

## Brian MacKay-Lyons: Achievements

Brian has made a significant career in the province that he loves. He speaks about the land where his ancestors have lived for centuries and you recognize an attachment to place that is heartfelt and enduring. After travelling and working around the world, Brian returned back home to Nova Scotia in 1983 to establish his own practice. In doing so, he made a commitment that has focused his energies over a lifetime. His search for a contemporary yet regional architecture is widely recognized and appreciated. It offers an alternate view to much of what is going on in architecture today. He offers an architecture of connection, an architecture about community and an architecture firmly embedded in the cultural landscapes in which he builds. His is a firm and resolute regionalism that views the past with fresh eyes, eyes that extend and explore what you sense is, for him, the unfinished work of his region. It is work of great depth that is respected around the world by architects, academics, students and a great many people in the general public.

Brian's began his career doing simple (but beautifully sited, planned and detailed) small houses in his area of Nova Scotia. These, and the subsequent substantial body of single family houses scattered over the Nova Scotia landscape, are, perhaps, what his firm is best known for. This body of work acts as an exemplar for his breed of regionalism. The houses are mostly modest houses, houses that describe a careful attitude to the use of resources. They are houses with real plans! Beautiful plans; Kahn-like in their rigour of served and service spaces yet tempered by the casualness of life on the Nova Scotia terrain. Many of the houses seem to be type variants, houses where you can see the architect improving on work that has gone before, where you observe an architect who is clearly disinterested in novelty and newness, where you follow an architect working seriously on a process that is more related to craft than anything else. The crafts-person learns by working and reworking a piece, by constantly searching for improvements on things. Brian's method of working is just such a practice.

Initial recognition for the residential work has led to a transition in the practice - toward increased public and international commissions. In these larger commissions, the 'practice', the method of working, remains intact. It is interesting to see how this transition has been accomplished, from the small scale work to the larger scale work. It is clear that the initial economy of means and the concern for the specifics of place that are present in the houses has formed a firm discipline for approaching the larger works.

Brian's contribution as a teacher spans over a period of 30 years, initially at the Technical University of Nova Scotia, now at its successor, Dalhousie's Faculty of Architecture and Planning. It is hard *not* to see his influence in the fundamentals of the program transferred from TUNS to Dalhousie. While there are many talented teachers on faculty at Dalhousie, it is apparent that the work of the school, of the students, bears a strong trace of his influence. If you are a firm hiring a student from Dalhousie you know that that student will have certain abilities: to think through the materials of building, to consider the nature of a detail or joint, to be cognisant of place, of a regional condition of site and community.

Brian's clear position as an architect has provided him with an equally clear platform as a teacher. Students know where he stands and are able to test their own inclinations as future architects firmly with, or against, that position.

Brian has also made a significant career as an educator in Canada, but also abroad. He has held 17 endowed chairs/visiting professorships in academic institutions around the world.

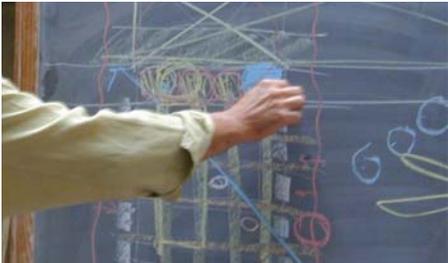
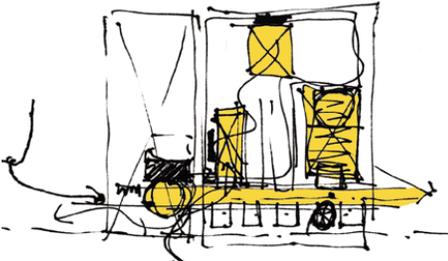
Perhaps most significantly, Brian's life-work transcends specific areas of expertise, 'making connections between areas of focus that might be considered circumscribed'. He does this in the broadest sense. Through a brilliant act of imagination, Brian, in 1994, founded the first Ghost Lab on his farm near Lunenburg. Over the years Ghosts Labs became a "meeting place for a 'school' of architects who continue to share a commitment to: landscape, making and community." And it became much more. It drew not only architects but educators, students, journalists, writers, and many others...from around the world. Ghost connected multiple areas of interest, landscape, making, and community with the joys of teaching, learning, discussing and socializing and...for Brian,with the love of family, animals and friends. Ghost put all Brian's various loves and interests together, in one place, at one time...for the world to come, to learn from and to enjoy. The experience of a Ghost Lab was a form of condensation, more *submersive* than simply *connective*. The 'final' Ghost Lab in 2011 (planned around resistance to the globalization of Architecture culture) marks the end of a series of remarkable place/time/events. What remains are the memories...those remarkable ghosts.

While working locally Brian has had a truly global presence. He has broadcast both his message and accomplishments nationally and internationally. His work has been published extensively here in Canada and around the world. He has taken every opportunity to speak, both throughout Canada and abroad. He is both deeply grounded in a specific place and, simultaneously, a peripatetic global traveller who enjoys speaking to, and engaging with, a broad cross section of people around the world. He has transcended place while remaining deeply embedded in place. He is an incredibly engaging individual who spreads his love of architecture effortlessly, via both a deep knowledge of the subject matter and a healthy dose of humour.

