

Shorts

Profile

Introducing Nigel Smith – new BRANZ Chair

The recently appointed Chair of BRANZ has been obsessed with building from an early age.

IN HIS 30-plus-year career, Nigel Smith has worked across most building disciplines from labouring, architectural design and quantity surveying through to builder and successful construction company owner.

Started as a labourer

Raised in the small town of Rakaia, near Christchurch - 'In those days, it was famous for having the longest road bridge in the southern hemisphere,' he says - Nigel worked as a labourer on building sites every school holidays from the age of 12.

'It was the thrill of making something from nothing that attracted me. I loved learning how buildings were put together. It involved both brain and brawn. It was the creativity that got me hooked. I started taking clean sheets of paper and sketching things up.'

Cadetship in architectural design

Leaving school at 17, Nigel undertook a cadetship in architectural design and studied estimating and quantity surveying. He believes his time on building sites gave him a distinct edge.

'I guess I understood that pretty lines on a page don't always translate well in practice on site. My work was very much driven by practical application.'



After qualifying, Nigel went back to work for the same builder who had employed him as a young labourer. There, he further honed and utilised his broad skill base, including gaining experience in project management.

'It gave me a terrific grounding. I had a hand in so many different aspects of a build, both on tools and the management part as well.'

From one building company to national franchise

Married by this time to his high school sweetheart Anna and living - and working part-time - on her parents' farm, Nigel worked for and eventually bought a building company in Ashburton. As that business grew, he opened another branch in Timaru, then opened a couple of franchise businesses and eventually he took on a national franchise.

'I loved the whole ethos of building and building a company. It's very satisfying. And along the way, I was presented with a lot of opportunities, and I took them. Through my work, I had a lot of interaction with Registered Master Builders as a member, and that developed into the beginning of my governance career as a director on their board.'

Joined BRANZ Board

Nigel joined the Board of BRANZ in 2020 with a strong understanding of its work, having experience of and valuing its product appraisals process and being a regular reader of *Build*.

'I'd always been interested in BRANZ research, but digging in to how mental wellbeing programme, MATES in Construction, came about was a light bulb moment. Given the industry attitude towards mental health had been basically "take a concrete pill", MATES in Construction was an important leap forward for an industry that sadly has a high rate of suicide.'

'I learned that the whole catalyst for this initiative had been based on research conducted by BRANZ. I was blown away. This was such a great example of how wide BRANZ casts its research net that it touches on every facet of the building system.'

Enthusiastic about the opportunities for BRANZ

Nigel says joining the BRANZ Board has further broadened his knowledge of yet another aspect of the industry he loves.

'I love to learn, and my time at BRANZ has deepened my respect for the science that is commissioned and undertaken. There's a rigorous process around which research is going to be funded and why. From a governance perspective, the discipline of that process is impressive. Then there's the burning and smashing of stuff for continuous improvement ... I love watching that too!'

Leading the BRANZ Board, Nigel is enthusiastic about the opportunities ahead for BRANZ.

'Helen Anderson's legacy is powerful. The Board she led and the management team have built strong relationships across industry, government and beyond so that BRANZ is now seen as truly independent. BRANZ is trusted, and that's fundamentally important because we have a huge role to play in helping the industry address decarbonisation, waste and environmental sustainability challenges.

Industry must embrace sustainability

'My hope for my tenure is that BRANZ continues to help the industry find financially viable ways to address sustainability issues. I believe the industry can do it, but it must overcome its fear of change.

'There is a shift in mindset needed, in much the same way as the industry had to address changes to health and safety back in 2014. And we just must do it. We can't afford to wait because the industry has a lot to do in helping meet Aotearoa New Zealand's ambitious 2050 environmental and sustainability goals.'

And a little-known fact about Nigel - despite not being a full-time farmer, he was a grand finalist in the 1999 Young Farmer of the Year competition! 