

Watertight Argument



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Projex Group Pty Ltd, based a stone's throw from Sydney Airport at Botany Bay, has a reputation for supplying and installing products and systems that meet the needs of situations that demand the highest level of waterproofing.

Written by John Boley

THE company was founded in 1988 by Jim Kornmehl when he saw an opportunity to introduce the German-made Wolfin waterproofing system to the Australian market (please see sidebar for further details). Since then, Jim and his team have added several other world-leading brands – all designed to supply the absolute best materials to solve the problem.

“Spending extra to ensure total water-tightness makes sense if you have equipment inside a building that must be shielded.”

Today, Wolfin is one of three core products Projex carries, Jim says. It was the first and it “came about as an accident.” He owned a large building in North Sydney with excess parking space, was looking to rent it out and attracted the interest of a company in the computer business, who not unnaturally wanted it to be guaranteed waterproof. “No problem, we said. But then they said ‘when we mean guaranteed, we MEAN guaranteed’. We could not find anything locally; then we looked around the world and found Wolfin.”

Wolfin makes thermoplastic membranes, primarily for water-



proofing flat roofs and buildings. The material can be used for waterproofing any type of roof as well as repair of roofs of almost any material, usually without removing the failed membrane. It is used for waterproofing of balconies, terraces, decks, basements and in planter boxes (it is certified root-proof); in gutters – or as a pre-made gutter; bunding; under carpark surfaces and on the joints; under concrete slabs to prevent seepage - even under high pressure; on expansion joints, tunnel walls and bunkers; in water tanks, fountains and water features, dams and sewage tanks; and on railway or road bridges.

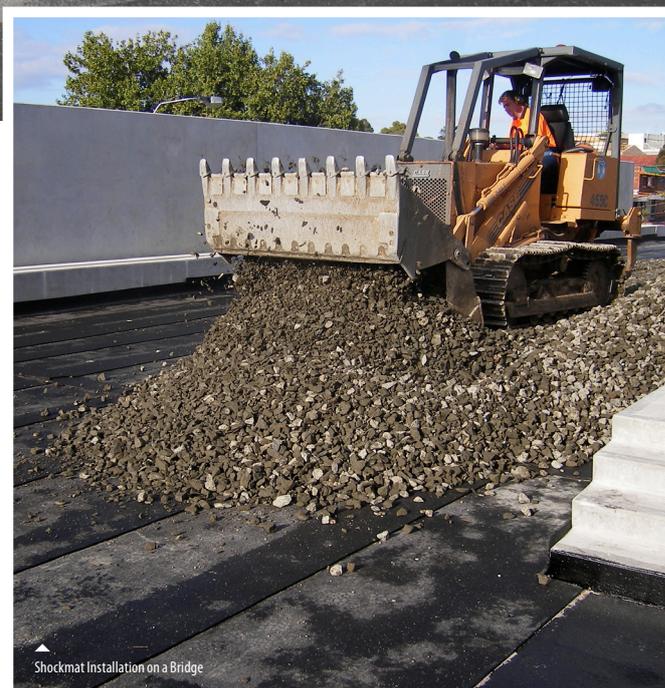
This was high-end technology and solving a problem to a degree of prevention of ingress that not everyone needs, so



Redfern Oval Grandstand Completed

it took a while before Wolfin became popular in Australia. Jim says they are not interested in run-of-the-mill waterproofing, only where it's really vital to keep all liquid at bay. "We won't do a local garage or a semi-detached in the country. But when it is important that it is completely waterproof, then people will use Wolfin."

While this product grew in popularity, people were also asking Jim and his colleagues Michael 'Harry' Herder and Nick Pearson for solutions to similar problems, such as needing a waterproof course that would stand walking or other heavier use but without recourse to tiles which would be too heavy. Accordingly, Projex sourced another German product called Shockmat, made of reclaimed rubber, sourced from the tyre



Shockmat Installation on a Bridge



Ravensworth Tank



Ravensworth North Underground Mine

► industry, bonded together with polyurethanes. This product has many commercial and industrial applications and is ideal as a protective matting medium. It is also widely used for waterproofing membranes, as a sound reducing medium or on railway bridges for ballast protection. As a membrane protective medium, Shockmat is cheaper and easier to install than tiles or concrete screeds and is installed by simply rolling out.

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This attracted the attention of railway engineers throughout Australia. They wanted to know if Shockmat, now being used on many bridges, could additionally be used as a ballast mat. “I thought it was interesting so we checked with the company in Germany – and they had just started manufacturing ballast mats.” They are made the same way – recycled car tyres bonded to fine tolerances and tuned. “You would have a different type of matting for a train that travels over it at 100km/h than for a train travelling at 50km/h.” The type also varies with axle load.

