses are technically unique as the foundations are carefully engineered steel structures that extend from the water surface down to the bedrock below the bottom of the lake," he says. "One of the boathouses actually has a full stone fireplace with two fireboxes back to back – one in the sitting room, the other for the exterior terrace – yet below is clear space with several slips for boats."

Ask him to play favorites with his designs, and Stark graciously declines. He has found success in the career path he chose in his early teenage years, and spends summers working on projects in his favorite part of the world. "The results speak for themselves," he says. "You have to have great clients, and I do, and you have to have great people working for you, and I do. That's what's so exciting to me."

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