

SPEAKING *UP*

BY MICHELLE O'BRIEN
EDITOR, URBAN DEVELOPER UDIA (QLD)

Ross Elliott has a few things to get off his chest when it comes to the development and construction industry. With a career that has spanned property, politics, media, tourism and marketing, Ross has seen enough to know that Queensland is due for a few changes.





"It's been a team effort, but Cockram has grown, in less than three years, from what was just me in a little service office at Riverside, to over 30 staff with over one hundred million dollars worth of work in hand."

"I enjoy sharing my views with people because they tell me they enjoy reading them," says Ross Elliott.

It's a Tuesday afternoon at Cockram Constructions on Brisbane's North Quay and I am discussing with Ross what gets him fired-up and what motivates his active online presence.

Apart from his day job, which for the past three years has been helping to grow Cockram's business into Queensland, Ross provides communications, marketing and business development advice to private companies. He also authors two blogs – 'The Eye', a forum on business development and marketing strategy, and 'The Pulse', a blog that, according to its tagline, is 'dedicated to the never-ending pursuit of public policy enlightenment'.

And there are a few things, it seems,

that disappoint Ross about the latter topic in Queensland.

"I think it has been a tragedy to see how public policy, particularly when it comes to development and housing, has drifted so far away from the people it should be serving," he says.

"Young people trying to buy a home at a reasonable cost, so they can establish themselves and their families and their futures, shouldn't be facing so much policy-induced difficulty. Development has been turned into the most complex, time-consuming and costly exercise, and it's really only happened within the space of 12, maybe 15 years.

"It's important that organisations like UDIA just keep on reminding policy makers, politicians, bureaucrats and academics that it's not about the process, it should always

be about the outcome. And the planning policy outcomes we've got at the moment are just quite shameful really."

It's not just the rule makers and academics that Ross takes aim at. He believes the industry has a lot to answer for in terms of the negativity that has crept in over the years.

"Some of the resistance to these policy innovations was about as intimidating as being threatened with wet lettuce," he says.

"I'm talking about the organisations that represent the industry as well as the individual companies in the industry. They had the opportunity to resist some of these policy ideas much more vigorously than they ultimately chose to do."

BUILDING A REPUTATION

By the time this issue goes to print, Ross will have taken up a new consultancy at Devine Constructions, looking to grow their

external client work in specific areas. He will remain in a less hands-on advisory role with Cockram, whose expansion he has helped lead in the last three years.

Despite being a 150-year-old company in Victoria, until recently virtually no one had heard of Cockram in Queensland. Enter Ross, whose blend of marketing strategy experience, business development know-how and industry connections made him a logical choice to help establish the business in Queensland.

"It's been a team effort but Cockram has grown in less than three years from what was just me in a little service office at Riverside, to over 30 staff with over one hundred million dollars worth of work in hand," Ross says. "It's been a great success story, to achieve that in a downturn, because the construction industry is not exactly firing on all cylinders at the moment. It goes to

show you have to make your own luck."

Ross shares that success at Cockram came down to a focused strategy designed to build the local reputation of the brand, which enabled him to leverage some highly targeted opportunities. Those opportunities then led to further opportunities, and today the Brisbane office has around \$100 million worth of work in hand, and a very healthy tender board of current and forthcoming select opportunities.

"There's no point reading the bad headlines in the paper and throwing your hands in the air, or to suggest that the sky is falling," he says. "There are always opportunities out there."

A NEVER-ENDING JOURNEY

Ross is no stranger to career twists – his varied interests have seen him take on roles in areas as diverse as property,

construction, politics, media, tourism and city marketing. His previous clients and employers include Brisbane Marketing, Sirromet Wine, the Property Council, McGuires Hotels, Anthony John Group and Springfield Land Corporation. There's even been a Melbourne book store in the mix.

"The prospect of me ever getting long service leave is a bit of a joke," he laughs, "and that's not something I've ever wanted. I think that keeping yourself energised by taking on new challenges is far better than allowing yourself to get stale.

"You're the first person to know when you've been in a job too long, and it's your job to sack yourself if no one else does it for you," he says. "I think your capacity to think laterally and bring fresh ideas into an organisation starts to diminish over time, so moving around can be a good thing."

“To me, it was time for Brisbane to really shake off its daggy, boring, hot, dull sort of image – and the way to do that was to go for a much younger image.”

One of the formative jobs Ross held early in his career was working for a Federal Member of Parliament in the seat of Fadden on the Southside, which, he says, first opened his eyes to the nature of politics.