Brian has made a unique contribution, in many ways, to Canadian architecture. Perhaps the best 'ending' to this nomination of Brian Mackay-Lyons for the RAIC Gold Medal would be to note the words of a special award given to him in 2002 ...from his peers in his home province of Nova Scotia:

*2002 Nova Scotia Association of Architects Special Award, in recognition of achievements in architectural design, attaining national and international acclaim while practicing within a firm in Nova Scotia, to the overall benefit of the profession.*

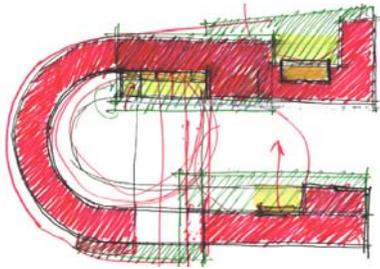
**Brian MacKay-Lyons: Significant Projects**



University of Toronto, Academic Resource Centre, Scarborough Ontario



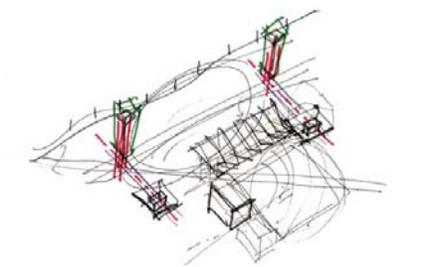
Cliff House, Nova Scotia



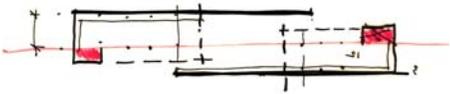
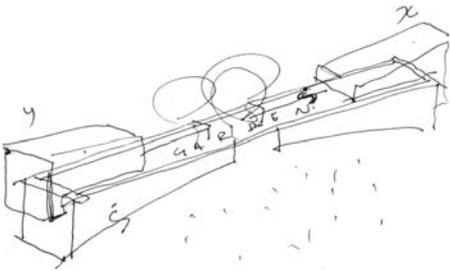
Canadian High Commission, Dhaka Bangladesh



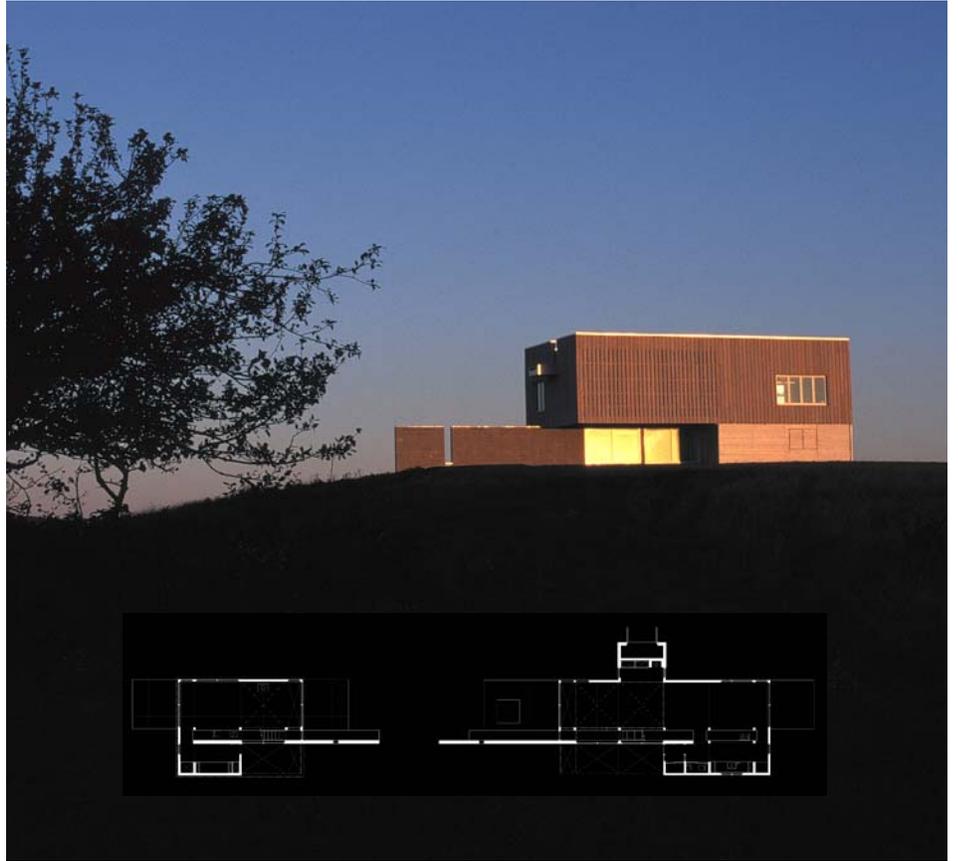
Ghost Campus, Upper Kingsburg Nova Scotia



