

SELENIUM



SELENE YUEN,
PRINCIPAL



JOHN SAUNDERS,
PRINCIPAL

- In a home, kitchens are a special place where families and friendships grow, and we truly enjoy being a part of people's lives in this way.
- Our production team makes a quiet but real contribution to our style. We take pride in the contemporary look of our projects and hone our skills to create a clean, modern aesthetic.

Art, craft, passion

AUGUST 2023

PROFESSIONALISM
QUALITY
INNOVATION



Kitchen is the playground

In an age where so many ideas are available online, one might suggest that carving out a unique style is more difficult than it's ever been before.

But that's not the case for Selenium. Just take a look at their projects and you will see art, craftsmanship and a passion for wood woven into everything they build. We reached out to Selenium to learn more about the company and to see how they have been so successful in creating a unique style. We spoke with Selene Yuen, Principal at Selenium.

CKCA: Tell us a bit about the history of your company.

Selene: John started the business in a shared workshop space in Liberty Village in Toronto in 1998. John and I are industrial designers, and he started the production side of the business so we could manufacture our own furniture. Originally, we sold our furniture through boutique retailers across North America. After features in Style at Home magazine and The Toronto Star, we received opportunities to take on much larger custom architectural millwork projects. Focusing on custom millwork gave us great opportunity to grow and eventually our mix of commercial and residential work became a specialization in high-end, custom residential projects.



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We still do all kinds of production woodwork, but the kitchen always seems to be at the heart of the project. There are many innovations in the cabinet industry, and the kitchen often becomes our playground to implement the latest technology, which is super fun!

CKCA: What is your customer base?

Selene: Our customers are general contractors who work with us on both premium residential and commercial projects, as well as homebuilders.

CKCA: Tell us about your employees.

Selene: We are a tight-knit and relatively small group. Some members of our team have been with us up to 12 years.

CKCA: What are some of the challenges Selenium has faced over the years?

Selene: Custom work means that building standardized processes is

tricky, because one project can be very different from the next. As well, when your happy place is focused on creating high quality things in wood, there are other important things that a strong business requires—and these things may not come so intuitively or instinctively to the craftsman in us. This means that we need to be really deliberate about the “craft” of entrepreneurship just as much as the “craft” of woodwork itself.

CKCA: Is your business where you envisioned it to be when you started?

Selene: Our business has evolved beyond what we ever thought we could do. We've grown from being a sole proprietor (John) sharing space and equipment, to a team of 15 in a 21,000 sq. ft. production space in 2022. Our first production batches were so small that you could fit them into a van. When we started, we did not envision



working in the homes of sports heroes, nor that our bread and butter would be inside the top 1% of homes in the Edmonton area.

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Clean, modern, naked?

CKCA: Are you pleased with where your business has gone?

Selene: The key gift in our business is the endless, abundance of opportunity to create improvements and grow people. We have really enjoyed creating a community where apprentices build skills, experienced craftspeople become mentors, and everyone learns from each other. That we do all this while working for clients who often become friends feel pretty lucky to us.

CKCA: What are your future plans to evolve the business?

Selene: We are always looking to evolve! Through our custom projects we have been able to experiment with so many new ideas—in materials, technology, style, and design and we are planning to create products around some of these ideas. Stay tuned for some interesting product launches in the coming year!

CKCA: You have carved out a unique style, where does that come from and how do you think you've managed to accomplish this?

Selene: Because John and I are educated as industrial designers, we have an extra appreciation for the work of the designers and architects we're involved with. I think this



enthusiasm is then reciprocated (we all enjoy working with people who appreciate us, right?) which makes for a great team with lots of trust. We love what we create, and the people we create it with. So this simply means that we get asked to do more of the same as time goes by.

CKCA Does your team contribute to the Selenium style?

Selene: Our production team makes a quiet, but real contribution to our style. We take pride in the contemporary look of our projects and hone our skills to create a clean, modern aesthetic. This is never as easy as it looks. Traditional mouldings and trims have their own beauty, but they also cover up imperfections and distract the eye. Over time, we have found ways to make sure all our details look great “naked”...so to speak!

CKCA: Do your customers seek you out because of your established style?

Selene: Yes! Although our airy, modern style is driven by the talented interior designers that we work with, many clients come to us already familiar with our look and seek to recreate it in their own homes. Sometimes they'll see something in our showroom and specifically request that same detail, or material, in their project.

CKCA: Do you have any projects that come to mind that really showcase your style?

Selene: In collaboration with the professional chef at OnOurTable (known for their iconic charcuterie boards), we've developed a line of residential kitchen cabinetry. Our kitchens include thoughtful features that make cooking efficient and effective, such as ventilated storage drawers for wine and root vegetables. We've chosen practical but lovely face materials like rift-cut white oak to make these kitchens both timeless and livable. Although we have built many luxury kitchens, not all our kitchens are destined for use by culinary experts. This kitchen is unique in that it's designed to be highly functional as well as beautiful.

