



## Building Remotely



By Douglas Converse

# Cross-Country Build

*The extra planning and considerations that must be taken into account when building from afar*

**B**uilding a house can be an overwhelming and sometimes stressful task under the best of conditions. There are countless decisions to make during the design phase, regulations to observe with municipal offices and progress to review during actual construction. Imagine carrying out all these tasks 2,000 miles away from the building site. Douglas Converse and his wife, Marianne Webb, built their dream home on British Columbia's Sunshine Coast while they were still living in Ontario.

"When we tell people we built the house from Ontario, the usual reaction is 'How did you manage that?'" says Webb. The short answer is with lots of planning. Converse and Webb's vision was to build a 1,000-square foot Japanese inspired timber-frame home. Webb had travelled to Japan a number of times in her career as art conservator with a specialization in Asian lacquer. On those trips she developed an appreciation for the Japanese style. She felt that features like a covered porch and large roof overhangs would be just as appropriate in BC's coastal environment as they are in Japan.

As every project team has its players, the couple soon discovered that an essential partner in the whole building project proved to be modern technology. Where

architectural drawings, hammers, nails and building supplies were the on-site tools and materials in BC, e-mail, digital photos, cell phones and the Internet became the necessary tools used in Ontario. Technology like e-mail allowed quick and clear communication between the clients in Ontario and many suppliers and service providers on the coast. In the design stage Webb surfed the Internet to find pictures of various elements of Japanese houses to

send to the draftsman to help convey their vision, and later, during construction, the builder e-mailed digital pictures of the work in progress. Equally important was the ability to copy numerous people into e-mails to ensure all players were kept abreast of decisions and project progress.

Not only was the project a challenge to coordinate from a distance, but the lot itself presented its own challenges. At the time of purchase, the couple was informed that the lot was in a sensitive geo-technical area that could impact building. With a wonderful view of Vancouver Island across the Strait of Georgia, Converse and Webb were able to see a diamond in the rough and pushed on.

As a first step, a review of the local municipality's website revealed a developmental permit was required before an application could be filed for a building permit. This >



**Left**

Kyoto Cottage (as coined by its owners) on the Sunshine Coast, completed after five years of hard work in both BC and Ontario.

developmental permit required a satisfactory report from a geo-technical engineer assuring that the land would sustain the structure. “Fortunately the lot came with a geo-tech,” says Webb. The realtor had documents indicating an engineer had performed a brief overview of the lot for a previous owner. A few phone calls from Toronto to Vancouver secured the services of the geo-technical engineer. They soon learned that this geo-technically sensitive lot was going to dictate the shape, size and location of the house. The lot has 100 feet of road frontage and is almost 800 feet long, but there is an overall drop of 300 feet as the lot cascades down through a series of benches to the ocean. The whole project relied on the drainage ability of the soil. Too poor drainage may mean a smaller footprint for the house. Too unstable soil may mean no excavation at all, allowing for only a simple structure like a trailer.

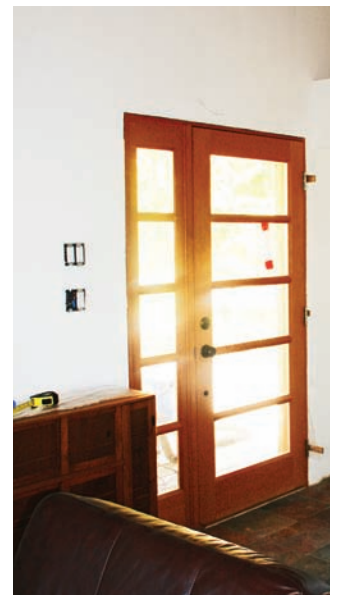
When the all-important drainage test was scheduled Converse and Webb arranged vacation time to witness with anticipation the back hoe digging 10 feet into the soil to determine conditions. The test revealed native soil with very good drainage in the bench nearest the road—a geo-technical green light. This solid footing also allowed for excavation suitable to build a lower level walkout, adding an additional 1,000 feet of living space. The project began to take shape.