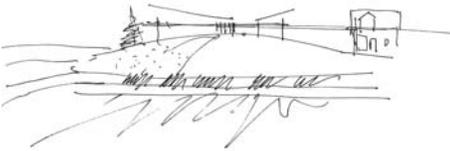
Ghosts, Upper Kingsburg Nova Scotia



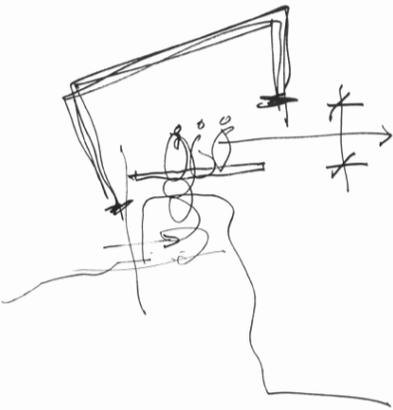
Hill House, Nova Scotia



House on the Nova Scotia Coast 22, Nova Scotia



Howard House, West Pennant Nova Scotia



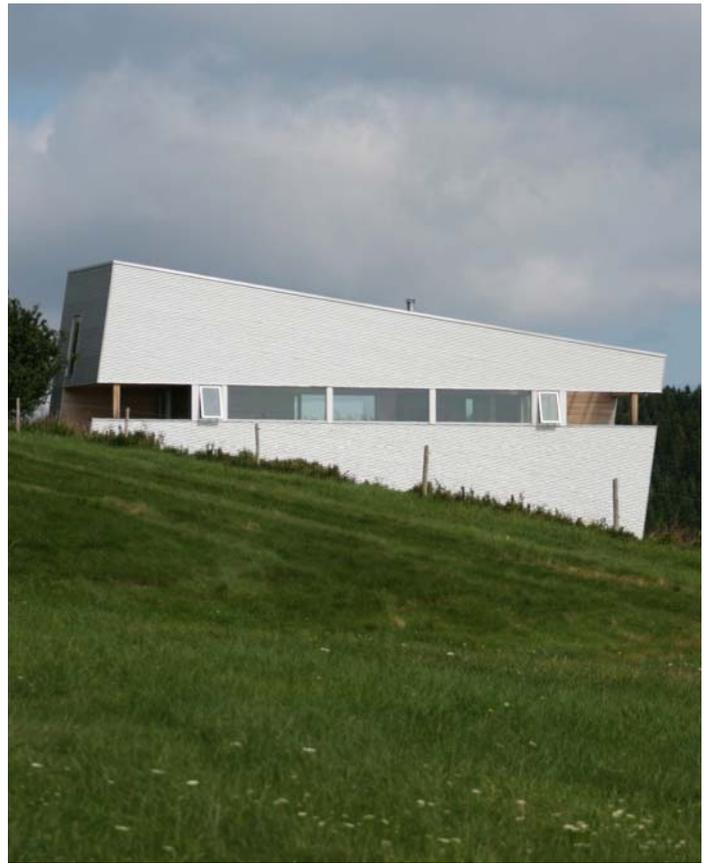
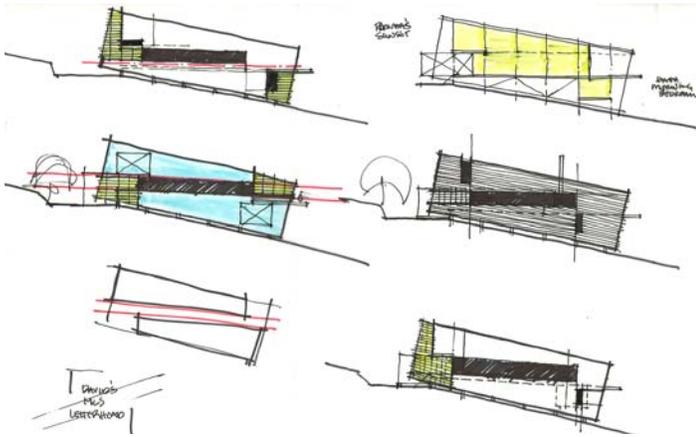
Kutcher House, Herring Cove Nova Scotia



Martin Lancaster House, Nova Scotia



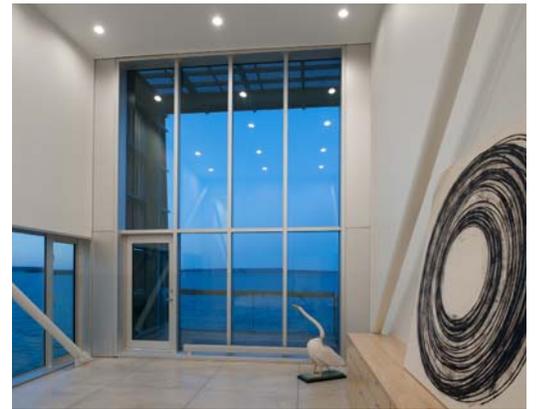
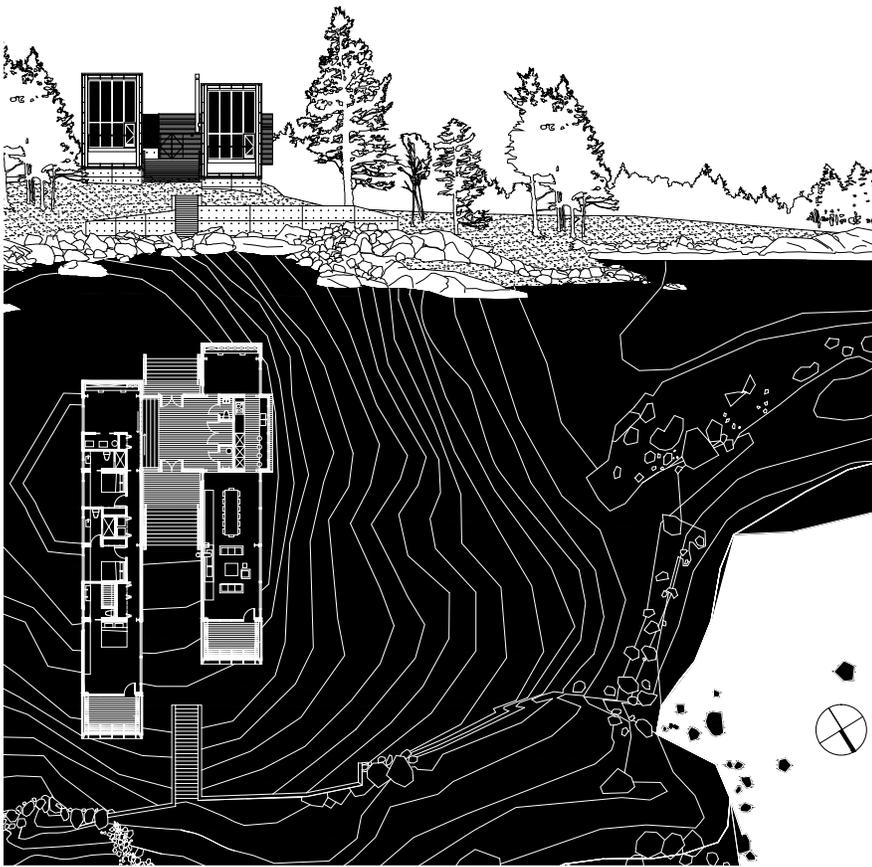
Office of MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple Architects and the Creighton Street Town Houses, Halifax Nova Scotia



