

BRIAN MACKAY- LYONS NOVA SCOTIA

OLIVER LOWENSTEIN MEETS AN ARCHITECT WHO, AFTER A CAREER NURTURING LOCAL BUILDINGS LIKE A VILLAGE DOCTOR, IS ABOUT TO GAIN RECOGNITION WELL BEYOND HIS HOME IN REMOTE NOVA SCOTIA

At the edge of the Western Atlantic, Cape La Have buffers an archipelago of small islands stretching across one of the many estuary rivers of Nova Scotia's glaciated coastline. Few in the British architectural firmament know much about either Brian MacKay-Lyons or the ruggedly beautiful Nova Scotian shoreline he has been designing and building on for more than two decades. This, though, may be about to change.

MacKay-Lyons is an architect whose practice, MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple (MLS), has been rapidly expanding throughout the past decade. His visually striking, aesthetically simple, modernist buildings, built in equally striking locations throughout the Canadian Maritime Provinces, have brought attention from many far-flung parts of the world. Indeed, Kenneth Frampton, *éminence grise* among architecture's critical regionalists, sees MacKay-Lyons' work as key to the renewed debate regarding critical regionalism. If MacKay-Lyons is ambivalent about this tag, he's certainly helped bring a cool, hip gloss to the regionalist debate, upended in the wake of the big architecture juggernaut.

Meanwhile, the internationalisation of the practice's work is taking shape. The most high-profile of its projects will be the opening of the Canadian Embassy in Bangladesh during 2007. The practice is also in the running for some significant

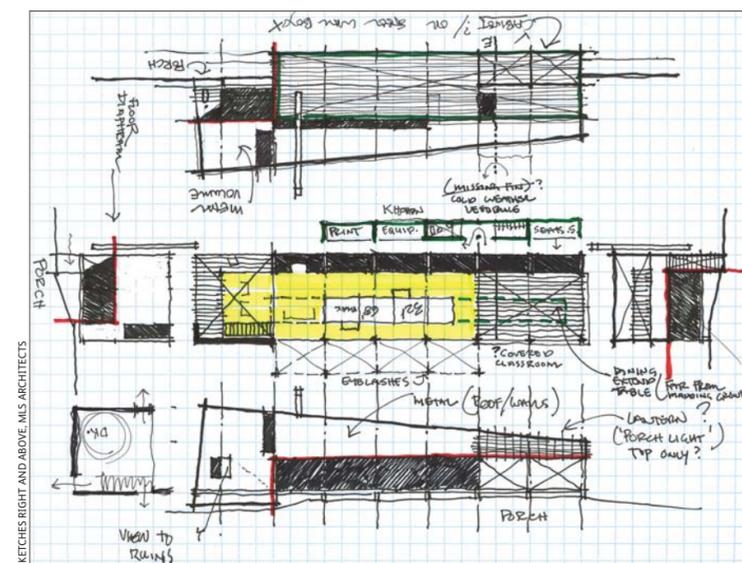
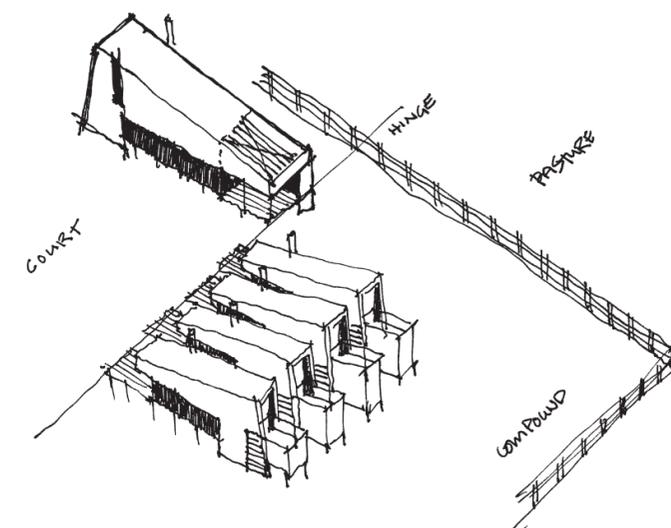
The Ghost Lab site, with the dormitory block, based on the design of a Nova Scotian fishing boat, on the left and a new workshop and MLS's satellite office on the right



Left: One of Ghost Lab's shoreline towers built during Ghost 6

Right and below right: Sketches for extensions to Ghost Lab

Below: An inside view of the workshop. The upper floor will become MLS's satellite office



SKETCHES RIGHT AND ABOVE: MLS ARCHITECTS

projects across Europe. An exhibition of the practice's work begins touring Europe in February, starting in Düsseldorf and going to five other cities.

