

FRAMING THE LANDSCAPE

Standing on the porch of The Long Studio in Joe Batt's Arm on Fogo Island, Newfoundland. The horizontal spruce cladding continues along the interior of the artist's studio, which was designed by Norway-based architect and Newfoundland native Todd Saunders. Long Studio is one of six artists' studios dotting the island. They are the workspaces of successful applicants to a residency program that brings creators from around the world to Fogo Island.

THIS IS FOGO ISLAND, NEWFOUNDLAND, A COMMUNITY 60 KILOMETRES NORTH OF GANDER THAT WAS LONG IN NEED OF ECONOMIC REDEFINITION. A TEAM OF BUILDERS AND THINKERS, LED BY CARLETON ALUMNA ZITA COBB, IS PUTTING THIS ROCKY PLACE IN THE NORTH ATLANTIC BACK ON THE MAP BY SETTING UP AN ARTISTS' RESIDENCY AND BUILDING A LUXURY INN. ALONG THE WAY, HER TEAM IS MAKING A BUSINESS CASE FOR OUTPORT COMMUNITIES DEVASTATED BY THE COLLAPSE OF THE COD FISHERY

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In some ways it's a blank canvas, this rocky land mass called Fogo Island.

There's water all around and it's virtually treeless, meaning you can see into what seems like forever. Nice metaphor as it is, you can carry that idea further to define the local economy, which is barren and devastated.

The moratorium on cod fishing, declared by the federal government in 1992, took the steam out of the economic engine of the island and robbed it of its identity. Cod fishing had been the island's reason for being since it was settled more than 300 years ago, and that heritage is plain in the settlement pattern. A bird's-eye view of the place shows 10 little ocean-edge communities dotting the island's perimeter. It's only 15 kilometres wide and 25 kilometres long, and it's hard to reach. To get there, fly to Gander, drive a bit over an hour to Farwell, and catch the ferry for another hour-plus haul to Fogo. You don't happen upon this place by accident.

"People come with intent," Zita Cobb, BCom/80, likes to say. "If you come with intent, you're going to have interest, genuinely, in the culture and in the place."

Cobb, 54, is president and co-founder of Shorefast Foundation, a charitable organization registered in 2004 and dedicated to the economic and cultural development of Fogo Island and nearby Change Islands. The centrepiece of its redevelopment—a 29-room luxury inn—is scheduled to open in the spring of 2013. Already,



in preparation for the opening, there have been spin-off cottage industries reviving the local craft culture of quilting, knitting, and canning to stock the inn. It makes jobs so that islanders can stay in their place.

Joe Batt's Arm is one of the 10 communities on the island. Cobb grew up there, one of seven children raised by parents who did not know how to read or write. For that generation, islanders lived and worked by the rhythms of the sea. Each community had a fishery and a schoolhouse and was culturally distinct. In neighbouring Tilting, Irish Catholics had different accents and dialects that made it seem like a world away, yet it was only five kilometres down the road. For years, there was no elected government on the island. Communities were run by merchants and the clergy. Amalgamation started in 2010 to strengthen the municipal infrastructure and combine finances as the consolidated Town of Fogo Island.

Like many islanders, Cobb left Fogo after high school. She headed to Ottawa to study business and graduated from Carleton in 1980 with a bachelor of commerce. She spent a good part of her career as chief financial officer for Ottawa's JDS Fitel tech company and as senior vice-president of strategy for fibre optics manufacturer JDS



Left: A long view of The Long Studio, which also appears on the previous page and the magazine's cover. The sliding doors to the left reveal a kitchenette and bathroom. At the end of the sliding wall is a wood stove and a stacked cord for keeping the artistic fires burning and the working artist warm. Natural light flows in from the windows, bouncing off the white floors and walls. Above: The rocky hike into the studio over hills covered with caribou moss.



Zita Cobb inside a fishing stage in Joe Batt's Arm. The stage is where generations of sea-going people cleaned, salted and dried their cod. This stage belongs to the Deckers, long-time friends of Cobb's. It's a place she describes as her favourite in the whole world.



Right: The Bridge Studio in Deep Bay is a favourite retreat for writers. The wall of windows faces the water (not visible in the photo). Inside, the studio is just 320 square feet, with a whitewashed interior of spruce cladding, a wood stove and built-in shelving.

Below and facing page: A view of the easy two-kilometre hike up to Brimstone Head, the place The Flat Earth Society declared one of the four corners of the world. It's marked by the sign, shown at left, near the summit. Logs stacked inside The Long Studio are used for the wood stove.



Above: The shelf at Growler's, the café in Joe Batt's Arm and unofficial community centre, displays items from the town's history, including old pay stubs, food packaging, a boot and a 1970s Sears catalogue (not shown).

Above left: The dramatic Tower Studio juts into the stark sky. It's accessed by a long walk down a path designed like a gangplank that's so narrow it can accommodate only a bicycle or a wheelbarrow. Located in Shoal Bay, it can be seen from a number of points on the island.

Uniphase, achieving enough success to retire at 43. She pursued other interests, including sailing halfway around the world and running an inn in Costa Rica, while staying involved with her home island's concerns.

