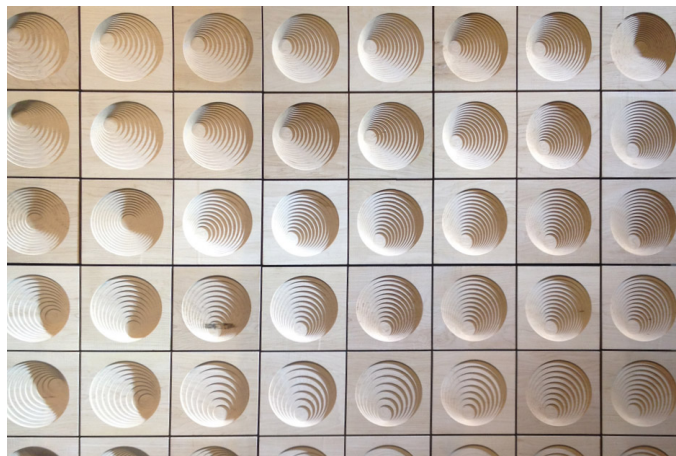


# THE GLOBE AND MAIL



## How these Toronto architects are advancing the artistic application of wood

Ellen Himelfarb, Wednesday, Nov. 19 2014

Imagine you're an architect. You've just won \$50,000 from the Canada Council for the Arts for your "exceptional artistic potential." You've got two years to spend it. What would you do? What wouldn't you do? Study the effect of mass movements in the Earth on the growth of trees? Interview the world's authorities on manufactured wood? Perhaps.

Yet that is precisely what the small Toronto practice Williamson Chong went for after winning the Professional Prix de Rome in 2012. To principals Donald Chong, Betsy Williamson and Shane Williamson, the form of engineered wood known as cross-laminated timber (CLT) is one of the best things to happen to architecture since concrete. And they embarked on a round-the-world research tour to prove it.

The team has since distilled its research into a pair of exhibitions launching this week at the Corkin Gallery in Toronto. The central work of Living Wood is *Tracings*, a 200-square-foot grid of seemingly identical maple squares subtly distorted by mass movements. The work, along with a series of ink-jet landscape prints, showcases the firm's studies in digital fabrication. "They're at the forefront where theories of design and technological advancement come together," says gallerist Jane Corkin of the architects, "an intersection representative of the arts in the 21st century."

To support the work of Williamson Chong, Corkin has curated a supporting exhibition called On Architecture and Structure, linking the firm's theories on design, technology and ecology to painters, photographers and digital artists. "For instance," Corkin says, "their interest in materiality and structure aligns with the philosophy expressed through the paintings of David Urban. Their interest in wood and environmental issues is similar in thought to Thaddeus Holownia's portraits of trees."

For a small architecture practice to be making such strides in wood construction, not to mention its artistic application, is a rare accomplishment. Yet Williamson Chong, after barely four years in business (after stints at other firms, including Shim-Sutcliffe, architects of the Corkin Gallery – small world), has managed to close in on

something of a golden rule. “Shane, who [is] a professor at the University of Toronto’s faculty of architecture, offers an uncompromising critical outlook,” says Betsy Williamson. “He’s the feedback loop in the office, always saying, ‘We could push that a bit further.’”

While they may not have the resources to innovate like the Fosters and Gehrys of the world, they make it their method to “work really hard in the scope of every project to find one or two things that can be really great,” says Betsy Williamson. Sometimes those “things” are monolithic wood feature walls or slimmer staircases to allow in more sunlight; other times they are bold concepts.

Their Natural Light prototype house, for instance, won a Gold Award from Toronto’s Interior Design Show for its upside-down nature, in which the architects “hoisted up” the common rooms into the sky-lit pitched roof and lowered the bedrooms in the more private, darker half. “It meant the rest of the house could be simple,” Williamson says. “Some projects come to you with all this [interest] built in – meat you can sink teeth into. Other projects you have to work hard to make interesting.”

Their latest scheme, the overhaul of a ski club on Ontario’s Niagara Escarpment, will take the scale of their work up a notch, from residential to monumental – along with their use of cross-laminated timber. “They have a deep respect for wood as a poetic material, and a profound interest for using new technologies of fabrication to shape it into form,” says Brigitte Desrochers, a program officer at the Canada Council.

With the Prix de Rome funding, the team travelled to timber-producing centres in Europe and Japan to learn the latest technologies in softwood lumber. That they had to leave home to learn about such a characteristically Canadian resource was an irony not lost on them. “New-growth timber is the only renewable material we have at hand in Canada,” Williamson says. “It’s affordable, it’s relatively light – you can imbue it with innovation for less money than concrete. But as it comes into fruition as a major building component [here] at the same level as concrete and steel, the technology hasn’t changed.”

Elsewhere, change has been ticking along for some time. At Aalto University in Finland the architects workshopped with a professor specializing in wood architecture; in Denmark they studied new digital design modules. In Switzerland and Austria, the European leader in cross-laminated timber construction, they shadowed engineers and digital consultants who work in the highly developed prefab building industry. And in Japan, they met with architects like Kengo Kuma, whose light-as-air abstract wood constructions have won over millions from 20th-century standards like brick and brutalism.

In Canada, Williamson reckons, wood has got stuck in a rut. “When people think of wood here, they think it has to feel rustic. It’s still got this cottage vibe,” she says. “We’re not about that at all. We want to challenge architects across Canada, to show them how it can be seen as contemporary, elegant material and move it forward.”

Though Williamson Chong is an exception to the rule, it’s not the only firm applying wood in innovative ways. Williamson name-checks Stephen Teeple’s design for the Philip J. Currie Dinosaur Museum in Wembley, Alta. – built almost entirely from a recycled pine-beetle stock called Glulam. When the museum opens next year, it will have the sort of “amazing detailing in timber construction” that once eluded such prestige public projects.

“We originally started working with wood because it was achievable, because we were making everything ourselves,” Williamson says. “We’re now starting to see timber technology that can be applied to large-scale building components.”

The Corkin Gallery exhibitions will examine the company’s role in that development. “We try not to be too satisfied with our past accomplishments,” Williamson says. “Whether you’re in Canada or [exploring] something that’s applicable across borders, every architect has a responsibility in the profession to keep it moving forward.”