

I miss the Americans: the disappearance of seasonal cottages, a cross-border community and the love ethic

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Keywords: housing, preservation, community, vernacular beach architecture, seasonal cottage, identity, autoethnography, cross-border relations, great lakes, crawlspace

GOOD MORNING

Me: *Good morning, hi, I hope you don't mind me...*[walking up driveway]

American cottage owner: *You must be Canadian. Because you're here.*

Me: *Actually yes but I'm American too.*

American cottage owner: *You're lucky.*

Me: *But I live here, just down the road, across the road. I'm writing an essay on the disappearance of these old, seasonal cottages.*

American cottage owner: *Oh yes. Well whoever buys this will probably demolish it.*

Me: *Oh, don't say that.*

American cottage owner: *Well come in if you want.*

In this an ongoing project I am trying to document the social and formal dissolution of a once tightly interconnected cross-border (US-Canada) community. I focus on the building typology of the seasonal cottage which once characterized the area and which are now being sold, en masse, by their American owners. The typology of the seasonal cottage here in this lakeside bordertown has been, I argue, a key contributor to a specific kind of "love ethic"¹ that has bound people in this community not just to each other, but perhaps more importantly, to its context: the natural environment.

In addition to photographic documentation and measured-drawings, autoethnography the most obvious inroad for me to conduct this ongoing project because I live in the middle of this rapidly changing community. Autoethnography acknowledges the particular circumstances of the author and "seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience."² I live in a seasonal cottage which has been, over the decades, buttressed-up with four, maybe five, additions. Notoriously tentative in their construction, mainly because of make-shift piers used as foundations, these seasonal cottages weren't necessarily meant to have long lives, though many have. Their humble size and informal construction juxtaposed against the big lake, mature tree canopy and sometimes-wild wind can be seen as a deferential stance.

American cottage owner: *Please feel free to enjoy our porch, especially if there is a lightning storm over the lake.*

Me: *Thank you...I know my kids would enjoy this very much.*

My hypothesis here is maybe an overly romantic one: that an architecture can engender a specific ethos of care, generosity, even love, that spreads through a community and lasts for many years. I use my own self and my feelings as proof of this; having lived here for less than four years, I care for my ramshackle cottage/house and like my neighbor, fear that it will be instantly demolished if I move and have to sell it. I care for the beach and the trees and I try to plant new ones each year as mature trees are cut or succumb to the Emerald ash borer. I care for the kids on my street and I invite them to play here even if my kids aren't around and I feed them snacks and buy them pizzas in the summer. Not to be too self-congratulatory, but I try. There's a unique sense of stewardship that comes over you like a spell in this tiny, lakeside enclave and I'm trying to get to the bottom of it. My hunch is that it has something to do with the Americans.



Figure 1. This cottage in the Waverly Beach neighborhood was shuttered and unused for over two years. The US-Canada border closure during the COVID-19 pandemic barred American cottage owners from using their properties in Canada. Only minutes away by car, many American owners were frustrated during the prolonged border closure. The border closure and absence of Americans in the small Canadian bordertown has had a lasting impact social fabric of the place, as many cottages are now listed for sale. Image credit S. Davidson

As field research, I go and sit on my down-the-road neighbor's porch – as she invited me to do – and it feels so strange. Where else do people invite you to sit on their porch when they're not home? What remains unsaid, but tacitly understood, is that the ever-changing, awe-inspiring landscape is too rich *not* to share. There's a sense of obligation to share the view, the space, I guess, because there's an intrinsic generosity to the landscape.