Sliding House, Upper Kingsburg Nova Scotia



Two Hulls House, Nova Scotia



Two Hulls House, Nova Scotia



University of PEI, School of Business, Charlottetown Prince Edward Island

## Brian MacKay-Lyons : Awards (edited)

### International Awards (18)

- 2012 • AZ People's Choice Design Award, Azure, Two Hulls House, NS
- 2011 • Record House Award, *Architectural Record*, Two Hulls House, NS
- North American Wood Design Honor Award, Cliff House, NS
- North American Wood Design Design Citation, Two Hulls House, NS
- 2009 • North American Wood Design Award, Citation, Hill House, South Shore, NS
- 2005 • Record Houses Award, *Architectural Record*, Hill House, South Shore, NS
- 2003 • American Institute of Architects Honor Award, Howard House, West Pennant, NS
- 2003 • North American Wood Design Award, Merit, Messenger II House, Upper Kingsburg, NS
- 2000 • Record Houses Award, *Architectural Record*, Howard House, South Shore, NS
- 1998 • Wood Design Honour Award, Leahey House, Pugwash, NS
- 1990 • 'New Room' for Architecture, First Prize, International Design Competition for an Extension to The School of Architecture, Technical University of Nova Scotia, Halifax
- 'New Room' for Architecture, First Prize, International Design Competition for an Extension to The School of Architecture, Technical University of Nova Scotia, Halifax,
- 1988 • Royal Society of the Arts, Manufacture and Commerce, Honourable Mention

### Canadian Awards (24)

- 2012 • Governor General's Medal for Architecture, Cliff House, NS
- 2011 • *Canadian Architect* Award of Excellence, Two Hulls House, NS
- 2008 • OAA Design Excellence Award, Academic Resource Centre, University of Toronto, Scarborough, ON
- 2003 • Canada Council for the Arts Assistance to Practitioners, Critics, and Curators of Architecture, Plain Modern: The Architecture of Brian MacKay-Lyons.
- 2002 • Governor General's Medal for Architecture, House on the Nova Scotia Coast #22 Lower LaHave, NS
- *Canadian Architect* Award of Excellence, Messenger House II, Upper Kingsburg, NS
- 2000 • *Canadian Architect* Award of Excellence, Howard House, West Pennant, NS
- 1999 • *Canadian Architect* Award of Merit, "Between Two Rocks," Digby County, NS
- 1998 • *Canadian Architect* Award of Excellence, Northwest Cove Productions, "Studio Retreats," Big Tancook Island, NS
- 1997 • Governor General's Medal for Architecture, House on the Nova Scotia Coast #12
- 1996 • *Canadian Architect* Award of Excellence, Howard House, West Pennant, NS
- 1994 • Governor General's Award for Architecture, Leahey House, Pugwash, NS
- 1993 • *Canadian Architect* Award of Excellence, Leahey House, Pugwash, NS
- 1992 • Governor General's Medal for Architecture, 2042 Maynard Street, Mixed Use Infill, Halifax, NS
- 1988 • *Canadian Architect* Award of Excellence, Nielsen/White House, Halifax, NS
- Olympic Arts Medal, Gate for Olympic Games, Olympic Arts Festival, Calgary, AB
- Heritage Canada Restoration Award, Windemere House, Restoration/Renovation, Charlottetown, PEI

1986 • Governor General's Medal for Architecture, House on the Nova Scotia Coast, Renovation, Upper Kingsburg, NS

### **Regional Awards (51)**

- 2013 • Lieutenant Governor's Award of Merit, Sunset Rock, NS
- Lieutenant Governor's Award of Merit, Sliding House, NS
- 2011 • Lieutenant Governor's Medal of Excellence, Two Hulls, NS
- Lieutenant Governor's Award of Merit, Leahey II, NS
- 2010 • Lieutenant Governor's Medal of Excellence, Martin-Lancaster House, NS
- Lieutenant Governor's Award of Merit, UPEI School of Business, Charlottetown, PEI
- Lieutenant Governor's Citation, Cliff House, NS
- 2009 • Lieutenant Governor's Medal of Excellence, Bridge House, NS
- Lieutenant Governor's Citation, Ghost Campus, Upper Kingsburg, NS
- Lieutenant Governor's Citation, House on the Nova Scotia Coast #22 Spa
- Lieutenant Governor's Citation, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Port Campus, Halifax, NS
- Lieutenant Governor's Citation, Canadian Chancery and Official Residence, Dhaka, Bangladesh
- 2007 • Lieutenant Governor's Award of Merit, Brock University Plaza Building, St. Catharines, ON
- Lieutenant Governor's Citation, Regan House, Halifax, NS
- Lieutenant Governor's Citation, Creighton St. Townhouses, Halifax, NS
- 2006 • Lieutenant Governor's Medal of Excellence, Young Ave. House, Halifax, NS
- Lieutenant Governor's Citation, Mason House, NS
- 2005 • Lieutenant Governor's Citation, Fischer House, NS
- 2004 • Lieutenant Governor's Medal of Excellence, Hill House, South Shore, NS
- Lieutenant Governor's Award of Merit, Academic Research Centre, University of Toronto at Scarborough, ON
- Lieutenant Governor's Award of Merit, New Office of MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple Architects Limited, Halifax, NS
- Lieutenant Governor's Citation, Ship's Company Theatre, Parrsboro, NS
- 2003 • Lieutenant Governor's Medal of Excellence, Messenger II House, Upper Kingsburg, NS
- 2002 • Lieutenant Governor's Medal of Excellence, Agnew Residence, First South Cove, NS
- 2000 • Lieutenant Governor's Award of Merit, Howard House, West Pennant, NS
- Lieutenant Governor's Citation, Dalhousie University Faculty of Computer Science Building, Halifax, NS
  
- 1999 • Lieutenant Governor's Medal of Excellence, Kutcher Residence, Herring Cove, NS
- Lieutenant Governor's Award of Merit, House on the Nova Scotia Coast #22, Lower LaHave, NS
- The Alcuin Society Citations for Excellence in Book Design in Canada, Adult Picture, Photography and Museum Catalogues Category, TUNS Press Documents in Canadian Architecture Brian MacKay-Lyons: Selected Projects 1986-1997
- 1998 • Lieutenant Governor's Award of Merit, Banque Royale, West Pubnico, NS

# METROPOLIS

POINT OF VIEW MAY 15, 2008

<http://www.metropolismag.com/Point-of-View/May-2008/Q-A-Brian-MacKay-Lyons/>

## Q & A: Brian MacKay-Lyons

elizabeth

The Ghost site is located on an ocean estuary near the spot where the French first landed in North America in 1604. Ghost 6, pictured above, was inspired by the traditional Nova Scotia lighthouse. Photo by James Steeves.

