

# Well-disciplined

'Managing the downturn' can be hard when you've just jumped from 50 to 300 staff. The MD of multi-disciplinary Atkins Ireland talks to **Colin Leopold** about green shoots in the water sector and Danish lifelines

There was much hooting and hollering last month when the newly built Samuel Beckett bridge floated down the Liffey all the way from Rotterdam. One man up in rainy Swords didn't raise an eyebrow, however. He's seen it all before, and much else besides. "We designed the East-Link bridge (back in the 80s), the steel deck for that was floated up the Liffey, and it was the exact same process, the exact same fanfare." Without a hint of bitterness or cynicism, it's not strange to hear Tom O'Malley make reference to 1960s Ireland in the same sentence as a heated discussion about current government spending.

In an industry where so much attention is given to last year's house completions or predicted output in the next quarter, it's refreshing to hear how the Lemass era kick-started much of what we now know as large-scale infrastructure and transport projects. Although now managing director (Ireland) at Europe's largest multi-disciplinary consultancy and the world's third largest global design firm, you get the feeling O'Malley still likes to think of himself as part of the small engineering practice set up by a transport planner called Paddy McCarthy in 1965. "You see Sean Lemass was trying to transform Ireland into an industrialised country," he says, as if beginning a long fireside tale. "We had infrastructure needs, so that's how the company started off, doing those quite large-scale transport studies sometimes taking in four or five counties. They led on to more specific studies – 'How does improving the Dublin-Galway route affect Longford?' and so on. So you'd be looking at options, inner relief routes and such." This first era of engineering consultancy gave birth to Ireland's highway scheme, the need for detailed drawings, specifications and building quantities which firms such as McCarthy's would put out to tender and contractors would price. By the 70s a few other companies had started doing the same. After the roads came the bridges and much later the tolling stations and other add-ons, along with project management for O'Malley on jobs such as the Dublin-Cork gas pipeline and Ireland-Scotland gas interconnector.

But as O'Malley tells it McCarthy's steady growth throughout the 70s and 80s soon came to a head in the 90s (as it did for many consultants during the boom years). Legislative requirements, impact assessments and demand from clients for a one-stop solution created a fork in the road which in truth many engineers are still trying to find their way past. "We were about 50 people so it was getting harder and harder to cover all the bases. So we started to seriously look around at where we were going. And there was only two ways to really do it: you could either downsize and become really niche or you needed to become a good bit bigger

and have a multi-disciplinary range of skills." O'Malley went from 50 staff to 300 and now oversees an architectural division, an M&E division, building services, building structures, water and environmental divisions. But he is keen to stress that the link-up with Atkins was on his terms. "We'd had a number of successful JVs with them and they're nearly twice as big as anyone else in the UK and even in architecture – which they wouldn't be renowned for – they'd have 400 or 500 architects in the UK. The move allowed us to become a one-stop shop. We did the M1 motorway, from Balbriggan to the Boyne, but then the NRA wanted to put a toll facility onto it so we had our architects design that, and we brought in one or two of the toll specialists from the UK. You need to be able to do that."

Although O'Malley admits there is now a slight move away from the large multi-disciplinary set-ups as work has become thinner on the ground, he is confident that when things pick up it's organisations like his own that will be the first to benefit. "The last two years have become quite difficult," he says, leaning back in a rather clinical boardroom on the edge of north Dublin. "We're seeing guys concentrating on niche areas again. In the old days going back about 30 years, a lot of engineers would have described themselves as civil engineers and would have been able to do a lot of things – they were very much multi-tasking. But as time has gone on, everyone has had to be more specialised. But I think in the long-term it is going to be multi-disciplined; large multi-disciplined companies or small niche operators." Nevertheless, big, complicated projects aren't going away. Although there is a danger in scaling up (especially for contractors) to meet the demands of clients –

"Ireland is still a small country" – O'Malley has been thrown a few lifelines from Atkins offices in Denmark and the UK. "What we're really trying to do is to manage the downturn at the moment, I'd say we're doing reasonably well, selling our services to other Atkins offices outside of Ireland – in the UK, in Denmark and in the Middle East. They all have their own problems too but nevertheless that's helped us to manage. Strategically we're trying to ensure we keep all our core capabilities in these areas, keeping them intact. So when things pick up we will still be able to offer the same service to our clients."

When things do "pick up", says O'Malley, water and the environment both driven by EU legislation will be two of the key areas for those who survive. Although he joins most of the industry in calling on the government to invest more in Ireland's infrastructure – "There are projects that could proceed with the design which is relatively inexpensive" – he does like working the government as a client. "They are flexible. Problems always arise on projects and you can sit down and deal with them." Although he's currently in charge of over a €1 billion's worth of roads schemes in the form of the M50, N6 Ballinasloe to Galway and the N7, there is also water-metering for over 13 local authorities – an area which bodes well for the future, he says. "Eventually I think companies will have to get used to slower pace of growth than in the 90s. I would see people relying a lot more on organic growth where you can control it, but we're well placed now, that's part of the process – you do something small and then you watch it grow into something significant." ■

## SPOTLIGHT

### Value engineering

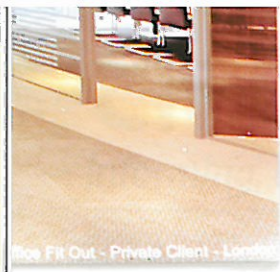
The rise in design and build has been good to Atkins Ireland. Value engineering and identifying design solutions with contractors can have its problems but it's been a priceless tool over the past two years, says O'Malley. "It's an area where you can save money for a contractor and we've done that and we've redesigned parts of schemes. The client would put out a specimen design and it's approved and we've been able to make some significant changes and even going back to get it re-approved. From our perspective it's a lot of design solutions. Contractors would come up with different materials and if we can use them then that's good. We've have changed layouts of interchanges and things like that."

Recent Atkins projects such as the Malahide Community School have benefited from efficient low-cost solutions but is there a risk to the architectural merit of many public schemes built during these tougher times? "I think that's a challenge for the designers. The Department of Education is clearly trying to save money and keep costs down and we came up with a really low-cost solution. We did spend money but only in particular areas, we took a lot of advantage of the layout of the school – natural light, internal courtyard. You can do a lot of that. You really can pare down your costs, it's a matter of where you spend the extra money – that's just a challenge for designers, they have to live in the real world."



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