



Sir James Irwin Presidents Medal 2007

Two blokes and their sheds

Steve Herbert and David Chapman have shaped the modern architectural character of the SouthEast in its own image

Their many fans say they've almost single-handedly changed the architectural landscape in South Australia's South East, stamping their often flamboyant style on everything from dairies and timber mills to landmark wineries and coastal holiday homes. But ask these architects what they are all about and their answer is simple. "We do sheds." "We do good sheds." "We do bloody good sheds."

It's a serious statement that goes to the heart of their style: simple structural forms made of practical and locally-sourced materials that are built according to what goes on inside. "You've got to get people away from what I call the real estate values that every week in the Sunday Mail advertise houses that are perceived as 'good-looking faces'". "Architecture's nothing about facing the street ... it's about what you live and work in."

Their work relates creatively to the local climate and character, using predominantly local stone, dolomite and plantation softwoods, not to mention big spreads of farm-style galvanised iron. But the practice is by no means confined to the local region, with their projects now having taken them from Victoria's Mornington Peninsula and western New South Wales to the Flinders Ranges and Western Australia.

Chapman worked for the Public Buildings Department while Herbert his future partner staffed the local office of an Adelaide firm. At the time both wanted the chance to go out on their own. "So we pooled our minimal resources and said let's give it five years and see what happens.

Since then they've carved a reputation as skilled all-rounders, but specialising in what they describe as "aesthetic engineering", which has been a hit in the local winery and timber industries. They're also strongly in demand for residential work, which makes up about 10 per cent of their business – "we've changed the skyline, I think, in Robe," Chapman says – and have brought the community with them on many of their architectural passions, with projects like the Mt Gambier City Hall, which they've 'turned around' to focus on the once-ignored Cave Gardens at the rear, and the iconic Eye Station. As a result, they've won significant recognition, including nine Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA) awards and commendations for landmark projects like the Balnaves Winery and Yalumba Estate, both in the Coonawarra, the Mt Gambier City Hall Redevelopment, and the Tantanoola Pulp Mill.

Mount Gambier-based Chapman Herbert Architects marked its 25th anniversary last year, a long innings for a partnership in any profession. South Australia's only regional architectural firm, it's a thriving

business with an impressive swag of awards, a reputation for “stretching the envelope”, and its own ‘branch office’ in Adelaide. But while they’ve made their mark professionally beyond their regional borders, these architects are just as renowned for their own eccentricities, and all but legend for their love of life and a good party. Leading South East politician and State Government Minister Rory McEwen, a great fan of the business and the role it’s played in the region, testifies enthusiastically to their reputation. “I’ve seen Herbert farewelling guests at midnight from someone else’s party – in the nude!” he cheerfully divulges. “They’re legends in the community.”

“They’ve made a significant contribution to the built environment of Mt Gambier, their style is now clearly stamped (on the town),” McEwen says. “The community’s got enormous respect for them, the quality of their work.” That doesn’t mean, he adds, that they haven’t been “controversial and provocative” with some of their designs.

Still, Chapman believes the regional nature of the business and smaller scope of the projects it has, therefore, dealt with has shaped the team’s style and creativity – laughing that “the last time we put a lift in a design was a hell of a long time ago!” While it’s been tough at times operating in country regions, with a smaller population, more conservative outlook, and limited pool of funds, they’ve been given surprising freedom with their designs and able to develop a range of clients in vastly different fields, from wine to timber and lobster fishing. “We’ve always felt we missed out on that glamorous (city) boom of the ‘80s when they did some glassy, glitzy, palacy things,” Chapman says. “We didn’t really see that, but neither have we seen any busts. It’s usually steady.”

One of their former employees favourite stories stems from the days of the illustriously-named South East Architects Association, a group whose annual fees were calculated purely to pay for the 12 annual extended lunch sessions. Current Housing Trust executive and former Archicentre manager David Bernard was a key member during his days in Mt Gambier and scored a rancid package of empty wine bottles and crayfish shells posted to his then Adelaide office in answer to his joking demands for a refund from the group. They later struck again with the embarrassing ‘Iron Man’ photo, of Bernard posing mockingly in exercise mode, that was sent to his office on a fax loop, repeating over and over till the 40m thermal roll finally ran out and he was brought out of a meeting to sort things out.

