

EC Harris retains identity after Arcadis merger; resi managers get digital help; GVA gazes into the future

On Monday, the French takeover of DTZ collapsed (more from me on that *débâcle* on page 58). The same day, Dutch water engineering firm Arcadis announced its purchase of EC Harris, a 2,600-strong built-asset consultant best described as King Sturge in wellies and a hard hat.

So, it was off to the King's Cross HQ of EC Harris on the day of the announcement. Here to see if the 100-year-old partnership with a family flavour would be swallowed whole and never heard from again, like King Sturge. Apparently not. The Dutch are less controlling than Jones Lang LaSalle.

EC Harris got to manage the engagement party. The name stays, for a few years at least. But the 180 partners are ceding sovereignty for the same reasons as King Sturge: they own a mid-sized business doing well enough, but not quite well enough. And think of the money.

The atmosphere in the EC Harris café was animated. But it could easily have been just another Monday as staff chatted away. The contrast between the heavy stage management of the JLL/King Sturge deal and a

REALITY CHECK

Peter Bill

London Evening Standard



100-year-old EC Harris avoids losing the family name as it becomes part of Dutch engineering firm Arcadis

cup of tea and a chat with EC Harris partner David Sparrow was vivid.

Two tables away sat a dapper Brian Harris. His grandfather started the firm. His father, now 95, came next. Brian, now in his 60s, tends to commercial clients in London. Brian says he is "entirely happy" with the deal. He seemed less happy with JLL's abandonment of the King Sturge family name.

Online headache cure

Residential block management is a complete pain, with its thin margins, bolshy tenants and endless niggles. Ease your pain: talk to Guy Windsor-Lewis.

I did, on Monday. Nice chap. The 46-year-old former events manager runs a 10-strong business called Locale, which provides pain relief services to the likes of Knight Frank in the form of bespoke websites.

These also ease the pain for residents who find block managers a pain. Occupants of the 403 flats in the Strata tower in Elephant & Castle use Locale software. A bespoke website provides all the services you could hope for in a modern communications system, including e-mail and text messaging. This costs £10,000 a year – about £25 for each flat.

Windsor-Lewis set up in 2005, working at first on commercial projects. Now he is keen to provide 21st century communication for the residential sector. Hands up all those managing agents keen to open digital channels with residents. Anyone? Come along!

Instability on the horizon

The fact that GVA still runs company cars came as a surprise on Monday, when the firm formerly known as Grimley announced it was to scuttle the fleet. One director is apparently contesting the decision to scrap solid metal in

favour of an allowance that ranges between a generous £8,000 and a stupendous £13,000 a year. (Hint: not really a good time to be moaning, is it? Pipe down, for heaven's sake.) GVA says the move will save "hundreds of thousands a year". Don't all shout at once about how even more could be saved.

GVA clearly has fat to trim. Others are down to muscle and bone, according to a director of a mid-sized agent trying to flesh out a budget for 2012. Firms with a calendar year-end are engrossed in the annual exercise of trying to guess the economic weather 12 months out.

No, it's not possible. But management has to pretend it can be done to create a semblance of control. What to do? Guess income will rise on the back of a wizard growth strategy? No? Guess fees will fall just because it all feels a bit iffy? The truth is, economic visibility is clouded by eurozone instability. Guessing 2012 is near impossible. So why not abandon estimating income at least in favour of hoping 2012 will match 2011? Remember, you can always guess again as the presented facts start to change your mind.

18 October 2011 It's 11.30pm. I'm tired, hungry and I've missed the Champions League semi-final on TV.

I've been sitting in this sterile room since 9am, with my client and our QC.

We're in mediation with a company that my client has been suing for months. There seemed to be little prospect of a deal being done when we started this process over 14 hours, 23 biscuits and three tuna sandwiches ago, but now we seem pretty close.

The courts require litigants to consider "alternative dispute resolution" – to try and resolve their disputes out

ON LAW

Steven Ross

Litigation partner, Brecher

Mediation, if successful, is invaluable in saving the cost and acrimony of a trial

of court. Should the parties refuse, the court can penalise the parties in costs.

Usually this means the appointment of a mediator, to try to broker a deal.

Litigation consumes people emotionally and financially.

Whilst the expense of a trial may very well be avoided, the costs of mediation can still be quite large, but if it's successful it's invaluable in saving the cost and acrimony of a trial and it frees up space in the over-burdened court system.

Back to our sterile room – the parties are now "only" £50,000 apart but this is too wide a gap to bridge tonight. Our team retires and heads for the nearest burger bar. I look out of the window (and almost choke on my milkshake) as I watch the defendant's barrister snap the heel of her Louboutins as she races down Fleet Street trying to catch a bus.

We settle the case a week later. The defendant defaults and doesn't make the payment – but that's another story.

Guest blogger Steven Ross is a litigation partner at Brecher

CORRECTION

Estates Gazette reported last week that Barratt London had beaten United House to partner the Homes and Communities Agency on the redevelopment of Trenchard House on Broadwick Street, W1. In fact, United House is working with Barratt on the project. We apologise for any confusion.

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