

Building Local Icons

Perkins Builders is a regional construction company in the south-west of Western Australia with a history of reliability and quality as it has grown and expanded its business.

Images by Henderson Photographics

Not many Australian construction companies can say they've been entrusted to build a new cathedral, rebuild a war memorial, and construct a function centre for a reception for the Queen. Perkins Builders, however, can. A regionally based builder that started more than 50 years ago in Bunbury, Western Australia, it has risen to great heights only a decade after establishing a branch in Perth. *The CEO Magazine* spoke to Dan Perkins, Managing Director of Perkins Builders, about the growth the company has seen and his vision for the future.

The CEO Magazine: What is the history of Perkins Builders, and what roles have you had in that time?

Dan: There was one bricklayer and one carpenter who essentially started off as residential cottage builders, but immediately commenced entry-level and lower-tier commercial building activity and started Perkins Builders. That partnership effectively continued for 25 years. In the early 1990s, we transitioned into a new entity, which was triggered by the passing of one of the foundation partners. I had been an employee of the business since 1983, originally as an apprentice carpenter and then

progressing to a site manager, through to estimating and project management roles. During the first 25 years, our growth profile was fairly static; we were a regionally based commercial builder in south-west Western Australia of relatively modest activity and turnover.

We had a reputation for quality and reliability. From 2000 onwards, we've experienced significant growth year on year—compounded growth, even during the global financial crisis. We generally have around 20 to 30 projects per year, with a value of \$150–200 million. The expansion geographically out of the south-west happened in about 2002. During that time, we took the decision to expand our operational area from outside the south-west, where we were based in Bunbury, and we inaugurated a branch based out of Perth. Initially, the split in work was 25 per cent Perth and 75 per cent south-west, but the Perth component increased until, now, generally, the Perth office will provide a larger percentage of our annual turnover than the south-west will.

What have been the major challenges, and how have you overcome them?

The major challenge, without a doubt, is to establish an

operational delivery model in Perth that has the degree of control and quality outcomes that we have in the south-west. The culture of the industry in Perth is different: bigger city, more builders, more activity. There is a greater level of people moving around between one company and another, and they seem to be more job-by-job and project-focused than they are career-focused with an organisation.

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The diversity of skill sets and the quality outcomes from individual participants—be they clients, consultants, or employees—is far less than what we see in the regionally based projects. The result is that we're striving for a point of difference—we want to replicate the reputation of being a quality, robust, and reliable contractor in Perth as we have been in the south-west. The challenge has been around recruiting and retaining people of high enough calibre to deliver the result in Perth that we have a reputation for being able to do regionally.

What would you describe as the key values of Perkins Builders?

It's the resilience to be able to keep withstanding the pressure to capitulate to the lowest common denominator in areas of integrity and quality. The senior >



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management side of things involves ensuring that the compliance and quality and completeness of what we're producing and providing for a client is at the forefront. On every occasion, we're being commercially and contractually transparent and responsible to our client requirements so that we can claim to provide the level of confidence backed by the reputation and track record that our clients expect from us. It's the diligence from management that has enabled that to occur.

How do you retain staff and ensure there is good leadership for the future?

It's one of our clear points of difference, particularly in regional areas. The modus operandi of our company across the board has always been about recognising the importance and necessity of youth, to have a cohort as young as possible in all levels of the operation: from trade and apprenticeship areas, early opportunity, and promotion through those areas into site supervision and site management roles, but also in the professional side of things, in estimating and contract administration. One of our distinct points of difference is the young age cohort we have in relatively senior management roles and providing that opportunity. That is obviously, with some intent, to futureproof ourselves and provide the potential security of our future management staff and the high-level operatives coming through the organisation, as opposed to having to be recruited externally. We certainly don't have the approach of waiting until we need something and then trying to find the experienced, qualified, high-level person externally; instead, we train staff up from entry level.

Is there a project you're particularly proud of?

The building of the new St Patrick's Catholic cathedral in Bunbury in 2010 was certainly a pinnacle. It was such a rare

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opportunity; it was the first time a brand-new Catholic cathedral has been built in Australia in 60 years. The opportunity to build such a traditional building was certainly a privilege that you would not expect to be afforded in anybody's career in the construction industry these days. I'm a fourth-generation Bunbury person, born and bred. To put an iconic city building on top of an iconic hill in the centre of town is an honour. And the challenges involved in that were not insignificant, from the company's point of view; we used our experience and resources and wherewithal to take that in our stride and deliver a recognised successful outcome.

There were a couple of government public infrastructure projects which we as a builder were entrusted with. The first of these was the construction of the Migrant Welcome Walls at the Western Australian Maritime Museum. It was a relatively small project, but for us to be selected as a regional builder, relatively new in Perth, was significant. Immediately on the back of that was the reconstruction of Perth's primary war memorial in Kings Park. That was deconstructed by us block by block and then rebuilt. We took that as recognition of trust in our capability by the state government. Third in that group

was when Perkins was the contractor to build the Fraser's Kings Park function centre, which was commissioned ahead of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting for Queen Elizabeth II when she visited in 2012. It had to be built to very specific requirements. We were contracted directly to the Department of Premier and Cabinet to build that, with no compromise on quality and timeline outcomes because it had to be completed ahead of the Queen's visit to Perth.

What does the future hold for Perkins Builders?

I hope for a continuation of the same, because I think the challenges will come externally to us, not internally, and I think that they'll be how Australia, and Western Australia in particular, adapts and responds to economic and global challenges. I would be very pleased to think that our robust and proven model of reliability and delivery has put us in good stead to continue doing what we're doing the way we are doing it, and I think that will be a necessity to survive into the future. We certainly don't have an agenda of wholesale change or restructure; I think if we can just stay positioned as we are and operating as we are, then that's the best place to be in the future. •

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