Yet it is Nova Scotia where MacKay-Lyons' roots are – the ground from which he has nurtured, developed and refined an architectural language. His work applies much of his region's natural and cultural landscape, reframed in contemporary form into an avant-dialect which speaks to the wider architectural world. As for the La Have Islands, MacKay-Lyons has made them one of his main bases. As well as siting his Ghost Lab summer school there, he has quixotically designed some of his most elegant buildings on part of the dramatic easterly edge of the La Have River. When I visited him there he referred to himself as the 'village architect'. These local buildings, since they are still unpublished, remain largely invisible to architecture. But, along with the Ghost Lab structures, it is these modernist houses in this dramatic setting – 'these funky, skinny buildings' as someone said to me – which have brought both architectural and financial attention.

There are three examples within a short distance of his summer base, each immediately

memorable. Messenger House, over the ridge from MacKay-Lyons' home, is a mix of intelligent, light timber frame structures moving around in ways I've not seen before. Clad in well-weathered shingle, it is one of the early precedents for MacKay-Lyons' attraction to sharp, trapezoid-type boxes, and carefully sited to work with the rugged, cliff-lined landscape. On the other side of the bay and just about visible beyond the hills on far cliff-tops, is the oddly balletic, butterfly-winged Hill House. Around the other side of the bay is House on the Nova Scotia Coast #22, which is two spartan box buildings joined by a cultivated wetland. 'I don't know what they are,' MacKay-Lyons muses. 'Maybe land art.'

Decades earlier, MacKay-Lyons headed away from Nova Scotia to live in different parts of the world. In the late Seventies and Eighties he travelled and studied in Sienna ('for the urbanism and humanism'), Japan ('for landscape'), and UCLA California, where he went, he says, because 'I had to confront the suburbs and how much I hated them.' There he worked with Charles Moore, fully aware of post modernism but feeling it respected neither place nor humanity, and developing his own take on a rehumanised modernism. In the

early Eighties he moved back to Nova Scotia, taking a post at the only architecture department in the Maritime Provinces, Dalhousie University, Halifax. He returned, he claims, with a renewed sense of commitment to his childhood origins.

'I decided very deliberately to look at the vernacular building tradition and methodically abstract from it in a modern idiom,' he says. 'It's pragmatic, in terms of your psychological health. You want to know where you and your intellectual roots come from so that you don't find yourself looking through magazines for ideas. While I know the ideas come from the ground, from lowbrow vernacular, from place, I've often thought it's an anti-intellectual approach to just do that. You have to look under the carpets and go to the mountain. That's why you travel, why you work with interesting people, and why you look at the great architecture of the past – to try and learn from it. So my approach has been kind of highbrow/lowbrow.'

Historically, the Maritime Provinces and Nova Scotian economy has revolved around a mixture of the sea and the forest, or wood, wind and water. The vast stocks of fish near the Atlantic Bank means that fishing has been a critical part of local



life since the first settlers pitched camp 400 years ago. During the wars for colonial supremacy between the French and British in the 18th and 19th centuries – first over Canada and then the American War of Independence – Nova Scotia, particularly Halifax, became the workshop of ship and boat-building for the British Empire. The forests were stripped for houses, and boats were built, with techniques, designs and skills overlapping throughout the Maritime Provinces.

This bred fierce self-reliance among the people, who needed to survive the harshness of the long winters, and austerity, making them idealise the simple and distrust metropolitan ostentation and sophistication. Nowadays, although the buildings survive, nearly all the working culture has gone, much of it in the past 40 years. It was this that inspired MacKay-Lyons on his return. 'What I found in Nova Scotia was through landscape and through material culture,' he says. 'And through a cultural ethic about austere things, which happens to overlay quite nicely with modern architecture. I started looking at how buildings respond to the climate and the landscape, how they weather, and the way they are. It became about the means, not the goal.'