“What you read about in the papers is nothing compared to what you begin to learn behind the scenes,” Ross says. “It was a real privilege to have one of those jobs early on in my career.”

From there he moved into real estate, which, he points out, is another lifelong passion of his. He went on to hold a number of roles in property, beginning running research and media management for property consultants Hillier Parker in the late 80s.

A five-year stint with the Real Estate Institute of Queensland, running their public affairs and research activities, which Ross describes as “a great deal of fun”, drew him even closer to property. From there, he went on to run the Queensland division of the Property Council, then known as the Building Owners and Managers Association.

“That was a period of significant organisational growth, in terms of its financial resources, advocacy campaigns and communications,” he says.

When the time came for Ross to move on, he became the inaugural CEO of Brisbane Marketing, which was the result of a merger of a number of different organisations, with the view that the city could be better promoted in a united fashion.

“To me, it was time for Brisbane to really shake off its daggy, boring, hot, dull sort of image – and the way to do that was to go for a much younger image,” he says.

“It was unusual because Brisbane was being promoted as if it was some form of tropical tourist destination, minus the beach. I think I recall the logo the city had at the time was a palm tree growing out of the top of City Hall, with a great big sun beaming

down on people. Of course the sun was a turn off, we all know what the climate is like in Brisbane – people won’t visit in summer for recreation or business if they can help it, because it is damn hot. But nine months of the year the climate is beautiful.

“We really wanted to focus on the new urban economy that was Brisbane, so we took a very different approach. We focused on the night life, the restaurants, the culture. As a front man for that exercise, we asked Nick Earls, the Brisbane author who wrote Zig Zag Street and 48 Shades of Brown. Nick was fantastic, and the TV commercial we made for downtown was very effective. I think we really started the process of changing people’s perceptions of what Brisbane is all about.

“That process has continued and it’s all been good. Today’s ‘new world city’ line for Brisbane is a nice extension of that.”

INDUSTRY VOICE

After somewhat of a sabbatical from the Brisbane business world, in which Ross established a successful off-road motorcycle publication, *Trail Bike Adventure Magazine* (clearly following the tug of another one of his passions), he was approached to return to the Property Council to set up the Residential Development Council.

“I enjoyed this tremendously because it allowed me to really begin to focus on some of the policy issues that drive me spare, absolutely drive me nuts, and they continue to drive me nuts,” he says.

“We had the issues of urban containment – which there is some logic to – but not the dogma that came with it, that the only way for growth to occur must be through high-density living. And there is this demonisation in some public policy circles of the suburban living alternative. It’s created a black and white view of the future: that high-density is good, low-density is bad. That only high-

density is environmentally sustainable and low-density isn’t – which is rubbish. I think we need to be reminded that people are entitled to choice and the planning system we create should reflect and provide for consumer choice, not dictate choices based on ideology.

“Then there was the rise of the infrastructure levy, and the ‘per lot levy’ in particular, which grew out of the notion that ‘the user pays’, but in effect became a back door opportunity for governments to charge developers exorbitant fees, which they knew were being passed on to home owners. We had councils and public policy makers in state governments expressing their concerns about housing affordability, who were at the same time taxing the industry, knowing that those taxes were being passed on to consumers.

“Why isn’t affordability a key point of interest of the planning scheme? So that if it fails to deliver on affordability metrics, we can say the planning scheme has failed. If you were to apply that rationale to our planning schemes at the moment, it would be ‘fail, fail, fail’.

“The new Queensland Government I think recognises this, and has made some very positive early moves, but there is so much to undo and it won’t be easy and it won’t be quick.”

THE SCOREBOARD

At the core of Ross’ business philosophy is a belief that individuals or organisations should only ever focus on the outcomes, or “what makes it onto the scoreboard”.

“Focus on the outcomes that you want,” he says, “and then devise a method of getting there. If that means stepping outside of your comfort zone and doing things quite challenging or radical, then so be it.”

This attitude also helps Ross to balance work with his life outside the nine to five, which for him includes spending time at his farm in Kerry Valley and regular “expeditions” with friends to locations like Cape York, Central Australia and New Zealand.

As for the future, Ross shares that he would like to do more advocacy work in the public policy space, if the opportunity arose.

“I still have a lot to learn,” he says. “I think the moment you start thinking you’ve learnt everything there is, you should start making your own box, because you might as well crawl into the ground.” ■



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