

Building The Cabin In Your Mind

Regional architect
Dale Mulfinger
designs the American
'getaway' dream

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When I was very young, my family vacationed some summers in a cabin on the shores of Shagawa Lake near Ely, Minnesota. I treasure those times. What I remember most clearly is that our family of six suddenly included three more: my grandparents on my father's side and my father's brother. It was there that I learned how much Grandpa loved to fish, how little Grandma enjoyed cooking fish every night, and how much my uncle enjoyed reading.

The cabin, as I remember from my childish perspective, was huge and made entirely of wood—wood floors, wood-paneled walls, wood staircase and railings, wood trusses and beams, wood bookcases and cabinets, all worn to a soft, warm glow by years of use. It smelled good; the huge stone fireplace smoked enough to tinge the air with the delightful scent that was so unlike our suburban split-level back home in Chicago. Closets and beds were stuffed with and swathed in colorful, handmade quilts and fresh cotton blankets, and after a day or two, my mother was sweeping sand out the back door morning and



▮ Cabin design should capture the spirit, color, and texture of the land. The prospect of view must work synergistically with the feeling of refuge.

◀ A cabin not only provides the simple pleasures of shelter and warmth, but it can also be exhilarating.

◀◀ Some special places can be designed to say "grab a book and come snuggle up here."



▲ Cabins can rarely have too much wood or too many windows.

night. Our swimsuits were either on our blurred bodies or dripping on the line strung between two trees, lakeside, while we shivered deliciously in towels. Mugs of hot cocoa accompanied the long stories told by the flickering firelight.

Cabins—or, depending upon where you live, lodges or camps—aren't just structures, although their structures are a part of what makes them special. Cabins are where we relax, hang out, get casual, go barefoot, read as long as we like, and immerse ourselves in nature. Because of that, cabins often are the repository of vivid emotions and of remarkably fond memories.

Dale Mulfinger has heard countless stories like mine. He's an architect. In 1983, he cofounded SALA Architects in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and his professional background includes employment with several local, national, and international firms, including the Architects Collaborative of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Brown Daltus of Rome, Italy. He is a registered architect in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Wyoming and is NCARB certified.

But the noted architect and author of four books, *The Architecture of Edwin Lundie*, published by the Minnesota Historical Society Press, and *The Cabin, The Getaway Home*, and *Cabinology*, all published by Taunton Press, is very interested in cabins and camps and lodges.

The interest many of us have in cabins, Mulfinger would say, is due to what he calls the "cabin gene." As he puts it in *Cabinology*: "It's almost as if getting away were a genetic predisposition, as if something is spun into our DNA, beyond our control. If you suspect that you have the cabin gene, you've got company. I know a lot of people with the same genetic disposition. It's my business to know them. I am a cabinologist."

If you've got the gene

If you've got a cabin in your mind, Mulfinger has some good news for you—and some excellent advice. First, the good news. He says, "In this economy, buying stocks may not look too exciting to us. If we have an extra nickel, though, parking it in a legacy property is a great idea. It becomes a legacy thing: If I invest in a lake home, I have something to pass to my kids. People see that investment as stable. The added plus is that we can use it and also leave it to our kids, who'll get to use it, too." Not a bad idea.

The advice? Get back to your childish perspective. "You don't really have to have an architect to design a cabin for you; it's not too complex, really," says Mulfinger. "You have the skill to draw, and it's empowering for you if you just sit down and figure out what you like. I love the way children draw, straight from the gut; they draw from a rather iconic point of view. As we get older, we draw floor plans; they would draw an image they like, maybe throw in a room. So pick up some crayons and dream a little. Think about what you want to do in and around your cabin, what it looks like. You don't have to stay in between the lines."

Getting back to basics

Of Mulfinger's own cabin, he says, "I like the way it reads 'basic shelter.' I love it; I love its sense of prospect." Mulfinger refers to the 1975 English prospect-refuge theory of human aesthetics in simple terms: "We humans have a need for open, unbroken vistas (prospect) and places of safety (refuge)." The theory explains why we like getting away to our cabins and lodges and camps: basically, because we love the views of nature—prospect—and the feeling of refuge—often tucking our cabins into a hillside.

▼ In a cabin, a sleeping area can simply be a soft surface snuck into the corner. Privacy is not so important.



▼ A screened porch should project into the outdoors and protect from the rain and bugs.



The essentials

For those reasons—prospect and refuge—Mulfinger suggests that after you've designed your ideal cabin with those crayons, hone in on the site. "The adventure really starts with an interesting piece of land," he asserts. Most of us look for remote areas in which to get back in touch with the natural world. Does your region offer great river views? Mountain ranges? Evergreen forests? Capitalize on them.

But if you're building a "getaway" from city living, Mulfinger suggests you keep that firmly in mind. "I've worked with some clients who've asked me to do 'uncabinly' things," he says. "They ask, 'Should I have a garage connected to the house?' I say, 'No, you're not going to get outside if you do. Why are you going to this place if you're not going outside?' The detached garage promotes the action of actually going outdoors." Same thing, he says, with so-called three-season porches versus screened porches. Sure, a screened porch can't be used as much, but it's a step out into nature. You'll have a very different experience with it, too—you'll have breezes and birdsong and experience ambient air temperatures. It's just part of what Mulfinger would say makes a cabin "cabinly."

If you've got the "cabin gene," chances are you've already gotten out the crayons and have made a start on the drawing that will lead to building the cabin in your mind. Don't worry about staying in the lines, and be prepared to make lots of good memories. ■