

## SEVERNWOODS CONSTRUCTION

*Luxury residential renovator and builder transforms historic homes into showpieces*

BY SANDRA GUY

TOM CUMMING STARTED IN CONSTRUCTION NINE years ago with a project to rebuild and add a significant addition to his family's cottage, which his grandfather had built in 1950, on the Severn River. He completed the impressive challenge of building the cottage single-handedly over the course of three years, designing ladders and other equipment that enabled him to hoist a beam, a 20-foot-long fascia, or roofing material into place. After putting up the framing and shell to the addition, he did the electrical and plumbing work and the interior woodwork, finishing on weekends and in his spare time.

The experience convinced him that he could start his own company, SevernWoods Construction, and oversee detailed construction work with his own twist—providing personalized service with the sophistication of a university-trained workforce and with the business acumen of a banking professional.

A breakthrough occurred for SevernWoods six months after Cumming founded the company, when a couple that was unhappy with their architect and contractor turned to Cumming to add a significant addition to their 1930s North Toronto home without putting a massive post in the middle of the master bedroom, as was proposed.

Cumming quickly discovered a way to complete the project without the post, by designing and building a complicated scissor-truss roof system. The six-month project that started in July 2004 cost \$250,000 and resulted in a happy client who started spreading the word.

By the end of that summer, SevernWoods had four employees. It now garners \$3 million in yearly revenue while keeping its business focused within a five-mile radius. The secret to SevernWoods' success is its quality work and its attention to client concerns. "I treat people the way that I want to be treated," Cumming says. "I don't over-promise. I respect people, and I have good, competent people working with me who represent SevernWoods in a professional way."

SevernWoods takes on no more than four projects at a time so that Cumming can maintain personal

involvement in all aspects of each of them, as well as have a SevernWoods supervising employee on site at all times. "The employees, most of whom are university educated, have chosen to do this work because they love it," Cumming says of the quality of the company's teamwork.

Client satisfaction is one thing that garners new business for SevernWoods. In fact, the company proactively uses past-client testimonials to gain new business. "I give potential clients 10 to 12 references of people for whom I've worked recently so that they can learn about the other clients' renovation experience, and so they can potentially view the finished products," Cumming says. "That's because I am selling quality, value, and an enjoyable renovation experience."

SevernWoods does its own in-house demolition, framing, rough and finished carpentry, and project management. Cumming aims to cultivate relationships with subcon-

### AT A GLANCE

LOCATION:  
TORONTO, ON

EMPLOYEES:  
10

AREAS OF SPECIALTY:  
LUXURY-HOME RENOVATION AND CONSTRUCTION, HISTORIC RESTORATION

ANNUAL REVENUE:  
\$3 MILLION



*Open concept space created for a modern kitchen and dining and family rooms.*

tractors who employ the same work ethic as his own employees, so that the experience is seamless. Cumming also keeps the overhead low by doing his own quotes, proposals, invoicing, and project management, while his wife, Jennifer, manages the bookkeeping, marketing, and government-liaison work.

And the company's projects do not entail just typical construction work. "An entirely different set of skills and a different knowledge base are required to renovate old homes well, as opposed to building new," Cumming says. "We have developed those skills and employ them on every project.

"Local building codes don't always apply to renovations, yet we attempt to meet or exceed the intent of the building codes in all aspects of our renovations," he continues, noting that the company uses closed-cell spray foam on every project to meet or exceed current code values, even in double-brick-walled homes that started with zero insulation. "The building science used 100 years ago is different from that of today."

However, even with all of these complexities, Severn Woods excels in renovations as well as new construction of high-end homes. Luxury-residence projects include:

- **Playter Estates in The Danforth neighbourhood:** For this structure (originally built in 1911), SevernWoods gutted the three-storey, 3,000-square-foot home, rebuilt it, relocated 15 windows in double-brick walls, and installed modern insulation, plumbing, electrical systems, heating and air-conditioning systems, and interior work, complete with a fully open main floor and no bulkheads.
- **A 5,000-square-foot home in Rosedale:** The renovation and addition required underpinning the house, gutting and modernizing the main floor, taking out the back wall and extending it to enclose the semi-circular addition, raising the basement ceiling from six feet to eight feet, and employing 27 steel beams and nine steel posts to seamlessly hold up the existing structure.
- **An 11,000-square-foot home in Rosedale:** The company fully renovated the home in two-and-a-half months so that the homeowners could move in as scheduled. The work included replacing two staircases, doing extensive woodworking and paneling, replacing four furnace systems, changing 80 percent of the electrical systems, gutting and redoing five bathrooms, removing existing hardwood floors and installing new maple hardwood floors, installing new custom cabinetry, and repainting the entire house.

In addition to its on-time delivery, SevernWoods also employs the most environmentally friendly insulation available, implementing high standards of air quality and energy efficiency. "We exceed new building codes

and standards with heat-recovery ventilators and other systems to ensure the highest air quality, and we use a soy-based polyurethane spray-foam insulation," Cumming says, also mentioning its use of energy-efficient windows and heating and cooling systems.

For the future, Cumming intends to continue his focus on renovating historic homes, and to build new custom, high-end homes in the finer central neighbourhoods of Toronto. *CBQ*



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—Tom Cumming, Founder & President



## SevernWoods

### construction

Residential Renovations and Additions








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