



# *Building a law firm that helps builders to build better*

*At first glance, 'Construction Legal' may not seem like the most imaginative of marques for a fledgling law firm with its sights set on disrupting the construction industry. That is, until you realise it does exactly what it says on the lid.*

Founded by principal solicitor Jessica Rippon, Construction Legal's innovative point-of-difference is their combination of tier-one legal expertise with unparalleled 'on-the-ground' engineering experience. Specifically, Jessica heads up the practice's expert legal division, and is supported equally by her co-director husband Shawn Rippon, who has 30 years of experience as a civil engineer. This inhouse 'double-barrelled' capability amounts to an embedded understanding of how major construction projects are tendered, managed and delivered, and allows them to interrogate every aspect of both a legal contract and a technical construction scope, in ways other law firms simply cannot.

While this unique dual offering might account for how Construction Legal continues to dislodge top-tier law firms as key counsel for a host of blue-chip construction companies and government clients, it is perhaps equally due to Jessica's reputation as a genuine thought leader within the industry. As part of undertaking her Masters in Construction Law, Jessica wrote a ground-breaking new thesis titled *The Solution to the Strata Living Crisis*. In it, she proposed the introduction of Decennial Liability Insurance (DLI), a much-needed reform initiative to protect consumers when their buildings are plagued with major defects, particularly if the builder is no longer around. The research paper not only went viral but paved the way for Jessica's appointment as a ministerial advisor to NSW State Government. Better yet, DLI is now being offered in NSW for the first time by Resilience Insurance.

This is just one example of the sort of approbation that Construction Legal has earned. But really, it is Jessica's determination to disrupt the industry

and drive innovation that is becoming a hallmark of the firm. In our interview with Jessica, we found out more about this very progressive law firm and its hard-working team.

How important is it to you to attract the right team that shares the firm's vision and technical excellence? And what is it that your clients value the most?

When we first hung up our shingle, our goal was simple: "Build a law firm that helped our clients become better at building. And in doing so, establish a reputation as the new go-to law firm for the construction industry."

It's absolutely vital that the lawyers we attract also value developing that extra dimension to their legal repertoire, particularly as it's a multi-faceted skill-set and a level of expertise that they gain, which is currently unparalleled elsewhere in the legal industry.

So yes, right from word-go, building the right team to realise that goal has been key. It also meant that every lawyer we've brought onboard truly grasped the major paradigm shift we were seeking to enact.

So, when you ask what our clients value most about Construction Legal, it is this unique dual offering. For example, we might often be first brought in by a client to examine or draft contractual fine print, but when we show we can also forensically analyse the literal 'nuts and bolts' of any project, they're blown away. Shawn's team and mine regularly pick up on discrepancies – the sort of oversights that could otherwise leave a client exposed to expensive litigation down the track; or conversely, now allow them to confidently pursue claims of their own. It's a truly synergistic service, and it has not only proven invaluable for our growing roster of clients but led to our firm surpassing all our own business goals, year in year out.

Your role on the NSW Government's Decennial Liability Insurance Industry advisory panel, along with Steve Mann, CEO of UDIA NSW, gives you a leadership role at the table encouraging the industry to support the market. What are the opportunities for developers and what obstacles do you see that may impact the ongoing rollout of DLI in NSW?

Big change always encounters resistance, right? Even when it's positive. One of the key obstacles that I see right now is a lack of understanding in the market about the DLI product and its many benefits. As someone who is an advocate of DLI, I am aware that it is still very new to the market. Hence the focus needs to be on educating developers on its benefits and clarifying to them the practicalities of the policy. It is for this reason that I have been championing DLI through various industry groups.

In short, I see DLI as a 'win-win' for industry, to bring back purchasers and to reduce costs. I remain confident we'll start to see mass uptake of iCIRT accreditation and DLI across the industry. Speaking to all our clients, new and old, and the industry bodies that Construction Legal often advise or host seminars for, I think there's real optimism there. There is a desire to embrace change and a positive understanding that this is something that absolutely needs to happen.

Of course, the other trend is that governments have increased their infrastructure spending. There are not only more major projects, but many of them are of a significantly larger value.

Your firm has grown rapidly, which is a testament to the quality of work that you do and the trust the firm has earned from commercial clients and government. A highlight must be winning the Australian Financial Review's 'Fast Starters' award. Where to next for the Construction Legal team?





You can see we're genuinely passionate about educating the industry. It's why we regularly conduct a range of free seminars to expand knowledge on issues such as contract disputes and resolution, legislative updates, the iCIRT accreditation process and the importance of Decennial Liability Insurance. We're also currently the only 'Equifax-accredited' law firm to educate construction players on this critical certification – that's a huge achievement for a young boutique law firm.

We aim to keep evolving and innovating. Part of that will be catering for the ever-changing workforce and the seismic emergence of AI. Like every business, legal or otherwise, we'll need to be nimble to adapt to those incoming changes and offer our clients even more as a smaller yet infinitely more agile firm.

Your team is a true representation of diversity that many seek to achieve. Can you describe the culture of Construction Legal?

I truly believe that diversity of representation amongst any organisation — whether it's the board members of a global company, or the lawyers in a boutique firm like ours — leads to diversity of ideas. Different experiences and different backgrounds will invariably foster different ways of thinking. Which, in turn, ideally results in an increased capacity to crack any sort of difficult

problem. I can proudly say that, as a woman who founded a law firm in a very male-dominated arena, such as the construction industry, having a unique perspective was a help to me and my clients, not a hindrance. So, right from word-go, I knew that building a strong culture at Construction Legal meant leaning into diversity among our employees. I think it's not only been a massive part of our success thus far, but it will continue to help us attract the right talent moving forward.

In terms of nurturing a positive professional workplace, well, it's something we take very seriously. We make an effort to extend support to every single member of our team, and offer them each the opportunity for growth, mentoring and personal development.

Importantly, our clients know all this about us. They value it, because they see it as not only rounding out our dual offering as a firm, but also informing the way we interact with (and impart ideas to) them. They love working with us, and we genuinely love working with them.

Looking back on your career at the choices you made and the success you have achieved (for example, you were recently named as a winner in the 'Top 100 Women in Construction'), if you could travel back in time and start out again, would you change anything, and if so, what?

Well, let me start by saying, I am grateful for every hard learning, every failure, every mistake. It might sound cliché, but that stuff is truly formative. It makes you a better, stronger and more balanced human being, not to mention a better lawyer in my case.

So, if I could go back in time, I would be even more confident in my abilities and know that these barriers are not insurmountable. And I regularly tell the same to any young lawyer starting out the same.

If we were meeting again in 12 months' time, what would you like to be celebrating?

I'm genuinely excited about the firm's continued growth and expansion. We continue to employ amazing new people and are seeing impressive development of our team's knowledge and skills. So, naturally, I'd like to be celebrating plans to yet again expand the footprint of Construction Legal — whether that is having a larger Sydney floor plan or expansion into other states and territories.

Beyond our business, I feel privileged to be a member of organisations like the UDIA and its subcommittee which is addressing affordable housing. Sitting around the table with such high-calibre, intelligent people, all working together to solve one of society's most wicked problems really is both an honour and a privilege, and so I aim to bring my best to the battle. ■