

EMERGING: MOUNTFORD ARCHITECTS

WITH A CARPENTER/BUILDER FOR A FATHER, BEN MOUNTFORD WENT SOMEWHAT STRAIGHT FROM THE CRIB TO THE CONSTRUCTION SITE. LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON, HE SPENT A NUMBER OF YEARS IN THE BUILDING INDUSTRY, BEFORE CARVING OUT HIS OWN NICHE IN THE ARCHITECTURE SPHERE AND ESTABLISHING MOUNTFORD ARCHITECTS IN PERTH'S INNER SUBURB OF NORTHBRIDGE. THE PRACTICE ALSO MAINTAINS A WORKING SPACE IN SURRY HILLS, SYDNEY.

/ SARA KIRBY

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You grow up quickly when you start your own practice. It changes everything," says Ben Mountford, principal and director of Mountford Architects. "You change your outlook, because you have to wear so many hats, and you become aware of all the responsibilities and connections that a project has, as well as the internal running of the business."

Since kicking off his studio, Mountford's life has changed – in some ways a lot, in other ways just a little. Growing up the son of a carpenter/builder, he spent much of his childhood around buildings, often visiting sites. "I remember being on some sites for houses by John Andrews in Palm Beach in Sydney... And just watching the construction over the school holidays. You'd see these homes come together, and they were nothing like the homes we lived in. So I picked up the bug early," he says.

Following in his father's footsteps, Mountford then worked for builders through his university years – in which he studied construction management – and, day by day, his interest in architecture grew. "I'd often wander about and question what we were doing," he says. "Your brain works quite fast when you're on sites all the time. They're long days."

After many of these long days on-site, he decided to take time off to travel, and then, with inspiration sourced from a number of international landmarks, he bit the bullet and went back to university to become an architect.

Five years later, when he was 32, Mountford took the advice of his tutors, who were always adamant about being proactive, seizing opportunities and believing that you can 'do just about anything'. And thus, Mountford Architects was born.



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Starting the practice off with projects such as tiny additions to strata developments and decks, the studio didn’t see much money in the first year. It was just enough to tide things over. Following those initial projects, however, referrals started to come in and the projects eventually got bigger.

Mountford Architects has now developed into a studio with an aesthetic that combines a regional focus with an international sensibility, and a priority on sustainable practices. Its latest projects include new homes in Attadale and Dalkeith, alterations and additions from Claremont to North Perth, and commissions outside of Hobart and in Sydney’s Northern Beaches area. Already with builds across the country, Mountford hopes to expand further interstate, and eventually work on projects overseas. He also plans to start doing small public works soon. With the studio’s growth so far, these seem like extremely plausible goals.

“I think having been a builder helped because I was never afraid of going to tender... I knew what was coming,” Mountford says. “For me, there was never this sort of ‘other world’ that I was crossing into. Despite that, I couldn’t think of a more challenging job. I mean, obviously there are more challenging jobs, but... this is up there. But we [architects] do walk into this knowing that it’s going to be quite a challenge.”

So what piece of advice could he give to those thinking about opening their own studio, despite all the difficulty? “If you start up when the economic cycle’s going well, that can help, because you’ll just get better conditions. Your first buildings are often the most important. I’ve heard architects have bought other architects’ houses that were the first ones they built, because they felt that that was the most interesting or the bravest of their designs. So those initial projects, they need a

good economic context, because they can set the standard and get you noticed.”

You also cannot underestimate a good team, he explains. A good accountant, good IT people, a good bookkeeper and a good work ecosystem are invaluable. For these are the people who will support you all the way through, and pick up the weight in the areas you aren’t qualified to or where you don’t know how.

Mountford’s team now is small, but reliable. Still comprising friends Mountford made at university, the practice is made up of three core staff who work within a multidisciplinary office, co-located with engineering company Atelier JV and landscape architect REALMstudios. The team works with these contractors as projects call for it, as well as with other architects and consultants and, on occasion, students are employed part-time. Working on residential projects allows the practice to maintain this flexibility.

As logic would go, a reliable team produces good work, and good work produces happy clients. And that’s what Mountford says he values most. “I think when you go back to a job after it’s been three or four months and you’re doing your inspections, you can catch a moment with a client that’s just very happy,” he says.

“Winning awards is fantastic, obviously, but really you’re just responding to the brief. But when the client says, ‘I’m just really happy here, I’ll never go back to something that’s not designed or built well’, that’s what it’s about. You can see that they’re thriving, as Kevin McCloud says. The children are ripping around the place or the adults are just enjoying what they’ve got and how it works, and that’s very satisfying.” **ar**

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