



Take an
isolated
water-access
property, two
designers,
and a singular
vision for a
dream cottage.
One couple's
route to a
sophisticated,
off-grid retreat

DESIGN UNPLUGGED

By Ann Walmsley Photography Edward Pond



IT'S A SATURDAY IN AUGUST,

and I'm following Arriz Hassam through the forest at his cottage, "Red Rocks," on Drag Lake in Haliburton. He is walking with a cane because of a recent soccer-induced knee injury. The cane is elegant, as is his Tilley hat. Born in Uganda, he moved to Canada when he was 10, and he's new to cottaging. He stops to point out lumps on the forest floor where moss has overgrown fallen logs, and places where bracket fungi have colonized other logs. "It's beautiful to see the decay of old trees," he says. "For me that's part of the discovery." Covering 43 acres, the property has plenty of rotting tree debris.

We are interrupted by the sound of thumping up ahead. Peering forward, I see that the noisemaker is Hassam's wife, Suzanne Dimma. She's picking up fallen limbs on the path and flinging them into the woods. Unlike Hassam, she is a veteran

Ontario cottager. But she notices even off-the-path fallen branches because she grew up cottaging in Georgian Bay's Cognashene area, with smooth rock underfoot and only a few windswept pines. Even fall leaf colour was foreign to her idea of the cottage. "It has taken me a while to say, 'This is actually beautiful, to see things falling down and returning to the earth,'" she admits.

Two people with different approaches to cottaging, each with design credentials. (They are both prominent figures in the Canadian design community.) Yet the



couple has collaborated to build an off-grid, sustainable, and low-impact water-access cottage that pleases them both. Hassam and Dimma describe it as their “treehouse loft.” It’s hidden from the lake by trees, a surprisingly modest statement for Hassam, a principal at Toronto-based 3rd Uncle Design, given that this is the first cottage he’s designed from the ground up. “On purpose, there’s no place to stand back and admire it on the outside,” he says as I strain without success to see the entire elevation. “The architecture simply provides us with an experience of the landscape.” At 1,200 sq. ft., it’s a one-storey

charcoal modernist box protruding far out over a rock hillside on slender black legs—like a sophisticated seaside fishing pier. At one point it hovers more than seven metres above ground.

Hassam and I scramble around to the back of the cottage to stand on a sprawling piece of granite so he can show me that the supporting black legs are slender for a reason: He wanted them to blend in with the surrounding tree trunks, and to create the illusion that the building floats. Made of black-painted hollow steel and anchored to the granite slope with steel bolts driven 30 cm into the rock, the posts eliminated the need for ugly concrete piers or blasting and satisfied the couple’s wish that the construction process be low impact. “Generally, you dig deep holes and pour concrete and use that as your foundation,” says Hassam, adding that he and Dimma were not keen on barging in digging equipment and countless bags of cement or cutting down trees so that heavy machinery could move

Arriz Hassam (left) studied architecture at the University of Waterloo, and Suzanne Dimma (above) works in design media, so they each brought complementary skills to the design process. They took time to plan every aspect of the cottage’s creation, living on the land for a full year before breaking ground to help them fully understand how the building could best interact with the environment.



THE OFF-GRID REQUIREMENT DROVE



Since everything had to come by boat, the couple took their time selecting furnishings, ensuring that each item would work before hauling it across the lake. The bedroom door is made of wood harvested from Toronto Harbour and has a unique “petrified colour,” says Hassam. The bedroom decor includes an evolving collection of paper mementoes adorning the walls (below).



THE DESIGN FROM THE BEGINNING





A charcoal, water-based stain covers the exterior, mimicking the look of charred wood. The interior, however, has a warm, reddish glow—floorboards, walls, and ceiling are Douglas fir. “The idea is to make things fit the environment, not stand out,” Hassam says.

around. He shows me that the posts end in steel plates. “Where the plate meets the rock, we just poured a little leveller of concrete.” A few well-placed stones conceal the plates. Hassam worked closely with a structural engineer to calculate the loads and spacing of the posts and placement of cross braces to further reinforce the structure. Still standing on the granite, I’ve had my first lesson in low-impact cottage building.

One reason why Hassam and Dimma chose to build on that steep rock, as opposed to the flats near the beach or on the plateau high above the lake, becomes apparent as we walk inside from the cedar wraparound deck. The impression is one of stepping into an art gallery. But here, the “paintings” are windows that dramatically frame views—each vista carefully selected. To the west, the living room window showcases a vertical granite face that rears up surprisingly close to the building. To the east, beyond the screened-in porch, the window frames a mammoth white pine. To the north, through the bedroom window, a forest rises over the hill. And to the south, the private bay glimmers through the trees. “This spot bridges three terrains,” says Hassam. Pointing to the east and west windows, he adds: “Before we built, you wouldn’t make the connection between the rock and that tree because you’re just in vast openness.”

