

# The Fogo Island Experiment

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**The Fogo Island Experiment is a study in how a remote place can become a center of a culture through the careful balance of sourcing an international roster of architects, industrial designers, artists, curators, journalists and even chefs to interpret and distill the local vernacular. The result is a compelling vision of contemporary architecture, art and cuisine that contributes to reviving the local community, as well as enriching a wider interconnected global culture.**

**Having had the opportunity to speak at length with the architect, the client, visiting artists and local residents, this paper includes insights on the overall architectural project, how it intersects with the local culture and what the future holds for the Fogo Island experiment. Its continued success rests on a critical edge that navigates between the local culture and contemporary influences to create something that is authentic without defaulting to nostalgia. A project that learns from the vernacular but remains critical in order to generate a series of architectural interventions that is both strange but familiar and in doing so creates a 'raw' place that nurtures the creative spirit.**

## THE PROJECT

At the most remote eastern edge of the North American continent and the closest land mass to Europe, the island of Newfoundland is in the middle of nowhere but historically a center of the North Atlantic cod fishery and a crossroads for the refueling of transatlantic international flights at Gander International Airport. Off Newfoundland's northeast coast is Fogo Island yet another rocky outcrop that measures a mere sixteen miles long and nine miles wide that since 2010 has been the center of an architectural experiment consisting of a series of four art studios and a deluxe twenty-nine room hotel, which have attempted to revive the local

vernacular culture that has been economically compromised since a moratorium on cod fishing was announced in 1992.

Architect Todd Saunders, a native Newfoundlander, who is based in Bergen, Norway, designed the pavilions, consisting of the Long, Squish, Bridge, and Tower Studios and the Fogo Island Inn. The project stems from the vision of businesswoman and patron, Zita Cobb who was awarded the Order of Canada for her efforts in 2016. She was born on Fogo Island and after a successful career in the fiber optics industry decided to return to her native home and create the Shorefast Foundation whose objective was to invest in the local culture and create an artistic and eco-tourism destination to enhance the cultural and economic sustainability of the island.

The overall project is a study in how a remote place can become a center of a culture through the careful balance of sourcing an international roster of architects, industrial designers, artists, curators, journalists and even chefs to interpret and distill the local vernacular. The result is a compelling vision of contemporary architecture, art and cuisine that contributes to reviving the local community, as well as, enriching a wider interconnected global culture.

Many forces are at play in this ongoing project; a central one is how a regional vernacular culture founded on an island relates and thrives within the context of an increasingly globalized culture. How does a remote place have a dialogue with a broader contemporary multi-ethnic culture and maintain its distinct quality? How can aspects of a traditional culture be advanced and be interpreted at both an architectural and artistic level without defaulting the nostalgic and the picturesque? The question posed by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur in 1965 seems especially appropriate: "... how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization."<sup>1</sup>

## CRITICAL REGIONALISM

In reference to Ricoeur's thinking, the term critical regionalism offers some line of navigation between local and universal culture. Formulated by Alex Tzonis and Lilliane Lefaivre in 1981 in their article "The Grid and the Pathway", critical regionalism continues to relevant in the formulation of contemporary architectural theory in the 21st century, especially in relation to architects who work within



Figure 1: Bridge Studio, Todd Saunders Architecture, Fogo Island  
Newfoundland, Photographer: Bent René Synnevåg

regional contexts and who are challenged with the interpretation of the local vernacular architecture in face of a contemporary architectural culture that is characterized with parametric design and form making that tends not to address immediate and extended contexts.

Starting with Tzonis and Lefaivre's definition, Kenneth Frampton's expanded on the notion of critical regionalism in his articles: "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance" and "Ten Points on an Architecture of Regionalism: A Provisional Polemic". As articulated by Frampton:

"The fundamental strategy of Critical Regionalism is to mediate the impact of universal civilization with elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular place."<sup>2</sup>

It is clear from the above that Critical Regionalism depends upon maintaining a high level of critical self-consciousness. It may find its governing inspiration in such things as the range and quality of the local light, or in a tectonic derived from a peculiar structural mode, or in the topography of a given site.

Critical regionalism is certainly an implicit component of the Fogo Island project and both the architect, Todd Saunders, and the client, Zita Cobb, have articulated the importance of creating a fresh interpretation of a place without defaulting to the nostalgic and the picturesque. In this regard, both Saunders' and Cobb's point of reference is more aligned with the Tzonic and Lefaivre's notion of critical regionalism that stresses the notion of defamiliarization and strangeness as tools to mediate between the vernacular and contemporary architectural design.

