

creative moment

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photo: © Paddy Barry

ROCK STEADY

HOW ZITA COBB,
SELF-MADE MILLIONAIRE
AND PHILANTHROPIST, IS
CREATING AN ECONOMY OF
CRAFT, CARE AND CULTURE
IN THE MIDST OF AN
UNKNOWN SEA.



“Everything in the inn has potential for economic wellbeing for us,” she says. “The only way we’re going to attack the plague of unemployment is to create an economy of craft, care and culture.”



The view from Fogo Island Inn

photo © Lusher Caverly

“If you want to understand a person, start with the place they’re from.”

For Zita Cobb, president of Shorefast Foundation, knowing when to leave was what led her to come back. Born and raised on Fogo Island, off the northeast coast of Newfoundland, Cobb’s sensibility was forged by extreme weather, a storied history and a proud community whose isolation created its strength.

“Everything that I know came out of this place,” says Cobb. “Even though my career was away, I never lost touch with home. I needed to leave to get an education and my business experience, which served me really well for what I’m doing now.”

Away for Cobb was Carleton University in Ottawa followed by jobs in Alberta, worldwide travel and an extremely successful career in technology. In 2001, she retired from the position of chief financial officer for fibre optics giant JDS Uniphase, taking with her stock options worth close to \$70 million. She was 43.

“In the intense finance world, you know when it’s time to go,” she says. “When you’re not learning anything new, you’re not giving anything new.”

So Cobb up and sailed away—in a 47-foot yacht—for four years. “It was a really great way to put distance, literally and figuratively, between me and that world.”

When she returned home, it became apparent that, as with most rural places, Fogo Island and its population of 2,700 needed help. Growing up with the island’s dynamic weather and geographic isolation, Cobb understands the importance of time horizons. “If you don’t survive the short-term storms, you won’t be here for the long-term.”

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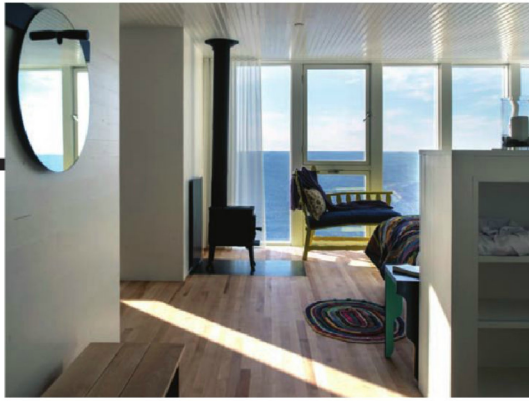
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she says. “We live in tandem with nature. Rural places know this most of all and Canada is a country that’s built on rural. We have great cities—but those emerged with technology and finance to support the rural places that made us wealthy. Extracting those resources is how the cultural fabric of the country emerged. The further we get away from that, the more detrimental it is. In modernity we are crafting an unknown sea.”

A COMMUNITY-CENTRED ECONOMY

Cobb’s present path is the joining of two roads really, that of making money and of giving it back, though for her they are not mutually exclusive. “I’m always looking for the and’s not the or’s,” she says. “I grew up in this deeply cultural, special place that can come only from being isolated. I have deep business experience that I’m lucky to have. When you put those together, that’s a gift.”



To watch movie clips related to Fogo Island, have a look at the digital version of present, available via the App Store and Google Play.



Canadian government attempted to relocate the islanders in the 1960s. The headstrong people refused to leave, and instead used media to create a sense of community and build themselves back up.

She started the Shorefast Foundation with a view to serve social ends. “It is a registered charity but no one wants to receive [handouts], so we use philanthropic funds in a business way by creating social entrepreneurship,” says Cobb. “My boss at JDS Uniphase always said, ‘The most important thing is to keep the most important thing the most important thing.’ The wellbeing of the community is my most important thing, and so [everything I do] should line up around that.”

FOGO ISLAND INN IS THE EMBODIMENT OF HER OVERALL PLAN

Every piece of furniture and textile used at the inn is natural and made on the island. These items are, in turn, sold themselves; Cobb invited outside designers to collaborate with local craftspeople and create a cottage industry. “Everything in the inn has potential for economic wellbeing for us,” she says. “The only way we’re going to attack the plague of unemployment is to create an economy of craft, care and culture.”

The inn is intended to be a vessel for that culture, as well as a bridge to join together the island’s past and future. First settled as early as the 1500s, fishing off Fogo Island sustained locals and foreigners alike; merchants sold the abundant catches worldwide. But as stocks depleted, the island’s outlook became bleak. So much so that the

RENEWAL THROUGH CULTURAL REVITALIZATION

“*The Fogo Process*” was a series of documentaries produced in collaboration with the National Film Board (NFB) and Memorial University as a response to the Economic Council of Canada’s report on poverty in Canada, which failed to represent the rural perspective. Twenty-seven films were made as part of this nation-wide “Challenge for Change” project and they had a profound effect on the Newfoundland community.

It’s this cultural invigoration that Cobb is contributing to with the Shorefast Foundation and the Fogo Island Inn, which features a dedicated NFB room that screens the film series. When the inn achieves surpluses, they will flow back into the charity and be reinvested into the community. “It makes a lot of sense to put a business at the core of charity,” says Cobb. “There’s no reason not to. It is possible and necessary for charities to be profitable.”

What’s next on her chart intimates the community’s fishing roots: taking from the island and sharing it around. “We could develop a tool kit from what we learn,” she says. “Find some pan-Canadian way to help other rural communities.”

Cobb concludes with a poem from New Zealand writer Glenn Colquhoun called *The Art of Walking Upright*, which says the trick of using two feet is that one is for holding on and one is for letting go.

“We have to figure out how to hold on as hard as we can to Fogo Island, but that in itself isn’t going to save us. We need to figure out how to become relevant again.”