



up close + personal with

anthony pillinger

REGISTERED BUILDER
– SWELL HOMES

// interviewed by merelyn demarte



How did you get started in the building and construction industry?

I joined the building industry when I was 16 years old — 32 years ago. I started a small maintenance business called Right-Price Building Maintenance and did small repairs and patchwork for a few Terraces in Paddington, Sydney. My grandpa Henry Isaac was an old school handyman — and a Bondi tram driver — and he helped me on most of these jobs. It was a great way to bond with the industry and my grandpa, plus make a few bob along the way.

What kind of projects does Swell Homes work on?

We build 50 per cent extensions and 50 per cent new homes. While each building we do is a one-off reflecting our client's brief, all of them are designed with solar passive and water-wise principles as a cornerstone. The best part of building wide and varied styles of homes is that it keeps the process fresh for me and my team, while giving clients a lot of input into the feel of their build.

What makes Swell Homes' approach unique?

We have taken our time in training our growing team, and have enjoyed the planned growth. Getting to where we are now is a result of providing great customer service from bottom to top, and direct communications between the builder and the client throughout the process. This may not be unique, but it is very important.

What does make us unique is the ongoing development of our cloud based project scheduling and client liaison systems. This will soon be developed into a builder's service called BuildCloud —

watch this space.

We also differ from many other builders in our common use of composite construction. We have been trialling many new products, and assessing their merit and most useful application in the Perth environment. We have applied these to traditional 'heavy weight' methods, and made interesting amalgams. One system that we have developed is a light weight timber framed wall that rates greater than R4.0 and has a convectonal detail, whereby applying heat to the external surface induces airflow over the external insulated layers.

What reflections do you have on your time in the industry?

It takes a long time for a builder to develop a strong inbuilt understanding of their position in the industry relative to law, standards, business management, CPD [Continuing Professional Development], and growth. We found that the meetings and the subsequent assessment and report from Enterprise Connect (a Federal Government small business initiative) have been the most helpful events in developing from a small to a medium builder. In hindsight, I'd have liked to have done this 10 years sooner.

What have been some of the biggest challenges you've faced in your career?

The biggest challenge that I've faced would be creating a business that is consistent. Consistency is a combination of having at least a year's worth of potential work (strong leads) pencilled in, written procedures in place to effectively turn these leads into contracts, and then procedures in place to properly document and execute the job.

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This sounds very boffinish, but 90 per cent of problems stem from not taking the time to ‘proceduralise’ what we do. This is an ongoing job, and it requires constant updating and training. However, without strong in-house procedures, time wasting, inconsistency, cost inefficiency, and possible exposure to disputes are likely. Builders face challenges on a daily basis and they need to be dealt with promptly. Without a solid base on which to deal with these daily challenges, a builder is constantly putting out fires.

What have been some of your biggest accomplishments?

We were previously Mt Hawthorn Period Extensions. It was a respected little business, and we never needed to advertise. About six years ago we moved to South Beach, Fremantle and the old business no longer had relevance, so we started up Swell Homes. I feel that my greatest accomplishment (after marrying my wife Rachel, and raising two great kids with her) is developing this business to a medium sized building company while still keeping it a low key affair. We rely on word of mouth, and work hard at providing a quality personal service to our customers. The growth of this business over the past two years has been a great result for Rachel and I. We have enjoyed writing the strategic business plan and the marketing plan together, and reaping the results. My favourite saying these days is ‘Beware of what you wish for, for you might get it’. I think that Rachel is a bit sick of hearing it, especially as I drop new client briefs on her design and drafting business – Shoreline Designs.

What are your interests outside of work?

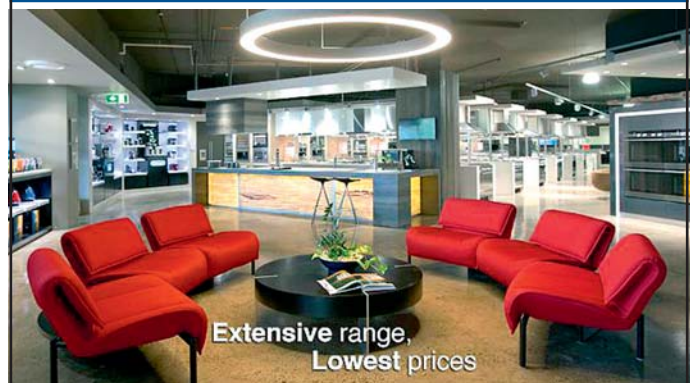
I am an avid kitesurfer, fisherman, and brewer. We kitesurf and fish here at South Beach, and regularly partake in ‘an hour of power’ once the seabreeze hits in summer. Post kite surfing and work, there is always a keg of fresh craft beer on tap at my place. I’ve homebrewed since I was 18, but around three years ago I took it a step further and commenced brewing with full grain – no preservatives; just grain, hops, yeast, and water.

My recipes developed to a point where my ‘beer geek’ friends advised that they would be willing to pay for what I can make. I took this seriously, and have nearly completed the foundation of Innate Brewers with three other brewing buddies. We have set up a microbrewery in Spearwood, and are expecting to be producing and selling by October 2014.

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