

SME

Building dreams

Prime Structures Engineering prides itself on materialising the lofty dreams of architects - at an accessible rate.

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15 December 2015

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Mr Bensily with daughter, Julia. The biggest project that Prime Structures is working on currently is a casino resort in Manila, comprising a glass dome which is 100m in diameter and 33m high to house an indoor beach.

ONE of the most photographed backdrops in Singapore has to be the visually arresting Marina Bay Sands SkyPark, with its unmistakable ship-like platform floating on top of the three hotel towers overlooking the city.

Such an enormous and complex structure required a building and construction firm that could rise up to the challenge, and that was exactly what local company Prime Structures Engineering did.

"This was 57 stories up without any scaffolding, so we had to devise a special platform that could support the people below. The concept was given by the client, but we made it a working design. That

was the most prestigious job that prepared us to venture overseas," describes Sonny Bensily, chief executive and founder of Prime Structures.

The successful completion of the high-profile project launched Prime Structures into the public eye. Many other high-profile projects - both local and abroad - have since followed.

Finding a niche

Mr Bensily started Prime Structures Engineering 20 years ago, growing it from a small startup to what it is today. Both his wife Diana and daughter Julia are also part of the family business, taking on the role of financial controller and business development executive respectively.

For the first 15 years, the company's focus was mainly in Singapore, and their work consisted of building envelope structures, which refers to the "skin" of buildings.

"When we first started, we did more brick-and-mortar projects. But over time, we started getting noticed for our niche projects (such as MBS) which started taking up a bigger percentage of our revenue. Right now, such special projects makes up 80 per cent, while brick-and-mortar is 20 per cent. Previously, it was the inverse," explains Mr Bensily.

Niche projects require specialised know-how and technology to build due to the precision and complexity of such construction compared to traditional brick-and-mortar buildings.

Daughter Julia Bensily says that Prime Structures now markets itself as a company able to take on special projects with more complicated designs. It is one of the few local building firms that have the capability to do so. "For example, for the glass facade of the Wisma Atria project, every piece of glass is sized differently and they all slope at different angles. A lot of calculations were involved. Because of the high complexity of such projects, clients are willing to pay a premium," she says.

She adds that when it comes to mass brick-and-mortar buildings, the company is not able to compete with China construction firms, which can do it at a fraction of their cost. Some other notable local projects that Prime Structures has done include Fusionopolis and Changi Airport Terminal 3.

The company also has the know-how to build art structures, setting itself apart from the rest, adds Ms Bensily. "Art structures require a high degree of precision and the margin of error is very low. When a company says it is able to construct art structures, it speaks volumes about a company's capability, technologies and skill," she explains.

One prominent art structure is the Ned Kahn Art Wall, located at the Marina Bay Sands. Four vertical acres of the glass facade of the hotel lobby is covered with a cable net structure composed of half a

million hinged elements that sway in the wind and reveal the patterns of the wind. It is part of the MBS project worth over S\$50 million that was awarded to Prime Structures, which also included the external facade of the SkyPark, its canopy and podium. As Ms Bensily succinctly puts it: "We help make architects' dreams come true - at a lower cost."

Going abroad

The exposure that the MBS project received opened many doors overseas for Prime Structures. The company recently wrapped up a project for the Australian embassy in Jakarta which supplied and installed bomb blast-proof and bullet-proof windows for its six buildings.

The biggest project that Prime Structures is working on currently is a casino resort in Manila, which consists of a glass dome which is 100m in diameter and 33m high to house an indoor beach. And because Manila is in the earthquake zone, it must be able to withstand high winds and the like.

Ms Bensily believes that the Singapore brand helps raise the company's standing when they pitch for projects abroad. "When we go overseas and we tell people that we are a Singapore brand, they immediately think we must be safe and that our quality is of a certain level. This brand image that Singapore already has helps us," says Ms Bensily. She adds that the company does only the "brain work" in Singapore, which consists mainly of conceptualisation and design. The production of materials goes overseas to the most affordable company so that costs can be kept low. When heading overseas, the company tries to work with IE Singapore whenever possible. Ms Bensily says that the company has received generous support from them when they first ventured into Indonesia, and also for the current Philippines project.

However, despite its strong reputation overseas, one of the biggest challenges that the company faces is getting support from financial institutions. "When companies award you with a contract, they pay you a down payment of about 20 to 30 per cent. When they pay you, you need to issue them a bond to ensure you don't run away. For us to get this bond from local banks is very difficult due to perceived risk," explains Mr Bensily, whose company had an estimated turnover of S\$50 million in 2015.

"For example, I'm working on another project in Sri Lanka worth about US\$30 million. The client wants to issue us a contract, but I must demonstrate to them that I have a bank to support us. I am still shopping for a bank. I think our local banks are not very supportive - quite a few have turned us down," he says. He adds that banks here are selective of the countries that firms venture into.

"If I go to a new country, new frontier, it's quite difficult for me to get funding even though the margins are better. There's an opportunity for me right now to go to Somalia, but I don't think any bank would support me," says Mr Bensily.

Grooming talent

Contrary to other SMEs out there, manpower is not on the top of the list of problems for Prime Structures. It has about 60 staff altogether, excluding foremen and construction workers. "I have a good team, comprising people of many nationalities. Aside from Singaporeans, I have British, Malaysians, Indians, Sri Lankans, Chinese and Burmese employees in my core team," says Mr Bensily.

He believes that the primary incentive for people is recognition, a sense of belonging and to be paid well. "Once they achieve their targets, we pay them a reasonable package. I think that's why our staff turnover is quite low for the industry," he says.

The company has a strong family culture where breakfast is provided at work, and employees' families are included in outings. Every year, the company treats its staff to a holiday. Ms Bensily says that the company intends to attract younger people as part of the renewal process. "I think SMEs find it tougher to attract fresh graduates as it is not glamorous and we don't have the benefits that multinational corporations have. So we find new ways to attract young people such as through Facebook," she says.

Staff development is also taken seriously at Prime Structures. Aside from technical skills upgrading, the company also invests in its people by sending them to courses to learn life skills such as negotiation. Each staff member gets more than 25 hours of training every year.

"I always joke with my family - happy wife, happy life. The same goes for work. If your staff members are happy, your customers will be happy," says Mr Bensily. "At the end of the day, the company is nothing without its people," concludes Ms Bensily.