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SARAH
CONSTRUCTIONS

NEW HEIGHTS

Sarah Constructions is ready to capitalise on future growth opportunities as the Adelaide market picks up after recent tough times.

Images courtesy of Sarah Constructions

Sarah Constructions has been an established name in South Australia for more than 50 years. It sits across a multitude of sectors within the property industry, dealing with projects from \$50,000 to \$30 million. General Manager Adrian Esplin started with the business in September last year. His previous experience enabled him to come into the role with a fresh set of eyes and a new outlook, ready to start implementing plans for growth.

“The key strategy for me is to maintain what it is that we already do well and improve on it,” says Adrian. “It didn’t take me long to realise that the recipe which Sarah Constructions has is good and strong, but coming as an outsider I can see ways that it can do things a little bit better.”

Adrian is a trained civil engineer and worked as a consulting engineer for several companies including GHD before he struck up an interest in the construction industry. He landed a job as a site engineer with Baulderstone in 1994 and eventually became project engineer, working on some significant social infrastructure and high-density residential projects in Adelaide. “Baulderstone was probably the leading South Australian-based tier-one contractor at the time, so I had some great training and exposure across the industry,” Adrian says.

In 2000, he joined Brookfield Multiplex, which was “a new and exciting group making all the right noises in wanting to grow and develop.” He was site manager and

directly responsible for managing the day-to-day operations of what was set to be the first high-rise built in the city in a decade.

At this time, Multiplex was undergoing some significant transformations, and, after several successful large-scale projects, Adrian was promoted to director of the Victorian and South Australian business unit. “I was given an edict at that point, in 2007, to grow the business. It was all very exciting. And then around 2011 to 2012, the market here, at the top end, started tapering off. My role with Multiplex then shifted to help with the business in Melbourne.”

For the two years prior to starting with Sarah Constructions, Adrian was living in Adelaide but working in Melbourne. While enjoyable, it wasn’t sustainable for the long term, and he entered discussions with third-generation owners of Sarah Constructions Tim and James Sarah.

“Although I was very focused on what I was doing at Multiplex, Sarah Constructions had always had a very good reputation in the Adelaide market. What I was doing in Melbourne was very exciting, but you reach that point where you know you need to make a decision to either relocate or get used to jumping on and off planes every week. An opportunity with Sarah Constructions certainly sparked my interest, and the more I spoke to Tim and James, the more our ideals and mindsets around the industry were alike. I made the change, and have been extremely happy ever since.”

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Adrian recognises there are strong opportunities for growth with Sarah Constructions and that its skill base is well equipped to adapt to a variety of challenges, including developments on a larger scale. He believes the business has the capability to do projects in the \$100-million-plus space, but also understands it is important not to disregard the company’s current portfolio of work.

Experience in the Melbourne construction market has shaped Adrian’s approach to business. “Spending the past two years in Melbourne gave me a perspective in Adelaide that if we drive hard enough and work hard enough, we can actually—rather than just talk about potential opportunities—create them or transform them so they can become a real opportunity that adapts to the market.

“Slowly but surely, Adelaide seems to follow what happens in the east. It’s always a little bit behind because it’s a smaller place and doesn’t have the same population density. But trends happen for a reason. I can see that market starting to get on its feet again. It isn’t instantly going to happen tomorrow, but certainly there is good reason for some optimism.”

According to Adrian, the tough times for Adelaide’s construction market have hit their worst, and things can only improve from here on out. “If you are a developer or contractor who wants to build large-scale \$350–\$400-million-type projects, like what happens regularly in the eastern states, then >



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- Adrian Esplin

you are going to be disappointed. Those projects will happen in Adelaide, but not with the same regularity as they have been in the past five to six years. Adelaide is classified as more of a mid-tier market, and it’s really starting to get its engine going again.”

Sarah Constructions has fostered a number of long-term relationships with suppliers, subcontractors, and clients—a key element in the success of the business. Being family owned has helped to support its efforts in creating a solid reputation in the industry.

“They all know that it is a two-way street,” Adrian says. “When we ask them to work with us and move with us and be flexible, they know that they are going to get their fair work in return over time. That being

said, it’s not a pool of maybe 10 people; it’s probably more like 150 key subcontractors and suppliers across the 50 to 60 trade packages that we constantly deal with.

“We have a very loyal and trustworthy subcontractor base, and we always have other subcontractors that are looking to be part of that group and be pre-qualified with us. We really rely on them to deliver the success that we promise to our clients. It’s important to keep, continue, and build on those relationships and keep them going strong.”

Adrian says he views the construction industry no differently from any other: “It starts first and foremost with the relationship you have with the customer.” In previous roles, he was accustomed to plenty of repeat business, and that has continued since starting with Sarah Constructions.

“I wouldn’t have come to Sarah Constructions if that wasn’t the

case. If ultimately your only differential is price, then life is pretty hard for you. You still need to be price competitive, but if you have those relationships already, then people know you will do your best to deliver for them. You need to listen to them, and be flexible, nimble, and dynamic with their needs when they need you to be.

“That has been an ethos of the business for a long time, and consequently that means we have a very loyal customer base. That being said, you can never rest on your laurels because, at the end of the day, construction is a service. If you don’t respect your clients, don’t listen, or if you create problems for them, then that will be it. There’s plenty of other service providers out there they can switch to.

“We’re very acutely aware that to ensure we can provide a high level of customer service, it’s a combination of having the right attitude and the right people in the business to deliver that.” ◉

“Working with Sarah Constructions has enabled De-Construct to grow in a collaborative working relationship with South Australia’s most progressive building company. Sarah Constructions provide the support we need to develop our systems into those needed by leading national contractors.”
- David Eames, Managing Director, De-Construct



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