

Mission Insights

Episode 01: Salter Builders

Transcript

MISSION ZERO

Trevor Salter / Salter Builders

So my next guest is one of the most down to earth examples of how climate action can become embedded into business and how to turn competing demands of supply chain disruption, market growth, and regulatory constraint into opportunity for communities.

Trevor Sultan is the owner of Salter Builders, a boutique family run building company in Nelson Tasman. Salter Builders has received multiple New Zealand Master Builders House of the Year awards in 2017, 2019, 2020, and most recently, July 2021.

Welcome, Trevor.

Thank you, Jodie. That's quite an amazing introduction. Hopefully we can live up to it.

When we first met, what I noticed about you is that you don't use terms like eco or sustainable or green. It's just embedded in what you do in the homes that you build. And even when I invited you to come and join me here, I acknowledged how busy you are in the construction industry is, and you said "this is what we make time for".

Tell me, how has this climate and this social value really embedded itself in your business? And what does it mean on a day to day basis, like with your staff?

Something that from an early age, actually, I was brought up in an environment where it was a fairly basic upbringing. I was always looking to up-purpose, or use things that other people would throw away. I don't know why I had this sort of unusual understanding that, like a tin can, why do we throw it in the rubbish when we mine that same material out of the ground.

So it's something that I've taken from nearly as to adulthood. And there's been a lot of situations through my building career where I've seen a lot of waste and seen a lot of opportunities where we can improve on what we do. I guess for me it's ingrained in my nature. I suppose it's always been there.

And how do you then communicate that and bring that to life through the teams that you work with?

So with my workforce, we actually focus on trying to minimize waste as much as possible. On a building site a lot of things we can do is minimize our impact. So most building sites you turn up and there's a skip out the front and it's an open invitation for everybody just to throw stuff in there.

So I sort of take people aside in the beginning and I say, look, this is what we do here as far as we don't chuck lengths of timber longer than 600 in the skip. Cardboard, we fold it up and we recycle it if you are using anything that we can, any sort of metal products, and again we'll try and recycle it.

And the benefit of doing that for our business as well as we're quite big on our team environment and taking our team out on a regular basis. So I say to them, if we can recycle this stuff and make money from it, we'll put it towards our team building and we'll go and use that to buy beers or as we're out doing something like with bowling or whatever, so they benefit from it as well. I think you've got to engage people so that there's no point telling someone to do something if there is no benefit to them.

We do find we have to remind people from time to time, but it's more other contractors that come onto our sites that tend to have to be educated. So one of the great things about construction now is when people come on to the site, they have to be inducted. So we have to have an induction process and tell them all the health and safety side of things and we can add that onto it. So we say, well, we're trying to minimize waste around here, so if you're unsure, just ask somebody.

Fantastic. And I'm thinking about even that time commitment that you're putting into your staff training, the activities or the expectations that you have. There's a cost and benefit to all of this. There are some things that you earn money from taking a positive action. There's other things that I'm sure have a cost to your business. Where do you see the cost and benefits and how do you weigh up the right opportunities from the business perspective?

Obviously, waste is expensive to get rid of and there's already a levy on construction waste. It's been identified as one of the biggest contributors to landfill. So, there are lots of things that we can do to reduce those costs because everything that goes into that bin, we pay for it once it gets dumped, right? So there's a fee just to have the bin and then it gets weighed. So once it goes over a certain amount, it costs us extra.

So the ways of saving money, there are several different things. Even something as simple as plaster board, with the jib off cuts. A lot of the jobs we do for clients are on lifestyle blocks. And here in Nelson we have a lot of clay soil, okay? So the compounds that make up the jib are actually ideal for breaking up clay soil. So we just make the suggestion to the

homeowners saying that we could put this on the skip and pay to get rid of it. Or we could stack it in a pile here and you could spread it all out and put all over the top and it will help it all break down naturally. So that's been an easy way to convince people to do that. And on the types of builds we do, that's a whole skip just saved just like that.

In the early stages, obviously we use a lot of reinforcing steel and sort of steel doesn't carry a lot of value, but it is still better to recycle it because of the weight of it. You get some money back from it. You've got to look at the benefits of as soon as it goes in that skip, you got to pay for it to be taken away. If you keep it out, you'll get some money for it, but you've also saved by not putting it in that skip.

Other things, aluminium, right? Obviously, copper and things like that, they vary quite a bit and especially if you're doing alterations, renovations, where you are exposing lots of those types of materials. So they're well worth holding onto. Certain contractors know the value of them, so plumbers don't throw copper away. Most electricians will keep their off cuts of wire because again, it can be recycled. So there are lots of benefits there.

Do you see that some of the changes of behaviour that they're either driven by change of mindset or is that the pressure from supply chains driving people's behavior?

Yeah, that's an interesting question actually. A lot of people are driven by money, obviously that's their main consideration. So if there's no benefit to some people, then it's hard to get them to do something.

The supply chain side of things now has changed the game because it is a lot harder to get a hold of things that we used to be able to get on a daily basis. So I think if you're smart enough to think about that, you've got to go, oh yeah, even this offcut is worth holding onto because this material I may not get my hands on again for some time. So yes, that has changed.

Do you see that, I guess ,climate change in generally is starting to shift the construction industry in certain ways. Like you came in with a magazine from the industry and the front page is all about climate change and the actions that are needing to be taking place now in order to reach our 2050 targets. What do you see shifting really?