Did they ever consider installing a floor window to see to the forest below, like some other buildings cantilevered over hillsides? “Never,” says Hassam. “We wanted people to look up,” says Dimma, “to notice the prettiest views.”>>



“FOR ME, IT’S ALL ABOUT THE WATER.”



Scores of treasured items are included in the decor: deer antlers found nearby, vintage family photos, a ceremonial mask from Hassam’s native Uganda. “It’s all meaningful from our relationship or how we feel about being up north,” she says. There are also reminders of her former cottage life on Georgian Bay—their big-water aluminum Stanley boat (opposite) was a work-horse during the construction process.

Music is the next impression inside the cottage. Arcade Fire’s percussive tune “Wake Up” fills the space, followed by Bob Dylan, and then a mariachi-sounding ensemble—Beirut playing “The Gulag Orkestar.” I wonder why they’re using precious off-grid electricity on a big sound system. Hassam, the audiophile of the two, shows me a palm-sized, energy-efficient stereo amplifier—operating at only 15 watts (compared with 60 to 100 watts for a conventional amp). The walnut-framed speakers in the living room aren’t Dimma’s favourite objects, but she accepts them for the payoff: the glorious sound. “The music is part of what creates the mood,” says Hassam.

Before she even married, Dimma had decided to build her own cottage after her parents sold the family cottage. “I was heartbroken when we sold,” she says.

After looking at a few listings on Georgian Bay, the couple began searching in Haliburton, but Hassam was aghast at the

properties’ lawns: “I didn’t want a suburban house with manicured lawns.” Instead, he imagined something like the off-grid eco-lodge he had visited a few years earlier during a safari on the Nile. When the pair saw the remote water-access site on Drag Lake, they each had an instant gut feeling that this was their place. Dimma loved the glacier-smoothed rock along part of the shore and the sandy beach that revealed itself in fall. Hassam was captivated by the sheer scale of the property: “43 acres of privacy, 2,500-foot shoreline, sandy beach, private bay, waterfall, massive rock cliff, and a natural forest,” he says.

HE'S MORE ABOUT THE LAND”



The design collaboration began with Dimma describing to Hassam the important aspects of her previous cottage experience. “My old cottage was almost entirely white,” says Dimma, “and all weathered cedar shingles on the outside. Because of the rocks, we were beachy and barefoot.” Hassam, who has a degree in architecture, but whom Dimma describes as “a cottage newbie,” took her two key mandates—a place to nap with a view of the lake, and a mixture of glass expanses and cozy wood panelling—and added his own ideas, ensuring that the space was open and flowed well from room to room.

As they spent more time on the lake, living in the solar-powered bunkie that came with the property, their thinking converged around the simplest possible design—a forest loft. Hassam began filling sketchbooks with drawings—evolving from two storeys down to one. He took the lead on the exterior and major structural elements of the interior, while Dimma led the interior design and decor, always consulting one another before finalizing each decision. Often, they figured out solutions together. For instance, they planned a wall-to-wall built-in day-bed for the living room and determined how wide it should be by lying down side by side on the floor. “Once I developed the framework, drew it up, and figured out how we were going to make it,” says Hassam, “Sue brought in the next layer: the mattress, the cushions, and all the things that bring life to it.”

Hassam explains that the off-grid requirement drove the design from the beginning, given {Continued on page 104}

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the remote unserviced shoreline on the lake. The couple had a group of friends on the lake, many of them part of the design community, who had built off-grid cottages with a similar aesthetic. Unlike the expensive solar-power systems that run washers, dryers, and dishwashers, Hassam and Dimma's system is scaled down and cost only \$10,000, all in. Three small panels on the roof

power a compact, high-efficiency fridge, a pump to draw water from the lake, a composting toilet, the stereo, minimal lighting, and a fan on the back of the woodstove. That's it. There's no dishwasher, no bulky water heater, and no oven—not even a toaster. However, when it's cloudy, Hassam turns on a gasoline-fuelled 3,000-watt inverter generator housed under the cottage to top up their system's four sealed, all-season batteries. I wondered why Dimma kept strolling out to use the outhouse with such a

fine composting toilet indoors. It's not over any concern about the toilet being able to handle high volumes. Rather, "I just like using the outhouse. It's old school," says Suzanne. "Plus, I like taking the trip along the path to get there." Propane fuels an on-demand tankless hot-water system and a six-burner cooktop. The couple also has a barbecue on a small deck, at the door near the kitchen. And if they want toast, they grill it over the stovetop. They keep the refrigerator full—a trick to further conserve energy.

With no need for a septic, there's just a grey-water pit for the waste water from the elegant black slate shower and the cottage's two sinks. Despite the rocky terrain, they found sufficiently deep soil for the pit in a cavity behind the cottage. In the centre of the building, a black Regency woodstove provides heat when necessary. Wax candles add extra light, as do battery-powered pillar candles set on a timer.

