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Surveying the Middle East

ÁINE RIORDAN outlines her experiences of going to the Middle East during the recession and returning as the Irish economy improved in 2013.

When the Irish construction sector collapsed in 2008, I was Regional Director with Nolan Ryan Tweeds. I had founded and led the Civil Engineering Quantity Surveying Division since 2003 but in the latter half of 2008 we were forced to downsize. As the Government tightened purse strings and engineering consultants ceased splitting the cost/design processes to keep staff employed, it was obvious that the future for civil engineering quantity surveying in Ireland was bleak.

Dealing with the downturn

As a positive and proactive person, I found it very difficult to deal with the growing economic negativity and uncertainty constantly emanating from our media. I consistently plan ahead and for the first time in my life, I could not foresee my immediate future working in Ireland. Following a meeting with an ex-colleague who was moving to the Middle East (ME) to sit out the Irish construction crisis, I decided to assess what opportunities might be available there for me. I discussed those opportunities with my husband, John, and satisfied that I would find a suitable position, I gave in my notice on October 16, 2008. Recruitment agencies advised me at the time that being chartered was a major advantage but being “non-Arabic speaking” and “a woman” were potential disadvantages. I was not perturbed.

Leaving Ireland

On December 19, 2008, I accepted a two-year contract with the Louis Berger Group (LBG) for the position of Commercial Manager on the €1bn Abu Dhabi Tunnel and Expressway project. Over Christmas, John and I decided that he and our two girls, Béibhinn (10) and Ádhmhín (5), would remain in Ireland in case the position did not work out. Once on the plane, I hit the emotional ‘switch-off button’ and focused on what was ahead, which I will admit, I found quite daunting, but extremely exciting.

LBG was appointed programme manager by Abu Dhabi Municipality (ADM) to oversee the project’s four contracts. Three of the four had

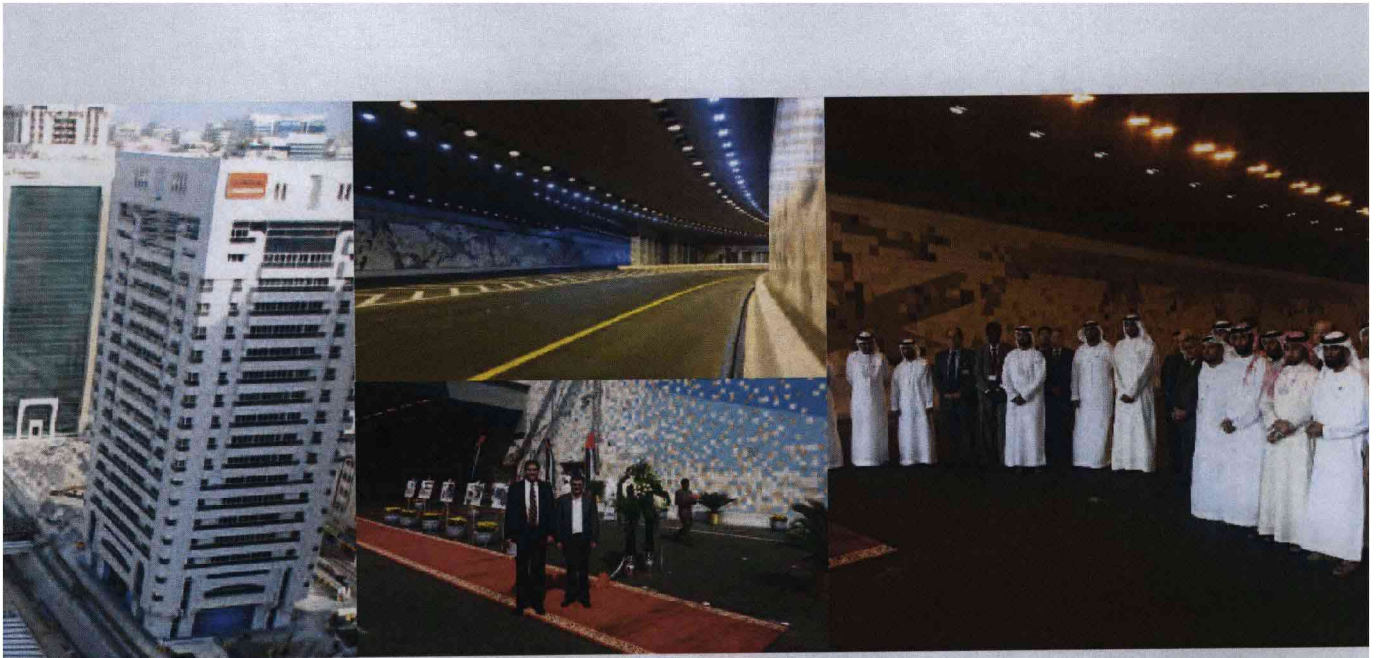
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already commenced when I arrived, with an international/local joint venture appointed on the largest contract, which consisted of a 4.4km, eight-lane tunnel. Local contractors had been appointed on two of the other three contracts, which entailed in excess of 10km of road widening, underpasses and a bridge. On arrival my boss, Michel El Hajj (Programme Manager), who will remain a life-long friend, introduced me to the then ADM Project Manager, an Emirati. I remember feeling quite apprehensive as this man in traditional dress invited me to take a seat, to have an Arabic coffee (delicious!) and to tell him all about myself. He quickly put me at ease with his charm, wit and knowledge of Irish culture. We chatted for the best part of an hour before he finally stood up, shook my hand and announced that he looked forward to working with me. Little did I know at that time that if he had decided that he did not want to work with me, I would probably have been on the first plane home!