Converse drew on the project management skills he had developed as a facilities manager overseeing many interior construction projects. The key is planning and hammering out all the basic design layouts before any construction work begins. Design changes after the plans have been finalized would incur additional costs. They had to take all the time they needed to plan and be firmly set in the design before they moved to the next step. So Webb spent most of the next winter communicating via e-mail with a draftsman who lived on the Sunshine Coast. Using the dimensions dictated by the lot, a rectangle roughly 20x45 feet, Converse and Webb sketched out a rough idea of where rooms should go. The draftsman pulled the design together by moving some of the elements around in the space and ensuring building codes were met. He added two bump-outs to the bedrooms that provided more room inside, and made the house’s rectangular shape more interesting. Varying the roofline and lowering the height of the covered porch also added more shape. All winter drawings ▶



→ **Right**

All of the design and detailing for the home was decided via email, with trips to the site roughly every two months.





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were e-mailed back and forth.

Next they compiled a very detailed project binder complete with listings of all the interior finishes listed by room and cross-referenced by finish type—doors, windows, flooring, bathroom fixtures. The binder even included specific store SKUs and product brochures to ensure the correct product was sourced. “We created two identical binders,” Converse says. “One copy went to the builder who was amazed by our thoroughness, and we kept the other binder for ourselves. Updates were made to both binders when we were in BC.”

Although the cost of travel was built into the overall construction budget, the trick was to coincide the trips with key milestones in the construction process. Converse and Webb wanted to see the forms prior to pouring the concrete foundation, framing interior walls and the basement roughed-in plumbing before the floor was poured. The frequency of travel turned out to be about every two months. That meant every trip had to be planned with a specific purpose and intended outcome—decisions to make, and next steps to take. They didn’t have the luxury of saying we’ll see you again Monday.

“Everyone at work thought I was heading off for fun long weekends away,” says Converse. “They had no idea how much work we had accomplished”. Scheduling visits was also difficult because weather conditions could slow the progress of work, or the tradesmen, very much in demand, may be working at another building site.

Equipped with drawings, the planning binder, notes from all the past phone calls, measuring tape and digital camera, Converse and Webb would catch a flight from Toronto early Thursday morning to arrive in Vancouver midday. They would drive directly to the building site for their initial review. Friday morning they would meet with the builder, spend all day discussing work done to that point and planning the next steps. “The builder did a great job of pulling the trades together to meet with us to answer our questions,” says Webb.

Saturday would be another day of on-site planning, and then they flew back home Sunday morning. The pace of the visits was often frantic and sometimes stressful because they needed to review two months of work in detail and try to think ahead at the same time.

Door to door, it is almost a 12-hour trip from their house in Toronto to the Sunshine Coast. Each trip they became more efficient. First, they started using the online airline check-in, eliminating the need to arrive

as early to the airport. Then their packing became more precise getting everything they needed into just two carry-on bags, reducing the time to check and retrieve baggage upon arrival. Finally, looking to shear as many minutes off the trip as possible it became a game of how close they could cut it: cab to airport, walk straight to security and then run right to the gate before last boarding call. Time was saved in BC as well by trying to coincide flight arrival times with ferry sailings from Horseshoe Bay to Langdale, accounting for the approximate one-hour drive through downtown Vancouver. Like a military operation they wanted to make every minute count.

As building progressed Converse and Webb occasionally transported small appliances or fixtures in their carry-on luggage. On one trip airport security were quite curious about two porch lights. "I think they were more interested to see the design than they were concerned about a possible security risk," Converse recalls.

Upon their return to Ontario after their visits to BC, Converse and Webb would sketch out the next stages of work for themselves. A lot of time was spent planning. "I walked around with my tape measure in hand everywhere we went," Converse laughs. "We were even seen at the big box home building and decorator stores measuring their ceilings to get an idea of how high 14 feet at the peak would be compared to furniture and whether it felt too high."

The time difference of three hours between locations also became something to keep in mind. Converse would arrive home from work usually about 6 p.m.-Toronto time, providing enough time to call the builder before he finished his work day. But there were times when decisions couldn't wait until the end of the day. Converse recalls a time when he had to step out of a meeting in the office to take a call on his cell phone. "The builder was calling while the electrician was on the roof asking where to cut the holes in the vaulted ceiling to feed power to the various pendant lights." They were looking for confirmation of position of the kitchen island and the dining room table. "I was glad they called rather than guessing and finding the lights hanging in the wrong spot."

All in all it was a five-year project from the original concept to living in the house. Sitting now on the deck of Kyoto Cottage, as they have coined their home, watching pods of dolphins or the steady stream of tugs toiling in the Strait of Georgia, they feel all the planning paid off and the project was a success. 🌐



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