

GovHub sails onwards and upwards

Major building is just ahead of schedule

BY CALEB CLUFF

TALKING to veteran builder Richard Nicholson about the progress of the GovHub project, you would think the past months of COVID-19 lockdown had been a minor glitch in a well-oiled operation.

"It's going well; we're currently tracking on or just ahead of program," Nicholson says.

The director of Nicholson Construction, in partnership with Melbourne's Kane Constructions, is responsible for bringing a major addition to Ballarat's skyline in the five-storey building, which is due for completion in February 2021.

Not without its controversies, the new government office site dominates the corner of Mair Street and Armstrong Street North, its timber and glass frontages a challenge to the predominant brick and bluestone Victorian-era neighbours surrounding it - and to the yellow brick mass of the 1950s Civic Hall alongside.

Because of its modular construction - the majority of the building is designed and fabricated off-site then delivered and fixed into place - both Richard Nicholson and designing architects Stefan Mee and Luke Jarvis of John Wardle Architects say it's physically possible to see the progress of construction.

"One of the key achievements that we've had on this project is because of its innovative timber structure. Obviously Australians and Europeans have been building out of timbers for millennia, but the industry moved away from timber and it's great to see it coming back," Nicholson says.

"The partnerships we've had to create with experts in Victoria for the installation have been great. It's being installed by about 15 carpenters: three or four are from Melbourne and the rest are from Ballarat.

"It's one of the advantages timber has: while it's a lot

of effort in the manufacture of it, it can actually be installed using local labour. We achieved that here, and it's terrific."

The new GovHub has accelerated towards completion in recent months, another feature of the pre-fabricated mode of construction. The architectural firm responsible for the design, John Wardle Architects, looked to modern European construction methods in laminated beams and steel frames to ensure a swift build.

"Because of the timber construction and the modular facade, we had long lead-in times from a design and construction perspective," says architect Luke Jarvis.

"The real advantage is when it arrives on-site, it can shoot up quite quickly because it's been amplified by that off-site construction. Timber just goes up so quickly, there are none of the wet-trade delays with propping and forming up. Concrete takes 28 days to cure; this is a very clean site and it's a very quiet site.

"When the design and sequencing occurs, it means the modular component arrives on the site and that day it is installed. That has significant benefits in times like these. A lot of the prefabrication was done last year, so we've had a jump-start on this. So a lot of the job could be rolled forward because it was being made in a controlled environment.

"A lot of the energy and effort is at a desktop level: there are workshops with the facade contractors and the contractors," Jarvis says.

"A lot of time, effort and energy is around discussing and resolving the difficulties and complexities of the elements, so when it gets to site installation is relatively straightforward: trucked in, craned up and dropped into place."

Richard Nicholson says it's thrilling both for him and his carpenters to see the progress at the end of a day.



PRE-PREPARED: Some of the timber construction propped within the GovHub building. Most of the building is made off-site. **Picture: Richard Nicholson.**

"It's actually exciting," Nicholson says.

"The building is being constructed in two halves: north and south. We're now building level 4 on the northern end, that's the last of the floors to go in... when I say 'floor', that's essentially the columns and the floor plates. Level 5 will have a concrete floor because it's the where the plant room will be.

"It takes about three to four weeks and we'll have installed that whole northern end. So it goes up quite fast. Everything you see wrapped on site at the moment is finished. That will be unwrapped, sanded down and handed over. That's exciting."

The impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on construction was to a great extent negated by two elements. The first was the prefabrication, much of which had taken place in late 2019, putting the components into a storage yard to be used.

The other element was a concerted plan by the construction team and builder's unions to put together a combined approach to ensure work on the site could go ahead.

"Everyone in the community was concerned about the sort of impact it would have on all businesses and fortunately the construction industry remained an essential service," Nicholson says.

"That was a combination of the unions and employer

groups working together to convince government - well they didn't take much convincing - but give them the confidence the construction industry could manage coronavirus adequately.

"Pretty quickly we prepared management plans which consisted of additional cleaning and social distancing. They were the major components we implemented. I really have to give credit to the all the workers on site who embraced the change so quickly and thoroughly. We really haven't had a significant decrease in productivity at all."

"Responding to the pandemic is the same for all aspects of the industry," architect Stefan Mee says.

"Safety on-site is paramount, and Kane-Nicholson have responded to that, meaning the project could maintain momentum."

