

## IN CANADA

### THE BEAR STAND

From city living to their own private wilderness experience: Shanghai-based AD China's Editor-at-Large Sharon Leece and her husband Joe Magrath build an indoor-outdoor vacation home deep in the Canadian wilderness, fusing a passion for contemporary design with a heartfelt appreciation for nature.

By Sharon Leece  
Photography Manolo Yllera  
Stylist Patricia Ketelsen

It's just before sunrise and Contau Lake is at its most serene. Standing on the dock watching the mist rise off the lake, the silence broken only by the calling of loons, it's an ethereal experience. It is this closeness to nature, this quiet, restrained conversation with the wild, that makes this property so unique.

In front is our private bay – undisturbed by the echoes of nature - fringed by white pine, red maple and hemlock trees. Behind, emerging quietly from the woods, is a 3,400-square-foot timber and glass cabin, inspired by the Pacific North West but transplanted to the wild eastern forests of the Ontario Highlands. The contrast is surprising and unexpected, yet perfectly fitting.

Such a hybrid sits well here; its existence reflecting the melting pot from whence it came. Ours is a global family – myself British, my husband Joe Magrath, Canadian, our daughter Naia, 9, half Brit-half Canadian and born in Shanghai, the city we call home. Together, we had a dream of creating a place to escape urban living, somewhere different in every imaginable way from our daily lives in China's bustling mega-city. A place where we could relax and recharge, enjoy the outdoor life, connect with family and friends and create a legacy that Naia could enjoy for decades to come.

It is one thing to want to build your dream home, another to make it happen from 10,000 kilometers away. Fortunately, our communal insight kept us on-track. As Editor-at-Large for Architectural Digest China, I get to spend a lot of time visiting, and being inspired by, beautiful homes and interiors around the world. Joe, who oversees development interests for a global real estate investment firm here in China, knows how to run a build project and how to get things done. And, most fortunate of all - as we came to discover - we have very, very similar tastes in design.

From childhood, Joe had always wanted to build a cabin in the woods. Before I even visited Canada for the first time, I heard tales of summers growing up on Contau Lake, of cousins and aunts and uncles, of boating and hiking, of bears and blueberry patches. Back in 2011, a unique and unspoiled 99-acre woodland and waterfront site came up for sale, formerly part of lands once owned by previous generations of Joe's family, who in the 1950s came to make the rugged shores of Contau Lake (about 3

hours' drive from Toronto) their beloved wilderness playground. Joe jumped at the chance to buy it.

We had the land, we had the vision; all we needed was the architect. We immediately looked to the Pacific North West as we love the open, airy, contextual connectivity of the modernist design aesthetic there. Robert Miller from the Seattle-office of American architects Bohlin Cywinski Jackson ([www.bcj.com](http://www.bcj.com)) expressed an interest in our brief – and when he eagerly agreed to join us for a wilderness camping session to discover the land and its qualities, we knew we had found our perfect partner.

Flashback to five years ago and we sat around the campfire, chatting about our vision. We wanted a modern cabin aesthetic which captured all the traditional elements of cabin living, to be luxurious yet relaxed, progressive yet comfortable; one that respected the land, the water and forest and which visually communicated with the environment. We wanted a retreat that we could enjoy alone, or with our family and friends. Robert listened, sketched, and explored – surveying the adjacent wilds, and taking early morning canoe trips to capture the lay of the land from the water.

Over the coming months the team fell into place – Kyle Philips, Associate at BCJ, drove the project forward, whilst wood mastercraftsman Mark Brinkman of Brinkman & Sons took on the challenge of building an entirely modernist structure in the middle of the woods. As the house took shape, we visited Contau season after season, communicating in-between via Facetime, and resorting to a pattern of early Saturday morning calls - the only time that conquered the 18-hour time difference between us. It is testimony to the professionalism of Robert, Kyle and Mark that we actually got things done (despite harsh winters, sloppy roads and faraway subcontractors). By Fall 2015 the house was move-in ready.

It's pure bliss every time we walk inside – usually tired and disoriented from a long-haul flight, we are immediately energized when we encounter this light-filled, soaring hand-crafted space. A huge glass entry opens into a glazed front foyer, which offers expansive outward views into the forest, and beautifully framed sightlines into a sunken two-storey open plan Great Room. With a full-height screened room with terrace attached, the connectivity to nature is nothing short of compelling. A custom walnut stairway flanked by a slatted clear-grain cedar wall leads to a cozy upper den and terrace, guest bedrooms and an expansive master suite with indoor freestanding tub and a sunken outdoor Japanese-inspired hinoki wood ofuro tub.

From every angle there are forest and lake views – reminding us that this is a very special retreat. The material palette is rustic yet refined: craggy Douglas fir, clear-grain cedar, glass, board-formed concrete, rough granite stone, and reclaimed timber on the bars, benches and mantels. For contrasting drama we added numerous black accents via painted steel balustrades, mdf panels and outdoor fibre cement boarding.

For furnishings, we wanted an authentic cabin look, influenced by classic mid-century modern design, but bought up-to-date. The look had to be natural yet comfortable,

warm and welcoming, and suit all seasons, from high summer to the snowy depths of winter. Together, Joe and I spent months looking for interior inspirations, mostly online, making purchasing choices often sight unseen and with healthy doses of optimism. When you live in China and are furnishing a home in Canada, there is no other way.

Final choices came down to what was in stock when needed, and whether the supplier was able to deliver when we were visiting. With long manufacturing and delivery lead times to work with (some suppliers could only deliver deep into the Canadian woods once every two months), it was a complex juggling act. And, to be sure, an interesting lesson in how Asian efficiency still fails to be reflected in the rest of the world.

