

Design and construction feat wins top award

By Jennie Curtin

It was a job Glenbrook builder Mark Tam won't forget in a hurry. Building a house overlooking the Kanimbla Valley, withstanding wild winds blowing across from Oberon and temperatures dropping well below zero.

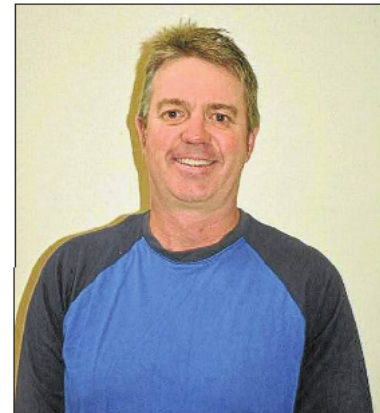
But the efforts have been rewarded with the announcement that the high-tech home of glass and concrete at Hampton, nicknamed the Invisible House, has been named 2014 House of the Year.

While the award went officially to Sydney-based firm Peter Stutchbury Architecture, Mr Tam was last week revelling in the reflected glory.

"The architect rang me on Saturday and I was on a bit of a high all day," he said.

Mr Stutchbury said Mr Tam and his crew were "fantastic".

"He'd never done something like this before



Golden opportunity: Glenbrook builder Mark Tam

In the winter, we used to get the wind from Oberon and it was like minus 12 out there.

but he was extraordinary and deserves some acknowledgement. The temperatures were from 45 in summer down to minus 10. Mark sent me a photo one day of the site covered in snow."

Mr Tam, from Dimark Constructions, readily agreed that it was not the easiest of assignments.

"There were plenty of challenges. The site was pretty remote. We were 1200 metres above sea level, which is higher than Oberon, and we got a heap of wind.

"In the winter, we used to get the wind from Oberon and it was like minus 12 out there."

It was not only the climate but the engineering which tested Mr Tam's team. The design of the house called for a wave-style roof which has a skin of water for insulation.

"This gets a reflection of the sky. On a clear day there's the illusion that it's not there," he said, explaining the "Invisible House" monicker.

Due to the remote location on Jenolan Caves Road, it was difficult to get materials on site.

"Dimark was well suited as we had to undertake a lot of the work ourselves including formwork, placement of reinforcement, placement of concrete, installation of doors and windows, and over 340 square metres of dry stack stone," Mr Tam said.

One of the major issues was heating so Mr Tam constructed a geothermal system with 60 metres of pipe running three metres underground where the temperature remains fairly constant all year. The air is pumped directly into the home, helping to withstand the extreme cold on the escarpment.

The design also called for Ned Kelly-like black steel boxes on top of the roof, which act as bedrooms and light boxes, and which also had to be built on site.

Mr Tam said it was both an extreme challenge but also a very satisfying project. "It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for any builder."

The Houses Awards are organised by Architecture Media, publisher of Houses magazine. The Invisible House was chosen from a field of more than 250 entries.

The judges said of the Invisible House: "Being (another) rural retreat with a jaw-dropping view, this project needed to convince the jury that all the moves made to create it are in harmony with its location, and that it is a great piece of architecture in its own right, and this it has."

The four-bedroom house, built for a filmmaker who wishes to remain anonymous, is now available to rent as a luxury holiday home.

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