As pointed out by Tzonic and Lefaivre the modernist technique of defamiliarization, first coined by the Russian writer Victor Shklovsky, was subsequently applied within architecture. Within the context of architectural design, the goal of defamiliarization is to incorporate the various elements common to a region's architectural vocabulary into a design "...strangely' rather than 'familiarily' in order to disrupt "...the sentimental 'embrace' between buildings and their consumers, 'de-automatizing' perception and thus 'pricking the conscious'..."<sup>3</sup>

## STRANGELY FAMILIAR

Interestingly, a fifty-two minute documentary entitled: *Strange And Familiar: Architecture On Fogo Island* was released in 2015. Todd Saunders is highlighted in the documentary as he tells the story of the project while the camera follows him as he visits the various completed studios and the Inn under construction. Paired with his narrative is Zita Cobb's philosophical viewpoint on the initial conception of the project and her deep ties to Fogo Island and Newfoundland. Interestingly both Saunders and Cobb both spent their formative years in the region and then lived abroad for a substantial period before returning to the island. In terms of Newfoundland, as with most remote island cultures, it nurtures very distinct dialects, cuisine, music and a cultural point of view, with anyone from 'away' viewed as a 'stranger'. In a certain sense both Saunders and Cobb can be viewed as 'authentic' islanders but might also be viewed as 'strangers' by the locals because of their time 'away'. They both have an inside knowledge of the culture but have also developed an outsider perspective. This has proven to be an asset in the development of a project that although remote also has to relate and communicate to a broader cultural context for its development and success. This negotiation between the remote and the proximate, the vernacular and global culture is a constant theme throughout the Fogo Island Project whether it design of the Inn, an artist studio, a chair, a quilt, or a doorknob.

## THE INITIAL STORY

As documented in *Todd Saunders: Architecture in Northern Landscapes* published by Birkhauser in 2013, The Fogo Island project began with a phone call from Cobb to Saunders who at the time was paddling his kayak on a fiord in Norway. After her conversation with him, she flew to Norway and he got the job. A major reason that he got the commission was combination of his growing international profile and production of impressive projects in Norway coupled with his background of growing up in Newfoundland. As articulated by Cobb, "Aside from his own personal history in Newfoundland and his already deep understanding of the character, anguish and triumphs of the outport communities like Fogo Island, he understood what we were trying to do. He understood the importance of the project to our culture."<sup>4</sup>

In terms of the actual design process, Cobb recalls very long teleconference calls a couple of times a week between Canada and Norway.



Figure 2: Squish Studio, Todd Saunders Architecture, Fogo Island, Newfoundland, Photographer: Bent René Synnevåg

The process worked because of implicit trust in the client and architect relationship, as well as the dedication of Saunders to the success of the project. Right from the start, the philosophy of the project was clear, and although the term ‘critical regionalism’ is not mentioned by Cobb the DNA is implicit in her statement about the basic direction of the project of finding new ways with old things.

#### THE ARTS RESIDENCY PROJECT

The four studios designed by Saunders Architecture for the Arts Residency Project are an essential part of Fogo Island Arts, an organization that hosts every year a number of international artists that include visual artists, sculptors, filmmakers, curators, designers and other creative individuals. Each artist, as part of their residency, lives on Fogo Island for up to two months. Each artist is granted one of the four art studios that are located a short walk from the island’s various villages.

The off-grid studios are designed as work spaces only and are equipped with photovoltaic arrays, water cisterns, compost toilets and wood burning stoves. Along with the studio, each artist is assigned a restored traditional salt box house, located within one of the island’s eleven villages, as their primary residence. The Long Studio (Figure 3) is situated on a rocky shoreline near Joe Batt’s Arm, the Squish Studio (Figure 2) is sited on grassy knoll propped up on a cliff near the historic town of Tilting, the Tower Studio is perched on the end of a rocky peninsula and can be reached by a long wooden boardwalk just outside Shoal Bay and Bridge Studio (Figure 1) hovers above inland lake that can be reached by traversing a series wooden staircases along a rocky hill just outside Deep Bay.

The remoteness of each studio from the various outport villages is highly intentional. Each artist, as part of his daily routine traverses the dramatic terrain of Fogo Island. A landscape composed of barren stretches of land with outcropping of granite boulders covered with delicate lichens, low lying juniper trees and grassy bogs. Given that the studios are not located on accessible roads, the fifteen minute journey must be made on foot; the hike becomes a meditative ritual of sorts, with dramatic views of the North Atlantic along the way, the ocean’s horizon interrupted in the spring and early summer by the jagged outline of icebergs that float down from Greenland. While living in the villages, the artists, most of them based in large urban centers, are encouraged to interact with the local residents and if the opportunities arises even accompany fisherman on excursions to the inshore cod jigging grounds and take part of the limited recreational cod fishery during summer months.

