



By Rhys Phillips
Photography by Roy Grogan

- A “tilted” island, cut by a sweeping stone path and densely planted, provides the imposing Arts and Crafts style house with a soft base when viewed from the lower street level.
- In the more formal west garden, the curve of the sunken limestone terrace is countered by a sea of pea gravel in which sits a whimsical ship wreck/play structure.

Sandpiper > rooted to the spot

At the Sandpiper Estate in Ottawa’s Rockcliffe Village, landscape architect John Szczepaniak has created a setting with a strong sense of place.

Restoration and a strong sense of “stewardship to the land” come naturally to Ottawa landscape architect John Szczepaniak. A native of Sudbury, Ont. Szczepaniak grew up in a city wrestling with the effects of decades of industrial pollution on the rugged landscape of the Canadian Shield. This has had a profound impact on him, and shaped his belief that we should think regionally while acting at the most local of levels, the house.

Szczepaniak sympathizes strongly with Toronto landscape architect Michael Hough’s position on turning away from creating pretty but placeless landscapes. *In Out of Place, Restoring Identity to the Regional Landscape* (Yale University Press, 1990), Hough writes, “much of the urban landscape ... has been subjected to a universal design standard that denies a sense of place.” Suburban landscapes “replace the woods and plant communities of the rural environment with exotic alien species, that deny the creation of a context between what is old or indigenous and what is new.”

Sandpiper Estate overlooks MacKay Lake, a small, picturesque pond located in the heart of Rockcliffe Village, Ottawa’s upscale community of historic mansions and more modest cottages. In this residential project Szczepaniak has tackled a robust but fragile environment that also includes a unique relationship between public and private land use.

