

Castles in the Sky & Houses in the Trees

Neil Moody's Life in Building Part 1



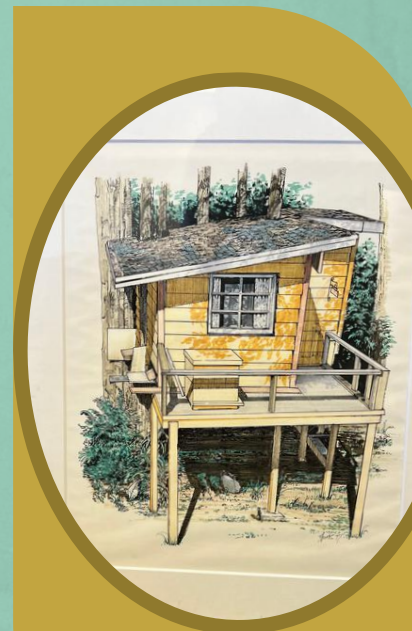
Youth

Neil Moody has had a storied career. Before joining the Canadian Home Builders' Association of British Columbia (CHBA BC) as their CEO in 2013, his entrepreneurial background allowed him to experience an interesting path. But from a young age, homebuilding was in his blood. Growing up in the Lynn Valley area in North Vancouver, Neil was surrounded by construction. At the time, his neighbourhood was undergoing rapid growth; new houses were springing up all over the cul-de-sac on which Neil lived and the surrounding areas.

Intrigued by the construction next door, Neil would stare out the window to observe the building process closely. Soon, he felt he understood some of the basic tenets of building and could replicate what he would see each day. Neil soon began to try his hand at carpentry himself. By age 14, he had built a unique tree house.

To be clear, this was indeed a tree house, in the truest sense of the word: a house built in a tree. "Inside, it had full 2x4s, 16-inch centres, insulation, electrical, 1x4 T&G cedar on the ceilings, a full duroid roof, gutters, downpipes: everything," Neil recounts. "I would sometimes sleep in it. It had a brick garden out front, stairs and even an address sign. I guess it was one of the first tiny houses built! And this is a key point: I built it all without a power saw. It was all done by hand, including mitering the cedar siding corners. It kept me busy." To this day, a professionally drafted image of the tree house hangs on Neil's office wall at the CHBA BC.

Save for his observations of the building process, Neil had little in the way of formal training at this point as a junior high school student: "I took woodworking and a construction course in high school where we built a house and in fact, wound up being awarded the Golden Hammer award along with a scholarship. I enjoyed woodworking and spent a lot of time in the shop after school. I would end up selling all the projects I would make in school as I liked the business aspect. That is the genesis of how my [furniture] business started."



Drafted Image
of Treehouse



Entrepreneurship

Upon finishing high school, Neil knew he wanted to go into the business of building furniture. So he took a job at LumberLand, a local chain of lumber stores, to raise the capital he needed for tools. He recalls: "I got the job there because I wrote them a letter. I wanted the money to buy equipment. I knew I wanted to go down that route, and they knew that too. It was a great first job. When I was 19, I started my company in the basement of our family house with one employee – a friend from high school and called my company Neilcraft Furniture, building and selling custom-made furniture through word-of-mouth customers. After visiting a local retailer and convincing them I could make them better products to replace their current imports from the United States, I gradually started making knockdown furniture on a mass scale, so I moved the business into a warehouse. This was when waterbed frames were trendy, so I began to focus on those products, supplying a local retailer and wholesale distributor.

The business then grew quite rapidly from there. We also made dressers, nightstands, and bedroom furniture. We were a leader in producing high-quality furniture and had sales throughout Canada. I sold that business but bought another similar [knockdown lumber] business, which was much more efficient."

Running two furniture companies at such a young age gave Neil a crash course in business in general. Neil explains: "You learn a lot when running a manufacturing business at 19 or 20. Everything from cash flow, hiring and human resources, material purchasing, sourcing and purchasing equipment, sales, designing, obtaining more space, and marketing: it's a real compressed MBA! I learned so much in these years.



"After hiring staff to run three shifts, unfortunately, a professional union organizer was included in that hiring process (that was on me). As a result, my production manager and I had to navigate a Union certification process with the International Woodworkers of America (IWA). Although our key well-paid employees who helped us build the company were not in favour, a majority of the reasonably new staff had decided to certify. After navigating this process and trying to continue our growth, I decided to sell the company to my retailer/wholesale distributor, even though the team eventually voted for decertification.



