

Q&A

MARCO CREEMERS

On the eve of the completion of Geyser, *Interior* catches up with Marco Creemers, general manager at Samson Corporation, about its long-term approach to property, efficient building practices and automated carparks.

INTERVIEW BY MICHAEL BARRETT PHOTOS BY SIMON DEVIIT

Marco, Geyser is almost finished and Samson now has a number of green buildings under its belt. What interests the company about such buildings? We've always done green buildings but in a different type of form. It's really important to us that our buildings are very efficient, and always has been, so we've always had sensors in corridors turning off lights, water sensors in bathrooms: all that sort of stuff. We've had those things for years now to keep the op-ex down. So, Green Star building is just the next stage in the evolution of what we've always been doing. For us, it just makes commercial sense. If you look at our portfolio of commercial office buildings, most of them are courtyard in type. We like people to have an outlook, and a sense of community, I guess, and plenty of fresh air and natural light. Our buildings are generally like that. In 2000, we refurbished a stock-standard building in Gillies Ave, Newmarket. For that refurbishment, we just put operable windows throughout. It's an air-conditioned building, but now you can switch it off and open the windows.

In some ways, 'green' buildings require people to adjust their behaviour – put a jumper on if you're cold, for instance – which is the substitute for the mechanical building solution. What's been an issue in our green buildings is that people don't want

to modify their behaviour; some people aren't concerned – yet – about the effect of their actions upon the environment. It's a sad fact, but it's what I've come to realise. Especially in a recession, the dollars count more than the environment. But it's a false economy; there are so many benefits from green buildings that aren't weighed up. There is plenty of research from the US and Europe that proves that green buildings add to the bottom line. If you look at our other courtyard buildings, like Axis, for instance, Site 3 or D-72, the tenants there are long term and love working in those buildings.

They are, in my experience, a pleasure to visit.

The only problem with D72 is that there isn't currently a good restaurant or café tenant, which would give it a bit of activity in the courtyard, but all-in-all, property is about location. A cool building in a good location is a good recipe.

You've had the Geyser site for some time, haven't you?

We're property investors rather than developers. Our company is quite old and we've had most, but not all, of these properties for a long time. There are six titles in total. Over a period of time, we've accumulated neighbouring sites. The buildings on those sites had basically come to an end of life. They were small and



underperforming. The land value was getting too expensive to retain them. So either we had to upgrade them or add on to them. We thought we would do a new office complex, similar to Axis, with a courtyard. There's always been quite a bit of demand for office space in Parnell. It was 1998 when I first walked on site with Andrew Patterson.

That's quite a lead time...

We had some issues. It took four years to get a resource consent.

Why was that?

The size of building. The fact that it was non-notified. The council took ages to make a decision.

I would have assumed a notified consent process would take longer. If it's non-notified do you think that makes the council more reticent in making a decision?

It puts you in the hands of bureaucrats, rather than into a political process where everyone can present their arguments and you can

rebut them. I think it took us a year to get through Auckland Traffic. They tried to make us pay for a \$2-million upgrade for an intersection, and to take responsibility for the whole neighbourhood's traffic issues.

You're either very patient or very tenacious.

Well I think you make a call, don't you. What's the best avenue to go down. Perhaps, in hindsight, we didn't make the right call then. We thought that the council would be right behind a quality building. It's hard to say that council is or not; there are so many people that you deal with.

Well, you did well to persevere.

Yes, we got the resource consent, but then we had to deal with the leases that were in place. We had a tenant that didn't want to vacate, so we said, "Ok, we'll wait until your lease expires", and we went and built Ironbank first. Geyser should have been built about six years ago.

Did the design of Geyser change during that interlude?

It did change a bit. In some parts the technology changed. The outer skin changed, but not hugely. I think there's just more computer technology that's gone into the building. A car stacker has gone in, rather than a normal car park.

There's nothing like a car stacker to make you feel as if you're visiting the future.

They have a range of benefits – they save a lot of money, they save huge amounts of power and huge amounts of the construction cost, because you need a smaller hole, and you don't have to provide full basements and supply all

the turning and manoeuvring ramps; you don't need to provide lift lobbies, you save on lighting, extraction, pumping down fresh air. And they're really safe. If you come down to the basement, you wait in a secure lobby for your car to be delivered and turned around, then you just hop in and drive away. It never gets scratched, or robbed – and every car park is disabled, so its nondiscriminatory car parking. If there's such a phrase.

There is now. So, Ironbank came first and RTA Studio designed it. You've worked with a number of architects. How do you select an architect? Tender, competition?

I think with architects you get what you get. If you put it out to competition, I don't think you normally get the best result. You don't get full commitment, unless it's a young firm really trying to cut its teeth, or a big firm, which can afford to spend the time. We look for cutting-edge architects, and then we generally test them out on a smaller building first. If you talk to RTA, you'll discover that the Ironbank that you see now wasn't the first design they presented. The first design was rejected. I think that was a bit of a shock for them. And then they came back with Ironbank as you see it today.