Each summer, architect Brian MacKay-Lyons takes a break from his award-winning practice, [MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple Architects](#), to host [Ghost Lab](#), a program where students and practitioners design and build a project on the dramatic coastline of his farm in Nova Scotia. Originally started in 1994 as a building exercise for nine architecture students, the project has [grown into an intensive two-week workshop](#) meant to steep participants in architectural principles and experimentation. This June marks the tenth anniversary of Ghost, and to honor the occasion, [Princeton Architectural Press](#) is releasing *Ghost: Building an Architectural Vision*. The book, which comes out today, follows the first nine Ghost Labs through a series of essays, images, sketches, and historical documents. The book not only presents a wonderful snapshot of Nova Scotia's vernacular architecture but also illustrates the power of collaboration to create modern structures informed by traditional building techniques. MacKay-Lyons spoke with me from his office in Halifax about the project, his architecture practice, and his love affair with a particular landscape. **How did the landscape look when you launched Ghost in 1994?** Historically, the area had been farmland and a fishing village.

There were ruins and the remnants of stone walls and foundations for basements of houses. It had grown up almost entirely into a mature forest. When we started, we had to clear a spot for tents and a spot to build. The first Ghost was made from logs that we cut out of the woods. **You've been studying the history of Nova Scotia and its building traditions for years.** Most of my friends couldn't wait to leave Nova Scotia and see the rest of the world. I had the opportunity to travel a lot when I was a kid, so that meant having some perspective. I started studying the building traditions in a more seriously way in architecture school when I was a student. I went to the city and was told by the professors that where I was from was nowhere, that the vernacular architecture traditions weren't architecture. The more they told me that, the more interested I got in it, to prove to them that they were wrong. **Would you say that mentality is still prevalent in architecture schools today, that there is still a disconnect from the material culture of our past?** In a certain way it's worse. When I was studying, it was the late-modern period, when there were a lot of failed European architects teaching, but architecture was still about building things. It wasn't a virtual topic yet. The more the computer has become a main tool, the less concrete architecture has come. The culture of universities and therefore the culture of architectural education have changed. It's become more esoteric. I think professors have quite a vested interest to keep it that way, frankly. **You end each Ghost Lab with a party for the village. Is that an attempt to communicate that architecture is communal, not esoteric?** Architecture can feel disconnected from society. People are made to feel they are not part of the cognoscenti. As a democratically minded person, I've always resented that. Architecture is a social art; it's important that it is accessible in terms of its meaning. I think young people go into architecture because they know it's about the environment, they know it's about the community, they know it's about making things—but it doesn't take long before architectural education changes things. Suddenly, you've lost your common sense; you left it at the door of the monastery. **The projects at Ghost pay great attention to the topography, the weather, and the landscape, which are all very common sense elements.** It seems like the site itself is very empty and sparse, with no clues. It seems like there's not much there. And yet if you train yourself to see what's there, to be a good observer, or have empathy with place, then you see lots of stuff and lots of possibilities. I've trained myself to mine the place for meaning, to see it. This comes from twenty-five years of going out with my chainsaw and my dog, and clearing the land and building fences. It comes from sitting on the stump of the tree I just cleared, and looking down into the valley and trying to understand it. It's a love affair, really, with this piece of property. **From the beginning, you have included a master builder at the lab.** The master builder use to be the builder, the engineer, the architect, all wrapped up into one in the Middle Ages. It's a very democratic model, but it's also hierarchical in that people contributed based on their level of knowledge and skill. That's a very important message to young people in a relativistic age when we've kind of oversimplified democracy. People need to understand that excellence matters and experience and skill matter. It's like the story of Abe Lincoln. He can grow up in a log cabin and become the president of the United States, and the idea that that's possible is very important. That's the democratic idea. But he doesn't get to be the president if he's no good. **It's amazing what you get done in such a short amount of time. I imagine the speed with which you realize these projects contributes to the need for a hierarchy of order.** As I say in the book, teamwork is learned quickly when there's too much to do. At the Ghost site, if you are a prima donna, you get bypassed. There's no time for it. **How did your neighbors react to that first Ghost project?** One of the reasons we keep doing this thing is because it reaffirms that society knows what architecture is, and that they actually have an innate curiosity about it. The neighbors are intellectually curious. Some of them have PhDs; others can't read or write, but that doesn't really matter. It's a natural curiosity. They want to see what the young people are doing that year and they come for the party. We start the bagpipes at dusk and they come. **I loved reading about Albert Oxner, an elder in the community who cannot read or write, and the story he tells you about how he and his father first came to shingle their barn. Our culture can tend to value those doctoral degrees, but in truth, what we can learn from a man like Albert about building and its evolution is invaluable.** Especially today when there is so much interest in issues of the environment—as if that is some kind of new fashion, which drives me crazy. There's a tremendous amount of environmental knowledge that was in the heads of those kinds of people. **You write of how everything was used, nothing went to waste—even the shell carcass of the lobster was returned to the soil.** That's right. Of course, we are a long way from that today in our society in general. I don't know how we can get it back, for all our talk about environment. Everybody's an expert in "greenness." Yet we're doing much worse. We can't go back to a subsistence economy; it's naïve to think that's going to happen. I just spent a month in Mali, in West Africa, and it's still like that there. Every single tin can, everything is recycled. When you don't have anything, you don't waste much. It's hard to know how we get smart like that again in this fat world that we live in. **Nova Scotia is not immune to change, and you note that tourism and summer homes there are on the rise.** It's happening slower than other places, but it's happening. I don't want to come across as some kind of Luddite, some kind of conservative person who isn't interested in the future. What you don't see in the book is the architecture that we make in our practice in this landscape, which is extremely modern. We're not interested in turning the clocks back, but there is that dilemma about continuity versus progress. **When you're doing a new project, like your commission for the Canadian Embassy in Bangladesh, do you budget in time to research and to immerse yourself in that culture in advance of putting pen to paper with a design?** No. One thing that is often assumed is that you do analytical work before you design something. If you are a designer, whether you are a designer of software or a designer of toothbrushes, your medium of observation is design. You palpate the world by proposing things, and you learn about the world by the way the world reacts to the things you add to it. I think it's a non-designer's approach to do a whole bunch of analysis about a culture and then design something. We jump in and start designing in a participatory way. You can live in a place for your whole life and never see it. You ask someone to draw the house they grew up in; they probably can't. If you train yourself to be a good observer, you can see things very quickly. When I flew in to

