



DON PARRY

CEO - TGM Group

Interview by Rowena Robertson

RR: Could you give me a bit of background about your company and its development up to the present?

DP: Like most companies we've been the product of a whole series of mergers and acquisitions. In 1929 there was a company called Thoms Limited in Geelong, and they were essentially surveyors. The name TGM derives from Thoms Gibcus McGrath, [which was named for] three of the very early founders of different companies that subsequently merged. We had a significant presence in Ballarat and Geelong and a small exposure in Melbourne, which was essentially a structural and municipal engineering practice.

A series of intervening mergers [occurred]; the big merger came in 2007 when what was then called TGM Pty Ltd merged with Parry, Fraser & Jones Pty. Ltd. That merger nearly doubled the size of the company; it went from about 65 to 130 people. It basically changed the company from what was a regional-centric consultancy group to very much a Melbourne-based group; the Parry, Fraser & Jones component of the merger had a large Melbourne-centric practice. The structural engineering group had grown somewhat out of the old TGM companies. So in 2007 what we sit with now [was created], which is essentially surveying, civil engineering, structural engineering and town planning. Probably a good half of our work is in land development, and that's across those three offices.

RR: Could you give me some more details about the kind of services you provide?

DP: It's pretty eclectic across the group. Melbourne has the three main tranches of the practice, which is civil engineering, structural engineering and surveying. The civil engineering component of the business is very much focussed on land development, but we have expanded into government and infrastructure works. The surveying part of the Melbourne practice has been very much the same – we're involved very heavily in land development; we work for a lot of big top-end development clients – Mirvac, Stockland, VicUrban, companies like that. We don't have any town planners here in the Melbourne office, but we have a significant structural engineering practice. That structural engineering practice has grown from what was essentially a practice that was involved in top-end architectural design type work to now being involved in a lot of heavy industrial and commercial work. We pride ourselves on the fact that we've got real expertise in a couple of quite specialist areas, one of which is the dairy industry, which is really expanding exponentially both here and particularly in New Zealand. We're breaking into other specialised structural engineering fields such as food processing and medical facilities.

RR: The team at TGM represents a mix of technical expertise, consulting skills and knowledge of particular regions. How have you gone about building a team that encompasses this range of abilities?

DP: We've become really good at building consulting teams, and I personally have come out of an environment working with big developers, in particular, who put together consulting teams that might have traffic engineers and structural engineers, strategic planners, landscape architects, architects – the whole gamut. We did a lot of work for Mirvac down at Docklands, for example, and it was a range of work from high-rise buildings to \$5 million three-storey walk up apartments on the riverfront. So a lot of us have come out of a business that's very much involved in consultant teams, and we've taken that sort of philosophy back into our own business. Even though we have three separate offices, the first thing we do when we get a project that we need to tender on is get guys from all over the place to sit down here and we build a team of people. We don't treat it as if it's just a Melbourne job or a Ballarat job or a Geelong job; we say 'what's the best team we can put together on this particular project?'. And one of the reasons that's driven our decision to merge with other companies and to acquire other businesses is to expand our base skill set. We got into the town planning business a few years ago – we don't have a big team of town planners, but we've got enough to provide support to our key clients.

RR: What have been some key projects for TGM?

DP: Probably one of the key ones we've got at the moment, insofar as how it relates to our strategic plan, is what's called the NVIRP – Northern Victoria Irrigation Replacement Project. We're providing engineering design advice services to the main construction contractor. We're probably halfway through the first stage of that; we're currently tendering the second stage of it, and it's going really well at the moment.

In structural engineering we're working with several large dairy processing companies. We've just recently completed a project in Warrnambool; we're currently working on another facility at Leongatha, so again it's big, heavy, industrial structural engineering design work, which ticks all the boxes for our strategic plan.

One of the other specialist niches that we're in is structural engineering in the security industry. We do a lot of work for Armaguard, designing secure buildings for them – money counting facilities and depots for their trucks, for example. A really left-field type of discipline to be in, but one that we consider important, and Armaguard are a great client of ours.

RR: Are there any other important areas in terms of your strategic direction?

DP: Our strategic plan for the next five years has several components. The three main strategic goals are to preserve our core business; expand our capabilities and presence in the infrastructure sector and further develop our specialist skills. We are currently involved in the design of several retirement villages. It's another growth industry – with an ageing population, more and more retirement villages being built, and a lot of our traditional land development clients have got into that sort of market and we've followed them into it. Again that's another slightly specialised field.

RR: Finally, how do you feel your early career experiences have informed your management style?

DP: The first thing you've got to be is honest to yourself. You are who you are, you've got a certain personality, you've got a certain way of



doing things, and to try to be something other than that is never going to work. You also have to be honest with the people you're dealing with. I've been in this caper for 35 years or so – I haven't moved around a heck of a lot – I set up my own company in 1987, so I've really only worked for three companies in 35 years. I haven't observed a lot of other people up close as to how their management styles are. But I've worked for a lot of guys who I thought were creeps, and a lot of blokes who I thought were fantastic ... I learnt a lot from both the good ones and the bad ones ... I think the most important thing you can do is analyse the successes and the failures, and to learn from them. The old adage "only a fool ever makes the same mistake twice" is a pretty good one.

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