Right: One of MLS Architects' more recent domestic builds, Mason House continues the practice's absorption in abstracting the local Nova Scotian vernacular into an elemental and individual take on modernism

Below: Howard House, on rocks just above the shoreline, was initially taxed as a boatshed. It too shows the relationship of MLS's work to the sea

Below right: The shingle cladding of Messenger House is a contemporary response to the age-old question of weathering in vulnerable, exposed coastal sites



“ I WOULD SAY THAT IT'S PRAGMATISM THAT LEADS YOU TO REGIONALISM AND THAT THE ONLY RELIABLE MODELS OF SUSTAINABLE ARCHITECTURE ARE FOUND IN VERNACULAR CULTURES. US HIGHLY TRAINED PROFESSIONALS HAVE LOST CONTACT WITH COMMON SENSE ”

Time away brought a different perspective, enabling MacKay-Lyons to see his own culture more clearly, including the pragmatism that he argues is at the heart of Nova Scotian vernacular: 'In a poor culture like Nova Scotia, if you want to build at all you have to build in a way that people know how to do, otherwise you can't afford to. There are green "cultural sustainability" aspects to that. If you are working with a local client and in the local building tradition interacting with something contemporary – which is very important – you find yourself using materials that are renewable and from the local area. I would say that it's pragmatism that leads you to regionalism, and that the only reliable models of sustainable architecture are found in vernacular cultures. Us highly trained professionals have lost contact with common sense.'

It is this sort of talk which has identified MacKay-Lyons with resurgent critical regionalism, Frampton describing him and Arizona peer Rick Joy as 'the hillbillies'. But MacKay-Lyons is somewhat tentative about this, pointing out how regionalism can be interpreted as 'a form of cultural empathy that you develop, that you can

transport to other places. It's a discipline, it's a way of looking at the world, looking for authenticity'.

MacKay-Lyons' independence of mind is sure to strike a chord with any architect or student drawn to an architectural world beyond big business, with those reimagining the vernacular, and especially with those frustrated by the straitjacket of the mainstream. Long-time professionals and aspirants who are particularly animated by MacKay-Lyons' work have an annual opportunity to work with him as he opens Ghost Lab to all comers.

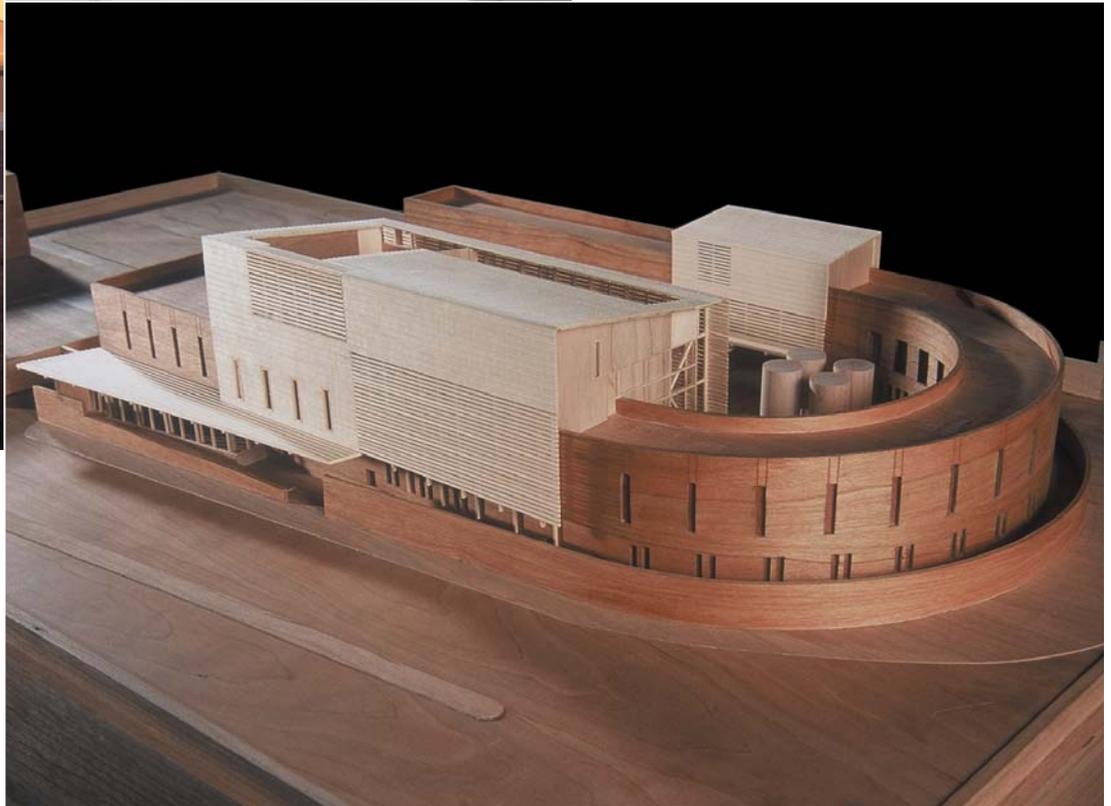
In 2005, four (initially temporary) adjoining, boat-style dormitory buildings were erected in the middle of the Ghost land. It's called Ghost Lab, as MacKay-Lyons tells it, partly because of the village community which inhabited this dramatic piece of coast until the war years, and partly because, at its culmination, there is a big, all-night, mid-summer party, at which the ghosts are brought back to walk again. In summer 2005 the skeleton of a new subsidiary satellite office, a very simple yet effective light timber balloon structure, went up. The evolving plan is to make a permanent base for research and development. In addition, each year an external luminary visits to provide