What was wrong with the first design?

It was a developer's building and not an investor's building.

What's the difference?

We don't sell our buildings, so we want them to continue to provide us with a good income. We want them to perform in a recession. Ironbank's not full, but it opened in the midst of a recession, and there's still a recession now.



1. Interior view showing penetration of natural light through the twin façade at Geyser, in Parnell. 2. The building's automated car stacker in action.

The timing was a little unfortunate, in that respect.

Well, it's three-quarters full and you can go around town and look at a lot of empty buildings. It's doing ok and, plus, it's in an edgy part of town. It's the highest rental in that area. You're bringing in different tenants to a fringe part of town, so that's a big challenge.

It's interesting the effect that a building like that can have on a district. K Rd has traditionally been characterful or, at least, full of characters.

Colourful, I like to call it, but it's well-located. To get in and away from there is easy. Parnell is good too, and Geyser will lease. It's been a hard one for us to show during construction; it's such a tight site, there's so much scaffolding and the façade has taken a long time to be put on the building. It's been very difficult for people to walk around it. They've had to climb ladders instead. So, when you're trying to explain things to people, you can see their eyes glazing over.

Now it's almost finished it will be easy. People will be blown away.

I see you're following the philosophy of smaller tenancies, which must fit Parnell as a boutique destination. It's not really rocket science. I think it's 86 per cent of companies in New Zealand employ six people or less. Our niche is smaller tenancies. I think our biggest tenant is around 500m². In Geyser we have one building where you can get to that level. You can also get up to 700m² if you are prepared to think outside the square and put people in different pods. Some companies are doing that in Ironbank, and it seems that the visual connection across courtyards works well for them.

Have you always been interested in efficient design?

I've always been interested in design. I'm not a designer; I'm a property manager and a valuer by education. It's experience too: I cut my teeth on the Axis Building. That was an Andrew Patterson design and, fortunately, I met Andrew when he was quite young, and I was quite young. I learnt a lot from that project. I also learnt a lot from the guys that were in that building, like John Hughes, from Martin Hughes, and his partner, Colin Martin. Like in any walk of life, you meet people along the way and you grab a bit from them.

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So with architects, then, go with what you know?

We try different ones all the time, but we'll watch what they're producing. We also like to see some evidence of commercial ability. Doing a house is quite a different thing compared to commercial work. Some architects can't cross that boundary.

There are plenty of architects in New Zealand who fall solely into the residential camp.

Maybe they never had a commercial opportunity. What we like in architects is their ability to keep evolving.

You see that with Andrew Patterson: there's a clear progression from project to project.

If you looked at Anvil and then drove across town and looked at Geysler, would you think they were done by the same guy?

Probably not.

That's what I think is quite key.

So you've got to be convinced of talent, and there needs to be a commercial imperative?

Yes, and we're not designers. Our business is investment; we want to get a return on our investment and we want buildings that have longevity. Buildings don't last forever; long-term property investment is more about land. But we'd like our buildings to last as long as they possibly can and continue to attract tenants.

You had a hotel project on the go at one stage, didn't you?

Yes, we had Stevens Lawson design an amazing hotel for us for a Grafton site. It wasn't accepted by the resource consent commissioners even though we mitigated all the issues. The commissioners didn't really have the conviction to go with our mitigated effects, because they thought the thing was too far outside the zoning allowances. The whole point of the Resource Management Act is that you can do things if you mitigate the effects. Council's planners had approved the scheme and it

was supposed to be ready for the Rugby World Cup. It was a shame that we didn't get to build that.

Undoubtedly it's disappointing to get through a big part of the process, only to be denied...

People don't like change. Ironbank had a huge number of people against it but I think if you went around the neighbourhood now, you'd find people like it. Young people love it.

Anything of significant character, these days, even the Auckland Art Gallery, which is almost universally admired now its built, will be sniped at.

If you want to do anything that's different, it's a hassle. People like Ludo Campbell-Reid are a breath of fresh air. He seems to be softening the waters, if you like, connecting internal departments... I think Ironbank is one of his favourite buildings.

He's not alone.

But it's hard; it's really hard getting those buildings up. I mean, Geysler took 12 years.

That would be a bridge too far for most. If your long-term view stretches out far enough, and your company's seems to, then fine. Most people wouldn't hang in for that long.

Our company is old; we're rational and we're careful and frugal with our money. We've been managing our buildings for a long time and we like them to be energy efficient. We try to make them good for our tenants because if our tenants' outgoings are low, and our rentals are around the market level then they'll stay. If the building is good, they'll stay. Geysler is an amazing building from the exterior but, when you're actually in the spaces, they blow you away. It's completely naturally ventilated, and it's won a Green Star innovation point for its lighting. It's the lowest energy-usage lighting ever designed in the country and it has really nice features. The rent is market rental for this kind of space in this area. The utility costs are just minimal. There are human benefits to being there. ♦



3. Geysler's twin-skin façade consists of laminated low-E glass, top-hung, frameless, manual sliding doors and laminated glass fins connecting to the operable outer skin.

