New hand at the helm

David Kelly, the new Chief Executive of the Registered Master Builders Association (RMBA), steps into the role at an exciting time in the industry. He tells Build a bit about himself and how he sees the lie of the land.

Q. What is your business background?
A. I trained as a civil engineer at Canterbury University. My first job after graduating was for Tonkin and Taylor in the construction of water storage lakes at Te Marua, north of Wellington. Over the years, I have had a variety of roles in building and construction. Most recently, I was Deputy Chief Executive Building Quality at the Department of Building and Housing, and was then heavily involved with response and recovery work following the Canterbury earthquakes.

Q. It’s a growth period in the industry. What do you see as the challenges and the upside?
A. We know from history that, in times of growth in the construction industry, quality can suffer - in part, because there can be a rush of new entrants to the market who may not have the technical or business skills to do a good job.

In a time of growth, many businesses can also get into financial difficulty if they do not anticipate changes such as cost inflation. For RMBA, that means providing support services to businesses to help them understand the challenges and opportunities and how to deal with them.

The opportunity in a growth situation is to invest increased revenues into improved systems and people. This will prepare for any future downturn and is as true for the building sector as it is for any sector.

Q. Any plans to grow RMBA?
A. Registered Master Builders has a strong base upon which to grow. I must pay credit to the work of my predecessor, Warwick Quinn, in ensuring that the Association is financially sound and has a strong management team.

Our Board is clear about the importance of lifting the level and quality of services that we provide to our members. We have a philosophy of providing a pathway throughout their career stages - starting with the apprentices through to members beginning and growing their own businesses. If we can provide value to our members throughout, we will attract and grow the membership of RMBA.

Q. What are your thoughts about new technologies in residential building?
A. We need a variety of housing types to suit the needs of the market. Historically, we have taken a bespoke approach to house building, driven by the desire of homeowners to ‘customise’ their homes.

However, there is increasing sophistication by a number of builders in understanding exactly where their costs are driven from and about delivering value to their customers.

The use of technology and off-site manufacturing to improve efficiency and quality is gaining traction in some quarters, but there’s a long way to go. The boom-bust nature of the building industry also poses a major obstacle, undermining confidence to invest.

Q. Is sustainability having a growing impact on residential housing?
A. I think sustainability will continue to grow as a factor. Worldwide, the issue is not going away, as seen from recent comments by leaders of China and the US.

At an individual level, I think people are more conscious of sustainability issues, including how it hits them in the hip pocket. The challenge is to be clear about what we mean by sustainability. It is not just a narrow definition of energy efficiency, and I don’t think there is common agreement about what it does mean.

Q. Any favourite out-of-work activities?
A. I enjoy travel and like to get out on the golf course. The golf is probably more a make-work scheme for the greenkeepers, as I tend to hack my way around the fairways. I tell myself it is not about the score but enjoying the company and exercise.