Towards the end of their residency, each artist has an opportunity to exhibit their work at the Fogo Island Gallery located at the Fogo Island Inn. During their tenure on the island, artists also host various events in their studios, this can range from film screenings, musical performances to the exhibition of works-in-progress. Fogo Island Arts has also reached out to various arts organizations for the exhibition of work such as the *Scrap Metal Gallery* in Toronto. This relationship fosters an increased relationship between the Fogo Island and Canada’s cultural metropolis.

#### THE LONG STUDIO - CLOSE UP

The Long Studio was the first of a series of studios designed by Saunders beginning in 2008 and completed in 2010. About thousand square feet, it is the largest of the studios to be constructed. It is situated along a desolate rocky coastline about one mile to the northeast of Joe Batts Arm. Aligned on an east-west axis, the 100’-0” long by 18’-0” wide structure is designed as an elongated tube, clipped at a forty-five-degree angle at both ends to form a parallelogram shaped footprint. It sits above a sloping terrain composed of a highly fractured landscape of granite bedrock, the surface rock formations dating approximately four hundred million years old. The Long Studio’s linear plan is entered at its western end with a generous wide stair that leads to an outdoor covered forecourt designed to be protected from the harsh extremities of the Fogo Island weather during spring and early summer. The exterior storage area, interior closets, galley kitchen, compost toilet and sleeping loft are banked in a 6’-0” wide service strip along the building’s south side. A triangular, north facing skylight brings in ample top lighting to the middle of the elongated studio that ends at its western extreme with a series of floor to ceiling windows that overlook the ocean. The exterior of the studio is finished with shipped-lapped spruce planks that are coated with black paint, in high contrast with the studio’s interior that is painted white. The eastern end of the building is anchored to the ground on a concrete pad. However, as the studio rises about the sloped terrain, the building is supported by a series of twenty-two wooden stilts that are anchored to the ground with metal shoes that are epoxied to the bedrock. The wood frame structure, that resembles some kind of nautical vessel, was pre-built



Figure 3: Long Studio, Todd Saunders Architecture, Fogo Island, Newfoundland, Photographer: Bent René Synnekvåg

and then reconstructed by the local craftsmen onsite who are well versed in both house and boat construction. The studio is designed not only as an artistic refuge but as a reinforced bunker to withstand the strong winds of the North Atlantic and the region's harsh winter months.

The Long Studio takes its cues from the local vernacular, composed of compact salt box houses, outbuildings and long fishing sheds with stages (wharfs) that traverse the rocky landscape and the sea with long wooden stilts. As well, the architecture references the traditional cod-drying fishing flakes composed of thin slats of wood and slender posts that anchored them to the ground. This vernacular is not only evident within the various outposts of the Fogo Island but also on a remote island off its coast, named Little Fogo Island, where some of Fogo's oldest families once resided.

Although Long Studio references the vernacular it clearly makes a statement as a work of contemporary architecture. Its blank south elevation with its zero-detailing appears as a severe horizontal datum rising above the surrounding jagged granite landscape as it is approached from the nearby village. As an abstract tubular form, it

sits as a viewing apparatus, an elongated camera obscura that frames its exterior views in a dramatic fashion. Its pared down aesthetic is a highly distorted, flat-roofed version of traditional salt box. Although the studio's abstract form, whose parapet caps, soffits and roof are clad completely in black spruce is only possible with the addition of an underlying blue skin membrane, a rubberized asphalt compound laminated on a blue polyethylene film that wraps all of its exterior surfaces.

#### THE INN

As part of Cobb's vision to create an eco-tourism destination that would help revive the local economy and contribute to its long term economic stability, the Fogo Island Inn opened its doors to the public in 2013. The business structure of the inn is unique given it is a social enterprise owned by a registered charity for the benefit of the local community with all of the surpluses from the inn channeled back into the community. The twenty-nine-room luxury inn is perched on an expansive outcropping of granite bedrock that has an uninterrupted view of the North Atlantic. The inn echoes some of the architectural strategies and materiality inherent in his Fogo Island Arts studio projects with abstracted elongated forms, zero-detailing, and sensitivity to how the building ultimately engages the landscape.