FACT SHEET

Project: Geysler Building, Parnell

Building owner: Samson Corporation

Architecture: Pattersons Architects

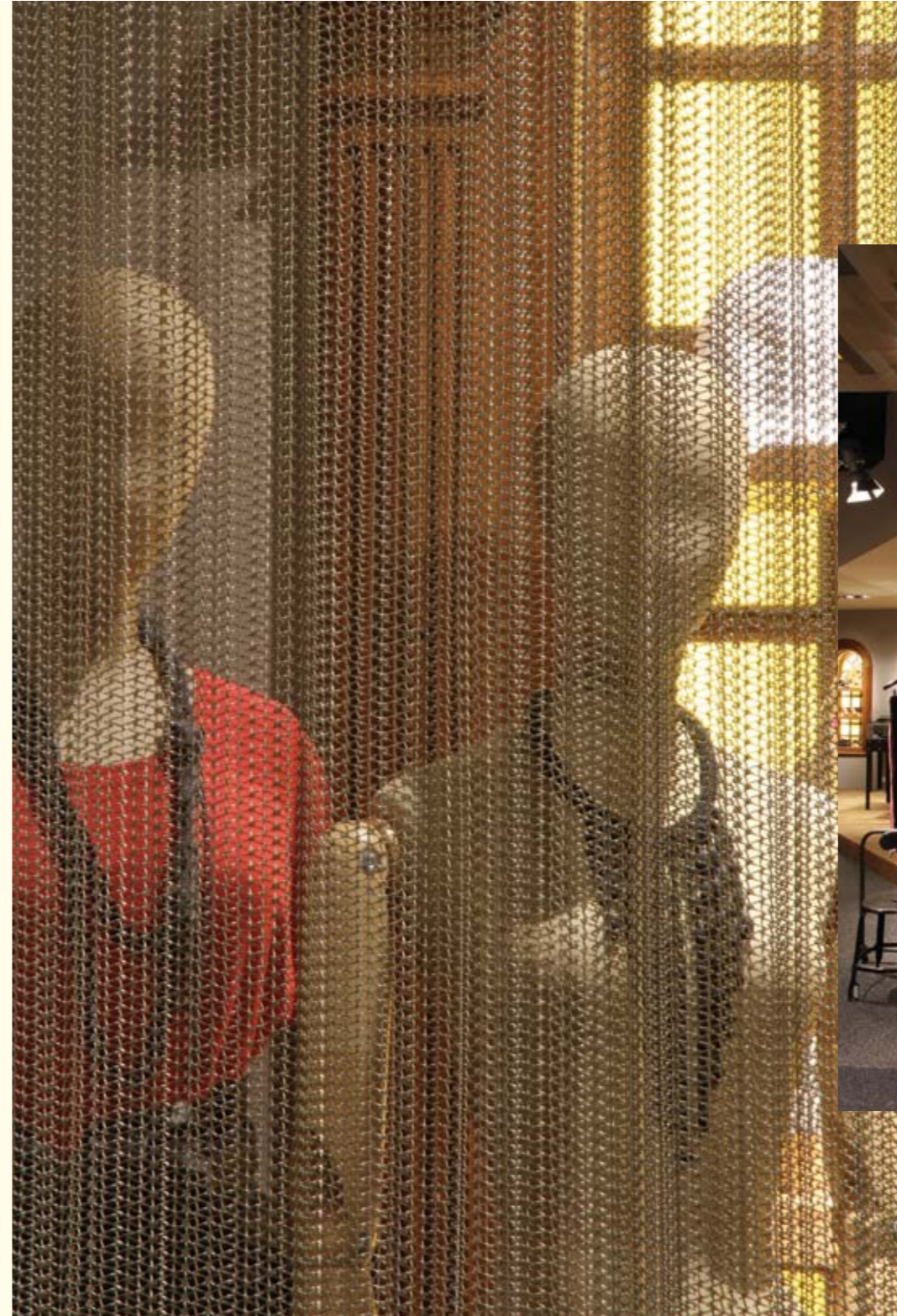
Building area: 6,200m²

Green Star rating: 6 Green Star – Office Design certified rating

Building notes: Floor plates are divided into five individual sub-buildings set around a system of atriums with pedestrian linkages. Each 'sub-building' is wrapped in a three-dimensional, semi-reflective, white twin-walled façade. Natural heating and cooling ventilation is created by way of thermal currents rising up through the void spaces between the two walls.

Lighting notes: The lighting system achieves the maximum Green Star rating of 4 points by achieving 1.39W/m² per 100lux. A first in New Zealand, 7 per cent better than the required top rating of 1.50W/m² and achieved over 100 per cent of the net lettable area.

Additional notes: Geysler is designed to use 27 per cent of the energy of a typical retail/office building of its size; it requires half the artificial lighting, uses only half the water and provides 100 per cent fresh air to occupants (as compared with the average of 25 per cent for air-conditioned buildings in New Zealand). geysler.co.nz



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