

Manifest destiny

Just off the northeast coast of Newfoundland, a Canadian island of some 240 sq-km is working to transform itself into a geotourist centre and a hub for international artists and film-makers

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PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF FOGO ISLAND SHOREFAST FOUNDATION



Fogo Island has some ambitious plans underway. Here, traditional construction methods yield a handful of restored historic buildings while edgier contemporary methods beget some high-contemporary artists studios. While it seems perhaps antithetical, the results so far indicate strong, coherent synthesis.

The Fogo Island Shorefast Foundation and the Fogo Island Arts Corporation share responsibilities in the undertaking. The agencies expect the project will create local jobs through new film and artists economies while perpetuating island traditions and aesthetically rejuvenating the community.

"We believe that these geographically and culturally unique islands are extremely well suited to visitors wanting to experience this. We plan to add the necessary infrastructure to catalyse this industry on Fogo Island and Change Islands, and to do so in a manner that engages the local people as masters of their own destinies," explains Kathleen Crotty, Shorefast's director of marketing and media relations.

Shorefast is restoring historic and/or deteriorated buildings. That includes a church, the local Fisherman's Hall, and the Fogo Island Inn. Not only has the restoration rescued some buildings, it has also honed the skill sets of local builders and sparked a new appreciation for local vernacular. It is in these restored buildings that Shorefast will be able to foster its other initiatives. For instance, the church will host local theatre productions and art exhibitions; Fisherman's Hall will house a professional wood shop where international designers can create furniture. The Inn will serve as the project's capstone element.

The contemporary side will be materialised by architect Todd Saunders. After years of international practice and now based in Bergen, Norway, Fogo Island's native son was a seemingly logical choice to help shape the project. His brief includes six artist's studios, as commissioned by the Fogo Island Arts Corporation, a contemporary arts experiment whose mission is to regenerate the islands by delivering an integrated strategy incorporating the arts, geo-tourism, and social enterprise. "All our projects are about capturing the essence of this place, building on what was created by those who have come before. We don't want to

dwel in the past, we want to respect it and work with it," says Elísabet Gunnarsdóttir, the Arts Corporation's director.

"We are at the beginning of a new century and a new millennium, and there is a strong need to rethink the way we have been doing things in the arts as well as in other fields. We want to create a new epicentre in a very specific place, away from the metropolis."

The highly contemporary studios with a robust linear aesthetic range from 20 to 200 sq-m. They'll all appear on the rocky coastal milieu. Another two are currently in progress and should be completed by year's end. Anomalous to the landscape, sort of architectural reformulations of Magritte's corpus strewn about Fogo Island, all six studios are completely off the grid. They do not tap into municipal water or sewer lines, natural gas or electricity outlets, or other public services. Energy comes from solar panels, wood stoves, harvested rainwater, and a compost toilet. The footprint was also carefully guarded during the construction process. Crews used local materials, many of which were literally brought to the sites by hand.

The Bridge, Tower, and Squish studios opened in June last year. The windows of the Bridge studio frame the horizon and a tranquil inlet of the Atlantic Ocean; Squish is isolated on a rocky cliff outside Tilting, a small town on Fogo Island's eastern end. On inclement days, the rough-sawn, whitewashed spruce plank surfaces throughout the interior and exterior blend the studio into the cloud bank. Small exterior spaces offer space to ponder the ocean and the landscape enfolding the studio.

The Long Studio is aptly named for its 100ft-long south elevation. Built on stilts, the design takes its cue from the local vernacular. It echoes the local fishing stages, wooden buildings used to land and process fish, which dot the island's shores.

Fogo Island is reinventing itself, from spurring a resurgence of its construction arts to calling home one of its travelling sons. And from local artists who work from their kitchens or garages to artists who travel from one to the other end of the world, its artistic programmes will nurture the talents at home and bring in new ones for sustainable invigoration. That's a veritable geotourist destination.