One project, establishing a student scholarship, required a public review. At a Fogo Island meeting, a woman stood up and told Cobb sharply that while it was all very nice to give young people a hand, the money was simply helping to send more people away from the island of 2,400 that has seen double-digit population declines in the past five years.

That exchange sent Cobb off on a "big think" and put into play most of what is happening today on Fogo Island.

Cobb is slender, gregarious, and quick-witted. She bears a passing resemblance to Shirley MacLaine—without the baubles. She is both businesswoman and committed islander, comfortable in the esoteric ideas of culture and artistic expression, as well as in the brass tacks of business. Her modesty is evident. When she came home, a very wealthy woman, she lived in an 800-square-foot house bequeathed to her by her Uncle Art (and she maintains a residence in Ottawa). We're told many times by people in the town how well respected Cobb is for knowing how to use her wealth and influence for good: Cobb started the Shorefast Foundation with an initial investment of \$6 million of her own money, while the federal and Newfoundland governments kicked in \$5 million each.

Cobb, like most people around here, wears work gear for a windy island, which she navigates in a Subaru and hiking boots. She spends

much time at the foundation's main office in the middle of the island and at the project sites that are part of the development plan.

The most visible aspect of that plan is a collection of six artists' studios. They were designed by Newfoundland-reared architect Todd Saunders, and each is a showcase of efficient, site-specific designs and curious, angular shapes. Successful applicants to the artists' residency program live in a restored house in one of the communities on the island. They walk each day to their studio to practise their craft. These workplaces aren't accessible by car: you get there by a half-block-length climb over rocky terrain.



This was a deliberate decision to cover a number of foundation goals. Building studios without roadways meant most of the lumber had to be carried manually, creating more jobs. Once they arrive, the artists from away are forced to reconnect with their natural surroundings—the through line for the sense of place Cobb is hoping to convey.

"We want to keep the fishery alive and bolster the culture at the same time as putting another leg on the economy through tourism," she says. Tourism is a tricky beast—and she's adamant that it be done right. "If you're going to dance with the devil, it's important to keep the devil in its place," she says. Tourism done wrong would turn her home island into "a theme park for all things outport," a kitschy version of itself where visitors drive by the sights, snap photos and think they've actually experienced something. Done right, with consideration for the surroundings, means sustaining the culture and geography of the place as it is while also encouraging progress.

There is hesitancy from some islanders. On the ferry ride here, the guy a seat over asks if we're researching that "fancy project." Some people who have left question aspects of the island project. Last summer, Cobb talked with an islander living in Toronto who didn't like the idea of contemporary architecture on Fogo Island.

"I said to him, 'I know you love this place. I love this place too,'" she says, relaying their exchange. "You cannot sit up in Toronto, come home for a week or two a year and expect this place to stay unchanging to suit your need for a nostalgic experience. If you want to come home and live here and actually get tangled up and try to do something, I'm willing to sit down and debate the merits of



Below: An ocean-edge view of The Long Studio, which also appears on the magazine cover. Architect Todd Saunders placed a window at waist level with a broad sill for leaning out and contemplating the sea. The wall of windows allows for dramatic changes in light to bounce off the inside walls, which are made with spruce beams.



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Above: A view of the Fogo Island Inn during construction as it was in April 2012. The 44,000-square-foot space, when complete, will have 29 rooms, each with sea views, as well as a sauna, cinema, art gallery, conference space and restaurant.

contemporary architecture and its impact on this community, but until that time, I think you lose your right to say.”

She says nostalgia is a dangerous force because it turns rural places into museums—inactive and focused on the past at a time when the island needs a way forward.

The Shorefast Foundation is set up as an extreme form of social enterprise, a term used for organizations that put their profits and business smarts toward societal good. While funding models for

these enterprises vary, few plow a full 100 percent of profits back into the community the way Shorefast does.

In 2011, the foundation had 78 full-time employees, according to Canada Revenue Agency. A year later, it has 99, including architects and builders, working on all aspects of the project. That number is expected to remain relatively steady, since as builders complete the work, service staff for the inn will be hired.

These hotel jobs could add a stabilizing dimension to the local economy, which is still centred on the crab, shrimp, lobster (and seal)

fishery and dependent on the vagaries of nature. Tourism needs people with discretionary income—the more the better—so the inn appeals to the so-called one percent.

Well-heeled tourists coming to Fogo Island will find a distinct natural experience, along with creature comforts such as rooftop hot tubs, windows with broad sills that open onto the sea, made-in-Canada organic mattresses, a National Film Board digital cinema, art gallery, heritage library and gourmet restaurant. While prices have not been listed yet, a starting room rate of more than \$1,000 has been bandied about.

From afar, the inn looks like a long wooden box held up by spindly legs (actually made of steel). It has an environmentally friendly infrastructure, including grey water capture. It’s heated by wood from managed forests tended by island families. Two Newfoundland dogs guide visitors up the footpath from the parking area to the inn. Such details add up to tell the Fogo Island story—something Cobb says is central to the foundation’s mandate.

