

THE DAILY SPECIAL

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BRINGING A B.C. LOOK TO JAPAN

CONSTRUCTION | When Kimi Ito talks, Japan listens to his bicultural expertise



SAPPORO, Japan
ere, business still gets done in smoke-filled backrooms.

This particular backroom is in the felicitously named Party House, which stands on a busy, undistinguished street a few kilometres from the downtown core of Sapporo.

Party House is usually rented out for private receptions, but its choice on this day as a meeting place for a group of developers who are prepared to put hundreds of millions of dollars on the table is no accident.

It's a two-storey wood-frame building, made with Canadian materials and Canadian technologies. Its rooms are large and comfortable, and feature a lot of exposed wood. It feels like a luxury log home.

The half-dozen men sitting at the large table are substantial independent developers, and the size of the project they are considering is huge — up to 20,000 households. As they smoke, they listen attentively to a slight man in a well-tailored suit, who is using a laptop computer and a projector to display attractive images of B.C. buildings on a screen.

Luxury homes from Whistler and hockey rinks from northern B.C. draw technical queries, which the slim man handles easily. It's something he does regularly, and his answers draw further interest. No interpreter intrudes on the subtleties of the exchanges.

Kimi Ito has become the face and voice of Canadian building technology for many people in the construction and real-estate development industries in Japan. In fact, he may be better known throughout Japan than he is in Vancouver, his professional base and home for more than 30 years.

"Knowing the culture is not difficult, but understanding is different from knowing," Ito says, sitting in his office in a well-appointed industrial building just off the Trans-Canada Highway on Boundary Road. "You can learn the culture through books or listening to somebody, but understanding is a kind of feeling."

He has been immersed in two cultures since 1970, when he arrived here to spend a year at the University of B.C. after student protests in Japan over continuing American occupation caused the government to suspend classes for a year. With his engineering studies on hold, he

took the unusual step of travelling away from Japan — something Japanese people rarely did in those days.

"I thought about paying tuition just to do nothing and I thought I might as well go out to see the world," he recalls. "I applied to UBC, and luckily I was accepted. It took five years to complete an applied-science degree."

It was a brave step, not least for the complexity of the studies for a student with an admittedly limited grip on English. "I was forced to work hard — no weekends, nothing. After dinner, I'd have to go back to the library to study."

He wasn't even particularly sure he would stay here: after two years, he returned to Tokyo in the summer to get married. But like him, his wife viewed the idea of living in Canada as an adventure and a chance to learn English, so they came back to Vancouver and he resumed his studies.

By the time he graduated from UBC as a structural engineer, they had established a group of friends and felt comfortable in Canadian society, which he describes as very supportive. He had landed immigrant status, and decided to at least see what it was like to work for a while at a Canadian engineering firm.

"I wasn't sure how long I would stay, but before going back to Japan, I thought I might as well see the working experience, so I worked for one year, two years, three years ... and I went, wow, what a wonderful society!"

He particularly appreciated the chance to get ahead on his own merits, rather than being locked into rigid Japanese social structures.

"In Japan, aging is the most important part; you respect aged people, always. Younger people didn't have much of a chance for a challenge — to work and show their abilities — so for the young people it was kind of frustrating." "But when I came to Canada, there was great freedom as long as you have ability and knowledge. That's a very good feeling, a very nice involvement, so I thought maybe I'll try just one more year."

That was more than 20 years ago, and Ito and his wife and three sons have called Canada home ever since. Their eldest recently returned from two years of teaching English in Japan and plans to head back there next year, but wherever he decides to stay, his father is likely to see him frequently.

Ito, now 59, reckons his work keeps him travelling about one-third of the time, primarily in Japan. He estimates he has done close to 40 projects there in the past five years alone, and he also frequently represents Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp., Natural Resources Canada and the federal department of foreign affairs and international trade.

"You have to be committed to it long-term, because relationships play a very important role there, so you can't go in one year and out the next — you have to be committed long-term and Kimi certainly is," says Laura Diakiv, senior trade consultant with Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp. in Vancouver.

"Kimi is someone who's



been involved in the market probably just as long as CMHC, and probably will be there for a very long time, and that's why he's well known, and that's why he's very well respected."

Wedged into the back of a Mercedes 4x4 that is climbing a winding road toward the Okurayama Ski Jump Stadium, the legacy site of the 1972 Winter Olympics overlooking Sapporo, Ito chats with two developers and points out buildings along the way. Land values, although well off their peak in the early 1990s, are still high here: houses on the side of this small mountain sell for \$2 million and more.

But the house on the large lot where developer Tateo Watabe stops the truck is a wreck — a derelict building with bits of cloth flapping through broken windows. Houses in Japan tend have a life cycle of about 30 years; after that, they are considered valueless and fit only for demolition.

Part of the reason for this is the conditions they must withstand — extremes of heat, cold, humidity and precipitation, typhoons and earthquakes. Many were built without insulation, and a strong market demand meant quick, cheap construction.

This house will be replaced by a number of dwellings on curved laneways, and the developers are anxious to hear Ito's opinion on the layout of their project. While the drawings would not be out of place in Whistler, the concept is new here.

Sapporo is the largest city on the island of Hokkaido, the

northernmost and least-developed of Japan's four main islands, and its tree-covered mountains are reminiscent of northern B.C. Hokkaido has become Japan's northern playground, and the Sapporo-Tokyo air corridor is the most heavily used in the world.