Figure 4: Fogo Island Inn (Exterior), Todd Saunders Architecture, Fogo Island, Newfoundland  
Photographer: Bent René Synnevåg



Figure 5: Fogo Island Inn (Interior), Todd Saunders Architecture, Fogo Island, Newfoundland  
Photographer: Alex Fradkin

As one walks the rocky, wind-swept site, one of its most striking characteristics of the exposed bedrock are the crisp fracture lines at oblique angles in the granite that were formed in response to the geological shear forces that shaped the island. Maybe it is not an accident that the architectural parti of inn of an asymmetrical X, echoes the patterning of the surrounding rock fissures. The X diagram neatly arranges the private and public zones of the forty-thousand square foot inn. One leg of the X, runs parallel to the shoreline contains all of the inn's twenty-nine rooms. This elongated four-story volume, which measures about 320 feet in length, is designed as a single-loaded corridor, ensuring that each room has an ocean view. The rooms vary in size from 350 to 1,000 square-foot double-height loft-styled suites. The other leg of X, measures about 200 feet long, is a two-story volume aligned on the east-west axis of the site. It contains all the public amenities of the inn that are open to both guests and the local residents which include: meeting rooms, the Fogo Island Contemporary Art Gallery, the Dr. Leslie A. Harris Heritage Library and the Fogo Island Cinema.

The relationship of the form to the site is two-fold. The western end of the building is grounded to the site with its grey-painted black spruce boards brought down to the ground and then scribed to follow the sinuous outline of the granite boulders and bedrock – the hotel's abstract form literally tailored to the landscape's uneven topography. The inn's most dramatic architectural movement occurs at its eastern end, as it is lifted 30 feet in the air above the rocky terrain and supported by a constellation of Corten steel columns that are tied directly to the undulating ground of bedrock with minimal alteration of the existing landscape.

#### TOTAL DESIGN PROJECT

The interior of the Inn (Figure 5) is a total design project in which items such as the bed, lounge chairs, exterior furniture, light fixtures, clothes hangers, rugs, quilts, key fobs, and even the wallpaper were designed by a diverse team of both Canadian and international designers. For some of the wood furniture, the designer was paired with local woodworkers/boat builders. The items in the inn have not only interpreted the local tradition of making wooden chairs, settees and tables but has also engaged the local woman quilting guilds in the creation of 400 patchwork quilts. As an off-shoot industry, some of the items featured in the inn are also available for purchase.

Consistent with the goal of the inn to bring both the local and international influences together, the project also encompasses innovative cuisine that sources island ingredients such as partridge berries, edible greens and herbs, local cod, snow crab and lobster and meats raised or hunted locally. The menu, created by chefs inspired by both contemporary food culture and local tradition changes with Fogo Island's seven seasons.

#### CONCLUSION

The success of the project is rooted in its consistent philosophical outlook that engages, at a variety of the levels, both the local and the global. Cultural, economic and environmental sustainability are very real goals that have concrete outcomes. Given Cobb's

financial background, the economics of the projects are central. In terms of innovation the Shorefast Foundation has devised 'economic nutrition labelling' for both the inn and its shop. It gives an actual breakdown where the money earned is actually distributed. The goal is that 10% of the surplus is invested back into the community.

As an overt component of the project, architectural design has been highlighted as a means of redefining and creating cultural identity. While the design is clearly rooted in the place and its traditional vernacular, the aim is much more ambitious, to create exemplary works of contemporary architecture that contribute the larger cultural landscape. A core strategy of the design process, centers on the idea of strangeness that is augmented through devices such as distortion. This is accomplished through such design operations as: elongation, compression, stretching, twisting and scale exaggeration.

Now built and in operation, the future success of the both the artist-in-residence studios and the Fogo Island Inn continues to rest on a critical edge that navigates between the local culture and contemporary influences in order to create something that is truly authentic and does not default to the nostalgic or the status quo. The project to remain successful must continue the investigation of how it intersects with the larger culture but also what differentiates it. Some key ingredients of that formula will surely include highlighting the physical and cultural rawness of the place that continues to offer a fresh alternative, a highlight in the continued flattening and homogenization of the global cultural landscape.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Paul Ricoeur, "Universal Civilization and National Cultures", in *History and Truth*, translation: Chas.A. Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 277.
2. Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance" in *The Anti-Aesthetic – Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 21.
3. Alexander Tzonis, Liane Lefaivre, "Why Critical Regionalism Today?" *From Architecture and Urbanism no.236* (May 1990), 27.
4. Todd Saunders, *Architecture in Northern Landscapes* (Basel: Birkhauser, 2013), 30.