In the past few years MLS has increasingly been working on larger institutional projects, including various buildings at Halifax's Dalhousie University as well as others across the Maritime provinces, and the University of Toronto, Academic Resource Centre in Scarborough, Ontario.

Right: The library atrium of the Academic Resource Centre, University of Toronto



Above: The exterior of the Academic Resource Centre, University of Toronto



Above: A model of MLS's Canadian Embassy in Dhaka, Bangladesh, opening in 2007

commentary, feedback and criticism. MacKay-Lyons has been able to bring in some heavyweights during Ghost Lab's short half-life. In the afterword to *Plain Modern*, Kenneth Frampton waxes lyrical about his time filling this role, while last year the Finnish theorist Juhani Pallasmaa was the critic in residence.

Ghost Lab is best thought of as a latter-day Taliesin, Frank Lloyd Wright's legendary school. More recent comparison points include Samuel Mockbee's Rural Studio or Glenn Murcutt's Masterclass in New South Wales, Australia. For the past four years MacKay-Lyons has played host to up to 30 student apprentices on his international architectural internship, which involves two weeks of intensive learning-by-doing. The first week is spent designing and planning what is to be built, the second by erecting the structure. Practical and hands-on, the course draws participants of varying experience from all four corners of the world, although knowing how to hammer in a nail is highly recommended.

'What is common to all those alternative educational architectural venues is that they are all a form of criticism of the mainstream, of

education, of the academy, and of the practice of architecture today,' MacKay-Lyons says.

MLS's most high-profile work, however, is because of its expanding portfolio of clients such as the prestigious Canadian Embassy in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Building far away from Nova Scotia enables MacKay-Lyons' team to practice the cultural empathy it has cultivated in entirely different countries and contexts. This means, for example, not using wood in a country where brick is the primary material. Meanwhile, in downtown Halifax a different project – a block of sustainable housing – is winning hearts and minds over to the idea of sustainability. And up the coast a new domestic dwelling has recently been completed, adding to the line of funky, skinny, elemental modernist buildings populating the Nova Scotian shoreline.

Later, on the afternoon after my arrival, MacKay-Lyons dons his village architect hat and sets off for a groundbreaking small local project he is helping out with. The hope must surely be that he'll be able to maintain this commitment to the local as the international phone calls begin to mount up ●

“WHAT'S COMMON TO ALTERNATIVE EDUCATIONAL ARCHITECTURAL VENUES SUCH AS FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT'S TALIESIN IS THAT THEY ARE ALL A FORM OF CRITICISM OF THE MAINSTREAM, OF EDUCATION, OF THE ACADEMY, AND OF THE PRACTICE OF ARCHITECTURE TODAY.”

Oliver Lowenstein runs the green cultural review magazine *Fourth Door Review*, www.fourthdoor.co.uk. He has been visiting Nova Scotia for more than 30 years