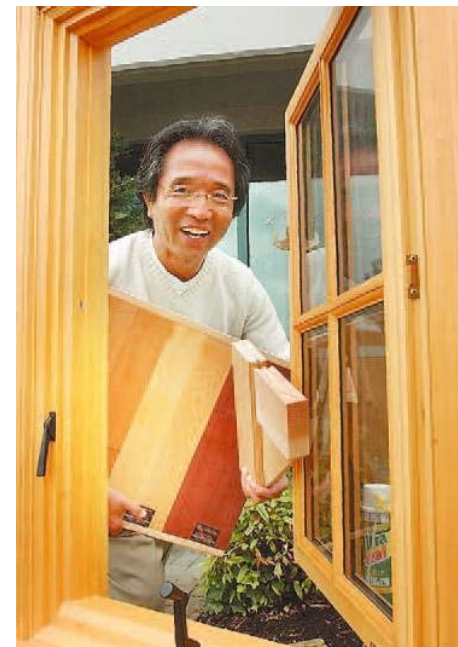
Hokkaido is much less traditional than the rest of Japan. It was not developed by the Japanese until about the time of Canada's Confederation, and outside influences are everywhere. With them has come a growing desire for new things, not all of which are easily supplied locally.

"It's the design scheme," Ito explains. "Design comes from the heart — you can learn some aspects of a design scheme, but the whole design presentation comes from the nature of your skill."

"People from Japan visit Vancouver and Whistler, and say, 'wow, that's a beautiful house, nice design'. But they go back to Japan and they cannot create that same image, because that's what takes a lot of process."

"They like it because the Western culture is getting into Japan through movies and TV, and they are very influenced by the media and seeing different cultures. The house is also the same way; traditionally, it would be a post-and-beam construction which is still very strong in Japan — 70 per cent of houses are traditionally built — but the younger generation likes the style of the Canadian or North American type of house."

Shinichi Tsujio, Canada's trade commissioner on Hokkaido,



Kimi Ito looks through one of his company's high-end window frames. Ito plays a pivotal role in making Japanese builders comfortable with Canadian construction products.

echoes Ito's view. "Historically, Japanese culture and lifestyle have been influenced by the Western way of

thinking, especially from North America since the Meiji Restoration in 1867-68," he says. "Civilization means making deeper

relationships with the West, and in terms of Canadian housing, these professionals and architects act as evangelists to provide Japanese consumers with good information and technologies already tested and highly evaluated in Canada and the U.S."

Hokkaido has the highest adoption of Canadian-style 2x4 construction of any region of Japan. That adoption has its roots in the early '90s, when the Japanese government began to explore foreign building technology as the way to ease its massive trade surplus. Buying products like door and window systems and kitchen cabinetry helped to ease the imbalance created by the export of high-end manufactured products to the rest of the world. But using these new products did not come easily to Japanese builders.

"The builders didn't know how to deal with these building products they'd imported," says Ito. "For example, windows — the window is not the same windows they build. Flooring materials are quite new, doors are different from Japanese size."

"So they just imported building products one after the other, but that was a problem for the industry, because there was no support for the technology, so there was no value added."

"We decided that to keep that imported-housing business growing, we should do something about a program so we can

train Japanese builders how to install the windows and the doors, and also build the envelope."

The result was a Canadian government-backed building program called Super-E, which was developed to provide comfortable, energy-efficient homes to the Japanese market. The "E" stands for energy-efficient, economical and environmentally responsible, and the government's stamp of approval is taken seriously by Japanese builders.

Ito, who acts as an international trainer for CMHC to explain the benefits of Super-E in Japan, points out that to qualify for official Super-E status, a Japanese home must be built with Canadian technology and 60 per cent Canadian components, including lumber, ensuring that Canadian suppliers have a market for their goods as well as their know-how.

Despite Japan's stagnant economy over the past decade, Ito is convinced a recovery is in sight. Even without one, the market is huge.

"When you look at the longer term, Japan is still the second-largest GDP in the world, next to the U.S. Housing starts are over one million a year, compared with 150,000 in Canada," he says. "It's a huge potential."

"Canadian products make a lot of economic sense to the Japanese market — they're not really expensive. But to keep supporting a program, we have to feed it, keep updating; you can't do just one program for 20 years, we have to upgrade our program. As long as they feel confidence, they will continue."

Much of that confidence comes from government involvement in programs like Super-E. While not usually a large consideration for Canadian builders and developers, government backing is critical for acceptance in Japan.

For developers like Tateo Watabe, emissaries like Ito are essential. Not only is Watabe able to talk easily in his own language about technical details, he has the assurance that Ito can grasp the subtleties of his projects.

"It is important to have such liaison persons to do business with Canada," Watabe says. "If we can get assistance from professionals such as Ito-san, it will be easier for us to take advice when we start actual business transactions."

Ito plans to continue with that assistance. He is in Japan four or five times a year, and with the youngest of his children now in college and his wife working with him in his engineering practice, he has plenty of time to devote to his overseas work.

He usually works about 12 hours a day, and fits in some extra hours on the weekend.

"I really enjoy my work, so I don't mind coming in," he says. "Whenever I have free time, I either play golf, walk the dog, or come to the office and do my work. It's very enjoyable, so I come here on the weekends and there are no phone calls and I can concentrate on studying those designs."

Besides, he says with enthusiasm, now there's the possibility of working in China; he's visited the country twice recently, and several Japanese companies he deals with have good relationships in China.

He smiles at the prospect.

Maurice Bridge recently spent two weeks in Japan on a fellowship from the Foreign Press Center/Japan.