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Surprises Were Never Shocks at Complex Construction at Mercers Walk

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Summary

As a family-owned business, Osborne aims to be an environment in which its people and projects both thrive. Its project successes have helped it become a leading UK contractor. When it took on the complicated and highly visible project at Mercers Walk, it made sure to put the right manager with the right experience in charge. He chose Powerproject to manage programme and progress, which helped him to bring it to an early and successful completion, adding measurable value to both the contract and the client in the process.

The £22m development at Mercers Walk, Covent Garden was described as 'fiendishly difficult' by the Chartered Institute of Building. It involved multiple buildings, including the refurbishment of an old warehouse at 13/14 Langley Street into a retail store, three mixed-use blocks that included 24 residential apartments, plus restaurant and retail units at ground and basement levels. Located in the heart of a busy retail, leisure, tourism and commercial area of London, the needs of a very broad range of stakeholders were considered throughout.

Senior Project Manager, Gerry Lavelle, was responsible for overseeing the

team, client and stakeholder liaison, and project reporting. His 40 years of experience were put to work, and his finesse in keeping this complex project under control won him a Gold medal in the 2017 Construction Manager of the Year Awards.

Simplifying complexity

Managing this project was always going to be a complex task requiring great care. Potentially, compensation penalties were at stake if local businesses were compromised, and the timescales were tight. From the outset,

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Gerry sought ways to de-risk wherever possible. His experience suggested to him that it might be possible to simplify some of the plans. "The one thing about Powerproject is that it's a very easily understood visual" he said.

As part of the project, the team had to take possession of an area that was used by a high-end restaurant, providing them with temporary space, whilst building their new space inside a listed building. Timing was critical, and Gerry was concerned that the original design created too much risk, and could create a cascade failure. Therefore, he decided to present alternatives: "Using Powerproject, I was able to show the intricate balance of relationships between the decant, the decant back, and the vacation of the listed building. We presented the case to the client for making it simpler, simplifying the structure of the building, so we could take that building off the critical path. Using the software, I was able to show

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was more secure, and less risky, to take the entire wall down and rebuild it. I could show that this option was easier to programme, and faster to complete, than leaving the wall in situ. It helped me reinforce my ambition to complete early. The architect then produced an elevation drawing that further proved that we would need to spend more time, more money, and risk contingency, just to retain 14% of a wall."

Archaeological surprises

Groundwork design was delayed due to the need to demolish existing buildings before survey. When it was carried out it revealed areas of archaeological interest, as is often the case in urban London developments. Two of the critical programme areas appeared to feature old walls and mediaeval cesspits which attracted immediate interest from the Museum of London Archaeology (MOLA). As the MOLA team arrived to start searching for 17th century ruins in the ground which a glass pavilion was to occupy, a risk of a six-week delay arose. It was overcome by designing a suspended ground floor slab to span the site, and reprogramming around that change.

No matter what changes the team encountered they were able to keep the programme running smoothly. Gerry believed that this was due to the thorough programme base they had in place: "Whenever there were changes it was easy to edit and improve the programme without having to destroy the intent – it was correction, not reconstruction. Because it was such a detailed programme we were able to just make little tactical corrections rather than major changes. Our understanding of basic complexities was so well captured that the surprises were never shocks."

how we could deliver it early, and create a retail opportunity by doing so."

Spotting opportunity

Gerry spotted the potential for the client to start gaining revenue earlier than planned under the original design. He explained: "I saw from the outset of planning this project that I could create an opportunity for an early completion of the warehouse building at Langley Street to allow a retail fit-out to take place before the planned contract completion."

He was given the chance to execute this when the client secured a major retail brand as the tenant for the warehouse

building; Osborne accepted a £1.5m variation and had a new sectional completion target to make the building fully ready for retail occupation ten weeks before the rest of the development.

Retention or demolition

One of the challenges to early completion was the intent to retain part of one gable end wall of the Langley Street warehouse. Located in a conservation area, the architect wanted to retain as much of this as possible, but experience suggested to Gerry that the risks and costs might outweigh the benefits. He outlined that "Using Powerproject I could prove it

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During construction, Gerry worked with a team of seven colleagues who each had access to the Powerproject programme. He often worked remotely but found it easy to exchange information about the programme when issues arose, and get the buy-in of different package managers. Managing changes seemed simple: "The programme you start with is not necessarily the one you finish with. With Powerproject I could take on board delays and other things that affected the original programme, and re-programme very quickly, very easily, and get input from individual managers to make the whole picture come together."

He believes that the choice of software plays a significant role: "Powerproject is the programme planning brand everyone is familiar with. Because it's simple to use, and widely understood, it makes it easier for me to work with everyone."

Collaborative success

The programme for Mercers Walk was collaborative from the start of the bid process in 2014. Gerry related: "We constructed the programme with supply chain input right from the start. It wasn't just Osborne but a collaboration with the design team and sub-contractors. We could separate out information requests, procurement requests, all using the

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basic programme. It wasn't just a build programme but a design, buy and sub-contractor input programme."

"It wasn't necessarily perfect but, due to this collaborative input, I knew what all the early pressure points would be, and I could take corrective action or re-programme to cope with the effects of them" he continued.

There is no doubt in Gerry's mind that such complete collaboration contributed to the success of the project: "It was a pleasure to manage. Everyone had plenty of chance to input, and make corrections. The programme was something everyone believed in because they all had a part in constructing it."

Early completion

The final programme featured more than 1100 activity lines. Despite its challenges, changes and surprises, the project was handed over on budget, and ahead of both the target and contract schedule, ensuring not only that the retail units were ready for the critical pre-Christmas trading period, but meeting all the deliverables for the

neighbouring businesses.

Gerry believes that the software had an integral role to play, saying: "Despite a very intricate programme, I always had at my fingertips up-to-date information that was no more than a day adrift in real time. It helped us control the construction of 24 apartments, the rebuilds, and all the refurbishment. The software enabled me to separate out the aspects people needed and just give them relevant information, rather than all 16 pages of the programme. It allowed us to hide what wasn't relevant, showing what was, break it into manageable pieces, and just get on and build it."

He added: "I couldn't have managed this project without Powerproject because I feel so comfortable and relaxed using it. Because I was going to be the instrument of success, I needed a tool I understood and could use to show my ideas to others."

The client's high satisfaction has since been proven through the award of a further six contracts. As an industry veteran, Gerry was clearly the perfect custodian for such a tricky project, and a worthy award-winner. "This project has been one of the best experiences of my life, and one am rightly proud of" he finished "although, it seems to have taken me 40 years to become an overnight success."

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