Slowly things fell into place. We used natural and reclaimed wood, leather and distressed greys as common anchor points and introduced textured knits, rustic plaids, autumnal reds, cooling blue-greens and neutral colour assemblies to define the various spaces. We custom-made furniture pieces in China and shipped them over; we used our favorite American furniture suppliers for beds, sofas, tables, carpets and light fixtures.

Joe trawled Etsy for vintage Canadiana to fill shelves and display spaces, uncovering everything from wooden skis to binoculars, Mountie hats, pendants, trays, tin boxes, maps and games. We bought piles of traditional flannel shirts in Shanghai, cut them up and took them to our local tailor to make cosy tartan and cashmere cushion covers, and gathered up contemporary Chinese ceramics from Chunzai and Spin in Shanghai together with retro-inspired Heath Ceramics from San Francisco. Such layerings of colour, material, texture and provenance really helped bring the house to life.

In the end, we termed our cabin retreat, *The Bear Stand*, a name which quickly became a source of much hilarity and debate among guests. Inspiration came from the hunting legacy attached to our property; if you look hard, you can still find the original hunting stand used by generations past in the woods off our walking trails. But no, we haven't yet encountered a bear at *The Bear Stand* – and I, for one, am more than happy to keep it that way...

Spread 1:

Left:

The Bear Stand celebrates both modern master craftsmanship and indoor-outdoor connectivity. Designed by Seattle-based architects Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, the timber and glass structure brings Pacific Northwest style to the heart of the Ontario Highlands.

Right:

Perched on the lakeside, surrounded by forest on three sides, the house sits effortlessly within the natural environment. Fiber cement board cladding, painted a

deep red, adds a splash of colour to the exterior. External features include clear grain cedar overhangs, a cantilevered dining room and an expansive upper terrace.

Spread 2:

The airy two-storey open plan great room features double height ceilings, floor-to-ceiling windows, a granite wood-burning fireplace, skylight and panoramic lake and forest views. The mantle is made with a piece of reclaimed timber from a traditional Canadian eatery. Retro-inspired wood and leather furnishes are accented by a grey, red and orange color palette. A glass door to the rear leads to a large screened room.

Spread 3:

Left:

The wood and glass cantilevered dining room allows diners to feel as though they are dining in the forest. The floor is engineered vintage-etched walnut. The multiple glass globe pendant lighting fixture adds a contemporary touch to the space.

Right

Top left:

Indoor-outdoor connectivity is highlighted in the dining room which is surrounded by glass on three sides. The distressed grey wood tones of the rustic Restoration Hardware dining table promote a sense of longevity.

Centre:

The architectural lines of the soaring two-storey open plan living room, kitchen and dining are both elegant and precise. A material palette of Douglas fir beams, glulam and clear-grained cedar ceilings, custom-crafted steel and black-painted mdf panels create a dramatic space that beautifully transitions between inside and out. The breakfast bar is made with a piece of reclaimed timber; bar stools by Restoration Hardware.

Spread 4:

Middle left:

Sleeping in the master bedroom, surrounded by glass windows, is like spending the night in the forest encased in a comfy king bed. Black painted mdf panels inside transition to fiber cement board outside to connect interior and exterior; the grey-turquoise-blue soft furnishings palette was inspired by a collection of plaid cushion covers hand-tailored in Shanghai.

Bottom left:

Bathe in nature, but with complete privacy: in the master bathroom suite, a freestanding bath tub by Blu Bathworks allows intimate forest views.

Right:

A concrete and timber terrace wraps around the living room and is protected from the elements by a large roof overhang. A Wolf barbecue unit is perfect for grilling,

whatever the weather. The teak lounge chairs and dining table set are all by Pottery Barn.

Spread 5:

Left page:

Upper left:

The sunken outdoor Japanese hinoki wood ofuro soaking tub, inspired by a trip to a modernist Ryokan in Yufuin, is connected to the master bathroom. Timbers from the wooden ceiling jut out towards the rocky hillside, again anchoring the house to its site.

Upper right:

The main entryway to The Bear Stand with its oversized glass entry door leading to a glazed front foyer offering expansive exterior views.

Bottom:

The screened room, connected to the Great Room, features floor-to-ceiling wood framed mesh screens. This means that even in the height of bug season, one can sit 'outside'. An outdoor fireplace and overhead heaters (not pictured) means the room can be used all year round.

Right page:

Clockwise:

1. The grounds sensitively transition from garden environs to the surrounding forest setting. Out on the point there is a lakeside wooden children's jungle gym and outdoor firepit surrounded by recycled plastic Algonquin chairs.
2. The quad bunk room, with built in desk and floor-to-ceiling window – is a firm favourite with the kids. All beds and cabinetries custom designed by Mill Line Woodworking.
3. Naia Magrath, plays on a fallen-down tree trunk by the edge of the lake.
4. A ceramic bear head hangs on the granite fireplace.
5. The upper guest bedroom uses a contrasting palette of black painted mdf boards, clear grain cedar and red and grey soft furnishings. A peek-a-boo window behind the bed looks out over the lake.
6. A custom walnut stairway flanked by a slatted clear-grain cedar wall leads to a cozy upper den and terrace.

Spread 6:

A canoe dock, complete with red canoe and red recycled plastic Algonquin chair, looks out over the private bay on picturesque Contau Lake. The perfect spot for an early sunrise paddle, or to enjoy a morning coffee.

Architect

Bohlin Cywinski Jackson [www.bcj.com](http://www.bcj.com)

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