PRIVATE PROPERTY BEYOND THIS POINT

Leaving the American-owned lakefront cottage, two women walking past stop and ask if I'm the owner:

Me: *No, I'm not the owner, but I was just speaking with her inside.*

One woman asks to confirm the owner's last name:

Local woman on sidewalk: *I'll tell my husband their place is for sale. Is her husband still alive?*

Me: *I don't know.*

Local woman on sidewalk: *Maybe someone from Toronto will buy it. Maybe then we'll get better grocery stores.*

Me: *Oh – yeah – right, grocery stores.*

Local woman on sidewalk: *Yeah, I'm just tired of being the end-of-the-line, you know?*

The "changing of the guard"³, referring to Americans selling their cottages to Canadians, mostly GTA (Greater Toronto Area) folks, is acknowledged within real estate circles and mostly attributed to numbers: American buyers are hit with a hefty new "nonresident speculation tax"⁴ and have increasing difficulty obtaining a mortgage, while existing American, nonresident property owners are subject to a new vacancy tax⁵ and Americans looking to bequeath their cottages are faced with children unable to shoulder the property taxes. Local town residents in Fort Erie, or even the southern Niagara region, don't generally have the capital to purchase a second home

Numbers are fairly easy to track but what about love? I've personally tracked a dip in the levels of love in the neighborhood



Figure 2. American/Canadian flag mounted at the entry to a cottage property, presumably meant to express a sense of unity and to celebrate the intermixing of Americans and Canadians, historically, in the neighborhood. “I love Canadians” is something you’ll commonly hear Americans in the neighborhood say. Image credit S. Davidson



Figure 3. Interior of cottage in Waverly Beach neighborhood, currently American-owned and up for sale.

The interior is typical of those in the neighborhood, with unfussy, worn surfaces and overabundant, mis-matched chairs. The buildings were used mainly for sleeping while most time was spent outside. Image credit: S.Davidson

as Americans have left. Snow fences are erected along the sand to separate thin public strips from the stretch of private beach, “private property” and “do not trespass” signage is erected on poles and trees, security cameras are mounted on cottages, and bylaw officers on ATVs are mobilized to patrol the beaches on busy summer weekends.⁷ The few cottages that remain American-owned around here have a different vibe for lack of a better word: sand dunes preserved in an effort to support the endangered Fowler’s Toad⁸, screened-in porches and ceiling fans instead of central AC rattling, bowls of shells, painted rocks, and maybe a Can-america flag – gestures of humility, convivialism, love. In “Living by a Love Ethic,” bell hooks asserts that “[a]wakening to love can happen only as we let go of our obsession with power and domination”.⁹

“I feel like I’m a guest here myself” says one third-generation American lakefront cottage owner, “so I would never shoo people away from my beach.”¹⁰

Though they owned property, in many instances for more than one generation, the foreigner-status of Americans in the Waverly Beach neighborhood appears to have played a part in keeping the beach relatively welcoming to all, a true commons.

ARCHITECTURE OF LOVE

There are two types of cottages in neighborhoods like Waverly Beach: first row (on the lake) and all the rest. I live in the second row in a cottage, so I’m in the “all the rest” category and these buildings are, predictably, more modest than the first row summer homes. All of the cottages, regardless of location,



Figure 4. Small den or niche without doors styled as a bedroom in the American-owned cottage shown also in figure 3. The room shows how even more spacious summer homes deviated from normative spatial organization, privileging, rather, time spent in the communal outdoor living room: the beach. Beds and cots were put anywhere they fit in order to accommodate large groups, often extended family with children. Image credit: S.Davidson



Figure 5. Two of seven beds in the American-owned cottage also shown in figures 3 and 4. Bedrooms in these seasonal cottages often have more than one single bed, and unlike principal residences, are not meant to have a single inhabitant. Even the most intimate space in these cottages, with their many users, are a kind of “commons”. Image credit: S.Davidson



Figure 6. Three American-owned, seasonal cottage properties side-by-side for sale in the Waverly Beach neighborhood. Image credit: S.Davidson.



Figure 7. View of seasonal cottage from rear. Image credit: S.Davidson.



Figure 8. The front door to this screened-in porch is unlocked, the American owners visit for an occasional weekend. Openings to the crawlspace are generous in size, inviting a range of local wildlife. This openness and accessibility could be seen as accidental or as a deliberate expression of the ethos of the place. Image credit: S.Davidson.

