

Tab copy: Whoever coined the adage “Good things come in small packages” must have been thinking about cabins.

Life Size

Many of the building projects we highlight in *Architecture Minnesota* are notable for their large size, the complexity of their program, and their bold or respectful response to their urban, suburban, or campus setting. Gleaming corporate headquarters, towering medical centers, bustling mixed-use residential—these multidimensional buildings reveal architects working at the height of their powers. But, I must say, it’s been immensely enjoyable for those of us at the magazine to turn our attention to a modest building type: the weekend cabin. If there is an overarching theme to this issue, it is this: Good things do indeed come in small packages.

Cabins are written in our collective DNA here in Minnesota, and for that we should be thankful. They’re an antidote to modern life with its 60-hour workweeks, hour-long commutes, and six-minute meals on the go. Cabins invite us to slow our pace, soak in the cool woods and the shimmering lake, and, most important, savor the company of family and friends. And the respite they offer doesn’t end on the Sunday drive home; daydreams of the next escape help lower our blood pressure in the workaday world.

The list of virtues doesn’t end there. How about sustainability? So much of what we deem eco-friendly design is fundamental to the intimate getaway. David Salmela’s Roland Cabins (page 38), for example, take pains not to disturb the forest floor, with the significantly redesigned main cabin maintaining the original footprint and reusing many of the original materials. Albertsson Hansen Architecture’s Cable Lake Guest Cabin (36), an inspired renovation of a tiny boathouse and sleeping room, is proof that a few hundred square feet of well-designed space is all that one or two people really need in a cabin. Both projects promote a scaling back of energy use and material needs, and show us that *life size* may be a little smaller than we think.

The endeavor to build a small shelter in the woods often yields adventuresome design as well, in part because owners want out-of-the-ordinary visual connections to the surrounding landscape. That was certainly the case with Julie Snow’s own arrestingly minimalist Weekend House (28) on the North Shore of Lake Superior and SALA Architects cofounder Dale Mulfinger’s inventive Madeline Island Retreat (22), which the owners enthusiastically refer to as a “glass tent.” But why stop at transparency when you can opt for open-air? Ghost (17), an annual midsummer design/build event in Nova Scotia, ups the ante by producing a sanctuary of cabin-sized structures designed and constructed to interpret the maritime landscape rather than keep out the wind and rain. (Some of the structures were later finished to house participants during their two-week stay.)

Best of all, architect-designed cabins can be affordable. Swan+Simmons Architecture’s contemporary Swan Fish Camp (34), for example, boasts the comfort and finish of a luxury home at only \$150 per square foot. A less sophisticated (though no less inspired) shelter would obviously be even more affordable. If you’re a fresh-air enthusiast who’s always wanted to work with an architect, a small cabin project—whether it’s a new cabin or a renovation—might just be the place to start. Owners of architect-designed getaways will tell you it’s a path worth exploring, with many pleasing discoveries along the way. And that the view from the trail’s end simply can’t be beat.

