

Publication Date: 21 April 2022
YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 309. "Evolve or Dissolve" - Bill Coles

Listen to this podcast episode [here](#).

Intro: Welcome to Your Strata Property, the podcast for property owners looking for reliable, accurate, and bite-sized information from an experienced and authoritative source.

Amanda Farmer: Hello and welcome. I am your podcast host, Amanda Farmer. Over the past couple of months, I have been putting together something a little bit special for you. I have three interviews recorded, each with someone I'm calling a strata powerhouse. These are three people who have been involved in our strata sector for many years, and have both watched and contributed to our strata-sphere growing up and growing into the trillion-dollar industry it is today. These are people from family businesses, unexpected backgrounds. Some of them are still tirelessly serving our strata owners and managers today. I've asked them to share their stories from the beginning, how they've seen strata evolve over what, for some of them, has been 40 years of lived experience, what they think may have changed for the better over that time, and what their hopes are for the future of strata. My first strata powerhouse interview, which you are going to hear right now, is with Bill Coles.

Bill Coles has basically grown up alongside the strata industry for the past 40 years. He heads up his family company, Cleaning & Caretaking Corporation, which is one of the strata market leaders. The company is now transitioning into the future with the third generation of the family, Bill's daughter, Simone, recently coming into the business. Bill is an SCA New South Wales life member and has a record-breaking 20 years of service to both New South Wales and national SCA boards. Bill has been the recipient of the New South Wales presidents' Max Dunn and Strata Service Provider awards, as well as the National President's Award.

Alongside that professional success, Bill is also successful in his personal life, representing Australia in his junior years for volleyball, and over the past 15 years, representing Australia in target shooting to world championship level, where he has been a five-time medal winner. I'm going to take you over now to my chat with Bill Coles. Before I do, remember to tune in next week to hear from our second strata powerhouse. I'm going to leave you in suspense over just who that might be. For now, settle in. Here's Bill Coles. Bill Coles, welcome to the show.

Bill Coles: Thanks, Amanda. Thank you for having me, and hello to everyone out there.

Amanda Farmer: This will be a familiar name, a familiar voice to so many of our listeners, I know. Tell us, where does the Bill Coles strata story begin? How did you get involved in strata, Bill?

Bill Coles: Very young in my working career. When I left school, I was in banking and finance originally, and mom and dad had started a small cleaning run. It was one of their first businesses that they decided to buy after immigrating here and working hard doing shift work, et cetera, et cetera. They decided when they bought a business that they wanted it to be during the day so that then they could spend some time with their children, which was my younger brother and myself. By coincidence, when they looked at cleaning, most cleaning is at night. The only day cleaning is strata cleaning. That's how they started the company and the reason they got into strata. I could see that there was an opportunity in strata, and I suggested that I should leave the, it was the finance company back then, and come into the company to help run it and grow it. That's how it all began about 40 years ago.

Amanda Farmer: Wow. So, 40 years ago you could have been a banker, a financier, and we wouldn't have the Bill Coles that we have today in strata.

Bill Coles: I guess that's true.

Amanda Farmer: What is this opportunity that you saw 40 years ago in strata that caused you to make that shift?

Bill Coles: Well, back then, we were talking about mostly walk-up buildings, and mom and dad picked up one large building. They called it large back then. It was in Glebe overlooking the water a bit. It was a four or five-storey building, and it had a lift. They said,

"Look at this. There's quite a few units in here." We could see that they were starting to build more units and that it could be a way forward, and I could see and explain to mom and dad that it's okay to be cleaners, but it's even better to have a successful business, and I could see the financial model in doing that and then starting to employ people like myself.

I guess I was an employee at the start, and then employ cleaners, and gradually, gradually they stopped cleaning. I used to do it part-time even when I was in the bank. So did my wife. A lot of us did back then as a second job. You're a cleaner at night or on the weekends. Basically, we could see that it could grow. In hindsight, obviously, we are where we are today to this amazing industry that we all work in.

Amanda Farmer: Were there many other strata specialist cleaners back then?

Bill Coles: No, not at all. They were mostly husband and wife teams like mom and dad were. Even the strata companies were husband and wife teams or small owner-operators. Back then, we didn't have the Peakers and the Bright & Duggans, but they were there. Again, like my parents and their parents, but they were much smaller operation. Then a lot of those companies grew as we did with the industry.

Amanda Farmer: So, smaller operations, smaller buildings. How else was the strata sector different 30 or 40 years ago, different to how it is today?

Bill Coles: Obviously, procedure was different. There weren't all the procedures and checklists and laws that we have in place now that have all improved over the years. It was a lot simpler back then, obviously, because it was different clients as well. Back then, it would be generic just older retirees that moved to a small apartment. Now we have a big gamut of people. People choose to live in strata nowadays. It's totally different. So, it was a lot simpler back then. Is that good or bad? I'm not sure. But that's just what it was. It was a lot simpler.

Amanda Farmer: Well, that was going to be my next question for you, a double question, perhaps, what's changed for the better and what's changed for the worse? Let's start with the better.