Bangladesh during monsoon season, I saw that ninety percent of the country was under water. It was a big river delta, and it was full of silt and teeming with people. It didn't take long to realize the building would be made out of brick from the Ganges Delta, and there would be good bricklayers who would be affordable. It took about ten minutes to figure that out. The Canadian government, of course, is not interested in that because bricks aren't spiffy enough. But you learn to see quickly. When I walk on the beach with my friend who has been painting for fifty years, he sees colors that I can't see. It's about the discipline that you're in. **What about the preparation for Ghost? Do you come up with a basic concept of what you hope to achieve and then go for it, or is there more preparation in thinking about how you will achieve that summer's building experiment?** It's ironic, because it's high stakes, right? I love this place and I don't want to ruin it with some half-baked project cluttering the landscape. I think about it a lot, and I think about it in advance, in a kind of pre-architectural way, a very abstract way. The sketches that are in the book, that begin each chapter, are sketches that I drew live the first day with the participants. In every case, they are done live on the spot and we tell ourselves, "We've got till noon." If we don't have a concept before noon, we're in trouble. Frank Lloyd Wright says if you don't get an idea on the site on the first day, you're not going to get one. It's a bit reckless, actually. But there are lots of corrections in the process, because we have smart colleagues who take part and a really good structural engineer and some really good builders. Our architectural practice is much more methodical. **One of the essayists talked about this idea that you instill in the participants. He says you encourage "thoughtful play" during these summer retreats.** People who choose a life in architecture want to believe that it's going to be fun. It's like being a child all over again. If you go into a life in architecture without a sense of that, then you are really going to be unhappy. Ghost is a way to remind everybody about why they went in to architecture, even if it is a bit utopian or idealized. That's ok. Seeing the world through rose-colored glasses has its value. I criticized the priesthood of architectural professors, and of course I am one; I've been one for twenty-five years. There's a good side to the priesthood, and that's to keep the lights on in tough times. To keep the lamp lit. The world can be going to hell in a handbasket, and the economy can be down around your ankles, and the whole thing can look pretty bad. Then it's even more important to be optimistic. **Do you believe we are in dark days now?** Yeah, kind of. I'm not going to go and hide. It may seem like it from New York, like I'm hiding on the fringes of the world. We have empathy for the world; we're not hiding from it. **At one point you stopped Ghost for a few years. Why did you start again?** There was no guarantee that it would keep going. We didn't know that there was going to be a party every year until people started coming to the bagpipes [announcing the start of the party]. Then we thought, This is socially sustainable; I guess we should keep doing it. The great thing about the Ghost is that we reevaluate it each year. It's not bureaucratic, it's not attached to the university where I teach, so it can adjust. It's nimble enough not to stagnate, and every year we reinvent it. **What are your plans for this summer's project?** We will develop a minimum house prototype. The essential house, if you will. I'm really interested in beginnings and origins and zero points of things and digging back. We're hoping this year to go back to the spirit of that first Ghost, the glowing lantern, by doing a modest house all over again. Once more with feeling, as they say. **Can you tell me more about the design?** One thing that's important is this idea of "zero," as I call it, this idea of minimum. There's a universal aesthetic dimension to it: elegance is a word that they use in the sciences and in every field, and it means the same thing in every discipline. In architecture that means something that is accessible, affordable, and it might involve minimum labor, so it somehow connects it to ideas of material culture. We've always done a lot of little houses in our practice—one a year, at least, that's under \$100,000—to try and prove that you can make architecture out of something very simple and that there can be dignity in living in something that's not expensive. I'm a hopeless democrat, I guess. For this year's house, one of the things we're trying to investigate is how a rural-house prototype has the DNA to become a good urban-house prototype. This one will probably be dismantled, and the plan is to rebuild it in the lobby of Canada House, in Trafalgar Square, next fall in London. That's where we are now, and between now and June we'll have to get a lot clearer.

The first Ghost in 1994 had participants build over the original foundation of a historic home. They wrapped the structure in a translucent sheath, lit it from the inside, and had a party for the neighbors. MacKay-Lyons once described it this way: "Close your eyes and imagine a foggy mid-summer's night. Imagine the glowing, translucent ghosts of archetypal buildings on the ruins of an abandoned village at the edge of the world."

"Technology is understood by making," MacKay-Lyons writes. "Pragmatism is the best teacher." In Ghost 3, participants addressed the intense wind loads carried off of the Atlantic and created a "wind tunnel" out of recycled lumber and panels of corrugated polycarbonate. Photo by Brian MacKay-Lyons.

Christine Macy, a critic invited to the first Ghost Lab, writes in the book: "By allowing a multitude of ghosts—'generations of ghosts'—to speak, we can break the domination of the present, open ourselves up to memory and heritage, and ultimately think about life beyond the present—toward survival of the larger culture and the world we live in."

## Design Dialogue: Brian MacKay-Lyons

SEPTEMBER 26, 2014

**Brian MacKay-Lyons** is the founding partner of *MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple Architects*, a professor at *Dalhousie University*, and the founder of *Ghost Lab* – the now legendary 2-week summer design/build program that took place on his family farm in Nova Scotia from 1994 to 2011. While relentlessly local, Brian's work has been recognized internationally with more than 100 awards, 300 publications, and 100 exhibitions. In 2012, the American Institute of Architects recognized the collective work and influence of *Ghost with an Institute Honor Award for Architecture*. Jurors, including Thomas Phifer of *Thomas Phifer & Partners* and Kristen Murray of *Olson Kundig Architects* said of *Ghost*:

"This project reveals itself as more than just a grouping of buildings; it is a physical experiment in education as well as an act of will to preserve the serene beauty in the landscape. As a teaching tool, the students find themselves immersed in an environment where they are challenged to produce high quality designs they can self-construct. This project is truly more than the sum of its parts; it is a wonderful resolution of materials, details, landscape, and learning."