The cottage's sustainability is not just about solar power and low-energy gadgets. Hassam also employed thermal dynamics, low-maintenance and reclaimed materials, insulation, and a variety of low-impact construction methods to preserve the landscape. Strategically placed screen doors and windows (such as the casement window at the head of the bed) and the open-plan interior optimize the prevailing breezes so there's never a need to use a fan. "During the day, the air moves from the face of the water towards the land," says Hassam. "And at nighttime, when the lake is warmer [than the air], the breeze goes the opposite way." For protection from sun and precipitation, Hassam chose a standing-seam metal roof and metre-wide eaves to provide shade in summer and sluice water and snow away from the windows during storms. The roof's pale-grey colour reflects light and helps keep the cottage cool. "I borrowed the idea from industrial farms and buildings that have to stay maintenance-free for a long period of time," says Hassam. He framed the wall, ceiling, and floor dimensions to fit standard 4x8 plywood, "so you're not making offcuts that you have to throw away later," he says. To reduce the energy required to transport supplies to the water-access site, he and Dimma selected materials that

could pack flat for easy shipment when possible, including the Ikea kitchen cabinetry. The bedroom's massive sliding barn door was fabricated from centuries-old hemlock logs that had been salvaged from Lake Ontario near Toronto's historic Fort York. And the roof beams are made from reclaimed Douglas fir. The horizontal wood surfaces (the floor, tables, and kitchen island) are not polyurethaned but rubbed with an environmentally friendly oil.

The couple's builders, a crew from Level Design Build, were recreational climbers and mountain bikers who camped on the site and used their climbing gear (ropes, pulleys, and carabiners), rather than mechanized cranes or Bob-Cats, to haul materials up the hill from the dock, in keeping with Hassam and Dimma's eco-friendly approach. The pulley system worked well on the building site most of the time, though on one occasion a load came crashing down to the dock, denting an aluminum tool box.

Hassam describes the Level Design Build crew as "MacGyvers" who fixed broken barge motors mid-lake; improvised scaffolding using the building's own posts as the uprights; and used their boat as an icebreaker as the cold closed in. Through the winter, Hassam and Dimma directed the project largely from a distance—e-mailing drawings to the crew, who sent back photos of the work in progress. "Normally, being removed from the job site gives you anxiety," says Hassam. "You have to allow for realistic time frames." But in this case, the process was remarkably smooth. On weekends during cottage season, the couple would hop aboard their rugged, snub-nosed aluminum Stanley and motor over to find out how things were going. "The boat is a tank," says Dimma.

As the interior neared completion, Brett Schramek and other craftsmen who custom-built furniture for the cottage arrived. Hassam tells stories of drumming jams around the campfire led by Schramek, a percussionist, pounding on an overturned five-gallon pail, while the others played castanets and sticks.

The interior is essentially one big room, with a single bedroom that opens onto the living room. The cottage can comfortably sleep seven (there is a bed

for one in the screened-in porch, the daybed accommodates two, and the bunkie another couple). Room for a good crowd, but not too many. "I wanted smaller groups," says Dimma. "It's more intimate and, I admit, it's a lot less work!" Moreover, Hassam and Dimma, both in their 40s, have no plans for children, so there was no need to consider how the design might function for kids.

The space, and the sensibility, is definitely adult, and activities low key: Dimma will sit for hours with a book or the crossword ("It's a meditative thing for me," she says), while Hassam likes to take a walkie-talkie and hike deep into the interior. She does long-distance swims or canoes along the shore. "For me, it's all about the water," says Dimma. "He's more about the land." He cooks (brilliantly), she runs the household. And although they have only occupied the cottage since the summer of 2009, they have already christened it with a lifetime of happy and tragic milestones, including a birth, a wedding, and a death. During construction, a doe gave birth to a fawn under the bedroom. In 2009, the couple held their wedding in a clearing by the water. Then Otto, Dimma's sister's dog, disappeared into the woods one day soon after. They conducted an ultimately unsuccessful hunt to find her, though the tale has a silver lining. "She died peacefully in a beautiful place," says Dimma. They also tell of the winter day when a wolf pack came at Dimma as she was resting on the ice while snowshoeing. Thankfully, they retreated once she stood.

With the cottage finished, Hassam and Dimma now focus on sharing their many first-time discoveries about Haliburton. "Once, looking at the stars above, I looked down and there were glowing stars on the ground—these glowing speckles," Hassam says. "So I took my lamp and saw it was actually the fungus in the wood glowing in the dark." Bioluminescence. Foxfire. "You realize we're just another particle in this whole cycle." 🐾

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➤ **To see more photos of Hassam and Dimma's cottage, including their simple, off-grid bunkie, go to cottagelife.com/draglake**