50 YEARS OF WOLFIN



Surry Hills Community Centre & Library Banner Image

In 1962, Wolfin pioneered the market with the most bitumen-resistant and vapour-permeable thermoplastic roofing membrane. The system was originally developed by Grunau GmbH in the town of Wolfen in Germany. Some years later, the Grunau company was purchased by industrial conglomerate Henkel GmbH.

Subsequently, the Wolfin Group floated off and became an independent subsidiary of the Icopal Group. Projex Group originally introduced the Wolfin Waterproofing System in Australia in 1988 and still represents Wolfin in the Australian and New Zealand markets. Projex's Quality Assurance and technical systems have proved to be an important cornerstone of Wolfin's World-wide Quality and technical package with the Australian company very involved in the development and testing of new Wolfin products over the last 25 years.

"We are proud to have been part of the Wolfin family for all those years. Collaborating with such a professional team and promoting the best waterproofing system available in our industry has been a real honour and privilege," says Jim. In Europe, Wolfin is considered the leader in high-end top-quality systems for waterproofing flat roofs and for structural waterproofing. The thermoplastic roofing and waterproofing membranes made by Wolfin cover more than 60 million square metres in all climatic zones of the planet.

Next, because of Projex' connection with waterproofing, came questions from industry and customers about sealing pipes that go through walls. This time the trail led to the US and a brand called Link-Seal. Link-Seal provides a range of engineered products designed to be used together, for quickly and easily creating a permanent seal between a cylindrical object and the barrier through which it passes. "This fitted in well. We had different things to offer to essentially the same customers, and the business has really been built on these three ranges."

But Projex has not stood still and has continued to search for products that offer solutions to other related issues. Take negative waterproofing: the answer is Koster, intended for jobs needing basement waterproofing (leaking basement repair) or other areas where access is restricted to the external surface. "Negative waterproofing is the 'wrong' way to do waterproofing," Jim explains. If you have a leaking building, the 'right' way

to repair it is to go outside and put a barrier there, but sometimes that is not practical because access is restricted or impossible. For such cases, Koster can be painted on the inside. It's not a paint as such, but interacts with masonry and forms a barrier that will hold "quite large amounts of water from the inside. It shouldn't work – it doesn't make any logical sense – but it bonds to the masonry and will keep the water out."

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For a couple of years, Projex also marketed a system for passive fire protection, but Jim says it was never a comfortable fit with his company which is a rather

laid-back outfit. "We work hard but we have a lot of laughs. People in the fire industry tend to be a bit serious." Jim and his team prefer to concentrate on marketing the waterproofing and allied systems to customers who generally appreciate the total proofing and are willing to pay for the quality.

In some applications (most mines, for example) absolute prevention of water ingress is not a priority. Jim says the difference between 98 per cent protection and 100 per cent "is probably a factor of three." But if you need 100 per cent for a specific application (a power station, say, or electrical sub-station), then cost is unlikely to be the main driver, although as Jim says "it sometimes takes two or three goes to prove that." It is not unknown for a project owner to specify the top system but for a builder to talk him out of it in favour of something cheaper. "Then two or three years later the owner will call us and complain 'your system is leaking' and we say we didn't install it." Eventually, Projex gets ►



▲ Lloyd Street Bridge



▲ Application Layer - SBM

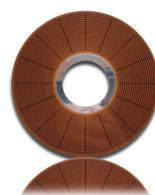
► called in to do the job properly. “This is a very common occurrence.” It is a very false economy, he points out. “If you look at a hospital, for example, it means shutting down operating theatres if even a little water gets in. That means re-sterilising everything. It’s a big deal.” Spending extra to ensure that total water-tightness makes sense if you have equipment inside a building that must be shielded, and Projex spends most of its time talking directly to engineers and owners rather than builders.

“The team is aware that even the best products and systems must be installed correctly.”

Jim says one of the company’s strengths is keeping large amounts of



materials in stock. Because the whole industry is not as good at ordering in advance as it is at building things, everything is urgent. "It's very expensive to keep stock, but it's part of the service and we are in a service industry." Despite that laid-back appearance, Projex takes its customers very seriously indeed and aims to supply "around 98 percent of all orders from stock." It doesn't stop there, either, because the team is aware that even the best products and systems must be installed correctly. Companies across Australia that install Wolfin have to sign up to promise to do things in our approved manner. "We inspect every installation without fail. We are a pain in the rear! And if we find something wrong, they have to – at their cost – take it out and do it properly. Because we warrant it as waterproof." Even for a few square metres in Hobart, "we fly down there to do it." And this policy evidently pays off; despite his protestations of poverty, Jim and Projex are flourishing. Not, you might say, just keeping their heads above water. ■



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