



TO THE MANOR BORN

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Shaun Majumder's
wild and crazy
idea to welcome
the world to his
beloved hometown

by **MARJORIE SIMMINS**

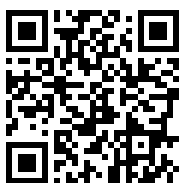
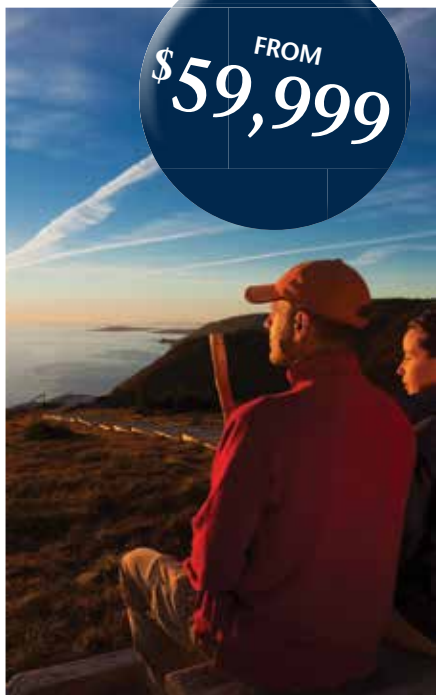
Shaun Majumder's love of Burlington, a tiny coastal community located on the Baie Verte Peninsula in central Newfoundland and Labrador, is no laughing matter. "It's amazing, and there's so much to do," says the 40-year-old comic and actor. "In the winter there's snowmobiling, snowshoeing, and cross-country skiing, and in the summer there are whales, icebergs, and blue skies, and it's 25 degrees all the time. I want to share this place with as many people as possible."

But there's one pressing problem: There's nowhere to stay or eat. Majumder, who is perhaps best known to Canadians for his rubber-faced work on CBC-TV's *This*

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Hour Has 22 Minutes, aims to change that. He is currently embarked on a grand plan for the enduring revitalization of the former fishing-and-lumbering port. The vision includes a contemporary eco-hotel complete with a five-star restaurant. The plan is for the place to have "net zero" energy consumption by employing energy sources such as wind and hydro power, natural lighting, wood heat, and a highly insulated building envelope. An on-site greenhouse will provide the restaurant with organic produce.

Majumder also
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Majumder also hopes to establish a not-for-profit company to stimulate the creation of local businesses. Now based in Los Angeles with his fiancée, fellow actor Shelby Fenner, Majumder has had a dynamic year that included a cross-Canada stand-up comedy tour called *This Tour Has 22 Cities*. The tour has since become the basis for an HBO Canada special, *Shaun Majumder: Every Word Is Absolutely True*, which premiered in April. Other past television gigs include appearances on CBC-TV's *Republic of Doyle*, ABC's *Detroit 1-8-7*, and NBC's *The Firm*. In January he will be starring in *Majumder Manor*, a 12-part reality TV series airing on W Network that will document the evolution of his eco-hotel.

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I knew it had to be more than a B&B and that I needed to do something spectacular”

— Shaun Majumder

THE DREAM THAT NEVER STOPS

“After I bought the land I thought, what if I build something on it?” says Majumder. “Then I thought, what if I build something where the money could go back into the town?” Inspired by social entrepreneur Zita Cobb’s bold vision for Fogo Island—a world-class inn, conference centre, spa, and art gallery—Majumder phoned her to discuss his ideas. Cobb, who is the founder of the Shorefast Foundation and a native daughter of Fogo Island, Newfoundland and Labrador’s largest offshore island, encouraged Majumder to be bold.

Majumder then talked to people at the province’s tourism department and on Burlington’s town council. “I knew it had to be more than a B&B and that I needed to do something spectacular,” he says. “I also knew the inn had to be culturally sensitive and fill a need for tourism. With hospitality, Newfoundlanders have it down. In their hearts and souls. Good home-cooked meals, a comfortable place to stay—when you come to our house, you’re like family.” Beyond this, Majumder also knew that

the region’s tourism sector was lacking in higher-end options.

Next, Majumder spoke to St. John’s architect Peter Blackie. They talked about rural Newfoundland and the outports, and their ongoing state of “tenuous transition,” which was set in motion after the 1992 cod-fishing moratorium. The death of the 500-year-old fishery remains a deep economic and psychic blow to rural Newfoundland and Labrador. “Shaun’s ambition was to come up with a meaningful, long-term, [economic] answer for his hometown,” says Blackie. “But also something that could inform other communities in this province, of which there are so many.” Blackie agreed to help Majumder build a project team and hire an architectural firm.