The islanders have been pulling up their own bootstraps for years. After the province joined Confederation in 1949, Fogo Islanders resisted government resettlement in the 1960s, preferring to stay in the place despite what bureaucrats described as an inhospitable climate. Cobb says Fogo Island seems to have seven seasons, from summer to winter with everything in between. The Labrador Current flows down from Greenland and interacts with fantastical landforms. Moving ice brings in seals and the occasional polar bear; there are icebergs, gentle winds, long days, moody skies and untamed oceans. One afternoon, we see a small herd of caribou eating the grass on the high school soccer pitch. The “seven seasons” line has become part of the marketing for the inn, adding dimensions to the province known as The Rock.

Tenacity-in-place was evident when islanders organized the main fish plant as a co-operative in the 1960s. It was one of many efforts that formed part of the Fogo Process: a social experiment documented by

The Emberley family's fishing stage in Joe Batt's Arm. The development project in Fogo Island wants to bring the old into the new to revive the economy in this outport community.




the National Film Board (it will play at the inn's cinema).
"Decisions about the fishery are made here," Cobb says. "No one is sitting in Florida in fancy shoes in a fancy condo making a decision to close the fish plant on Fogo Island—as has happened and is happening all around this province," she says. "There's no fuzziness about where the profits end up."
There is, however, some incoherence about the culture of the cod. Islanders speak of the bridge generation that grew up working the sea, yet their sons and daughters never fished for cod in their lives. P.J. Decker, the son of a fisherman and boat maker, is in his early 30s and the father of two. He recently returned to Fogo Island to set up a day-tour business for inland fishing and coastline hikes aimed at inn tourists. Before the Shorefast project, he spent most of the year in Fort McMurray, Alta., working in the oil sands. Others head to Toronto or other urban centres to find work.
Cobb calls the exodus a threat to the culture. "It's a short time before the past becomes inaccessible," she says. "We're vulnerable to a cultural flattening as the forces of the digital world accelerate and the seductions of the consumer age grow stronger." Why row a boat when you can stare at your smartphone?
(Tony Cobb, Zita's brother and Shorefast's chief operating officer, calculates that the community is only seven funerals away from losing the grandfathered craft of boat making forever.)
To revive interest and appreciation for boat making, Shorefast compiled a heritage collection of punts—wooden boats with long beams, which resemble bathtubs. It started a boat-building program

at the high school and organized an annual friendly competition of punt racing between Fogo and Change islands. People are still trying to beat the best rowing time of 2½ hours. Before roads linked the island's communities, boats were the way of both travel and making a living on the sea.
"Our culture is inextricably tied to going to sea. When we stop going to sea in boats, we'll stop being who we are," Cobb says.
Cultural preservation is one of Cobb's motivations, and eco-economics is central to her business plan. To get an idea of her thinking, surf to the inn's website, which has a reading list that includes *Prosperity Without Growth*, Tim Jackson's new way of viewing the claw-and-grab economy, or Wade Davis's *Wayfinders*, in which the Massey lecturer warns against being "entranced by the promise of the new" and the risks of turning our "backs on the old." Mark Vernon's philosophy, called *Wellbeing*, segues into the ideas of Theodore Roszak, who wrote the introduction to E.F. Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*.
Roszak writes: "We need a nobler economics that is not afraid to discuss spirit and conscience, moral purpose and the meaning of life—an economics that aims to educate and elevate people, not merely to measure their low-grade behaviour."
All lovely ideas, but isn't the standard model of capitalism de facto for most working people? Possibly, but it doesn't mean we have to accept it, she says.
"I'm not a raging socialist—I just sound like one," Cobb quips with a laugh. "I actually believe in the corporate model. I studied

This is Squish Studio, located outside the community of Tilting on Fogo Island. The slanted roof acts like punctuation on an otherwise bare skyline. Artists from the residency program work in this space and sleep in a house located about a block's walk from the town. Mid-career filmmakers and writers have worked here, and the program receives hundreds of applications each year.

business at Carleton and came from the business world. I just think we need to use the business model to serve a broader group of interest holders."
She's content to lead the charge.
"People like me, who can afford to make choices, darn well better make them," Cobb says. "And we'd better build new business models that make it possible for people who have a lot less money to actually live in a similar way." She says business leaders investing in and creating local enterprise create an entry point for those with less money.
One business model currently seeing success on the island is a \$1-million fund started by Cobb's former boss at JDS, Jozef Straus, with his wife, Vera Straus. Inspired by the micro-finance model developed at the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, it has friendly repayment terms and helped develop 16 island businesses.
While economic theories launched the Shorefast projects, economic realities will influence their outcome. We're sitting one afternoon in a café called Growler's in Joe Batt's Arm. It's hopping at lunchtime with workmen from the inn and curious tourists like us. The owner, Cora, is chuffed at the pace as Cobb gets set to launch the project of her life. How does Cobb know this experiment in tourism will fly?



"We don't know if it's all going to work, but we put everything into making it work." She notes that doing nothing is a bigger gamble for outport Newfoundland. "It's about trying to find a new way for this rural place that might be a model for other rural places," she says. "If we lose our rural places and we lose the continuity of people living very tangled up with nature, making a living in that way, how will we know who we are?" [📍](#)
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