

Chris Beer reckons building is a good career

Christchurch-based builder Chris Beer believes the keys to running a successful building company are people, communication and commitment to quality.

By Alistair Mackenzie, Freelance Writer, Christchurch

Since forming his Christchurch-based company, CBeer Construction, in 2002, Chris Beer has established a solid reputation in the city for his work in the architectural build niche, but it hasn't all been plain sailing.

After a rollercoaster ride over the past decade, Chris has come to the conclusion that first and foremost, success is about people. It took him a good 10 years to gather a core group of architects, engineers, builders and other tradespeople together. He loves pulling together a team to work on a project and says the trick is in letting people get on with what they're best at and knowing when to stand back.

Communication is essential – not just with the builders on site, but with all stakeholders on the project. Good client rapport is also crucial. While a builder's job may be governed to a large extent by the design and the materials stipulated, Chris believes a builder should work with a client and advise them of their options throughout the whole build process, even if that means seeking late amendments with the council. 'The aim is to produce the best possible outcome for the client.' This comes through total commitment to quality of build and service, both in the short and long term.

'Building shouldn't be about just smacking something up ... but about how well it lasts and what sort of back-up and guarantee the client gets. It's 5–10 years down the track that people get value out of a builder.'

Apprenticeship with a perfectionist

Chris learnt about quality early, during his apprenticeship with Methven builder Tom Findlay. Tom had originally trained as a boatbuilder and had an incredible eye for detail. 'Everything had to be perfect.'

Starting his 4-year apprenticeship when he did was lucky for Chris. In the late 1980s, franchises of specialist subcontractors had yet to take off, and an apprentice got to do more than just stand up frames.

'We did everything – made our own skirting boards, did our own roofing. We did renovations of old farmhouses, new builds, dairy conversions ... the lot. Because you've done a lot of stuff yourself, you can talk to tradesmen on site, think on your feet and make fast decisions. It makes you a much better manager of your time.' However, Chris reckons he didn't fully appreciate this training until he started his own business.



Chris Beer (left) with his foreman Josh Taylor.

Prospering architectural build niche

Shortly after completing his apprenticeship, Chris spent a year building a house in Moro Bay on the central coast of California. Then it was back to Christchurch to hang up his shingle. Starting with a house fit-out in Fendalton and renovation work in Cashmere, CBeer Construction was up and running.

Chris quickly found himself focusing on the architectural build niche. He loved the challenge of 'turning flat lines on a plan into a 3D piece of art'.

The company prospered, partly because of the times and partly because of the company philosophy: 'We did what we said we would do and we delivered what we said we would deliver.'

4 years of sleepless nights

The company grew to the point where Chris lost control and oversight of it. Then things turned to custard. 'I wasn't involved in the day-to-day running enough ... it got too big, and I gave away the responsibility to others. The quality of the work didn't drop, but it just became money in, money out.'

Rather than close the doors, Chris's professional colleagues, such as his accountant, helped him to refocus. 'They didn't give me options, they just told me what had to be done ... I had 4 sleepless years.'

Looking back, Chris sees that the harrowing experience was a chance to refocus on the company's original core values and get things back on track.

Today, he has a staff of 10. While not ruling out expansion in the future, Chris says it would be done in a much more sustainable way.

Concrete the way of the future

The most challenging project Chris currently has under way is a 450 m² tilt-slab home on a hill site above the seaside suburb of Sumner. Designed by Callum Pankhurst of Identity Group Ltd, it's 'a commercial style building being built to residential standards...on a hill. And with concrete you can't rush things; you don't get a second shot.'

Concrete homes have huge potential, Chris says. He believes there's a massive market for housing that's cost-effective to build and energy-efficient to run. To him, that means concrete.

The sort of concrete used depends on the site. 'Tilt-slab on a hill is complicated. But then again, so is poured in situ.'

Costs of building in concrete are falling as uptake increases and its longevity and thermal/acoustic properties make it attractive from a sustainability point of view.

Building is a good career

Chris obviously enjoys what he does, and few site offices have a better outlook: straight down onto Pegasus Bay, with the Kaikoura ranges in the distance. He can find little to grumble about these days, but the tendering process frustrates him.

'It's almost impossible to compare two tenders. Clients would be better served if they met with the project's architect, engineer and builder and formed a team that worked together from the outset – even before the design process began. The trouble is, only people who have built before will recognise the advantages of doing this.'

Chris is particularly staunch on the need for training and education in the industry. He won't employ anybody who isn't qualified or willing to show commitment to the industry by taking on an apprenticeship.

When he started his company in 2002, Chris wanted to provide good value and quality products, feed his family and enjoy a balance of professional and home life. After some rough lessons, he seems to be well on his way to achieving these goals. When he's not being a father and husband or coaching a sports team, Chris enjoys a mountain bike ride or a trip away fishing. Building is a good career and should be promoted more, he reckons. ♦

Post earthquake...

Build caught up with Chris Beer 3 weeks after the 22 February earthquake.

Like many Christchurch business owners, the earthquake has had a profound effect on Chris. 'A lot of houses, to be frank, are buggered,' he says. 'At the moment, we're doing a lot of remedial work to get as many people as possible back into their homes.'

But a lot of older homes in the hill areas where he specialises, including the badly hit Sumner and Redcliffs, will need extensive repairs before their owners can return. Then, of course, there are the new builds. Many homes are so badly damaged that they will have to be demolished and rebuilt.

'We need to think about those buildings carefully – we can't ignore the fact that an earthquake flattened our city. Look at Japan as an example. Tsunami aside, its buildings held up pretty well, all things considered.'

Chris's modern tilt-slab project in Sumner, which is less than 10 km from the epicentre, suffered only minor damage. 'It held up exceptionally well. That's the type of construction we need to move towards in Christchurch. I think the days of brick veneer and tiled roofs are gone.'

But he says the feeling amongst Christchurch builders is still very positive. 'The industry is definitely sticking with Christchurch. This is our city – we are the ones who are going to rebuild it.'

He estimates he has a further 2–3 weeks of remedial work before the real reconstruction begins sometime in the next 3 months. 'There's a decade's worth of building work here in Christchurch, but this is an opportunity to create a new and absolutely stunning city.' ♦