

MICHIGAN LITHOTECHTURE

BY MICHAEL J. P. SMITH

Earl Young's house at Round Lake in Michigan (below), employs rough-hewn stones and curvilinear roof forms to blend with the landscape.



(Photograph by Michael J. P. Smith)

From the crude shelters of arctic Russia's Novaya Zemlya to southern Africa's Great Zimbabwe, fieldstones of every variety have been used in construction since neolithic times. But rarely have they been used with the vivacity of three turn-of-the-century Michiganders who had little or no formal schooling in architecture. In their hands, the bouldery bounty bulldozed south by the Wisconsin Period Glacier has been translated into an indigenous "lithotecture" of variety, charm, regional sensibility, and mystical force.

In Northport, at the tip of Michigan's Leelenau Peninsula, dairy farmer and self-taught builder Byron Woolsey (1850-1940) collected biomorphic stones and gnarled timber for the whimsical houses he erected for family members and others. One hoard of stones survives on the grounds of "The Wigwams," an enclave of programmatic, conical structures Woolsey built in 1922 for his daughter Mary.

Among the examples of Woolsey stonework are the boulder buttresses of Northport Point's Atwill Memorial Chapel (1911) and an abandoned dwelling on Bellow (Gull) Island in Northport Bay. His most ambitious work, fortunately, is also the most accessible.

When Woolsey's son Clinton, an early aviator, was killed in a 1927 air crash over Buenos Aires, his father designated 80 acres of his Goldenrod farm as a memorial aerodrome, converting its fieldstone creamery (c. 1890) to a unique air terminal.

Inside, a small labyrinth of circular, apsidal, and vaulted rooms remains cool in summer owing to the insulating properties of its massive masonry walls. Outside, a curving staircase leads to a rooftop picnic shelter with views of the field's grassy runways and to an observation deck from which, on clear evenings, as the building's stones radiate the previous day's warmth like living things, the lights of the port of Charlevoix can be seen, shimmering like auroras across Grand Traverse Bay.

A Charlevoix real estate developer for most of his life and a dropout from the University of Michigan's architecture school, Earl A. Young (1889-1975) built his first stone house in 1918 for his family. During the next 57 years, orchestrating the work of local masons and craftsmen, this impresario of the picturesque transformed his town with dozens of stone-girt structures that continue to astonish visitors.

Resembling neighborhoods of J.R.R. Tolkien's Hobbitown, Charlevoix's three clusters of Young houses -- 26 in all -- range in size from a tiny button mushroom to a sprawling lakeside villa. They are both tactile and varied in design: warty structural walls of parti-colored boulders; stratified walls of buff limestone or scarlet sandstone domed and free-form roofs capped with shaggy coiffures of lichenous wooden shingles; and chimneys deliberately slumped like melting candles.

Young's weightiest efforts were reserved for three local inns and hostelries. The five boulder fireplaces of Young's Weathervane Inn (1954) include an 18,260-pound rock resembling a map of lower Michigan, its freeways suggested by pinkish veins. Young unearthed the specimen in 1928, hid it, and reclaimed it 26 years later.

Implicit in both Young's and Woolsey's work is an acknowledgment of the curious charisma of stones and their role in religions old and new. This linkage is explicit in a stone castle in Suttons Bay, south of Northport, completed in 1989 by construction firm owners David and Heather Lee Nielson.

Actually the coachhouse of its seven-acre, wooded estate (the main house remains to be built), the three-story, roughly 2,800-square-foot Nielson house's copper-clad gables and teak rooftop catwalks rise above seemingly indestructible walls of yard-wide boulders hefted into place by a crane and bracketed by four cornerstones nearly five feet tall.

The project followed a divinely inspired *parti* Heather Nielson says was given her in a dream. She overcame seemingly insurmountable problems, she says, through prayer and fasting. Local craftsman Tony Schaub and Michigan wildlife artist Rodney Lawrence were her principal collaborators.

The dwelling's conceptual basis was both scriptural and metaphorical, drawing on Biblical Psalm 127 ("Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who built it.") and the perceived parallel between the diversity of stones and humankind. The "fit joining" of the stones in the house's fabric was meant to reflect the unity of God's people. The current practice of using split rock as an exterior veneer was rejected as a defilement of a symbolically sacred material.

Even architects who lack divine inspiration might still recognize the numinous qualities of certain stones, be they Stonehenge's sarsens or some curiously compelling cobble discovered on a shingly beach. Such thoughts evidently guided Chicago-based Jacobs/Ryan Associates in 1990, when the landscape architects populated the grounds of an unattended telephone switching

building in Gurnee, Illinois, with a haunting emplacement of menhirs that suggests a mute group of eight Illinois Bell workers petrified by an encounter with the Gorgon.

The variety and vast antiquity of architectural fieldstones -- if not some mythopoetical juju intrinsic to them -- can induce in some observers the sensations of temporal vertigo and historical simultaneity portrayed by Dame Daphne DuMaurier in her novel *The House on the Strand*. To susceptible ears, there are indeed sermons in stones, if only whispered accounts of their distant creation.

Says the granite boulder: Behold my shock-deformed crystals! I was flung 100 miles by the impact of the giant Sudbury, Ontario, meteorite.

Says the basalt greenstone: I oozed forth as lava 1,000 million years ago, when a rift through the Michigan peninsulas threatened to tear North America asunder.

Says the Petoskey stone of fossilized coral: I grew as a reef under a balmy sea never seen by man.

Can NewStone, a faux granite concocted from soybean flour and otherwise landfill-bound newspaper in a process recently perfected by Phenix Composites, Inc., of Mankato, Minnesota, say the same?

Photographs by Michael J.P. Smith



Earl Young's stone houses near Charlevoix, Michigan, range in size from Hobbit-sized homes with mushroom-shaped roofs (left) to grand halls (above), where imposing arches spring from stones of megalithic proportions.

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