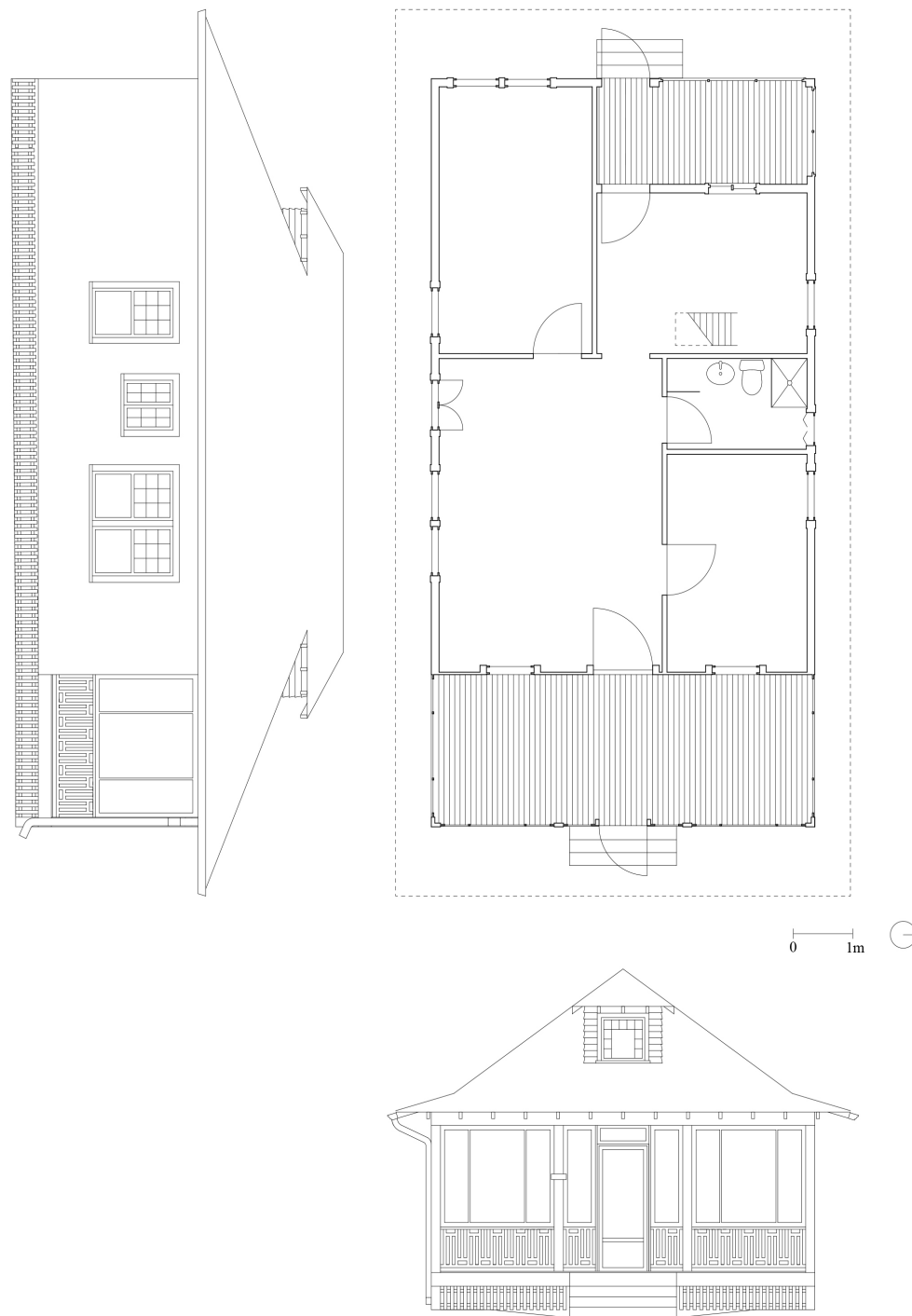


Figure 9. Measured drawing of the cottage shown in figures 6, 7 and 8. This cottage is American-owned and, uncharacteristically for these seasonal cottages, appears to not have any additions. Area of core part of cottage (without porches) is 52 m² (559 sq ft). The plan of the cottage is quite characteristic of the building type; a principal room is used as a way to link other rooms, as well as access outside. Corridors are avoided in these compact plans. Street-facing elevations (screened-in porches) are typically symmetrical. Drawing by S.Davidson

were traditionally unheated and therefore, also uninsulated. Natural ventilation was relied upon in the summer; lakeside temperatures are always slightly lower than city temperatures in the hot time of the year and the lake facilitates a consistent breeze.¹¹

