A man with grey hair, wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt, blue jeans, and sneakers, stands with his arms crossed in a rustic wooden structure. He is looking upwards and to the right. The structure has wooden walls and a thatched roof. To his left, there is a wooden table with various tools and objects on it, including a bowl, a brush, and some metal pieces. Behind him, there is a wooden bench with a patterned cushion. The background shows a corrugated metal fence and some foliage.

“Before I was 10 years old, I learned to build picnic tables, paint, build a stone barbecue. One season we built mahogany cabinets that are still there some 50-odd years later.”



Designing a Life

West Coast transplant
David Coulson is a celebrated
designer and craftsman
with deep roots in BC

|> BY CHELSEA FORMAN
PHOTOS BY LIA CROWE



AFTER ONLY A FEW MINUTES into our conversation, it's clear David Coulson is a heartfelt and dedicated West Coaster, despite having spent his first 18 years in Windsor, Ontario.

His passion for British Columbia is evident the more we chat, and I learn about the decades he's spent helping restore many of the province's heritage communities, and the years he's worked to preserve BC through sustainable building practices. From a young age, he took his interests, experiences and innate craftsmanship and used them to shape a life of monumental contributions to his adopted province, living proof that we each have the capacity to design our own lives.

"Having a master Danish carpenter who taught me everything from shipbuilding to staircases, to scraping French lacquered furniture and everything in between, [to the] designers I work with in Victoria in the commercial sector for the last 10 years or so, and the craft I learned as a child from my father — all these things combined have brought me to where I am today," David explains.

David grew up spending summers at his family's lake cottage in Ontario, where he first began to hone his skills as a craftsman.

"I learned to put things together there. I'd go there every spring with my dad to help fix the cottage up for summer. Before I was 10 years old, I learned to build picnic tables, paint, build a stone barbecue. One season we built mahogany cabinets that are still there some 50-odd years later," notes David.

As his interest for craftsmanship grew, David began to work in modelling cars. He recalls being featured in the local newspaper at 10 years old for his modelling work.

"I developed a real good pace for craft and wanted to go to a technical high school to follow an architectural career, but my parents switched me to a general high school. I rebelled and created a theatre department there where I got into set design," he says with a laugh.

After graduating from high school, David started travelling and landed on the West Coast at just 18 years old. He began building his own furniture and soon started custom furniture design for his growing group of friends. With roots permanently set in British Columbia, David soon got involved with a theatre company in Surrey.

"I went from set design to behind the scenes to a bit of character work — and then I fell in love with a woman who worked in costume design and that's my wife to this day. Almost 40 years later," says David.

“I went from set design to behind the scenes to a bit of character work – and then I fell in love with a woman who worked in costume design and that’s my wife to this day. Almost 40 years later.”

After the theatre company in Surrey was closed in 1976, David and his wife moved to Wells-Barkerville where they planned to open a roadside attraction. Soon after the couple arrived in the historic community, they began to restore and rebuild an old derelict building.

“It was like a museum in there when we finished because I handcrafted everything. That led on to handcrafting all kinds of sites in Barkerville,” David explains. “My father-in-law moved up to Wells too. He was a master Danish craftsman so I apprenticed with him for 15 years. We worked with Hollywood in Barkerville on at least six occasions and we got to work with some of the biggest and brightest people in the film industry of that time.”

David was deeply invested in community design and was a significant contributor to town restoration for both Barkerville and neighbouring Wells. David and his wife owned and operated several different businesses and infused the community with the arts through a variety of classes and programs.

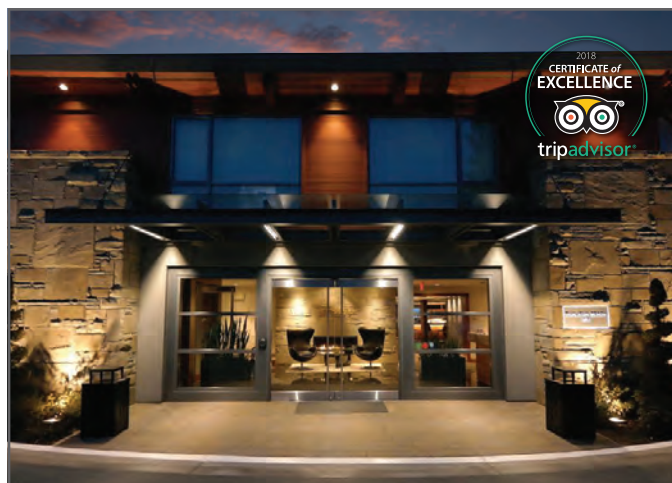
“It was a constant exchange of art, build, play and eventually we felt there was nothing more to contribute so we moved to the Cowichan Valley,” says David.

Since much of Barkerville is connected to the Provincial Heritage Branch, many of David’s contacts were located in Victoria, and with that built-in network of connections, he quickly became immersed here in heritage restoration.

“Just yesterday — some 32 years later — I was meeting with the director of the Emily Carr House and the Heritage Branch of BC. I’ve been looking after the Emily Carr House for over 25 years now,” notes David.

As David’s reputation for unparalleled craftsmanship gained recognition in Victoria, he began to work on several projects throughout the downtown core including restaurants, hotels, night clubs and shop fronts. The father of two was able to launch his company, Coulson Design, in Victoria. Business closer to home in the Cowichan Valley took a little longer, gaining momentum later in the early 2000s, but has continued to thrive since.

“The whole time I was working in Victoria I was living out of the Cowichan Valley and the commute was becoming difficult with two children and my wife at home — but it was hard to create a name for yourself up here in this close-knit community.



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In early 2000, it started turning around. I was winning awards, being really recognized in Victoria for my custom work and being featured in the media. People in the Cowichan Valley started to sort of see me as someone being overlooked, I suppose," David explains.

Coulson Design is now a 25-member team located in Duncan on three acres — a multi-zoned site featuring affordable housing.

"I am heavily involved in the design, planning and community building of the Cowichan Valley — and that's where my heart is right now. We are creating mostly custom homes and doing large scale renovations," he says.

David, often recognized for his innovative design, has been working in green and organic building for several years. Coulson Design is a sustainable builder with some staff members being Passive House Certified.

"We are going to the next level of custom, sustainable, energy efficient homes with the lightest footprint.

We are now offering 3,000- to 4,000-square-foot houses," he says.

One notable design is David's personal studio, which at just 875 square feet has become an international sensation.

David sends the viral floor plans all over the world.

The next phase of his studio is adding a custom-built tree house component in what David refers to as "Phase 3." The tree house is underway, with the main floor perched 16 feet up into the trees. When completed, it will be three stories tall.

Looking forward, David plans to enjoy his 1957 mahogany Chris Craft boat and pursue his knowledge and personal library of bamboo, one of the most ecologically sound building materials available.

"I'm a bit of the bamboo-smith of the region. I have one of the largest personal bamboo libraries. I use bamboo from my own collection and incorporate it into my building and garden spaces. I have travelled the world to many of the bamboo-growing countries to research the craft of bamboo. As I try to wind my projects down, just a little, and stop to smell the coffee a bit more so to speak, I'll spend more time learning the various bamboo techniques like weaving."

David continues to evolve his knowledge, portfolio and life. He has hinted that the design of our own lives isn't too many degrees separated from designing a home or community.

In order to succeed, and to achieve the things you want, you have to overcome the challenges and unexpected surprises by utilizing creativity and strategy to push forward with your greater plan. **①**

"We worked with Hollywood in Barkerville on at least six occasions and we got to work with some of the biggest and brightest people in the film industry of that time."