As personalities, Mt Gambier-born father-of-five Herbert is clearly the star of the show, gregarious, outrageous, witty and charming – “50 something going on 17” is verdict delivered more than once. Friends and clients all but gush in their enthusiasm, describing him variously as “an extrovert”, “exhibitionist”, “the life of the party”, and almost uniformly as a larrikin. “He’s never grown up and I don’t want him to,” says one. Chapman himself says he just loves coming to work, and it’s much to do with Herbert – “it’s just good fun, he’s rarely in a bad mood, he’s made life so enjoyable ...” But Herbert’s also had his tough times, having to quit architectural studies to go bricklaying for five years in his 20s to support a young family. Still, sharing one bedroom for years with his brothers helped shaped Herbert’s architectural vision. “I’m telling people to downsize, you can have a better quality of life in a smaller, more competent

environment, (rather) than this cellular approach of ‘they’re down this end, we’re up this end’, kids in separate rooms and secret enclaves.”

Chapman, who hails from Adelaide and shared a flat at the back of his parents’ home in his student days with 2004 RIAA Presidents Medallist winning architect Max Pritchard, is seen as more “sober”, “quieter”, “the steadying influence”, but it would be wrong to classify him as the typical ‘straight man’. He’s also very funny – at one point sledging Mt Gambier for its cool climes: “As they say, it rains nine months of the year and drips off the trees for the other three”. And he certainly ‘walks the talk’ on the ‘shed philosophy’, living in a stunning converted indoor tennis stadium, his five-bedroom home built out on four levels over the first court (converted to badminton status) and overlooking the second.

As his wife – who also loves the home – says: “David’s wacky in his own way”. But she declares the two partners are “like chalk and cheese. I think that’s why they’ve been so successful because they complement each other.”

The Chapman Herbert business began to find its way when it first started work with the pulp mills in Mt Gambier. “That was our first real foray into industrial processes, where we coined the phrase ‘aesthetic engineering’” Herbert says. “Because we simply became team members, along with mechanical, structural, civil, electrical, chemical engineers. The last thing they wanted to feel was that there were ‘architects’ involved, a bunch of bloody wallies who know nothing about processing, so we sat back and said we’re here to be part of the team (We) took their exposed structural and chemical forms and simply provided some colour, some texture, some light, some shade, some shadow. Brought some art to the craft.”

The boom in Australian wine then opened up more opportunities and even more creative possibilities, not just in the cellar door operations which are often as important to the brand as the wine labels themselves, but beyond. “Initially it is the sales outlet that they try to make their front door and centerpiece,” Chapman says. “But we’ve gone beyond that and tried to make the winery buildings themselves a statement.”

“We as a group don’t feel the need to take our architecture to Dubai or Shanghai or Vietnam,” he declares. “We are still happy that we’ve got a modest, manageable business ... you don’t lose sight of the end product.” Nor does he see need to relocate to Adelaide, pointing out that 50 per cent of the work done by the firm’s three-person ‘Adelaide branch’ is for regional projects. “We’ve felt no need to come back to the city to design anonymous multi-story buildings,” he says provocatively. “They’re not designed by architects, they’re designed by accountants. Anything that we do dealing with people as the main ingredient ... is the stuff you enjoy the most.”

And it’s this, their ability to inspire clients that a former employee sees as the key to their success. “If you’re looking from a worldwide architectural perspective, I wouldn’t suggest that what they do is truly

radical stuff, but I think what they are is fantastic communicators. They build incredibly good rapport with their clients.” It’s a skill he’s been able to observe on the ‘other side’, as a member of RAIA awards juries. “You see different people come in and some almost downplay what they’ve done ... Steve and David have never been that way and I think that really helps people to get excited about the projects. Herbert just has the gift of the gab, it’s unbelievable, he could sell anything I think. Chappo does it a bit more subtly ... he’s not bouncing around all over the place like Herbert but he has that inner confidence. People really really trust him.”

Asked a few years ago to label the style of one of our recently built rural structures, I had no hesitation in describing the building as being “post modern regionalist vernacular”.

Written by Andrew Vorrasi