

PROFILE

Lindsay Allen

Brisbane Steel Fabrications*



Jayne and Lindsay Allen

Steel Australia editor, Alan Marshall touches base with Operations Manager of Brisbane Steel Fabrications, Lindsay Allen about investing and integrating as a steel construction business, where the opportunities lurk and the way ahead.

AM: How and when did your company emerge? How did you become involved?

LA: Brisbane Steel Fabrications (BSF) began in January 1998 by Bruce MacLaren and Jayne Allen, both still heavily involved in the business. Bruce was a steel estimator and Jayne had many years experience in the construction industry, especially in steel fabrication. BSF's first location was a rented corrugated iron shed attached to a paint yard with a demountable office and a computer that ran off a marine inverter and car battery. In 2005, I had just sold an engineering company and they decided I needed a working holiday at BSF. I have certainly got the work since then but haven't seen much of the holidays.

AM: How has the nature of your business changed in response to industry needs?

LA: Industry needs change but the largest impact on our business was the complexity, logistics and organisational requirements of larger projects. The customer base increased to include the major commercial construction companies along with resource projects and engineering construction companies. We moved to a purpose-built 2200sqm (under crane) premises in 2003 and again in 2005 to a 4000sqm facility that we currently operate and are planning a move to a larger facility in 2009 to allow us to integrate all the parts of a steel construction business onto one site. The commercial, technical and project management and administration elements also need to expand to match the growth in turnover and broaden the skill base to manage the more complex commercial environment of the larger projects.

AM: Is the bulk of your business sourced within Queensland or beyond?

LA: Yes, the bulk of our business historically has come from the Queensland commercial and industrial sector along with resource project construction. We have successfully bid and supplied projects to NSW, Victoria and northwest Western Australia, as well as a small amount of export work.

AM: What has been the most crucial development in steel processing/manufacture over recent years?

LA: Without a doubt, the evolution of computer aided drafting/computer aided manufacture (CAD/CAM) into the steel processing equipment. On top of the basic concept of CAD/CAM available for a number of years, we are seeing the technological evolution of processing machines and software to incorporate high speed/power carbide drilling, (dry) high speed saws to name a few and improvements in the software/software and software/hardware interfaces.

AM: What new capabilities will your company's expansion provide? What new capital investment is entailed?

LA: Two years ago we started to review and improve, not only our core fabrication business, but also all of the support functions such as that erection usually included in a scope of work. Since then we have established a Sydney project office, installed a large detail drafting capability in-house along with some engineering support, a comprehensive manufacturing database and management system and purchased several equipment processing systems. We also purchased our own cranes and erection equipment and are planning the next facility to incorporate all of the above. Of special mention are the calibre, commitment and dedication of our staff. We have attracted a special team of people with complementary skills who not only worked together to identify and plan the expansion and improvements but work day to day with the equipment and systems to provide value to our customers who ultimately decide the success of our business. As we expand and optimise further we will be able to provide a full range of services for steel construction from our own resources, including detail drafting/3D modeling, structural engineering support, steel processing, fabrication, protective coating, transport and erection.

AM: What do you see as being the main drivers that will reinvigorate the steel fabricating sector in Australia?

LA: The single main driver would be to ensure local content for major resource projects. To retain a realistic proportion of the many millions of dollars currently being spent on cheap offshore fabrication, whether in conventional stick steel or modules, would give Australian industry a surge of work and

the cash boost to invest back in facilities, equipment and training within Australia. Without the medium-term surety of available projects any capital investment carries a greater risk. The second point would be to follow the world trend in the preference for steel for multi-level structures. Encouraging this trend would be particularly useful for the south-eastern states which are not geographically close to the current boom of resource projects.

AM: What do you see as being the main challenges facing the drive to get more steel in Aussie buildings?

LA: Two items really; the first being educating owners, architects, engineers and builders of the advantages a steel structure returns to them. It is refreshing to see some of the major construction companies currently seeing advantages in steel structures. The largest negative influence is the recent spike in volatility of steel manufacture and the supply chain which could introduce (perceived) reliability of supply issues. This combined with the dramatic cost increase of raw materials driving up steel pricing will unfortunately draw down on the good work done by the Australian steel industry and others to expand this market.

AM: Could you name drop some recent successful projects undertaken by your firm?

LA: My two favourite projects** are the Woolworths regional distribution centre (Watpac) at Larapinta in Brisbane and the multi-role tanker and transport hangar (MRTT) at Amberley RAAF base. The distribution centre has required about 4200 tonnes of structural steel including truss columns, truss transfer beams, multi-level steel/concrete composite floors, overlapping major construction phases and a 30-metre air bridge constructed as a one price weldment. The Amberley RAAF MRTT is a 64-metre clear-span hangar constructed from 18-metre sections to allow galvanising, along with workshops and associated buildings.

* BSF is now owned by Steel Fabrications Australia.

** Both are featured case studies on Brisbane Steel Fabrications' website at www.brisbanesteel.com.au