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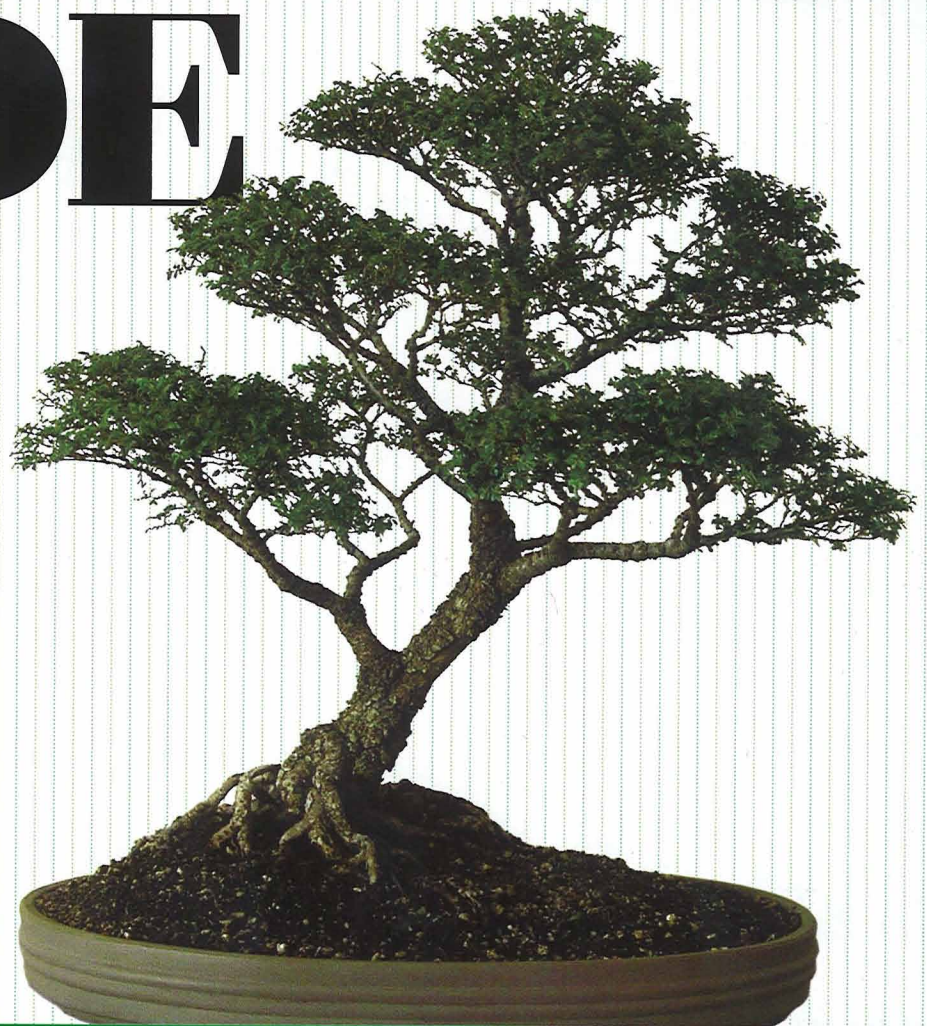
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Professions



Work in progress: Architectural firm Terroir's premises in Burnie, Tasmania

The partners agreed on the terms of the partnership agreement at the outset, with Balmforth and Reinmuth agreeing to benchmark their salaries based on Blythe's earnings – who would remain a full-time academic.

The firm's first large job was the refurbishment of Hobart's Boutique Hotel, and as the business grew it evolved towards "the creative end of the architecture business", Reinmuth says.

Awards and industry praise came quickly. The Boutique Hotel refurbishment won tourism awards, as did the first restaurant, Peppermint Bay, south of Hobart. The firm's first project in a public space – a canopy in Sydney's Rocks district – won international architecture awards.

Yet Reinmuth admits that the company's ambition to work on a diverse portfolio of projects has made growth and stability difficult.

Terroir's national workforce had grown to 25 by 2005 as its reputation spread around Australia and abroad.

Work was sometimes hard to come by, but the firm's reputation for environmental sensitivity – a product of Reinmuth's experience on historically important sites in Scotland, the firm's academic yet professional nature and its Tasmanian roots – enabled it to win enough work to get by.

"We never had an ambition to grow infinitely large," Reinmuth says.

Terroir's international reputation for sensitive design grew steadily from 2002, particularly in Scandinavia, and in 2007 the founders made plans to open an office in Copenhagen.

Reinmuth, who married a Dane, was also appointed as guest professor at Aarhus School of Architecture in Denmark.

And 10 per cent of revenue is now derived from Terroir's Copenhagen office, with six projects under design, including a \$200 million museum.

While existing projects cushioned the firm for 12 months during the global financial crisis, they have not been

ARCHITECTURE

DESIGNED TO SURVIVE

While the financial crisis meant shedding staff and taking on infrastructure projects, award-winning firm Terroir still seeks to create a unique practical and academic approach.