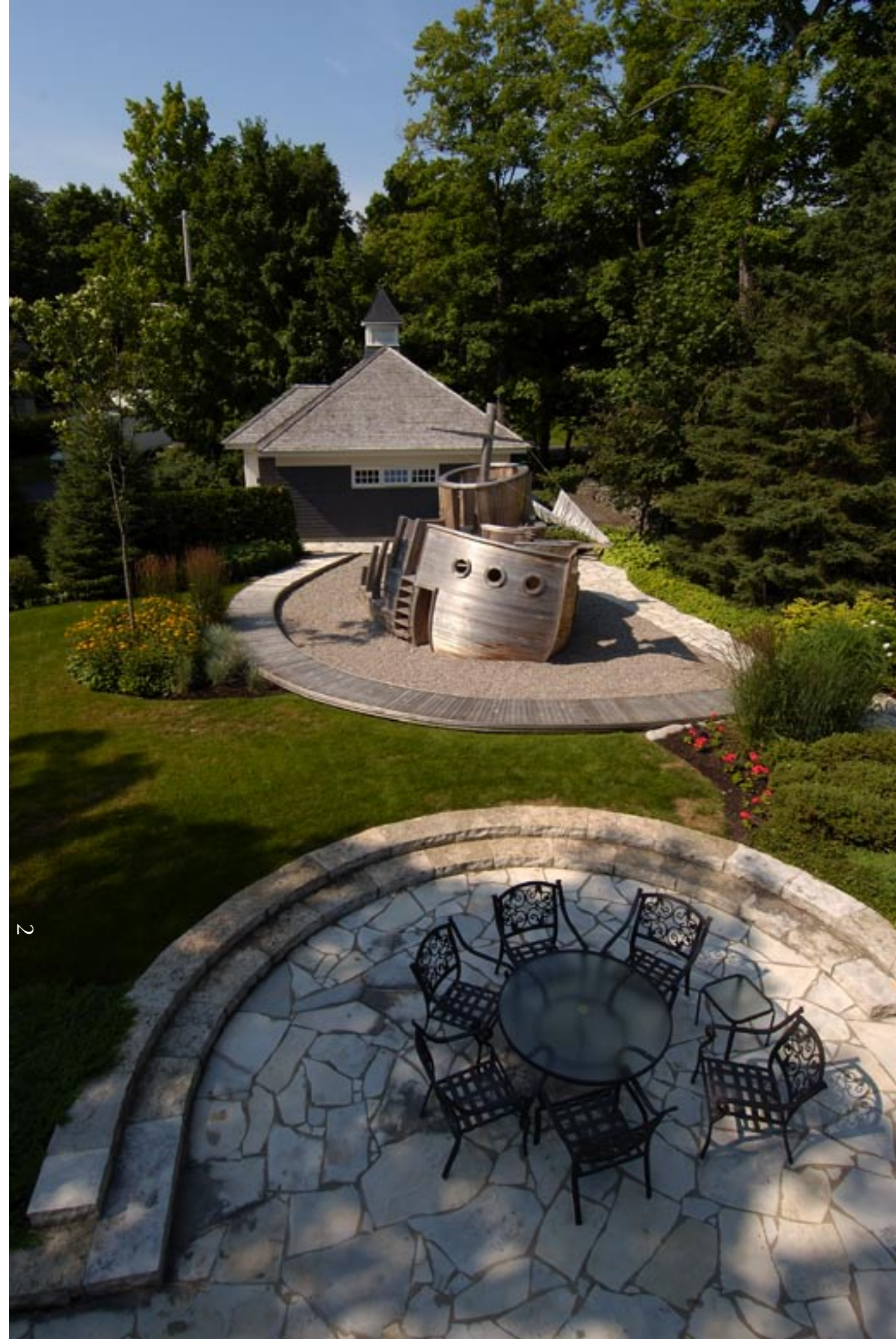
Preservation and change

As its name implies, Rockcliffe Park is, in part, defined by high rocky bluffs, bordering the Ottawa River. But some original cottages nestle into the spring fed lake’s undulating west slope as it dips down to the shoreline. It is an area blessed by a rich, mature landscape of large maples and other indigenous trees and bushes. Specific city bylaws exist to insure the protection of this landscape and its overall character. In addition, early forethought ensures the lakeside slope is traversed by a public path.

Sandpiper was originally a modest cottage until it was completely redesigned a number of years ago by designers John Swain and Guy French. The result was a larger but accomplished shingle-style Arts and Crafts house with a distinct coastal feel. What it lacked was a successful connection with its remarkable landscape.

“This project presented some unusual elements,” Szczepaniak begins. “This includes its proximity to the lake, its intensely sloping grades on two sides and, not least, a public pathway that separates the western two thirds of the estate, including the house, from its lake frontage.”

As he often does, Szczepaniak started by retaining much of what already existed, including several mature red maples. Within this strong context, he has introduced new elements designed first to order an outsider’s perception of the house’s place on its





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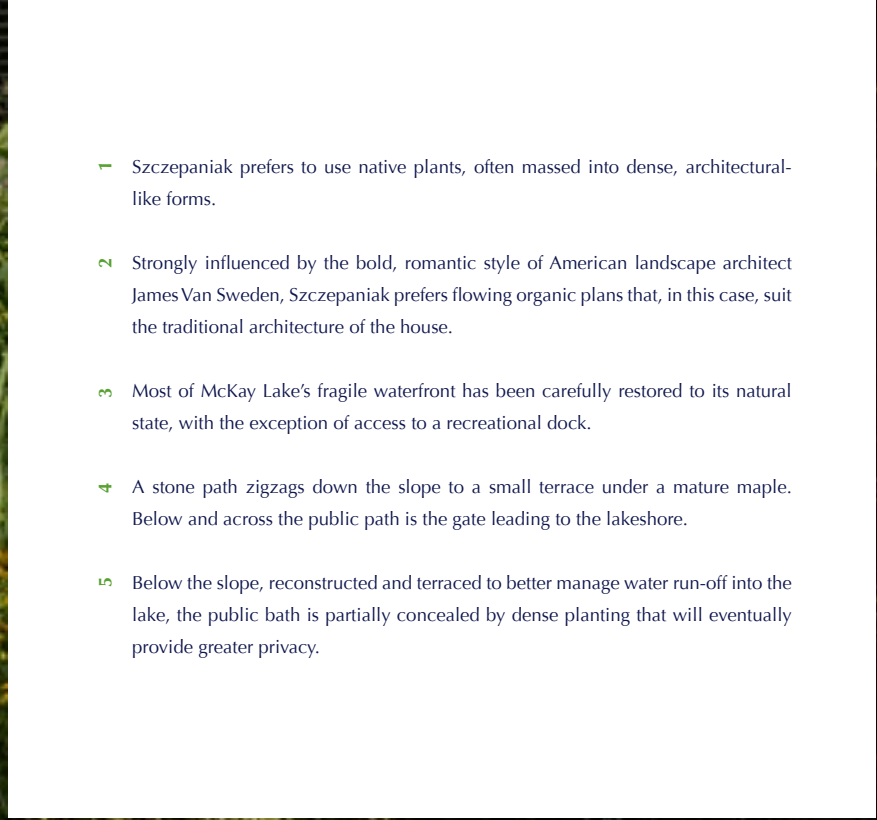
- Szczepaniak prefers to use native plants, often massed into dense, architectural-like forms.
- Strongly influenced by the bold, romantic style of American landscape architect James Van Sweden, Szczepaniak prefers flowing organic plans that, in this case, suit the traditional architecture of the house.
- Most of McKay Lake's fragile waterfront has been carefully restored to its natural state, with the exception of access to a recreational dock.
- A stone path zigzags down the slope to a small terrace under a mature maple. Below and across the public path is the gate leading to the lakeshore.
- Below the slope, reconstructed and terraced to better manage water run-off into the lake, the public bath is partially concealed by dense planting that will eventually provide greater privacy.