Cottages located on the second row and further away from the lake were typically small in size, with three or four rooms; bathrooms were added in more recent decades and these properties originally had outhouses. Attics were used as additional space for beds, because sleeping was the principal function of these buildings; most of the daytime was spent outdoors, in a lakeside landscape that still feels, to some degree, like a shared, outdoor living room. Formally, the humble buildings sit without fanfare. Non-decorative, their street-facing elevations are typically symmetrical, characterized by big, screen openings which are shuttered in the winter. No glazing, no basements, the small enclosures provide ideal spaces of refuge for wildlife through the long winters, expanding the idea of “commoning” to include raccoons, mice, skunks, opossum, and red foxes. The crawlspace as a built-in wildlife sanctuary is perhaps an unintentional side-effect of these cheaply-built structures, but one that nevertheless remains as-is in the American-owned seasonal cottages. If you’ve never seen a skunk up-close before, I can tell you they’re beautiful.

Because the seasonal cottages were erected without drawings, most have never been drawn.¹² Now that they’re disappearing, I am documenting them formally through measured, as-built drawings and photographs. The documentation is meant to serve not only as an archive, but also as a study in an overlooked precedent for a way of building and living that is low-impact with respect to the environment, that encourages harmoniously coexisting with wildlife, and perhaps most importantly sharing space with each other, regardless of property boundaries, different nationalities, different income brackets.

I miss the Americans. Though they’re not all gone yet, they’re on their way out and with them, their love.

Me: *This place is so wonderful. How long have you had it?*

American cottage owner: *49 years. It’s been a lifetime. But now I have to sell it. My kids can’t afford it. And the border...why was there such a long line today?*

Me: *Yesterday it was Canadian Thanksgiving.*

American cottage owner: *Well I know that. That’s why I didn’t come over yesterday. But today?*

Me: *Yeah. I don’t know. The border...*



Figure 10. Waverly Beach, Fort Erie, Ontario, with view eastward to Buffalo, NY. Image credit: S.Davidson.

ENDNOTES

1. hooks, bell. *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 2000).
2. Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams & Arthur P. Bochner, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” *Forum Qualitative Social Research*, Volume 12, No. 1, Art. 10 (January 2011). <https://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589/3095>
3. DeNatale, Sara. “Changing of the guard: Canada’s lakefront property is slowly moving back into Canadian Hands.” *Buffalo magazine*, e-edition. August 15, 2015. https://buffalo.com/feature/article_a88453e1-b087-5b85-9a1e-948fff93bb1e.html
4. Effective March 20, 2022, the Nonresident Speculation Tax is 20% <https://www.ontario.ca/document/land-transfer-tax/non-resident-speculation-tax>
5. Hutton, Richard. “Summertime Blues: Proposed vacancy tax worries Fort Erie Cottage Owners,” *Niagarathisweek.com*. February 21, 2022. <https://www.niagarathisweek.com/news-story/10572383-summertime-blues-proposed-vacancy-tax-worries-fort-erie-cottage-owners/>
6. According to Statistics Canada, the median after-tax household income in the Town of Fort Erie in 2015 was \$51,278. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=POPC&Code1=1062&Geo2=PR&Code2=35&Data=Count&SearchText=fort%20erie&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&B1=All&TABID=1>
7. First-hand observations made since 2019.
8. Fowler’s Toad are known to be endangered, but known to still live along the lake in the Fort Erie area: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/fowlers-toad>
9. hooks, bell. *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 2000) p.87.
10. First-hand conversation with American lakefront cottage owner.
11. “How do the Great Lakes affect Temperature?” instructional handout modified from “The effect of the Great Lakes on temperature” by James D. Meinke, Lakewood Public Schools; Beth A. Kennedy, Newark Public Schools; and Rosanne W. Fortner, The Ohio State University. The Ohio State University, 1996.
12. According to the local building department, the cottages that I’m undertaking to draw do not have drawings on file.