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THE NATURE OF DESIGN: AN INTERVIEW WITH ARCHITECT CHRISTOPHER SIMMONDS

Christopher Simmonds, founder and Principal of the firm Christopher Simmonds Architect, is an award-winning architect based in Ottawa, Ontario. Considered a leader in the field of green building projects, Simmonds' work is heavily influenced by the natural world; inspired by his travels to South Asia, his designs create a harmonious flow between artificial structures and the nature that surrounds them.

Simmonds recently took the time to chat with KHACHILIFE on his early influences, his process, and how he personally unwinds with nature.

What made you decide to pursue a career in architecture?

I was interested in studying architecture because the courses spanned a large spectrum of my interests — psychology, art history, mathematics, engineering, and design.

Your work, while obviously commissioned by clients, has a distinct voice; it is clearly a home by Christopher Simmonds. At what point did you feel as though you'd developed an identity for yourself as an architect?

When I started my own architectural practice 20 years ago, I realized I could focus on my own interests: garden design, Feng Shui, and human wellbeing. These interests continue to influence all of my housing design work, and regardless of the context and scale of project, they always come into play.



Muskoka cottage



Muskoka cottage

Which architects have had a major influence over your career?

It's impossible for any North American architect to deny the influence that Frank Lloyd Wright has had on our domestic architecture. Many of his ideas came from traditional Japanese house and garden design, of which I have always been a keen student.

Currently it is the West Coast modernists like James Cutler and Peter Bohlin that inspire me with their exposed structures and the intimate connections with natural settings that their houses demonstrate.

Your designs are consistently built with the environment in mind, drawing inspiration from the natural world. What led you down this path, and how does this focus shape your process? Where do you see the future of sustainable design headed in the next ten years?

I grew up with the pastoral landscapes of England, where my family visited country homes and gardens on the weekends and holidays. When we moved to Canada, I became enamoured of the rugged landscape of the Canadian Shield.

How we live with nature is a fundamental question that I carry with me in whatever I do. Ultimately it is our response to this question which will shape our communities and our homes and gardens in the future. I think that there are big shifts coming in all of these realms. The shifts arise from new technologies, but ultimately from our own imagination about how human beings can live purposeful and fulfilling lives in harmony with the rest planet.

Have you ever designed a home that was hard to part with upon the project's completion — one you wished was your own?

I go back to visit homes that my clients have lived in for 10 years. The gardens have grown and matured and they tell me what a delight it is to be living there. Escarpment House in Halton Hills is certainly one of my favourites, but many come to mind.

Is any past project a personal favorite of yours?

Our Muskoka Cottage project allowed me to use exposed timber structures in a rugged natural landscape, and that is a particular favorite. But I also love many of the smaller urban projects where there is an intimate connection with the garden. As you can see, the landscape is the common theme for all the projects.



Escarpment House

A constant theme in your work seems to be the idea of designing a 'retreat', creating a haven for homeowners. How does that translate in your personal life? How do you relax and retreat from the world?

I understand that the human nervous system is designed to flourish in a constantly shifting display of life and seasons. Personally I get deep inspiration and relaxation canoeing or hiking in the wilds.

On a day to day basis, it is the practice (and teaching) of meditation which keeps me grounded and creative.

If a client disagrees with the design at hand but you firmly believe in its merit, how hard do you attempt to persuade them that a concept will work? Conversely, does your firm operate under the notion that the client is always right?

When a client has an alternative idea I will sometimes sketch it out for them and explain the pros and cons of it. Usually (but not always) they come around to the original design concept or the design evolves to respond to their concerns.

However, I never impose aesthetic concepts at the beginning. Each project starts from a thorough discussion and understanding of the client's requirements and aspirations. The design emerges as a response to these and to the site context and opportunities.

You're given a project without budgetary limitations. What do you build?

Limits and the challenges of a particular context usually inform the design response on most projects. Without these limits, with only a blank canvas, one realizes that when creating something, we are projecting an understanding of ourselves on the world around us. That can be both scary and exciting. For me, it would provide the opportunity to use natural, tactile materials like stone and wood in simple, Zen-like compositions around a garden or natural landscape. Respect for nature would be integral in both the aesthetics and in the energy technologies and building systems.

What are you currently working on, and what's next for you?

Current residential projects include cottages, a boathouse, and several urban infill projects. We are also engaged in some projects like a corporate headquarters and an off-grid visitor centre for an astronomic observatory.



Escarpment House