



Builder Emmanuel Paquette is now in the centre of an exciting and risky endeavour: to keep selling lots and designing houses with the team he has assembled, eventually becoming the developer, as opposed to the builder. His company, Les Habitations Verlieu (www.verlieu.com), reveals more of what he's about: *lieu* is "place," and *vers* or *vert* could both apply—"nearness" and "green" are the destinations Paquette set out to capture in his light-filled spaces



Peter Markhauser is careful to place the house on the lot in such a way that it almost seems to have grown there. The exterior board and batten, cedar shakes, and green roof and trim are simply elements drawn from the forest they inhabit. Graceful arches above the garage-door entry and the front door are designed to echo the curve of the barrel-vaulted ceiling inside

Double Vision

Their sensibilities are very different—and deliberate. Meet two men who are transforming the Gatineau landscape house by house

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T'S ALMOST AS POLARIZED as a taste for cilantro: you either love it or hate it. In this case, the debate is over rooflines, and it begins as you drive north into the Gatineau Hills. In among the pine and spruce, you might pick out two distinct types of houses—one has a steep-peaked wooden roofline that echoes the angularity of the treetops, while the other is a white flat-topped modernist box.

"I hate that boxy design," one of you says. "It doesn't fit here." "I love it," retorts the other. "It's so much more inspired than the traditional one."

Here in this woody setting, two men are transforming the landscape house by house, one on the west side of the Gatineau River and the other on the east. Each has a unique and very deliberate sensibility—and a different market.

On the west side of the river, in Chelsea and Wakefield,

Peter Markhauser has spent most of his career as a residential builder. Though he has built more than 60 houses, it is his most recent work, some of it in a new development called Chelsea Park, that has allowed his trademark to emerge: it's an upscale take on traditional New England-style architecture that says "winter in the woods."

On the east side and decades behind him in experience, Emmanuel Paquette is just beginning to see his vision articulated, with a single house that wowed the crowd gathered at his July open house in Cantley. What he lacks in number of houses built, he makes up for in the singularity of his vision and his determination to get it exactly right. His roofline is flat—a subtle modernist approach to the woods in three distinct volumes that follow the topography of the granite they sit on. Another property nearby is in the design stage, and there are more to come, says the budding developer.



It's a certain thing to choose to build on granite. The Canadian Shield has been so romanticized—so painted, photographed, written about. But try setting a house slab on grade (grade? which grade? pick a grade) or telling buyers about the basement you're proposing to carve out with dynamite. Those who choose to build on granite create structures with a permanence to them. They appreciate how long it took the trees to grow there, so they tend not to clear-cut. Same with the houses: once built, they're there to stay.

PETER MARKHAUSER GREW UP framing houses with his father, who had emigrated from Germany. His father was a jack of all trades—a successful builder who got ahead financially with the familiar builder formula of “build, move the family in, build again, sell, and move again.” Markhauser took the practical experience he got through working with his father and added to it an engineering degree from Concordia University. He tried commercial construction while based in Toronto but didn't like it as much as he liked seeing actual family homes materialize. And so in 1990, he and his wife, Louise, moved back to the Chelsea area and began their dream house—a little “starter home” of 3,500 square feet.

Their current house is the third they've built for themselves and their three children. It stands in a dense forest of hemlock and pine, as majestic as the tall trees that surround it—and not in a pretentious way. The majesty here comes from the tall timbers that Markhauser used in the design

and from stunning expanses of beautiful, glowing wood grain. You feel among the trees even as you step inside—the wide central staircase has a graceful rise and railings in the shape of simple bare branches. The idea of the railings may sound countrified, but the execution is sophisticated—functional art created by Chelsea metal worker and Renaissance man Bill Place. Their cool, organic shapes give the house instant appeal, making you want to climb farther.

There's a reverence here in the Markhauser home, but it's an unstuffy reverence. It's found in the appreciation of old and found materials, such as the 18-inch-wide old barn floorboards, the salvaged leaded windows that grace the formal dining room, and the desk that's made out of the shell of a piano. An industrial planer/joiner in the middle of the kitchen serves as an island. The doors on the master bedroom are 7½ feet tall—masterpieces found among Cohen & Cohen's selection of architectural antiques. One of the doors is an original from the Château Laurier. The centrepiece of the house, however, is a newly built feature—a curved living room ceiling, barrel-vaulted in wood that reflects a warm glow when the fireplace is lit.