Report: Dan Hall

● A dearth of new design work has slashed the earnings of acclaimed Tasmanian architectural design firm Terroir, as it has for many others in the industry. However, co-founders Gerard Reinmuth, Scott Balmforth and full-time academic Richard Blythe are determined to make their unique partnership model pay off.

The firm's directors have a strict architectural philosophy, combining academic sensibility – through Blythe, head of the RMIT School of Architecture – and professional architectural practice through Reinmuth and Balmforth.

"We operate by the mantra that every building we do will be a leader in that field," Reinmuth says.

But taking the moral high ground in an industry that has had to resort to building school halls to survive has been challenging.

The three formed Terroir in 1999 after studying together at the University of Tasmania's School of Architecture in the late 1980s.

They were heavily influenced by the environmental campaign against the Gordon-below-Franklin dam on Tasmania's pristine Gordon river in 1982, which featured in Greens leader Bob Brown's rise to prominence.

"As very young people, the entire state was intensely gripped by this debate about whether to dam a wilderness area or not," Reinmuth says. "This had a profound influence on our world view."

Each of the partners had spent time lecturing in universities and they wanted to carry the forward-thinking academic approach to design through their business.

replaced by new developments, wiping about 50 per cent of earnings off the firm's bottom line.

As the crisis took its toll, non-essential staff were given the chance to "leave of their own volition". The firm's aim was to keep a core of 15 key employees.

The partners also implemented salary cuts, which are still in place as the firm recovers from the downturn.

To survive the hard times, Terroir, like many others in the industry, turned to federally funded infrastructure development work under the Rudd government's Building an Education Revolution program.

Terroir is also going through a strong phase of business development and marketing, which is something it never had to do before the financial crisis.

Reinmuth says the firm is trying to reposition itself as an adviser to councils and governments in Scandinavia and Australia that are looking for new ways of meeting growing sustainability requirements.

To support this position, the firm is taking part in the Architecture Institute of Australia's exhibition at the 2010 Venice Biennale, exhibiting a proposition for the future of Australian cities until 2050.

The work is a collaboration between Reinmuth and artist Richard Goodwin and philosopher Andrew Benjamin.

"That's very speculative, but it is thinking seriously about what Sydney might be if we didn't build as many new buildings and built between what we have now," he says.

Reinmuth says mergers and takeovers are out of the question, but strategic partnerships, both in Denmark and at home, have been embraced as the industry braces for harder times ahead.

"We're actively making strategic partnerships in Denmark, and although they came out of a practical necessity [doing business in Danish] they also opened our eyes to the fact that you can have good complementary skill sets," Reinmuth says.

Back in Australia, the firm has worked with design agency Johnson Pilton Walker on a 50-50 joint venture to create a master plan for the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

It is also partnering with John Wardle Architects in Tasmania, and the founders are considering focusing on specific firms for long-term strategic alliances. **BRW**



In a creative space: Gerard Reinmuth, above, and Maitland Bowling Club, right, designed by Terroir and opened in May



We operate by the mantra that every building we do will be a leader in that field

Gerard Reinmuth, Terroir



TERROIR'S TASMANIAN FOUNDATIONS

● Terroir director and co-founder Gerard Reinmuth counts the fight to save the wilderness area surrounding the Franklin below Gordon dam in Tasmania as a formative time in his life. He was only 11 years old when the dam on the pristine Gordon River was cancelled after one of the most important environmental campaigns in Australian history.

"The entire state was intensely gripped

by this debate about whether to dam a wilderness area," Reinmuth says.

He went on to study architecture in Hobart at the University of Tasmania in the late 1980s, where he met fellow directors and co-founders, Scott Balmforth and Richard Blythe.

"It was one of the best architecture design educations in the country at the time," he says.

After studying for a few years, he took

time off and spent a year-and-a-half travelling through Europe to see as many buildings as he could.

He finished his degree at the University of Sydney in 1996, and worked as an apprentice with the director of multi-disciplinary design agency Johnson Pilton Walker, Richard Johnson.

Leaving JPW in 1988, he worked in Edinburgh with acclaimed architect Richard Murphy, in

what he refers to as his "final apprenticeship", before co-founding his own architectural agency, Terroir.

At the time, Murphy was considered a radical, renowned for his progressive attitude towards the refurbishment of historic buildings.

"Edinburgh is a very conservative city, and he introduced a technique of refurbishing old buildings that was quite brave," Reinmuth says.

"It meant taking very large parts of

very significant heritage buildings down to make them work."

The work was in stark contrast to the Australian approach to heritage restoration, "where we were saving every plaster moulding."

He reconnected with Blythe in Hobart, and later taught a semester at the university campus in Launceston, carpooling with Blythe for the four-hour round trip there.

"In that car the practice was born," Reinmuth says.