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Hobbit-land

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Above, many Earl Young homes are called "mushroom houses" or "hobbit houses" because they appear to have sprung from the forest floor. Below, Boulder Park's Earl Young creations follow the architect's edict that "no two should be alike."



Solid stone gateposts stand sentinel at the entrance to "Boulder Park" in Charlevoix, where architect Earl Young designed a dozen fairy-tale homes in the 1930s.

An insurance salesman -- and later a real estate developer -- he had no degree in architecture and no background in construction. He never achieved fame outside this small pin-prick on the map of northern Michigan.

Yet Earl Young's homes have all the fluidity of dancing water, the rockiness of Charlevoix's shoreline, the intimacy of its hilly forests and the whimsy of native flora and fauna.

Like his contemporary, Frank Lloyd Wright, Young believed that buildings should complement their topography and be constructed with indigenous materials. His designs called for native stone including quarry limestone, field stone and red sandstone brought in by barge from the area around the Soo Locks.

Beyond that, Young's fingerprint is seen in mullioned windows, massive fireplaces and chimneys, and cedar shake roofs where there is no such thing as a straight line.

Young built a dozen homes in Boulder Park in the six years prior to the Great Depression. Situated along several acres of shoreline property along Lake Michigan west of Charlevoix, they're what today might be called a "planned unit development." After the economy settled down, he tackled his second "development" of 11 homes in the triangular block of Park, Clinton and Grant streets, and then turned his attentions to commercial buildings: the Weathervane restaurant, Weathervane Terrace, and the Lodge.

It's neighborhood folklore that when a resident of one of the architect's homes had to replace her undulating Earl Young roof, 13 to 18 layers of cedar shakes were required to approximate its flowing contours. Then, after she'd spent \$18,000 on the effort, Earl Young scolded her because it wasn't done as he'd intended.

Visitors to Charlevoix can view 30 of Earl Young's homes and businesses on a self-guided walking or driving tour. Maps are available at the Charlevoix Area Chamber of Commerce.



Undulating roof lines on this long, low house might have been inspired by waves lapping at the shore of Lake Michigan.



Above, mullioned windows, like those in the living room area of Grant Street resident Jeanine Wallace, are a dramatic focal point of many of Earl Young's home interiors. Below, Earl and Irene Young's former home bears the architect's trademark stonework, massive fireplaces and irregular roof lines, with surrounding stone wall.

