

House Works: Davidson Log Homes impresses with its fresh approach



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Eyebrow dormers and a cascade of roofs create the mystical quality that Matt Davidson's homes are famous for.

Sandy Mackay / Ottawa Citizen

I began visiting home shows professionally in 1988, delivering how-to seminars and looking for worthwhile things to tell Canadian readers about. Long experience has left me immune to being impressed by the latest “revolutionary” new products or building methods unless they really are terrific.

That’s why the work of a log builder named Matt Davidson caught my eye in November 2012. Canada is blessed with many outstanding log builders, but I’ve never seen anything that matches what Davidson builds in his construction yard in rural Ontario.

So how does a log builder shine in a trade blessed with master builders? In his case there are two ways: extensive attention to the textures and joinery of his log buildings; and a quality of artistry, shape and proportion that makes his work look traditional, unique and fresh all at the same time.



Matt Davidson removes sapwood from a white pine log with a draw knife in 2006. Davidson has put about 50,000 hours into the trade so far.

Davidson Log Homes / Ottawa Citizen

Davidson had the good fortune to grow up with a father who was not only supportive, but a skilled carpenter himself. This exposed him to a range of construction experiences early on, eventually leading him to train as a cabinetmaker. He met his wife-to-be, Alison, in that same training program, and they eventually fell in love — both with each other and with log building.

“I was 22 when I finally knew I wanted to be a log home builder,” he remembers. “But getting a job in this trade isn’t easy and the pay isn’t great. Every established builder naturally wants to hire someone with experience or someone willing to take a course.

“With a mortgage and a child in my life at the time, training was out of the question. Instead, I walked into a log building yard that I admired, told them about the one-year experience I had, then worked like crazy to prove myself. I was with Bullock and Company for four years, honing my skills and learning all I could.”



A bathroom in one of the many log homes that Matt Davidson and his crews have designed and built. Hand-worked log surfaces, carved details and curved shapes set Davidson's work apart.

Sandy Mackay / Ottawa Citizen

Davidson gave his employer six months’ notice when he decided to start his own log building company ([davidsonloghomes.com](http://www.davidsonloghomes.com/) (<http://www.davidsonloghomes.com/>); 705-833-1203) on the 130-acre piece of rural land that he and Alison bought. His father donated a month of labour during the springtime blackfly season of 2000 to help build the 24- by 28-foot log garage the family planned to live in on their property.

“I harvested white pine logs off our acreage to build that place,” he remembers, “and six long weeks after starting, Alison and I and our three children moved into that building without doors or windows. For the first 10 years of my career I ate, slept and drank log building. I read every book I could find on it. In this respect, every accomplished log builder is self taught because we’re all working on improvements.”

One innovation Davidson has developed involves sawing logs in half lengthwise before joining them into walls. This virtually eliminates the cracking that happens when full logs dry out over the seven years the process takes. Davidson could fill a book with all the other innovations he's come up with.

Now 42, he figures he's worked 50,000 hours in the trade. He and his crew have built about 50 homes so far for clients across Canada and as far away as Texas, and Alison sends Christmas cards each year to stay in touch. Davidson's favourite quote: "Life is so short, and the craft is so long to learn."

In my mind's eye I often imagine a world filled with perfect beauty and mystical craftsmanship. Do you understand the yearning I'm talking about? Though I rarely see buildings in real life that approach the qualities I envision, can anyone look at Davidson's work and not understand how close they come to the mark?

Steve Maxwell has helped people make the most of their homes since 1988. Learn more at stevemaxwell.ca (<http://stevemaxwell.ca/>) and [realrurallife.com](http://www.realrurallife.com) (<http://www.realrurallife.com/>).
