

An Olympic-Sized Challenge: Beyond Audio

Imagine designing and budgeting an installation without any direction from the client.

No audio specifications, no video specs, no wiring plans, no monetary guidance.

Now imagine that the installation is halfway around the globe. Meanwhile, it's no ordinary client -- it's the government. And it's for an event that will be attended by thousands and viewed on a world stage by millions.

These were the challenges Canadian integrator Beyond Audio faced when its group won the contract to construct the "British Columbia-Canada Place" for the 2006 Winter Olympics in Torino, Italy.

"My first call was that we probably shouldn't do this, because the potential downside was ridiculous," says Beyond Audio president and owner Mike Ohman. "You're guessing at so many things, and there are more questions than answers."

In the end, the Kelowna, B.C.-based installer came through on a project whose success and popularity during the Torino Games was deserving of a gold medal.

The Countdown Begins



In a house designed to showcase British Columbia's business, tourism and cultural opportunities in anticipation of the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics, Beyond Audio had a world stage for this installation.

Beyond Audio's road to Torino started with a call from building company Sitka Log Homes of 100 Mile House, B.C., about participating in a search effort by the provincial and national governments. The B.C.-Canada Place would serve as a multimedia meeting place to present the province's business, tourism and cultural opportunities in anticipation of the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics, but Ohman says there were no specific guidelines. "The government basically conceived it at the last minute, and the project was an 'invitation to design,'" he says. "They didn't know what they wanted as far as a building, forget about the electronics side."

Working with a blank canvas, the homebuilder and integrator hatched a plan -- several, actually, as plans changed three times -- spending more than 10 hours a day for three weeks. The group also included a lighting designer from Kelowna and a Crestron programmer from Vancouver. Beyond Audio went beyond its ordinary function, as well, writing specifications for things such as the electrical and fire alarm while figuring out its usual big-picture items like lighting control, computer network, background music and visual amenities.



Located over 6,000 miles away -- across a continent and over an ocean -- it's safe to say that this house posed some logistics issues for Kelowna, B.C.-based Beyond Audio

Among the changes the group tackled during the design phase were a switch in location and a nixing of an original requirement for the 3,500-4,000-square-foot house's disassemble post-Olympics. Ohman says that originally the government wanted to take down the project, ship it to Beijing for reassembly prior to the 2008 Summer Olympics and then repeat the process with Whistler, B.C., as the destination for 2010. That plan was ditched in favor of leaving the B.C.-Canada Place building in Torino as a permanent gift for the Olympic host.

The government eventually trimmed a field of 11 down to three competitors for the contract, with the Sitka group as a finalist up against two Vancouver-based multinational architectural firms, Ohman says. A government consultant chose Sitka's presentation over the other two as it out-rated them in every category -- Ohman does not know specifics, but says that its track record and overall concept and log cabin design, which highlighted the province's environmental values, were persuasive factors.

Ciao, Canada!

Ohman did not go to Italy himself but sent two employees -- Beyond Audio generally uses two-man crews -- to Torino for two weeks in December to work on the installation. He chose operations manager Dieter Planz ("the smartest guy") and lead technician Curtis Truman ("the most capable technician"), whom Ohman says brings valuable experience in working with large, complicated projects.

Working essentially as a subcontractor for Sitka Log Homes, Beyond Audio began purchasing all of the electronics as soon as the contract was inked in early August. Everything was assembled and tested in British Columbia, and bit by bit parts were wrapped up and sent to the builder, which had secured storage in Italy and handled the freighting. "They'd send it in chunks, whatever they had room for," says Ohman. "Every three weeks some stuff would leave. The logistics of it was a bit of an issue, and customs was tricky because there was lots of documentation that needed to be done."



Shipping issues delayed Internet connectivity and the arrival of Crestron panels, while general communication in Italy also posed a problem.

The incremental, bulk shipping presented a couple of issues for Beyond Audio. For one thing, Ohman says the \$18,000 he budgeted for shipping, hotels and other travel-related expenses was not nearly enough. "We tried to blend some of it in when we priced the project out, but it definitely wasn't enough. We blew past that." A more pressing concern came during the actual construction; Planz and Truman arrived in Italy before the last of the shipments.

"For the first three days, we were trying to work without the proper equipment," Planz says. "The boardroom tables didn't show up until the second week; the Internet connectivity and Crestron interface panels weren't there as well."

