The architectural Zen of Brian MacKay-Lyons

According to the experts, this Halifax-based builder of dream houses is “an original voice in the development of a contemporary expression of traditional regional architecture.”

By Alec Bruce • Photos submitted by MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple Architects Limited

Photo by: Raoul Manuel Schnell
“His work is universally recognized as pure, dignified, poetic and beautiful.”

Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, gold medal jury

1. University of PEI, School of Business, Photographer: Greg Richardson
2. Shobac Campus, Upper Kingsburg Nova Scotia, Projects left to right: Troop Barn, Chebogue School House, Ghost 6 Tower, Photographer: William Green
3. Two Hulls House, Nova Scotia, Photographer: Greg Richardson
4. Howard House, Nova Scotia, Photographer: Jamie Steeves
5. Sunset Rock, Nova Scotia, Photographer: Greg Richardson
6. Martin Lancaster House, Nova Scotia, Photographer: Greg Richardson
7. Canadian Chancery and Official Residence, Dhaka Bangladesh, Photographer: Steven Evans
Before today, we’d never met; still, I know I’ve seen his face somewhere. But where? As he chatters amiably about his daughter Ally’s graduation, only minutes before, from veterinary college under an unseasonably dark and cold, spring sky, which hangs over Prince Edward Island like a certain threat, I’m hardly listening. Who is this guy, and why can’t I place him? “You must be very proud,” he tells me, referring to my own daughter Jessica’s induction this afternoon into the ranks of animal doctors.

“Yes,” I acknowledge good-naturedly, “Now her mother and I can say we finally have a physician in the family.”

He smiles broadly and asks: “So what is it that you do?”

I tell him that I’m a writer. He seems authentically interested. I ask him about his own vocation. “Oh,” he says almost off-handedly, “I design buildings.”

Then, it hits me. “Would you, by any chance, be Brian MacKay-Lyons, the architect?”

He smiles again. “Why yes, I would be.”

I begin to laugh, possibly a tad too enthusiastically. I explain that just the day before I had left a message on his voicemail, requesting an interview for a feature profile I hoped to write about him.”

“‘Oh,” he remarks, “so, you are that Alec Bruce. Well, how do you do?”

I’m flabbergasted. The odds that our various interests should intersect in this time and place, and in this way, must be astronomical. But MacKay-Lyons hardly seems fazed. He exudes a conviction that life is all about connections, that they happen all the time, and that if we are mindful of them, the universe unfolds pretty much as it should.

For this Halifax architect — one of two principals at the firm, MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple — these days the universe has been unfolding just fine. Earlier this year, he received the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada’s Gold Medal, the highest honour that august body can bestow for professional achievement.

According to the jury, “his work is universally recognized as pure, dignified, poetic and beautiful. His work comes from an intimate connection with his communities. He’s an original voice in the development of a contemporary expression of traditional regional architecture. He continues as a major influence on current and future generations of architects.”

For his part, MacKay-Lyons (who normally eschews the hoopla of professional recognition) is genuinely honoured: “In an increasingly globalized world it’s

Saint John may be Canada’s first incorporated city, but we have a few “firsts” of our own....

Saint John is a city of “firsts”, but we at Commercial Properties have a few “firsts” of our own.

The first high-rise building in the city; the first privately owned building in Atlantic Canada to achieve the LEED Gold standard for new construction; and the first privately owned office building in Atlantic Canada to achieve BOMA BEST certification Level 4 (to name a few).

Throw in our award-winning heritage restorations and our responsive 24/7 ‘@ Your Service’ program for tenants, and you’ll understand why our landmark properties are the most prestigious in the city.

www.commercial-properties.ca

* find our more about Saint John’s numerous “firsts” at www.saintjohnlifeonyourterms.ca/saint-john-firsts.html
On October 24, 2015, join business and community leaders for HCF’s **Rock Around the Clock** themed Eleganza. With your support, we will raise funds for Eastern Health’s five adult hospitals in the St. John’s region of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Funds raised will support the Critical Care Program of Eastern Health.