On August 22nd, 2014 Brian hopped off his tractor and wiped the diesel fuel off his hands to discuss architectural education with Keith and Marie Zawistowski, co-founders of *thedesign/buildLAB* at *Virginia Tech* and partners of *OnSite Architecture*.

[An excerpt from this interview appeared in volume 25, number 4 of *Inform Magazine* ]

**Marie Zawistowski:** You are a famous architect, revered by many inside and outside the discipline. We, and our generation of architects, have collected books about your work, and your projects have received international recognition. How do you feel about that?

**Brian Mackay-Lyons:** Wow... I don't know. I'm not sure it's true, first of all. But to the extent that it is true, I think that the peer discourse on architecture and on architectural education is really important. To be part of the conversation with other people around the world who are excited about design is really rewarding.

It seems like so much of the discourse is focused on the big urban centers. Having sat on a lot of design juries for big urban centers, I am not sure that it's even true that the best work is happening there. In fact, I am sure it isn't but it's really important to be part of an international discourse if you are operating in a small isolated place like I am and like you are. You have the benefit of being able to concentrate, live in a place where you can get your work done and not be distracted by cocktail parties, and at the same time feel connected to the larger discourse. You can get cabin fever working in a small place.

**Keith:** Your contributions to the discipline of architecture have been both in practice and in education. In 1994, you founded *Ghost*, an international laboratory that influenced generations of architects with its simplicity and affirmation of timeless architectural values of place and craft. It was a pretty bold move, and it seems for us like it was a direct reaction to your discontentment with academia and the way architects were being educated. Do you still feel that strongly about the state of architecture education and the profession?

**Brian:** Yeah, for sure! And it would still be a fair criticism of both, because I think both have a role in the education of architects. I felt like – and still feel like – the schools get flakier and flakier, and the practices become more and more philistine. Practice is becoming increasingly dominated by a corporate globalized culture, and the small firms are getting eaten up.

Practices have not been doing as good a job as they used to at the apprenticeship part of education. I think large corporate practice views young people as mobile capital, human capital. The idea that you take someone under your wing as an apprentice, the way Louis Sullivan took Frank Lloyd Wright, is not as strong as it used to be.

So I don't just blame the schools anymore. I started out being pretty clear that I thought the schools were getting flaky. You know how it goes, the university culture forces people to get Ph.D.'s. So they get a Ph.D. and they are 45 years old and they have never seen a two-by-four. And the last thing they want the students to think or understand is that they don't know what a two-by-four is. So they have to call it some flaky name and hope that they never get found out.

Then those same faculty members choose the new faculty members in the school and the balance is tipped towards schools without practitioners, or schools where there is nothing behind the curtain, like in *The Wizard of Oz*.

**Keith:** So what do you think the education and the architect ought to look like?

**Brian:** Well, what I don't think it needs to look like is an all design/build curriculum. I guess I have also learned that it has its limitations, like everything. One reason that *Ghost* has taken this hiatus is because I realized that I was being insincere.

I believe an architect's role is not to be the builder. The architect's role — like a conductor's role in an orchestra — is not to be the first violinist either. I learned at *Ghost* that because I'm not a builder, I would volunteer for really dumb jobs on the site like driving spikes or carrying lumber. It was only when I was doing something not very challenging craft wise that I had the distance from the coal face that I think an architect needs to have to be the architect. I also learned in practice that contractors aren't happier if you start to act like a builder and start telling them where to pile the lumber or how to do things. I found that what works best in the construction industry is, when the builder asks you a question, to say you don't know the answer. Then the builder can be the builder and their experience is then something you can learn from.

I think both in practice and education, the architect is like Chauncey Gardiner in the movie *Being There*, when he said, "I like to watch." I think that is what architects do, they watch. So I think there is a romance around design/build that is a little bit misleading. However, I also think that it is really essential. Like in *The Fountain Head*, it's essential to have the experience of building in your education or in your practice. Rick Joy built the first six houses he did, but that was it.

The reason to have had the *Ghost Lab* is for architects to learn humility, so that they don't become the asshole architects on the site telling the builders what to do and not respecting them.

There are countless stories at *Ghost*. My favorite stories are when the architects and the people with Ph. D.'s and the engineers had it all wrong, and some guy who didn't even go to high school just makes them look really dumb. <all laugh> It is a wonderful experience.

So really *Ghost* was about humility. Realizing that builders are really smart in a different kind of way than us and that we would do well to listen.

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**Marie:** You've written about the impact of *Team 10* on your own intellectual development as an architect. You are also very close friends with architects such as *Rick Joy*, *Marlon Blackwell*, *Tom Kundig*, and *Wendell Burnette*. You guys visit each other's work, travel together and even look in on each other's families. Do you consider yourselves a school of thought – a movement in architectural history?

**Brian:** Oh boy that's another tough question. You know, there's this book coming out called *Local Architecture*, which is Princeton Architectural Press's idea of how to take all of that and make a name for it that sells books. <all laugh> It's really called "building place, craft, and community." I think all of us think that there is a curriculum there.

Rick [Joy] asked: "What is a curriculum for architecture today? What would it look like?" My temperament toward the timeless side of things and the fundamentals would be to say that there are 3 courses in the school of architecture: one is about place, one is about craft and one is about community. You only need three courses; it could be the best school in the world...

So the name of that book is really an idea about a curriculum, to bring it back to education. Because in that conference that we had in our barn a couple of years ago, education, again, was the elephant in the room. Nobody was talking about it, while everybody was talking about it. Because we're all teachers, right? Ask me the question again, I had an answer.

