

STRANGE & FAMILIAR

ARCHITECTURE ON FOGO ISLAND



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Todd Saunders's architecture transforms an island landscape

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Architect Todd Saunders' sculpture-like artist studios perched on the rocky shores of Fogo Island created a buzz among worldwide architecture fans when the first images were released. Since then, the four artists studios and the new Fogo Island Inn have been documented in more than 80 international magazines and blogs ranging from the New York Times Magazine, to fashion arbiter Wallpaper to architectural magazines such as Domus.

The striking buildings are located in an equally dramatic natural setting that is the rugged sub-arctic landscape of Fogo Island, a small, remote rocky outcrop off the coast of Newfoundland. The combination of sophisticated design and wilderness backdrop establishes a contemporary frame on an ancient landscape; one that embraces the excitement of living on the edge both in relation to nature and to modern design. The combination has been alluring to a large global audience of design aficionados and has elevated Saunders' already rising star even higher.

The success of Todd Saunders' designs re-brands Fogo Island as a geo-tourism destination. This fulfills one of the goals of Zita Cobb, the Fogo Island-born social entrepreneur. With her 'arts-centric' approach she has spearheaded the architectural commission and an international artists residency while enlisting the local support that has helped get these projects off the ground. The community's two thousand residents effectively host the project and, ultimately, have the most at stake. With the traditional cod industry gone, Fogo Island society must find new ways to generate its economy or gradually wither away. In what Cobb herself describes as a 'dance with the devil', her project's success is dependent on retaining what is special about the way of life on Fogo Island while simultaneously redefining its place in the world.

For Todd Saunders the Fogo Island commission represents a homecoming. Saunders is based in Norway where his reputation has been established but he was born and raised in Gander, Newfoundland, just over two hours journey from Fogo Island. The Fogo Island project has a very personal dimension for this architect and client satisfaction takes on a whole new meaning when the client, as in this case, includes kith and kin. He grew

up playing outdoors, running on the land and building forts. Saunders likes to joke, "Everything I learned about architecture, I learned before I was fifteen years old". Newfoundland was a formative experience for Saunders as a person and as an architect. This deeply shared background sensitizes his awareness that each detail of the buildings he designs have to be scrupulously 'right' in the eyes of his most demanding critics: Fogo Islanders.

The vision of the architectural program is remarkable in its requirement that every aspect of the project pay respect to the cultural traditions that inspire it. The charm of rural Newfoundland outport communities is found in the human scale of the buildings, and in what writer Chris Brooks describes as "the poetry of inhabiting a particular piece of geography over centuries, spoken in the language of village architecture." It is a beauty found in proportion, modesty, honesty of materials and the sustainable balance between community and nature. For Zita Cobb the project has to "take the lived experience, take the land, take who we are, and do our very best to express it in a contemporary way." For Saunders the commission was "a yes project from the beginning because there was no way anybody knew more about this place than I did as an architect". His buildings pay homage to his heritage while imbuing each structure with the spirit of the 'new' and achieving a winning balance between the strange and familiar.

Gorgeously photographed over all four seasons the film is a flowing, visual narrative that unfolds over time as the Fogo Island Inn is being constructed. Zita Cobb's belief in the tension of opposites as a positive force in human experience is reflected in the film. The Inn is totally modern yet filled with textures inherited from the past. The idea of moving forward while reaching back is tangible in the juxtaposition of old and new architecture. Extensive interviews with Todd Saunders and Zita Cobb provide intimate insight into the personalities and motivations behind the creation of adventurous contemporary architecture. A cast of local residents provides the real-world context in which the buildings exist. This is a portrait of a little island that wants to be relevant in a big and current way.

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