

Native Language: Brian MacKay-Lyons

Description

For starters, he's never been on the Internet. And as far as that's concerned, he's never even turned on a computer.

"It's just not that interesting to me," said Brian MacKay-Lyons of the groundbreaking Mackay-Lyons Sweetapple Architects in Halifax, Nova Scotia. "If I got on, I might not ever come out. It's a way to protect myself from getting sucked down that rabbit hole."

That's not to say that the rest of the talent in his firm – partner Talbot Sweetapple and the other eight architects, the single intern or the two administrative staffers – aren't computer literate. It's just that Brian prefers to stay in touch with the real world in other ways, communicating what he finds there in a livelier, more engaging manner.

"The effect is that I can still smell the browning leaves in the fall, and be alive in the actual world," he said. "I find that sketching is a lost art and a powerful tool. If you can't draw an idea live, and in three dimensions, you'll never drive the bus. There's immediacy and excitement in the conversation because of it – people feel the marks in relation to the words."

His architecture is informed by his region. And though he's based in Nova Scotia, his site-sensitive designs have snuggled up to the landscapes of Canada, the United States, and far-off Bangladesh. "You look at the manners and learn at home, then take it out to the world," he said. "It's like a tool kit like a doctor carries. Almost all our models come from vernacular building here – it's cultural, and how things work."

His minimalist "Messenger House" hugs the Nova Scotia land and takes its cues from surrounding agrarian buildings. It's built on a light platform, framed with two-foot by six-foot wooden beams, for a near-banal appearance. "It's what everybody does here – it's cheap and accessible," he said. "It pays attention to the architecture here and then makes peace with that. You may hate the buildings made from two-by-fours, but the fact is they exist, and you need to pay attention to them."

His solar-passive "Sliding House" is nestled onto a hillside, tightly relating to the land where it rests, rather than to the horizontal band of ocean that it faces. "This is the way the land works here," he said. "It's a really simple house that's close to being banal, or not there at all. If it were any simpler, it would disappear altogether."

Regionalism to this architect is not a style, but a method. It's a transportable set of typologies drawn from his rural roots. "All the work we've done is traceable back to my barnyard," Brian said. "The landscape comes first and the buildings second."

For more on MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple Architecture, go to <http://www.mlsarchitects.ca>

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