For information, please call (709) 777-5901.
nice to reaffirm a way of making architecture about place — its landscape, climate and material culture. The RAIC Gold Medal is all the more meaningful because it recognizes a body of work rather than the fashion of the day.”

Indeed, the “fashion of the day” has never much interested him. The houses and other buildings he designs invariably incorporate many schools of architectural thought — from Frank Lloyd Wright’s to “Arts and Crafts” — to cradle a vision that’s always grounded in both the landscape and the human footprint. It’s a tall order, and he’s been delivering it with brio for decades.

Having received his Bachelor of Architecture from the Technical University of Nova Scotia in 1978, where he won the RAIC’s Student Medal, he nabbed a Master of Architecture and Urban Design from the University of California, earning, in the process, the Dean’s Award for Design.

Later, he sojourned in China, Japan, and Italy, working with prominent architects, such as Charles Moore, Barton Myers and Giancarlo De Carlo, before returning home to Nova Scotia in 1983. Two years later, he established Brian MacKay-Lyons Architecture Urban Design in Halifax. Twenty years after that, he partnered with Talbot Sweetapple to form MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple Architects Ltd. Today, the practice works locally and internationally on cultural, academic and residential projects.

Throughout, MacKay-Lyons’ efforts have earned 100 awards, including the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada Firm Award in 2014, six Governor General Medals, two American Institute of Architects Honor Awards for Architecture, 13 Lieutenant Governor’s Medals of Excellence, eight Canadian Architect Awards, three Architectural Record Houses Awards, and seven North American Wood Design Awards.

Still eminent success doesn’t always command a round of applause.

Following a story about MacKay-Lyons in the winter 2013 edition of Dalhousie Magazine, operated by the same university for which he
has taught for decades as professor of architecture, one Brant Laidler, a laboratory technician in the institution’s Department of Earth Sciences had this to say:

“The buildings illustrated in this article have evidently impressed other architects, and are no doubt designed to be efficient in function and in energy consumption. But, am I the only common citizen who finds them to be visually uninspired, uninspiring, and aesthetically unpleasing? Why is it that with all the wonderful architectural styles which have been developed over the millennia, and throughout the world, modern architects design so many ugly, square boxes, especially when it comes to public buildings?”

This is, of course, the endless debate in this field of endeavour: function or form; style or fashion; art or artifice. One man’s meat is another’s poison. Still, says MacKay-Lyons, “Landscape for me is probably the most important issue in our architecture,” he says. “The source of the content is the land itself.”

Spoken, perhaps, like a true Maritimer, who claims literal eons of grounding and landscapes along the southwestern shore of Nova Scotia. “I grew up in Arcadia outside Yarmouth, in a house that was built by one of my ancestors,” he says. This Arcadian grandee and his descendants “married natives, and that house is on a permanent Mi’kmaq village. My forebears go back 10,000 years. I have my Métis card. I feel very, very rooted in the Maritimes.”

As he says, “It’s great to live in a place where you feel you belong. That somehow balances out the difficulty of being a creative person in this part of the world. As we say in the Maritimes, we eat our young.”

Still, and again, it’s about the connections to the land, to the people, to the spirit of place and not about the sprint to fame and fortune. “There are two traditions of working,” he says. “You can set out to make a hit record. Or you can set out to develop a body of work. As a teacher, I believe that the body of work is a more wholesome thing. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”

And now I know where I’ve seen his face before. I’ve seen it reflected in the eyes of my daughters and my parents, my neighbours and my friends, when I speak honestly about my own Maritime roots and the ineffable force that keeps me here. I’ve seen it in my own ancestral home on the eastern shore of Nova Scotia where Bruces have rusticated, off and on, since the late 18th Century.

I’ve seen it in the good earth, and in what my poet grandfather once described as the “deep, grumbling sigh of the bay at night”.

And, when I’m lucky enough to beat the long odds of connecting with a guy like MacKay-Lyons on a frigid island-province in the Gulf of St. Lawrence on the occasion of our daughters becoming veterinary doctors, I see it in the mirror, late at night, when the world is slumbering and the universe unfolds, for once, just as it should.