Entrepreneurship (Cont)

"After a trip to Hawaii for some needed time off, I discussed my plans with a large distributor in the industry, who suggested I speak to the owner of Scott Manufacturing, a company I had purchased processed lumber from while at Neilcraft. I then ended up buying the company."

At Scott Manufacturing, Neil continued to learn the ins and outs of business: "The person that I bought [Scott] from, Walter Scott, had set up the company in his industrial building and purchased the right equipment to produce products efficiently. In addition, he was buying lumber directly from the U.S. mills at a significant saving. While at Neilcraft, I liked what [the former owner, Walter] was doing as he disrupted an industry and bought the product from him. It saved time and money. Walter was already very successful in construction and owned several industrial buildings and a construction company. But, he mentioned that he didn't have the time to grow the business. So, after I bought the company, he mentored me through that five or six-year period. Lessons I learned then, I still apply today."

Moreover, Neil continued to learn about building, market demand, and supply chains. During the seasonal market dips, he learned to buy lumber by the tractor-trailer load from U.S. mills. He recalls: "We imported a lot of materials from the States. I would go to Seattle and California to talk to suppliers and manufacturers. It was entrepreneurial; you've just got to do what you've got to do, get out and do it, and build a great team around you. I certainly don't pretend to know everything and make mistakes, but doing things as a team is much more efficient than trying to do things alone."



On top of the manufacturing business, Neil was also entering the world of homebuilding. The former owner of Scott Manufacturing was a builder, mentoring Neil in this respect. Going back to his youth, Neil had already acquired some understanding of building: "I had it in my blood from my tree house days," Neil jokes. "When I eventually sold half of Scott Manufacturing to a larger distributor, it freed up a bit of time, and I figured it was time to begin building...I wanted to build quality homes with the approach I had taken with the furniture. Business is very transferable. Furniture and homes are different animals, but I wanted to build quality homes, which I did, with the help of sub-trades introduced to me by my mentor." In time, other business endeavours would take Neil away from the building. However, he adds: "I have renovated my own houses and enjoy renovating and designing."



Japan is Calling

After several years of building in the White Rock region, Neil realized that, unlike many of his peers from his youth, once he graduated high school, he began planning his business and had never had time for trips abroad or life-changing adventures. So, when his Karate dojo planned a trip to Japan, Neil jumped at the chance. The trip broadened Neil's horizons, and he immediately wanted to return to Japan. "I went back for what was to be for about six months and lived in Tokyo, right in the centre of things," Neil explains. "My first job in Japan was working in the famous fish market, Tsukiji, where I would deliver foodstuffs on a bicycle. I believe I was only the second non-Japanese person in its history to work there. It was a great experience, and the people at Tsukiji were very kind and memorable. Still, I moved on to work for an American company.



"I was involved with Karate and wanted to learn more about Japan and live in an international environment. I wanted to be outside of my element. I had a nice condo in White Rock (B.C.). I had a BMW, but I sold my condo, put everything in storage, and gave my car to my brother. I had to get out of my comfort zone and explore. I lived in Japan for a couple of years before returning to Vancouver. I returned to Japan again to join the American company where I had been employed after being convinced to return after a game of golf, some beer, and signing a contract on the back of a napkin.



"On my third trip to Japan, I was hired to run the Canadian Chamber of Commerce in Japan." This career change taught Neil even more about business. Neil learned about networking, building associations, and the political sphere at the Chamber of Commerce. He remembers: "The Chamber was an independent organization affiliated with Canada. We worked very closely with the Canadian Embassy. We arranged networking with various groups and Canadian staff who were transferred to Japan. We advocated for Canadian businesses and ran the Chamber like a small business because that's what it was. So, I could carry on with my entrepreneurial instincts to run the Chamber. We then built something in Asia too. I initiated a meeting of the Canadian Chambers of Commerce in Asia to collaborate to assist Canadian businesses throughout the region. It was very stimulating.



"Some of our members in Japan, were homebuilding companies such as Mitsui and Misawa Homes; others were associated with the Council of Forest Industries (COFI), promoting wood products from B.C. In addition, we represented all the major Canadian companies doing business in Japan, including major Japanese companies with connections to Canada, such as Toyota, Honda and financial institutions.

Visitors and trade missions would come from Canada. We would organize luncheons and networking opportunities and provide briefing materials for them. In cooperation with the Canadian Embassy, we hosted Prime Ministers, trade ministers, and Governors from the Bank of Canada: very high-level people." After 20 years in Japan over three terms, Neil returned to Canada. He relocated his family to their Vancouver house just in time to enjoy watching the 2010 Olympics in person.

Neil Moody's story will continue in our next issue.