**Keith:** Do you guys consider yourselves a school of thought? Are you a movement, the way that Team 10 was?

**Brian:** I don't know, maybe a little bit... I know that sounds very egotistical and that is why I didn't just come out and say it.

**Marie:** But I said it.

**Brian:** Yeah, there you go! I forgot it, conveniently. Yes, about education, would be the answer. Peter Buchanan calls this group of people, which includes many others, "The Resistance." And maybe we will have an exhibition that will go around after the book comes out and Peter will be the curator, and we will call the exhibition "Resistance," just the idea of resistance. A resistance to the unwholesome break between the academy and practice, between the head and the hand, we're a school about that. We agree on that. The idea about where you find your lessons, to be environmentally sustainable, we probably agree on all of that.

Mostly I think, to take [Kenneth Frampton's](#) position, the value of "[Critical Regionalism](#)" is in its resistance to the numbing effects of globalization, cultural globalization, which includes architecture and everything else. That's a school, yeah for sure, that's a school! We think of regionalism – and I hate the word, just like I hate the word sustainability, but we need a word. When you hear the word regionalism, people think conservative, parochial, provincial... and what I like about the other, the view that we hold as a group, is this idea of resistance.

It's a critical position; it's a radical position. It's like saying I don't get it; I'm not buying it. I think it is a radical position, this position of "resistance," so maybe there is a school there.

**Keith:** Part of the reason we asked the question is because I think long before you guys started to identify with that, the world almost saw a kind of inevitability. You guys were the guys that were together on my bookshelf when I was in college. And I was floored when I first met Marlon Blackwell a few years ago, and he told me you guys were getting ready to go on a trip together to see the Dogon in Mali. I thought, "of course they would go together. How could they not all be close friends?"

**Brian:** The better story is that Frampton, Pallasmaa and Murcutt were all going to go on that trip too and it was their wives who told them "no you can't go because you are going to die there." But Juhani [Pallasmaa] said to Rick [Joy]. He said: "So, Rick, when was the last time you went to the Dogon?" And Rick said: "The who?" We had all been raised on that book, *Architecture without Architects* by Bernard Rudofsky.

**Keith:** It's a cherished one for us too.

**Brian:** It changed the world that book, and it is just a picture book after all, you know? Where is the thesis, where are the words? The idea that you can look in other places for inspiration... I was also influenced by Charles Moore in that way. Sea Ranch was an important project because it said you can look at just the barns; you can look at sheep barns. You can look at other stuff; it doesn't have to be sanctioned. You can look outside, you can look at what poor people are doing. The trip to Mali – that made it look like we were a group – was really based on a bunch of young people listening to their elders.

Because I think looking to what traditions do is kind of like respecting your elders. So Juhani says, you have got to go to the Dogon, then I guess you may as well pack your bags. You should just go, right? Just on faith. So it wasn't our idea, it was his idea.

**Marie:** Ending with the subject of technology (which I know is one of your favorites), we have a story for you: While we were at the Rural Studio, Bruce Lindsey accepted a position at Auburn. Sambo invited him out to the studio to give a talk about his then recently completed book called *Digital Gehry*. After the third or fourth angry or condescending student question, Sambo turned around, looked at us and said "Y'all have got to chill out. I don't know anything about any of this stuff, but the world is changing and you aren't going to be able to practice the way that I do."

Like the Rural Studio was at that time, Ghost was fully analog, both in terms of representation and production.

Do you think the resistance to digital tool is a generational divide, or is there something truly fundamental at stake?

**Brian:** Oh boy, it's hard not to agree with Sambo. You don't want to put your head in the sand. That doesn't do anybody any good. I think some of the other problems that we talked about today are what Peter Buchanan describes as a kind of neurosis of the profession. He said that unfortunately the computer, the digital tools, are sometimes contributing to these problems. Like the young graduate has to be CAD monkey to get a job.

I think the computer is like a tool. It's just a tool. Fire was a tool; fire is a tool. With fire you can cook your dinner or you can burn your house down. It's not the tool's fault if you burn your house down cooking dinner; it's not the fault of fire. So the computer is a great tool, and we use it all the time in our office too.

I don't have anything against computers. I find that I am very interested in computers, in the way they are bad simulations of the brain, and I think that artificial intelligence is something really interesting, especially when we start to talk about design. So I find the work of Bill Mitchell on "Shape Grammar" very, very interesting.

As a production tool, it just serves the production. I tell students when I give lectures (and they hate hearing it) that if you can't draw by hand, with a pencil, upside down, in 3D, across a table, looking in the eyes of a client, live, you will never drive the bus; you're never going to be the author. I believe that to be the case because it is a social art, architecture, and you are looking in the eyes of another person, not in a fucking screen. The real eureka moments happen there.

The computer doesn't deal with ambiguity very well. You have to tell the computer how long the line is and how thick it is, and there is no room for "sort-of-something." When you make a pencil line in a pencil drawing, you can leave half the drawing unfinished because you don't know what goes there, or you can make a line have emphasis where you are clear or where you think something is important, then let it trail off. I think the computer doesn't tolerate, yet, not being sure of things. Lack of certainty is not what the computer understands. At least not the architectural tools we have today.

I remember 30 or 35 years ago, Bill Mitchell said to me at UCLA: "Come with me, become a computer guy, because any minute now you are going to be able to sketch just like you do by hand on the computer." And I'm so happy I didn't go on that journey with him because I think there is only one artist that's made even a serious attempt, the British artist, the painter, David Hockney. A tool hasn't produced, it hasn't happened yet. That fluidity of the hand and the brain together ... you look at a violinist play the violin, a really good violinist, the brain is hard wired to the hand. Frank Lloyd Wright said "we only understand what we make." Yeah, that's it.

## **Brian MacKay-Lyons: Publications (edited)**

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- MacKay-Lyons, Brian, , Ghost 13 International Architecture Conference
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- 2008 • MacKay-Lyons, B. Ghost: Building an Architectural Vision. Princeton Architectural Press: New York, 2008.
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