With my office based on the primary site, the tunnel contract, my general remit was to oversee the financial aspect of all four contracts, to monitor budget, to assist the Programme Manager and to report to the ADM. My contracted hours of work were 8.00am to 6.00pm, five days a week, but in reality the position required far in excess of this. I was happy to put in the hours as it kept me focused. My team consisted of Eóin Kelly MRICS, Rufino Bautista AAIQS and Pádraig Power FRICS FSCSI, with contract administration provided by Damien O’Connor LLM. Their work was of the highest standard and greatly contributed to the success of the project.

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Working in the Middle East

My experience of working with the great eastern and middle-eastern diaspora was that they are hardworking, willing to please and quite protective of their positions. As important as it was for me to have secured a good position with a corresponding salary, it was of profound importance to my counterparts who intended to live their lives and raise their families in the ME.

Decision-making would inevitably be offset to those within the hierarchical structures of the projects, which, timewise, could be quite frustrating.

Once I had proved myself working with the Emiratis, I earned their respect and I gained immense satisfaction from my work. Not long after I settled into my position, I took on board extensive research into the administration of the Fédération Internationale Des Ingénieurs-Conseils (FIDIC) Price Fluctuation Clause (PFC) in a deflationary market. This research led to collaboration with FIDIC, the Statistics Centre of Abu Dhabi, the UAE Ministry of Labour, and several embassies to ascertain levels of wage agreements. The revised application of the PFC led to an approximate 10% saving on the project value. During this time, I was offered a position with the ADM to set up and lead a stand-alone quantity surveying division within the municipality. I strongly considered this, but decided to remain with LBG.

My ex-colleague Declan Shanahan FRICS FSCSI and his wife Sinéad were my emotional springboards from my early years in the ME. It is a very transient society but I slowly developed a close-knit circle of friends, without whom I would have found it extremely difficult, from a personal perspective, to see out my contract, which turned into four years and nine months. I am extremely grateful to Thomas Topolski, President of Louis Berger International, who agreed in July 2013 to end my contract early in order for me to return home.

Clockwise from left: The €1bn Abu Dhabi Tunnel and Expressway project under construction in the heart of Abu Dhabi; a section of the tunnel; some staff of Abu Dhabi Municipality at the tunnel opening; and, Thomas Topolski, President of LBG (left) with Michel El Hajj, Programme Manager, at the tunnel opening.

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Coming home

I returned home in late September 2013 and, following a sabbatical, set up my own company providing contract administration services, claims management and dispute resolution support to the construction industry. AJR Consultancy Ltd, t/a Riordan Construction Claim Services, was set up in March 2014. I have been involved in a number of formal dispute resolution processes to date. I work with the Public Works Contracts, the **Royal Institute of Architects** Ireland Building Contract, FIDIC, the Institution of Engineers Ireland and the Institution of Civil Engineers.

I am in a particularly specialist area of the quantity surveying sector for which tendering is currently not available. Breaking into what is an established niche market in Ireland is not the easiest road I have travelled but former colleagues and renewed acquaintances have been extremely supportive and encouraging.

I am happy to have been involved in more than 30 projects during my first two years in business. I look forward to continued success into the future.