The winning firm was Acre Architects Inc., founded by Monica Adair and her husband, Stephen Kopp. Only two years old, it was named one of 2012’s emerging firms in Canada by Twenty + Change, a biennial exhibition and publication series

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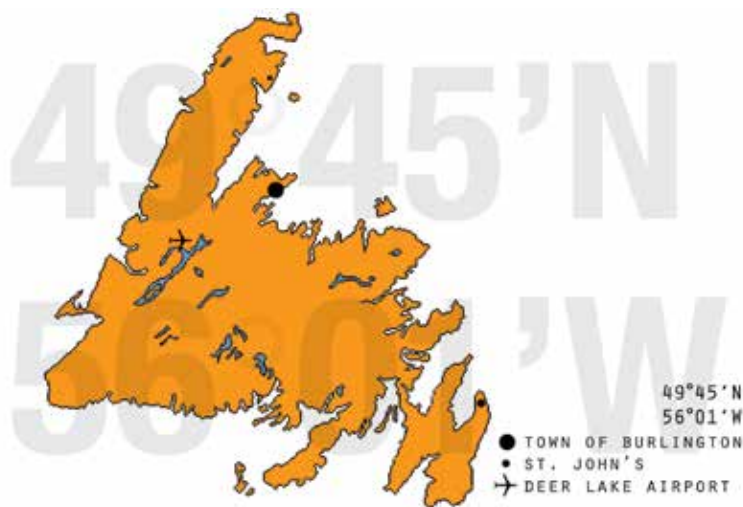
“We wanted to create a project that brought the town forward but connected it to the past”

— Stephen Kopp,

Acre Architects Inc.



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promoting young designers in architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design. Acre is based in Saint John, N.B., Kopp and Adair submitted a detailed proposal and asked a question that stirred Majumder's interest: "How can the rich history of Burlington, the character of its people, and the wild

of Newfoundland be experienced?" Majumder wanted to know more.

"We wanted to create a project that brought the town forward but connected it to the past," says Kopp. "The planning of the town is still like an old outpost; it isn't on a grid. The original waterfront buildings are wooden and have lots of character." And it's these net sheds, or "stages," as Kopp describes them, that help attract people to the region, not newer vinyl-sided structures. Accordingly the manor is inspired by traditional waterfront structures using wood-frame construction and stone and local structural elements, all crafted with local materials.

The design for the interior layout is both interconnected and intimate. Wide, open staircases will lead fluidly from one level to the next, connecting cozy eating and socializing areas. A more formal dining room will contrast with the casual bar area. An open kitchen will allow visitors a full view of the chefs at work. The inn will also feature a wine-tasting cellar, campfire

The comfortable design is intended to model the iconic Newfoundland kitchen party



COURTESY ACPE ARCHITECTS INC.

lounge, and sunset deck. On the top storey will be the ultimate retreat: five luxury suites with private balconies overlooking Baie Verte.

The comfortable design is intended to draw from the allure of the iconic Newfoundland kitchen party. "We want the inn to capture the spirit and intimacy of the traditional way of life," says Adair. "Great food, a warm fire—the inn will seek to bring

people from far and wide to share stories and traditions alongside the people in the community."

The images resonated for Majumder: "Rural communities, that's where the birth of culture happened, that's where food and stories began," he says. "It's where people look each other in the eye and help each other out. Cities can learn a lot from rural communities."

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And vice versa. "The heart of the project is the manor," says Blackie. "It's the place where all worlds can happily mingle in a very democratic way." Or in other words, every enticement and comfort—luxurious or homey—will be on hand at the inn. It will equally welcome local high-spirited snowmobilers and luxury-seeking international visitors. "From a social standpoint, it's incredibly ambitious," says Blackie. "You have to be a crazy optimist, but that's Shaun."

Burlington residents feel excited these days too. "Things are happening around here!" says George Kelly, the mayor of Burlington, his voice full of the Green Bay region's rollicking cadences and old Celtic syntax. "Always something new, always something comes up!" Kelly quickly points out that the manor will only benefit the townspeople: "The money stays in the community. Shaun's not taking anything, not five cents. And people are already starting to think of new business opportunities."

FAMILY TREES

While Majumder may live in L.A., everyone knows where his heart resides. "Shaun's dad was married to a girl from here," explains Kelly. "And now his dad and his stepmother have moved to Burlington. Shaun's grandparents were here, so he always comes home."