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site and second, to facilitate the occupants' interaction with the landscape and the striking vista over the lake, to the east.

Rooms with a view

Two complimentary design themes underlie the scheme.

First, strongly influenced by the bold romantic style of American landscape architect James Van Sweden, the plan introduces a flowing, organic plan that complements the picturesque house and breaks the site into a series of sweeping curves.

The house, the irregular crescent of the drive, and the sweep of the public path divide the triangular property into three outdoor "rooms." These include the east lakeshore and slope, a street facing "tilted island" and the west lawn, with a sunken limestone patio and children's play ship.

Second, these spaces are then further defined by largely native plants, creating dense, almost architectural masses of living matter that are themselves often re-enforced by a secondary layer of paths. In sum, he creates a naturalist, poetic integration of house and landscape based on what he terms "relaxed simplicity."

The lakeside room

The lake plays a defining role both for its scenic potential and its recreational use. To respect environmental sensitivity, careful attention was paid to minimize any disturbance to the natural shoreline. The upper grades, however, were modified without removing existing trees. Above the public path that traverses the site, natural terraces were introduced, which also serve to stabilize the slope and ensure water run-off management to protect the lake.

A shaded, limestone terrace partway down the slope connects to stone stairs that zigzag down under a broad maple and through dense planting to the path. An unobtrusive gate signals access to another zigzag path, this one a wooden boardwalk leading to the owner's small pier, the only accessible part of the shoreline.

Carefully selected plantings establish a physical separation of public and private space. In addition to new maples, these include

dogwoods, honeysuckle, fragrant sumac, and ornamental grasses.

The strong texture and form of these plants, Szczepaniak believes, are more important than flashy colour. Along the slope and elsewhere at Sandpiper, however, he has built impressive beds of hybrid lilies, rudbeckia, goldstrum and shasta (daisies), purple cone flowers as well as shrub roses. Selection ensures a staggered seasonal display of flowers.

The island room

From Mariposa Avenue, the house is first seen from below, looking up a gentle but distinct grade. In response, the driveway has been inscribed as a crescent that wraps around a tilted island. A large maple dominates its west end, soaring above exposed shale outcroppings, draped with spring blooming pink moss.

Curving across the eastern half is a limestone path that borders a bed of bush roses, Stella D'Oro lilies, ornamental grasses, and purple flax. "The path," maintains Szczepaniak, "serves to reach around the house to connect the east slope area with the west lawn, and is intended to ensure the island is not just an isolated visual element." The island also creates a soft foundation that integrates the house's imposing façade with the landscape.

The drydock room

The west lawn is intended as the garden's high-use family area. Two architectural elements dominate the irregular space edged in mature trees and cedar hedges. A large, sunken terrace is defined by a two-tier, solid limestone step/bench which curves out from the house.

Countered against this curve is set a looping boardwalk circling a bed of pea gravel. Afloat in this grey "sea" is a remarkable children's play structure. Designed by Jason Lowe, a Carleton University architecture graduate, this cedar "shipwreck" is as much whimsical sculpture as it is a place for kids.

Sandpiper combines the local planting and environmental sensitivity with the British tradition of carefully creating a landscape that seems to have emerged naturally over time. **B**