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EXCELLENCE IN HOUSING AWARDS

In the pursuit of perfection

A passion for architecture has led to a long, award-winning career for John Fielding, founder of Belvedere Constructions, the 2002 Master Builder of the Year, writes Karen Booth.

John Fielding is something of an anomaly in the building industry – a builder who simply loves working with architects. In fact, when he established Belvedere Constructions back in 1980, it was with the express aim of working exclusively on architect-designed buildings.

So what was the attraction? "I just like architecture. Also, I think that builders don't have a good understanding of architects. On building sites you often hear builders complaining about them but in 22 years, we've never had a dispute with an architect," said John.

"Often, if the architect and builder don't see eye to eye it's the builder's fault for not communicating properly. I have found that architects are usually happy to listen, especially the new generation of architects."

Over the years, Belvedere Constructions

has worked hand-in-hand with architects of the calibre of Glen Murcutt, Denton Corker Marshall, Daryl Jackson, Virginia Kerridge, Craig Rosevear and Dawson Brown. What's more, said John, "We are often involved at the planning stage and our ideas on building and engineering solutions are always welcomed. Our aim is to maximise the potential of the architect's plans."

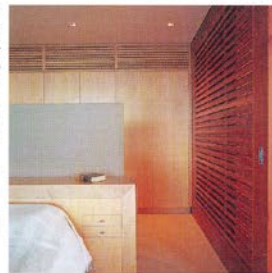
But to succeed you need to have more than an eye for detail and the ability to deliver excellent workmanship, said John. "There has to be a great deal of trust between the builder and architect and we have that."

Staff motivation

Another key to Belvedere Construction's success has been staff motivation. "I like to get my staff excited about architecture. I try to encourage them to look at other examples of



The home was built to maximise the stunning water views.



The joinery in the main bedroom is a fine example of skilled, highly detailed workmanship.

architecture besides the projects we work on. This improves their level of awareness and encourages pride in the company," he said.

"And by working only on architect-designed projects we are constantly improving our building knowledge which means we have the skill and experience to take on even more complex and challenging projects."

Although John is passionate about architecture, he said he "kind of drifted" into a builder's apprenticeship – even though both his father and grandfather were in the trade. At the age of 21 he started his own contracting business, which he ran for 13 years.

Looking for a new challenge, he found that business up even though he didn't have any other work in the pipeline. Soon after he decided to hook up with an architect he knew to tender for a design and construct project (for a block of government apartments), won the job and set up Belvedere Constructions.

Although the company is based in Canberra, the bulk of the work is done in

Sydney. In the summer months, they also take on projects in the Snowy Mountains, in particular Thredbo and Perisher. He even has a full-time manager based in Jindabyne.

His first Snowy Mountains job was a small block of units he built for himself in 1979. Since then Belvedere Constructions has worked on a broad range of projects, including Lake Crackenback Resort and additions to the 1959 Heritage-listed Sastrugi Lodge.

John's interest in the Snowy Mountains is both personal and professional. Skiing is another one of his passions – it's even reflected in the company name. Belvedere is the name of a ski run in France.

Teamwork the key

John spends much of his time overseeing the smooth running of the business, which typically employs between 15 and 20 fulltime staff, and liaising with architects and clients. And whenever possible, he endeavours to visit every site every day.

He accredits much of Belvedere's success to the team of dedicated professionals who support him. "The project and construction managers, who are supported by highly skilled tradesmen, assigned to each activity are valuable and experienced specialists paying attention to each and every detail," said John.

He is a firm believer in a hands-on approach to management and feels that the key to keeping a happy and motivated workforce – and ensuring the architect's plans are followed to the letter – lies in fostering a team-based approach.

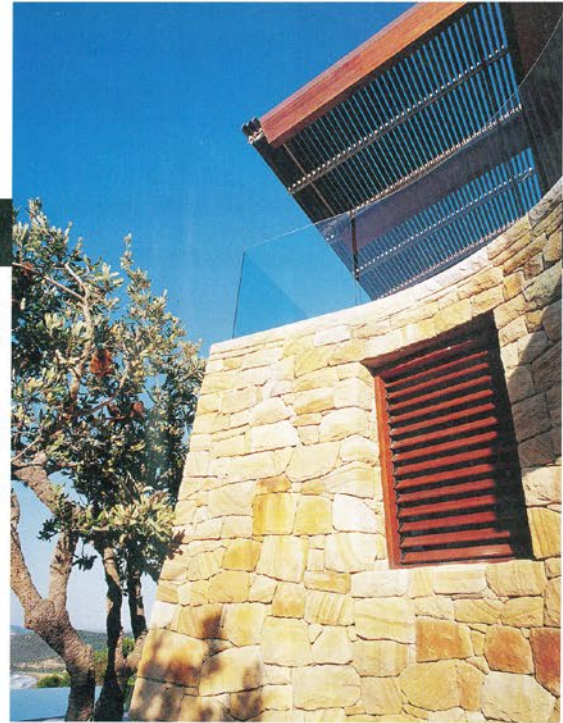
John says he draws great satisfaction from "just seeing a job done properly". He also enjoys the challenge of taking on detailed, innovative jobs on unusual or difficult sites.

But he's not just interested in contemporary, cutting-edge projects. He also enjoys complex restoration work with Carwoola Homestead and Dunroon Military College just two examples of projects successfully undertaken by the company.

Belvedere Constructions has won a slew of awards over the last few years.

In 2001 alone the company won awards in the Contract House and Heritage Restoration categories in the MBA of NSW Awards for Excellence as well as the Wilkinson Award for Single and Multiple Housing in the RAIAS NSW Chapter Awards. In 1997, Belvedere took out the MBA's Master Builder of the Year award.

So what motivates John to enter such a wide variety of competitions?



Note the use of random-cut coarsed sandstone.

"It's not so much for me but I think it means a lot for the people on site; for the people who actually build the houses. They like to have their work recognised."

I think winning awards also helps them to get excited about what they do day-to-day which means we do what we do better," explained John.

Award-winning homes

This year he entered two projects in the 2002 MBA of NSW Awards for Excellence, winning the Contract Houses \$1-2 million category (for which he was also named Master Builder of the Year) and the Best Use of Recycled Timber.

Describing his entry in the Contract Houses category as a project of "incredible workmanship", he gives much of the credit to his foreman, Murry Bolton. "This house was a real joint effort between the site foreman and the architect to develop the detailing."

Perched high atop a difficult and unstable site in Sydney's northern suburbs, the house is comprised of two pavilions connected by an external cloister walkway. The north pavilion is the family's main residence and the south pavilion is for guests.

The architect-designed house, which has a steel substructure, is a melange of materials, shapes and textures. The unusual

cladding materials are just one example – note the random coarsed-sandstone tapered base walls and the horizontal red timber cladding. The sandstone and timber motif was repeated in the interior with large sandstone tiles, internal sandstone cladding and with Rock Maple and South Queensland Murtle joinery.

Other novel features include massive laminated rafters, square-set joinery plus convex and concave tapering sandstone walls. And there is also a centrally located pool controlled by two automatic sliding frameless doors leading to the kitchen and living areas, both of which overlook the beach.

The success of this project can be largely attributed to Belvedere Construction's incredible attention to detail and their ability to construct to minute tolerances.

John also believes that his entry in the Best Use of Recycled Timber category is another example of how adept his "team" is at working on challenging sites and at being able to execute the most detailed architect's plans. Again, John pays homage to the site foreman, this time Adam Howe.

For Belvedere Constructions, it seems, teamwork is not just a catchphrase, it's a way of life. ■

