

# Asset Rich

Writer John Spavin

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Anna Robak examining the Petaka Stream intake structure and catchment for a point of use water treatment study in the Far North.  
Photo: Opus International Consultants.

Once upon a time in New Zealand it seemed there was a yellow Ministry of Works caravan or truck on every street corner. Tanned workmen in navy dungarees filled potholes, built dams, cleared landslips or planed green hills into motorways.

The Ministry managed “New Zealand Inc’s” assets – the infrastructure built and expanded upon since European settlement.

As visible as the workers were out on the street, the Ministry’s intellectual property resided in the minds of backroom engineers and planners. That backroom talent evolved, first into a State Owned Enterprise, then in the mid-90s into Opus International Consultants. Opus doesn’t lean on shovels; it advises mainly national and local governments on how to look after the infrastructure that the shovels and big ideas built. It looks ahead too, to see what may be needed decades hence.

Opus was an early international entrant into infrastructure and asset management. It had a reputation that found its way into the early Google search engine when a Canadian-born student completing a Masters in Infrastructure Engineering found it. Opus appealed to the then 25-year old graduate because it was a leader

in the field in which she wanted to build a career.

More than a decade later and still at Opus, Anna Robak is a senior asset manager, advising the top tables in local and national governments on asset management; how to plan it, communicate its value and maintain it. She has achieved a doctorate in applied economics. On top of contributing financial help towards her higher education, Opus armed her with the skills to take theory into practice.

Opus attracted Dr Robak because its graduate recruitment programme let her choose assignments amongst its different engineering disciplines. She plugged for transportation and water network maintenance, modelling pavement performance and project management and design of water treatment plants. She says her doctorate has provided a unique combination of economics and engineering. As well as

her impressive credentials, New Zealand lends its impressive reputation in asset management.

“New Zealand is still seen as one of the leading forces of asset management and that is really what drew me here,” Dr Robak says.

When she sat down for her job interview, Dr Robak met Tony Porter, these days Opus’ global director of asset management. He became a mentor to her at Opus and describes her as “Very capable. She’s great.”

Despite New Zealand being small and remote, Opus’ reputation attracts talent. Mr Porter says qualified people seek out Opus, often in preference to chasing careers with really big competitors. Dr Robak says this is unusual for a “small” company with only 3,000 staff.

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Top: Anna Robak with mentor Tony Porter. Photo: Simon Bush, Opus International Consultants.

Bottom: Aerial shot of Opononi water and wastewater treatment plants, taken as part of a water supply and water treatment study. Photo: Harry Follas, Opus International Consultants.

"New Zealand is ... one of the leaders in asset management, if not the leader," Mr Porter says.

Mr Porter's career began in the 1970s with the original Ministry of Works and when Rogernomics swept the country, private contractors began to maintain public assets. The public sector had to adopt private sector accounting principles, which included closely managing assets for the whole of their life. He says they learned to get more for less.

The global financial crisis has opened opportunities for Opus as many governments reassess public infrastructure management and impose maintenance and planning regimes that have often been lacking.

Armed with the Ministry's and then Opus' decades of shrewd asset management expertise, rising stars like Dr Robak can gain the attention of huge global consultancies. These include the likes of the United States' professional services and audit giant KPMG, for example, which shoulder-tapped Opus when it needed a partner to help America's second largest state highway network manage its transportation assets. North Carolina's Department of Transportation is Dr Robak's biggest current project. When it's suggested, just to gauge scale, that budget is probably bigger than Auckland's, she says that it's bigger than New Zealand's and with more kilometres of roads.

Planning and managing public assets at its simplest means that a government, before it turns the first sod, should have integrated long-term economic, social and environmental requirements. It's too late when it's time to swing the shovel suddenly to tack on afterthoughts. These days few governments can afford to build and run assets until they break and then rebuild them.

"Over the long term you need to be sure you're investing the right amount of money at the right time. It's kind of like the old adage of a stitch in time saves nine," Dr Robak says.

Some of those stitches these days are sewn not to build bigger but to manage demand and reduce consumption. Dr Robak says, for example, she may recommend a wetland rather than a treatment plant. Managing assets for efficiency and a return on investment is one goal, but it's not the only one.

"The main thing to keep in mind is that you're managing a service, not just keeping an asset." Dr Robak says that focus on service could be that access to a workplace may not mean designing or building a new road, but instead may involve developing better information technology infrastructure. Managing assets has become a broader activity than just undertaking annual maintenance on a set of pipes or relaying asphalt.

"People often think about asset management as just quite a narrow lifecycle cost. You build your asset in the first place and then you allocate a certain amount of money each year to keep it going. But it is certainly broader than that."

Dr Robak says many states in the United States have been able to throw money at an efficient highway system and resurface it every 10 years or so and not have to think too hard about the cost. However, times change. In the midst of the financial crisis and reduced budgets she has been helping them think strategically. In this respect, she says North Carolina has been one of the standouts in asset

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management and she considers herself fortunate to be working with them.

"It's the first time they've had this problem whereas we've been dealing with it here in New Zealand for a long time." Dr Robak says the North Carolina project involves planning expenditure so the state legislature can see why it's needed, its benefits and the consequences of reducing maintenance – decades out.

It takes a special sort of skill combined with experience to sit around with senior government planners and executives and advise them to commit perhaps hundreds of millions of dollars on a project that may not pay itself back within their lifetimes.

"It's not just the consultant telling the client what to do," Dr Robak says. "It's a genuine working relationship and I really enjoy that."

Mr Porter says he "carpet-bagged" through the United States 10 years ago

and found it very difficult to get any interest in how New Zealand had adapted to asset management discipline. These days, as deficits bite and he makes presentations to potential clients, the reception is different.

"Lots of times I present and people say 'you're 15 to 20 years ahead of us'". He disagrees with this view and says with the work done in New Zealand already, countries can catch up a lot faster. In his opinion, Opus' future in Africa, the Middle East, Europe and North America lies with experts like Dr Robak, whom he describes a first-rate example of the next generation of engineers coming through.

"She's such an articulate person that it's easy to send her into an environment where she's working by herself."

The younger ones don't always lead the pack, however, and sometimes the client's culture calls for grey hair. Either way, Mr Porter is relaxed, whether it's someone of his vintage or one of his "bright young minds" who wins the work. Just so long as it's done – and done well. ☒

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