"Obviously it's a little less efficient, but what we've seen as architects is how it's kept moving forward surprisingly quickly.

"The amount of prefabrication, the amount of pre-planning and construction off-site, has prepared the project well for something that's unforeseen, like this."

Sustainability has been a key determinant in the GovHub building, specified by the state government as client as well as being expected by the community in general.

By avoiding the use of con-



A NEW VIEW: Looking towards Mt Warrenheip and the eastern view of the city of Ballarat from the top floor of the GovHub building. **Picture: Richard Nicholson.**

crete, the construction of the building has had less impact on the surrounds, Luke Jarvis says.

"It reduces the environmental impact on the neighbourhood," he says.

"There's much less scaffolding needed on site. Actually there's quite an interesting buzz on this site; everyone feels like they're part of something unique."

"This is the third largest mass timber building in Australia at the moment," Stefan Mee says.

"It's the largest in Victoria, and a lot of the trades involved haven't seen a timber office building of this scale. It's a shift from the labour being on-site to the labour being in factories and other places around the site, making the site a place



RISING: The Mair and Armstrong street frontages of the GovHub building as it rises alongside Civic Hall. **Picture:** Luke Jarvis, John Wardle Architects.



FROM MARKETTO GOV-HUB: a timeline of the Mair Street site in Ballarat.

Prior to the 1850s:

The land of the Wathaurong (Wadda-Warrung) people, their home for 25,000 years.

After gold discovery in 1854:

The land was, like the rest of Ballarat, mined, dug over and scoured, then left. Some of it was used as a garbage tip as it was on the edge of the city.

1860s -1930s:

Part of the Ballarat Haymarket or Market Square site. During its 70 years, the Haymarket was the centre of agricultural commerce in Ballarat, alongside some other markets in the city itself and the saleyards. It comprised a weighbridge for the sale of produce. A version of the weighbridge still exists at the rear of the current site, on Market Street.

1940s - 1950s:

The Haymarket site begins to decline following the Depression and the war. A coal briquette factory is situated at the rear, but the rail branch lines are decommissioned and the area falls into disrepair.

1953 -1956:

After years of wrangling and infighting, Ballarat City Council is granted the right to use one half of the site to build a Civic Hall. It's later expanded to build a Lower Hall.

1960s:

Demolition of much of Mair Street's Victorian-era heritage, as the City Council calls for 'progress'. Part of the progress is tearing down streets and streets of cast-iron and timber verandahs, including one on the Royal Highlander Hotel.

Early 2017:

The Victorian State Government proposes GovHub, 'a new civic heart for Ballarat', at a cost of \$100 million.

May 2019:

Work on the site is halted after the rubbish deposited 160 years earlier is uncovered during excavation. It's revealed neither the state government or the City of Ballarat bothered with a heritage assessment of the site. Valuable relics of Ballarat's past are lost to scavengers or sent to the tip.

September 2019:

The state government reveals it plans to sell the GovHub after construction. The plan is dumped after two months following reports in *The Courier*.

February 2021:

Gov Hub is expected to open



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Richard Nicholson, director, Nicholson Construction

of assembly."

"When you walk through the site," says Luke Jarvis, "the warmth and the scale of the timber and the columns, it really is unique. And the views which are framed are spectacular, back from the clock tower at Town Hall and over the city to the train station.

"You get a real feeling of what it might be like to work in this building."

Ninety per cent or greater of the GovHub building is required to be locally sourced, and John Wardle Architects

have brought just two elements from overseas: the timber and the glass, both from companies with expertise currently unavailable here.

"What's interesting is the future of timber buildings in Australia will be about local sourcing," Luke Jarvis says.

"There are some terrific factories around the country but they're not at scale yet. A project like this will help build that capacity."

For Richard Nicholson, from a long-established family of Ballarat builders, the GovHub is a high point in

his career.

"Without a doubt this is very exciting. It's with great pride that our company is involved with it. Pride from a generational aspect because my father built the Glasshouse, the State Office Buildings, on the opposite corner. I can remember climbing the tower crane on that site as a 12-year-old and to be doing another one is terrific. I must acknowledge our metropolitan partners Kane Constructions, it's 50/50 Kane and Nicholson. It's going really well."



NEW WORKPLACE: The Govhub building will house up to 1000 Victorian Government employees, including up to 600 public sector positions relocated from Melbourne. **Picture:** Luke Jarvis, John Wardle Architects.