Okay, so on a local level there's certain areas that have been designated by the councils that are at risk because of climate change. So I guess case in point would be a project we're doing at the moment where it is technically in a flood zone that could flood within the next 100 years. So the whole design of that building was around having to comply with those future concerns and that was sort of stipulated by the council as well. So there are areas where that is obviously front of mind for a lot of people.

Are you seeing it more in that design space or is it more in the products and materials?

It is starting to happen more. So just in the design stage, I haven't really seen a lot happen in materials at the moment.

The supply chain sort of does affect, how do I put this? People will probably focus on things locally, local supply. So I'm not sure how much that is affected by the environment at the moment, but it may be in the future.

Okay, so design I think we do need to sort of focus more on how we design houses so that we can plan for the future. Obviously there's changes in the building code in regards to adding in more insulation, making houses more energy efficient, better ventilation, things like that.

So obviously other environmental things have affected buildings, like earthquakes, which have caused a lot of strengthening consideration to be designed into houses that we weren't doing before.

But yeah, I think we've got a long way to go still with the environmental side of things. Even though it's in publications and it is front of mind, I'm still not seeing enough consideration around the subject.

Is it consideration coming from within the industry or from more your customers and the homeowners?

Yeah. So someone like yourself obviously knows what you want and you're aware of what is likely to change and that is obviously a consideration for someone like yourself. We haven't had a lot of that sort of inquiry up to this point. I think some of it has to do with the types of houses that we build. We're building high end houses for people who generally are not building in a situation where they're going to be affected by the climate so much. They're not right on the coast, low down, they're normally elevated more.

I think that's still early stages for us as a business, but I'm sure other businesses are obviously being asked that question a lot more.

If we think about the current state then, there's obviously a lot more each of us can do, but also we can do across the entire construction industry from, we're talking not just design, but into the supplies and products. Are there some things that you could recommend to even a tradie or a builder or a company here in our region that they can do tomorrow that would make a difference? That first step, at least something that gets us going.

Yeah, I think we need to simplify things. I think the industry has gone down this road where we've made things really complicated. Right? So we need to come back to simplify how we do things so that we're not being so wasteful.

And again, it goes back to the designers. If you're building a building that is actually using products, the whole product, so most things come in module sizes, so sheet sizes, for example, most common sheet sizes can be adapted to the size of rooms. So if you're smart enough, you can actually design something that has very minimal waste.

Another thing that could be taken into consideration is how the houses are orientated with use of the sun. Obviously you put a house in the right location and you orientate the house correctly and you make the most of the solar energy that you can get into the house and also keep out of the house at certain times as well, then that will have an impact on that building for the whole lifetime of the building.

And I think there's still a mistake being made by certain developers where they develop land that is in the wrong place. There's some places where they are on the south side of the hill and it's really hard to build a house that's going to be energy efficient. And we all know that the best energy is the sun. So if we can make the most of that, if you don't allow for that, then obviously your carbon footprint is going to be a lot more.

So, yeah, there's some really some really neat and interesting ways that you can do that with design. As far as maximizing the sun.

One of the things that I've been talking to our other guests about is the opportunities for collaboration and within the construction sector, have you seen much or is there much underway in terms of working together to find solutions to design problems, waste problems, any other sourcing, even supply chain type solutions?

Yeah, through my work with the Master Builders last year, we had a few working groups that brought together a lot of the local entities around here, as well as from the government, and especially the councils are pushing towards this. They've got the saying, instead of demolition, we are now going to be repurposing. Okay, so, yeah, there is a lot of that going on in the background.

I think it's more probably not so much in the grassroots of the building industry, it's more the people who are the leaders in the industry. So if I wasn't involved in the leadership of the Master Builders, then I may not have been exposed to that at this point. It really depends on what circles you're in at the moment.

What do you think would be a great way then to engage onto that grassroots level, especially when we think of in our region, we have a lot of individual builders, we've got a

lot of tradies, and we've got a lot of growth. Is there anything that you'd recommend as far as kind of the collaboration or collective communication that we can share and kind of spread that message more widely?

Yeah, I guess one idea would be to try and contact the builders through their local supply merchant, because the supply merchants have the ability to set up sort of breakfast or certain gatherings where you can bring along a key speaker who can sort of educate people on certain things that they can change that will better their business. So I think that would be the first place to focus lower down, because the merchants have a lot of sway and a lot of power over the individual builders.

Another thing too, is in the building industry in particular, to do restricted building work, we have to be licensed as building practitioners. And part of remaining licensed is you actually have to go to a certain amount of events per year to actually be able to record what they call LBP points or say, for example, we went to a lecture and we spoke about what we could do to improve the building industry here around the climate. And it went for an hour. Then you get one point. So those sort of things would be a good initiative.

Fantastic. Well, I think there's a lot of opportunity that you've identified, there is a lot that is already happening through our community, and it's a chance for us really to spread that message, to try to get that momentum. And I guess our job at Mission Zero is to help support that as much as we can.

So I really appreciate you coming and joining us in our conversation. I look forward to hearing more through your podcasts and videos to what you're up to. Yes, and we'll talk to you soon.

Thank you, Trevor.

Okay. Thanks for inviting me, Jodie. It's really good.