Planz and Truman needed all of their two weeks to complete the installation, right down to the last few hours. "We would work until midnight the last couple days," says Planz. "We didn't get to do much sight-seeing, that's for sure. Come Sunday night, still in there at 9 p.m. with our plane leaving Monday morning at 11, I was wishing we could get the first few days back to get parts."

Part of the crunch stemmed from the language barrier. Because the crew from Sitka had arrived earlier, they were able to pick up some Italian, and some of the Italians knew a little English, but Planz says a lot of communication needed translation during his two-week stay. That certainly did not speed up the project, and hand signals became part of the standard operating procedure, he says.

It also didn't help that the jobsite -- aside from the mere unconventionality of being a parking lot -- wasn't exactly conducive to on-the-fly purchases when needs arose.

"Where the house was being put up was an older part of town," Planz says. "There weren't many big-box stores around. When we wanted to find little things -- like power bar brackets or extension cords -- you'd have to find a mom-and-pop store, so it turns out buying on site was a lot harder than expected."

Beyond Torino

One downside to sending an installation crew so far away, Ohman found, is the impact back home. Especially for a company of seven employees. "It was ridiculously difficult, and I just about melted down trying to deal with only half the [installation] staff," he says. "With December being our busiest month and everybody trying to get [projects done] by Christmas, all our work was squeezed closer and closer."

When Planz and Truman did return, it turns out that their work in Torino wasn't quite finished either.

Chris Cornish of Vancouver's Screenology Design took care of Crestron programming remotely, while Beyond Audio handled the lighting control and did some other tweaking via the Internet. But three days after the Beyond Audio crew returned to Kelowna, they got a call regarding three boardroom systems with massive ground loops. They had to have parts shipped directly through the manufacturer, then walk someone in Italy through the procedure over the phone.



Installers Dieter Planz and Curtis Truman worked until the final hours of their two-week stay in Torino to complete the systems installation for the "British Columbia-Canada Place."

Planz says that he felt some relief after everything was completed, but even more after the Olympics concluded and the company hadn't received phone calls with angry voices on the other end. Rather, by all accounts, the project turned out to be a big hit.

Ohman did not expect the B.C.-Canada Place to become the tourist attraction it was during the Winter Games and subsequent Paralympic Games, when more than 100,000 people visited the log cabin and over 80 British Columbia businesses used the space. He thinks the government did not fully expect it, either. "It was phenomenal," Ohman says of the attraction's popularity. "The government sort of told us what we were trying to do, but the information was so minimal. It seemed like it was going to be more of a business center -- I think the attendance [at the house] even took the government by surprise."

A news broadcast in Vancouver devoted a 3-minute piece nightly to the B.C.-Canada Place during the Torino Games, but did not detail the construction aspect or mention Beyond Audio's installation role, Ohman says. While the project and its exposure may have been a homerun for the Canadian and British Columbian governments and many local businesses, Ohman says his company feels the benefits more from a psychological standpoint than a financial one. "Our end was \$262,000, but I don't think we made a penny on the job," he says.

So was it worth it? "Absolutely, mostly because of the confidence it's given us as a company. We're in a little town compared to Vancouver [245 miles away], and because of that it's assumed that we don't work at a very high level. But that's just how the market kind of pushed us out this way. We know we can do high-level work, and this project just gives us more credibility and respectability."

Ohman notes that Beyond Audio can add the B.C.-Canada Place to its list of accolades it can present to potential clientele, and that customers who knew the company had worked on the Torino project were quick to create local buzz about it during the Olympics.

"One of our customers was bragging to his buddies, 'Hey, those are the guys who did our theater,'" says Ohman. "Credibility is really hard to measure, but for a lot of people, it answers the question, 'Can these guys do that kind of thing in our house?'"

It Pays to Train

Mike Ohman, president and owner of Kelowna, British Columbia-based Beyond Audio, says Canada is about two-to-three years behind the United States when it comes to custom electronics and system integration. As far as keeping his staff up to date on the latest the industry has to offer, Ohman urges training and more training.

Beyond Audio spends at least \$10,000 per year on training, Ohman says. The company is a member of CEDIA, and Ohman encourages CEDIA certification for his employees.

"We're not so worried about making a ton of money, but just having the best company we can make," he says. "That's my focus -- do the right thing, and do it well."

Ohman implores the benefits of training because it allows his employees to learn not only positives from other professionals, but they can also learn from their mistakes. And finding an employee who is well-suited for Beyond Audio has been the best, and worst, decision-making Ohman says he has dealt with in the company's 11 years.

"Hiring the right people to work with you is the best decision you can make, by miles and miles," he says.