Most reliably, they would see Majumder at Christmas. "For years, I don't know how many years being told, but every year at Christmas time, he would send a whole bunch of Christmas gifts," says Kelly. These were for the children of Burlington and the nearby communities of Middle Arm and Smith's Harbour. "We would wrap 'em and put 'em under the tree," he says. "No kid left out. No kid walks away from our town hall without a gift. Nice gifts, nothing skimpy about it."

The story of Majumder's family of origin is complex. His father, Mani Majumder, a Bengali Hindu, was raised in India and moved to Germany in his 20s. There he met a young German woman, Elizabeth ("Leisel"), with whom he fell in love. His intention was to emigrate to Canada, get a job, then return for Elizabeth. But it turned out he had the early stages of tuberculosis, so he was quarantined for six months. He lost touch with Elizabeth. He wrote letters to her but didn't receive a response.

In the meantime, Mani came to know

and then love the nurse who cared for him, Marian Bartlett. The Newfoundlander from Rattling Brook, near Burlington, returned his love. "My parents got married in Burlington," says Majumder. "They had my older sister, Rani, and me. But they split after seven years."

Majumder has been acting since he was 13. "It's just in the nature of what everyone did in Newfoundland—plays, Christmas concerts, make-'em-ups," he says. In 2005, performing suddenly became an imperative. "I went to On-

tario and dove into the entertainment business face first." Today his career is thriving, but he counts himself lucky to have had disappointments too. "I was blessed in the early part of my career to have been slapped in the face a couple of times," he says. "The experiences set my compass straight. There is no such thing as making it. All that matters is that you're doing it."

Neither of Majumder's parents remarried after their divorce. Majumder was especially close to his mother, who

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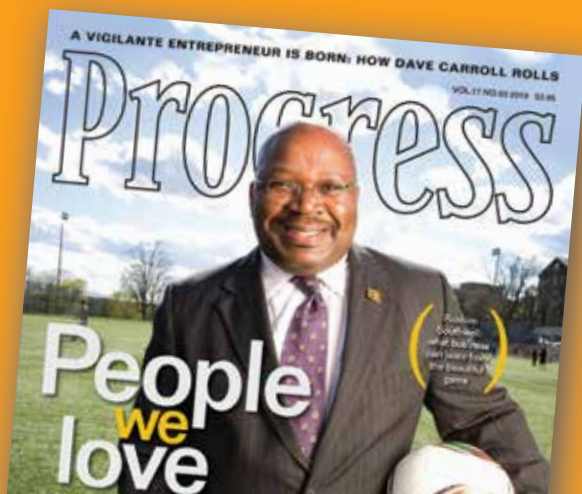
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loved to travel. So in 2003 he and Fenner took her on a trip to Guatemala and Mexico. While in Mexico, she had a heart attack and sadly passed away. Majumder was devastated, but he had bought the property in Burlington prior to his mother's death. His father, then living in Ontario, made a surprising request. "He said, 'Hey, if you find some more land there, maybe I'll move to Newfoundland. I have really nice memories of your mother way back then. I love that place,'" says Majumder. "So we found him some land and renovated the small house on it."

Then the story gets really interesting. "Four or five months before he moved back, he got a call from a woman called Elizabeth." It was the Elizabeth, who was living in Ontario. "She was reconnecting after 40 years, asking, 'What happened?'" It turned out that her husband had died a month after Majumder's mother had died. Elizabeth's mother, they discovered, had hidden the letters Mani had written. The reason? "Dad was Indian and she was German," says Majumder. "So they could be friends, but there was no way they were getting married."

But they did. Not long after they reunited, Mani and Leisel were married in Germany, with her now 100-year-old mother's blessing. "They're living happily ever after, in a tiny little house in Burlington," says Majumder. He uses his favourite adjective to describe his stepmother: "Amazing!"

RHYTHM OF APPRECIATION

Majumder seems to feel a debt of love he can't ever repay. "What Newfoundland has done for me, in my heart and soul and perspective, has been so influential," he says. "Being raised in a small trailer, with no money but not knowing I had no money, taught me so much about what's important. It could be going for a walk in the woods or making what you have count. It sets you up in a rhythm of appreciation for what you do have."

In an elemental way, Newfoundland helped give Majumder his life's work. "In Newfoundland, it's not like I'm special because I'm funny. Everyone's funny! It's how you survive; you use your sense of humour." Majumder is excited about being part of *This Hour Has 22 Minute's* 20th season. He and Fenner are also hard at work writing film scripts. "We don't worry about the future," he says. "We're enjoying the present." 🍷



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