



Len McSaveney

Change Insurgent

With specialty concretes the focus of this issue, it seems appropriate to profile a man who has been actively involved in helping to develop the demand for these new technologies. Golden Bay Cement's Market Development Manager, Len McSaveney, talked to Alison Bartley about his "passion for concrete" and his enthusiasm for innovation.

"Change Insurgent" is one of those terms from the 1990s business culture. It's a term coined, one imagines, to encourage the corporate world to celebrate, rather than fear, the rebel; to celebrate the lateral mind, the person who can "think outside the square." In the knowledge age, these "change insurgents" are the people who are going to lead us to the new frontiers of new products and new business.

Change insurgent is an unofficial role Len McSaveney has held in his various market development roles for over a decade in Fletcher Concrete & Infrastructure. The connotations of insurgency may seem somewhat at odds with the image presented by this well-groomed and polite man. But then jargon is no respecter of convention and this quiet man, who gets his "biggest buzz" from developing new ideas and products and arguing the case for new technology, fits the bill as leader of the cause.

And change of course does not have to be revolutionary or distressing. Often it's simply a matter of doing things better, finding ways to overcome the obstacles that cement and concrete encounter in the market place, finding solutions to problems.

One of Len's proudest achievements is his invention of the concrete power poles which are steadily replacing timber poles throughout the country. "I've got patents in that area and Stresscrete have developed products based on those patents. We've also licensed that technology in a number of countries. All new large power poles are concrete – the world is running out of large trees," he notes wryly.

Many of the break-throughs and new developments that the cement and concrete industry has seen in recent years have come as a result of the special concretes we are examining in this issue. Len is working with all these special concretes – from the lightweight concretes to fibre concretes – to develop new uses for cement and concrete and to see them applied to new products. From power poles to water storage reservoirs to motorway sound barriers or new bridge technologies, Len is constantly looking for new opportunities to grow the market for the industry.

Self-compacting concretes, without the noise of vibration, allow for pours at any time of day or night. The quality of finish which SCC can produce eliminates the problem of poor workmanship. Similarly, exciting new opportunities are emerging with lightweight concrete, which has long interested the Canterbury engineer. One of the barriers to expansion is the current need to import the aggregate from California. "It could be made here but the plant to make it is quite expensive. It is something I'm keen on and the production costs are coming down and there are new applications for lightweight concrete being developed all the time. So I haven't given up on it yet."

Although these special concretes still mainly occupy niche markets – "they're being used mainly by pioneers who are developing new uses and new products based on them" – Len is resigned to the reality that the development of new processes and products takes time and patience. Not everyone in this world is excited by change but that's something about which he is philosophical. "We need all types of people. We need the maintainers as well as the innovators," he says.

Take motorway sound barriers for example. Anyone who's been to Melbourne recently will have noticed them on the drive from the airport to the city. But New Zealand is lagging behind in adopting them Len says. "It's a bit like median barriers. New Zealand took a while to catch up with the rest of the world there. The use of sound barriers is growing overseas and it should be here too. But there's resistance from motorway owners – they're just postponing the cost for a while." Len believes they will become common here in time.

"With any technology, there are a few early adopters and there's lots of resistance for a while. Then inevitably the technology becomes universally adopted and people wonder why it took so long to change."

Len is optimistic about the future for the cement and concrete industry but says there's no room for complacency about the need to grow the market. While there are obviously lots of opportunities

for concrete roads in New Zealand, and Len believes they will happen eventually given their proven experience in Australia and elsewhere, they are “a bit of a gamble as they are always at the whim of Treasury”.

Housing is another area where Len thinks there's still plenty of room for growth. “There are new systems in the market now for precast and masonry houses and these will take off,” he says. “While a lack of skills with concrete amongst builders in the residential sector is limiting growth now, there will be growth particularly in the town-house and apartment segment of the market.”

And there's no doubt, he says, that concrete houses offer great advantages. As a young engineer working for a precast company in Blenheim, Len built his own concrete home. “It was very warm and quiet. We lived near the Omaka aerodrome and there was a lot of skydiving there but inside the house you couldn't hear the planes.”

Len, who had grown up in Christchurch, went to Blenheim on his return from Canada in 1974. A working holiday a few years after his graduation from Canterbury University with a degree in civil engineering had turned to a six-year sojourn when romance led to marriage to a Canadian. His first job in Canada was in the oil industry in Alberta where he was involved in designing engineering solutions to the problems associated with oil and gas exploration in the Arctic. His career with concrete began when he joined a precast factory in Toronto. At that stage it was a small family business, but was transformed into a big corporation run from Connecticut when it was taken over by the Stanley Tool Corporation. The job wasn't the same then and Len, his wife and Canadian-born son returned to New Zealand. He looked for a similar job “in a small concrete business where he could get a shareholding”.

A second son was born in Blenheim and the family appeared settled but in 1980 Stresscrete made the company an offer which was “too good to refuse”. Len was persuaded to move to Auckland where he became the chief engineer for Firth Stresscrete – a job which lasted 12 years.

The position involved working with customers and their consultants to develop innovative, cost-effective precast building alternatives in New Zealand, Guam and Hawaii. The skills and focus developed led directly to the market development roles he has held since 1992.

As Market Development Manager at Golden Bay Cement since last year and previously at Stresscrete and Firth Industries, Len has been responsible for “ensuring that Fletcher Concrete & Infrastructure Ltd have the materials, processes and skills to meet the construction industry's changing needs.” The role has also involved “ensuring that FC&I are not surprised by research findings, changes in Codes or Standards, or by overseas technology”.

It's all about being open to change, open to new ideas and keeping up with the play. And that's the work that excites Len. He does a lot of reading about what's happening globally with concrete, he travels to overseas conferences regularly (primarily through his role as New Zealand's representative on the International Federation for Structural Concrete (fib) and he maintains contacts with concrete organisations around the world. He is also an adviser, funder and business opportunity mentor to engineering students at Masters and PhD level – a role which

keeps him in touch with some of the brightest and most innovative young minds in the engineering field.

Despite resistance to change in some quarters, New Zealand is a world leader with earthquake-resistant precast concrete construction, which is Len's main area of expertise. New Zealand, through Len, is making a strong contribution to a state-of-the-art book being developed by the seismic commission of the fib on earthquake-resistant precast concrete construction.

Ironically when Len embarked on a Business Diploma in New Ventures Management at Auckland University in the 1990s, the concrete industry was used by the lecturer as an example of an industry resistant to innovation. Len was able to convince him that that's not the case.

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