CKCA: What trends are you monitoring that you think are gaining ground?

Selene: Our clientele tends to be very established and at a phase in their lives where aging-in-place is on their radar. Kitchens are beginning to include details



that enhance accessibility such as integrated lighting and motion sensors, electronic systems to open doors and drawers, in-drawer charging stations, height-changing work surfaces, and modular cabinetry that can be reconfigured.

On another note, we were in Italy recently and saw many examples of dark, moody kitchens. European trends seem to arrive in North America a couple years later, but given our cold, wintry climate, I'm not sure if this is a trend that will take hold in Canada!



CKCA: Are you implementing new technologies to help your business evolve while addressing the skilled labour shortage?

Selene: We have moved to cloud-based, digital systems that allow us to communicate and monitor our progress almost in real-time by using everyday apps. This is more for planning and management, but it does impact production by making information more accessible and changes easier to document.

On hiring, using social media to showcase our work has been a great way to find like

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Talent and creativity is closer than you think

-minded potential team members. Even when we don't have an open position available, wonderful people reach out to express interest in joining us. When they reach us this way, they are already acquainted with what we do, and we know that we're not just part of an impersonal resume blitz for them. I just keep a list and contact them as opportunities come up.

CKCA: It's not easy running a business these days, what strategies have you implemented to help your business thrive?

Selene: Well! Here's my chance to give a huge shout-out to the CKCA, and the way it keeps the Canadian Kitchen Cabinet industry connected! Running a business can be tough, but it's always easier when you know there is an entire group of friendly people across the country, wrestling with the same challenges.

Continuing education and continuing to try new things. This can be counterintuitive, because as human beings, we all find comfort in familiarity, routine, and structure. It's a fine balance to create enough stability to get things done, and simultaneously create enough momentum to grow and improve.

We find classic Lean methods to be very effective, and adaptable even during these times of heightened volatility and change. When in doubt, why not ask "Why" 5 times?



CKCA: Where do you see your company in another 5 years and do you remain excited about the possibilities?

Selene: There is a smorgasbord of opportunities in today's quickly changing digital marketplace. These are simultaneously exciting but can also be overwhelming. I see

interesting opportunities to collaborate with people all over the internet, digital tools to decrease cumbersome, analog processes, and an easier way to extend market reach.



As well, this feels like a great time to develop new products with less risk. Thanks to

economical photorealistic rendering, those of us in manufacturing no longer need to start by creating expensive physical prototypes to test products in the market.

CKCA: Where do you see the industry in another 5 years?

Selene: Artisanal companies focused on local markets will continue to do well, because of increasing appreciation for personal, craftsman-like experiences. As these become less common in our increasingly automated and impersonal world, demand (at least at the high-end of the market) will go up.

On the other hand, companies focused on scaling have more tools to choose from than before. Software that creates quotes more quickly than the spreadsheets of yesteryear allow us to increase sales, simply by getting more quotes out the door. And what a bonus when the software integrates with our financials to provide up-to-the-minute forecasting, cash flow, and profitability information. I actually see it getting much easier for small companies to participate fully in industry, because methods/tools previously developed for large companies can now be accessed at a lower cost by smaller companies.

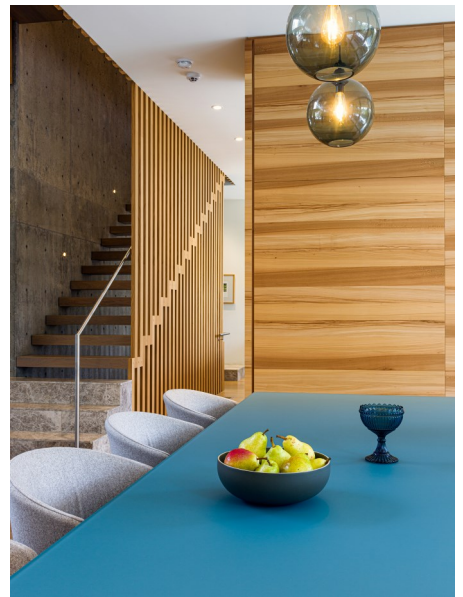
CKCA Final Note:

It was a pleasure to speak with Selene who were humbled to be interviewed.

It is clear there is tremendous depth and breadth to this company and what they build. There is often a perception in Canada that to get artistic style you need to look to Europe where so many trends are created. But after looking to what companies like Selene can do, you quickly realize that we have tremendous talent and creativity in our own back yard.

Why shop anywhere else?

We wish Selene continued success and look forward to hearing more about their upcoming product launches.



Professionalism—Quality—Innovation and Made in Canada!

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