



Project manager between 'Rock' and a hard place

GARTH PALMER likes a challenge. As a director of Impact Project Management, he's been co-ordinating the team of contractors and designers charged with building "The Rock", Wellington Airport's new international terminal – the final stage of a \$60 million development project.

Impact was appointed project director in 2005, when The Rock was barely a gleam in the architects' eyes.

The copper-clad terminal had to be built while the airport remained open 24/7, making the project one of the most difficult Mr Palmer has been involved with.

"When you've got an operational airport, the complexity just increases 10 times. You have to keep the government agencies all operating, and the last flights come in at midnight and the first flights are off at 6.15am. Sometimes, we've had a window of opportunity to build things of literally six hours."

Keeping the airport up and running while construction work went on was difficult enough. Add a constantly changing airport environment, with changes to airlines and their schedules, increases in border security and new restrictions on carrying liquids, aerosols and gels, and the task was even more complex.

Mr Palmer says much of Impact's role came down to managing the constant change – and communicating that from the airport to the consultants and contractors – even if that had to be by email at 4am.

"When it's a case of things like the liquids, aerosols and gels law change, you have to change immediately. If you don't change, there are government agencies that can say 'stop, we are not disembarking this aircraft because your security requirements aren't up to standard'."

The project came with plenty of sleepless nights for everyone involved.

"It's not just people in management. It's [also] the guy who's on the tools who has to finish an area by 5.15am because aviation security will be coming through to do a

sweep of the space before an aircraft goes out."

The Rock has been completed on budget and only a couple of months later than planned. Wellington Airport's brief to create an edgy, memorable building and the architects' design of a multi-angled roofline and a dodecahedron-like wood-panelled interior meant there were challenges all along the line.

By the time the building was completed, contractors had installed 13 tonnes of copper, poured 2500 cubic metres of concrete and put up 65 kilometres of timber. Around 200 people worked on the project, including some who travelled from Switzerland to advise on the installation of the copper used on the outer shell.

Mr Palmer says getting contractor Mainzeal involved from an early stage was key to the project's success. "We were sitting with the designers for about nine months prior to starting on site, constantly reviewing, constantly looking at different ways to do things."

To work out how to actually build the design, Mainzeal constructed a full-scale mock-up of a section of the building in a warehouse on the western side of the runway. Mr Palmer is aware that working as a project manager or project director wouldn't be everyone's cup of tea. In fact the term, "logistical nightmare" comes to mind. He says anyone considering a career in the field has to be passionate about the work, as well as being a good organiser and a good communicator.

"You have to enjoy working with people, and you have to accept a lot of stress. If you want a job where you go home at five o'clock and forget about work, then this is not the job for you. If you don't actually personally worry about your project, then you are likely to make mistakes, you are likely to make decisions that just aren't in the best interests of the project. You actually have to take it personally, and it's a fine line between worrying yourself to death and keeping it personal."



He will never walk around the new terminal as an objective observer like other passengers.

“There are a whole lot of areas that I look at and say, ‘trying to resolve that issue was just absolutely painful’. You come through the airport with your family and you’re about to take a flight out and they’re just walking around like this is just another project and you’ve spent four years of your life, putting blood, sweat and tears into it.”

Mr Palmer has also had to be prepared for controversy. Wellington Airport wanted the new terminal to polarise opinion – and it did. The morning an illustration of the design, pictured in bright orange and headlined, “Airport or pumpkin patch?” appeared in *The Dominion Post*, Mr Palmer was helping out at a school camp.

“I’m sitting around the breakfast table and all these people were looking at it and every one of them thought it looked terrible. They didn’t know I was involved. I did mention it later. Well, quite a bit later.”

Despite it all, though, Mr Palmer is full of enthusiasm about working for Wellington Airport.

“They are lean, decisive and loyal and I would say just about everyone who has survived this project, and has performed, would walk over broken glass to do another project for [them].”

Mr Palmer, a Wellingtonian, moved to Australia with his parents when he was 15, and went on to study construction

management at the Queensland University of Technology. After qualifying, he worked on some of the large-scale 1980s developments in southeast Queensland, including the 40-storey Central Plaza in Brisbane and the billion-dollar Hope Island resort.

The competitive Australian market, and the chance to be involved in such large-scale projects, gave Mr Palmer a good grounding for returning to Wellington in 1992, where he worked on the construction of Te Papa, before setting up Impact Project Management in 1999.

His next major project will be guiding the \$53m refurbishment of the National Library, aimed at increasing the building’s capacity so it can accommodate collections up to the year 2030.

Eighty per cent of the nation’s most precious documents will remain in the building during the redevelopment, and Mr Palmer is keenly aware of the need to protect them from the dust and vibration inevitable in a major construction project, as well as heading off the risk of fire or water damage. It will be as hard as the international terminal, he says.

“But the beauty of what I do is that the job is different literally every day.”

**For more information go to: impactpm.co.nz
 Wellington Airport will hold a public open morning tomorrow, from 9am to noon with behind-the-scenes tours of The Rock.**

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GARTH PALMER. PROJECT MANAGER





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Rocky road: Garth Palmer says four years of blood, sweat and tears went into the Wellington Airport project.

Photo: JOHN NICHOLSON