The houses Peter Markhauser has designed and is building in Chelsea Park take their wisdom from this house. What he learned by building his own homes, he passes on to his clients. They love the way that his new houses fit into their wilderness context—a romanticized house in the woods of a century or more ago. They are attracted to the height and

originality of the barrel-vaulted ceiling, to the screened-in porch, and to the bamboo flooring. The cedar shakes and roofline also make the transfer from builder to clients, as do the wide staircase and sense of expansiveness and, from that extra breathing space, a definite luxe feel. Though you're in the woods, the leather couch seems more appropriate here than a rocking chair. And the black granite countertops in the kitchen suit the mood as well. If there's an era of Canadian architecture that will, in retrospect, be called “Early New England Dimmer-Switch Pot Lights With Tree-House View,” Markhauser's Chelsea Park executive houses will belong to that movement.

NOW WE CROSS THE RIVER and change design gears. In Cantley, the flat-roofed plan of Emmanuel Paquette's model home is a very different vision of what belongs in the woods. It is set back on the lot in the most sublime way, making the approach up the driveway feel like a discovery rather than a grand entrance. Carefully selected mature trees act as sculpture against the flat surfaces of the exterior concrete fibreboard walls. The three volumes of the house—entrance and stair tower and two larger boxes tiered to resemble the humps of granite on the lot—are neutral-coloured, clean-lined, and crisply accented by small drip edges and beautiful black-framed windows. Many buyers have gone for this Charles Rennie Macintosh/Arts and Crafts-meets-industrial look—the Charlesfort Developments in downtown Ottawa



Peter Markhauser's current house is the third he has built for his wife and their three children. Markhauser obviously appreciates old and found materials, like the salvaged leaded windows (opposite, left) that grace the formal dining room. The doors on the master bedroom (opposite, right) were found among Cohen & Cohen's selection of architectural antiques. The curved living room ceiling (above), barrel-vaulted in wood, reflects a warm glow when the fireplace is lit. The screened porch gives the house a cottage feel (left top), as do the simple bare branches that make up the railings on the wide central staircase (left bottom). The branches are actually functional art created out of metal



The interior design of Emmanuel Paquette's house is modern and airy. "Whenever I got into the country [as a boy], I never could get enough of the open space," he recalls. Paquette and designer Chris Defayette have carefully choreographed the views so that each window is a frame, and within the frame, there is a composition—a tree, a grouping of trees, a chunk of sky or granite. The three volumes of the house (opposite, bottom) are tiered to resemble the humps of granite on the lot



have capitalized nicely on it—but in this context, against the neutral palette of tree bark and granite, the matte neutrality of the masses and the fine black lines of the exterior grids look extra sharp.

To achieve this initial visual impact, Paquette found himself working "like a chemist, choosing this colour, mixing paint, trying to get the right neutral. I ended up looking at the bark of the surrounding trees for inspiration." It's just one detail of many that he oversaw with precise determination. As he holds court on the back deck at his summer open house, he stands with a Corona in hand, beads of the day's humidity running down the bottle, and answers questions about his project. He is careful to explain his thinking on every point, whether it be design layout or materials. It becomes clear that nothing has been left to chance. He tells us that he let the features of the lot speak to him, tells us about his instructions to Chris Defayette, the designer with Framework who did the preliminary drawings and who developed the massing of the volumes and the layout of the house. The instructions were: "Please, walk the land with me, notice the path of the sun, the luminescence of this place, respect the lay of the land, and here—take this in." He handed Defayette a montage of images he'd created on the computer. They conveyed his love of clean lines and open, airy, modern space.

"I was initially surprised by how modernistic Chris's design was, but then I think that's what connected me to it so much. It's of our time, it's forward-looking and optimistic,"

says Paquette of his first model house.

This is romanticism of another type, an adjustment of the eyes for those who think they need a front porch from which to contemplate the wilderness. In fact, many moments of contemplation are built into the design. We just need to walk into the first room and look out a window to see how carefully Paquette and Defayette have choreographed the views. From inside, each window is a frame, and within the frame, there is a composition—a tree, a grouping of trees, a chunk of sky or granite. The residential road and nearby buildings are nearly invisible.

At the open house, people wander through and remark on the views, the slick interior layout, and the sense of fluidity between inside and outside. Paquette has taken an unusual path to get to this moment in the sun: he has spent most of his career in the army, serving for three tours in Bosnia. He then got into real estate appraisal—still a very calculating, rational job—but did so knowing that his ultimate goal was creative. He wanted to be part of a designing and building process. He says that this desire has been with him all his life, stemming from a childhood spent living in city apartments, with summer vacations at an aunt's house in the countryside. "Whenever I got into the country, I never could get enough of the open space," he recalls.

He has a photograph of himself as a nine-year-old boy up in a tree fort. The views in the house he has built have taken him back to this vantage point.

END