Bill Coles: The better is definitely the size and the facilities in the apartment buildings we see now. I mean, you can still buy into a small walk-up, but even those, they're much bigger. There's much better facilities. There's bigger balconies, there's bigger windows. There might be pools. There might not be. There might be a shopping centre underneath. So, definitely for the better, strata living is easier and it's more, I call it resort-style living. You can lock up and go away, but when you're home, it's like you're in a resort in a lot of these larger schemes, and even some of the small boutique ones. Whole floor apartments, those sorts of things, all those things much better to live in than the original little two bedroom unit.

In regards to the other part of your question, what's worse? Look, I think what's worse and is thankfully improving in the current year or two is the build quality. The build quality of those little red brick, two, three-storey walk ups, they didn't have leaks. They didn't have cracks. They didn't have noise issues. What became worse, not in all strata, but in a lot of them, unfortunately, if you look at the stats, was these cracks, leaks and noise issues with the new commissioner in place and the new laws and bonds, et cetera, et cetera. You're well aware of all those things. That will improve and raise the professionalism that we're trying to get in the industry, as well as in the building side of it and the developing side of it.

Amanda Farmer: What about in your business, Bill, the changes that you've seen over 30 or 40 years? Obviously, you've grown. I can see your business name in the background. There is Cleaning & Caretaking Corporation. I'm not sure if caretaking was on the agenda 30 years ago. But how has your business changed in this space?

Bill Coles: It's changed dramatically. I've got a sign next to my desk here with our logo. Under, it says evolve or dissolve. Basically, that's my motto. Yes. In regards to cleaning, obviously, procedures, chemicals, sustainability, all of those things have changed, and professionalism in a big way. Caretaking, we were actually one of the very first caretaking companies in Australia

Publication Date: 21 April 2022
YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 309. "Evolve or Dissolve" - Bill Coles

We partnered with one of our original strata managers, with his sons, actually, in a business called commercial caretaking. We started then. It was a part-time caretaking service back then. You didn't really need full-time facilities managers as we have nowadays. We actually instigated that with Bryant Strata back in the day, and then that evolved into the caretaking building management type companies that you see now. So, we do both. That's true.

We decided a long, long time ago to stick and specialise in strata. So, even though we have some very high profile commercial clients, our core business is strata, always has been, probably always will be. I would say 90% of our business client wise is strata, and probably 75% of it in revenue is strata. We've evolved. People have copied us. We've also learned from other people who have come in and maybe done what we've done and then maybe improved stuff. I believe you've got to be open to that. We were at the strata sailing day a few weeks ago, and a new younger strata manager was telling me about these stories. His boss was telling me about me and how we run and the old school system, and he said, "Which do you think is better?" My answer was, "I think you need a bit of both. You need a bit of the old head and the old way, and you need a bit of the new way and the new technology. Then you move forward that way."

Amanda Farmer: What is it, Bill, that drove you to be so involved in serving the strata sector? You've been on the board, you've been the vice president of SCA New South Wales. You're a busy man. What's behind all of that?

Bill Coles: I guess that's in my nature to give back. I and we, the family, are very appreciative of what the strata industry has given us. A long time ago, again, I think I'm still the record-breaking board member for 20 years. There might be some that have joined that now, but it's a long time. Look, you don't get a life membership if you don't give your life to the industry. I do have that life membership, and I'm very proud of it, but it was something that I wanted to do. It comes from the heart. It also comes from your company backing you and allowing you the time to juggle your real work duties with the voluntary duties.

Most of my board involvement was through events, which is really fun to organise. I really enjoyed the way it's evolved to the events we have now. Also on the strata services side, again, it was showing how the strata services is not a competitor in the industry. It's just part of the industry as the strata managers are, and lawyers and a whole gamut of other people. So, it was mostly for me giving back and saying thank you. Did it help our business? Maybe, maybe not. Sometimes it did, sometimes it didn't.

Amanda Farmer: Just going back to the changes that you've seen over many years, Bill, have you noticed a change? I think you might have mentioned the change in demographic in our strata buildings, different types of residents in different types of buildings. From the perspective of your business and perhaps with your staff on the ground, have you noticed a change in the way residents communicate with their cleaners, the demands perhaps that they have? How has that changed over the years?

Bill Coles: It's definitely changed. It's not just in our industry, it's in whatever you do. The clients are much more educated. They have much more access to yourself and to other competitors. They are now also much younger, much more tech-savvy. Again, even the older people are much more tech-savvy. I don't care what industry you're in, whether it's strata, whether it's cleaning, whether you're a butcher or a taxi or an Uber driver, you are working harder for your money and the profit margins are less. So, you need to deal with that however you want to deal with it, whether it be volume, if you want to grow big, or whether you go small and just manage it a bit more controlled where you're the only owner-operator.

Amanda Farmer: Good point. You've gone through, I imagine, a difficult couple of years with the pandemic, as so many in our industry have. As cleaners, you've been in an especially difficult position. I'm thinking of about nine months ago when the lockdown happened again in Sydney and we had hotspot LGAs where workers were not able to leave their LGA. There was some confusion at the time about whether that included cleaners, strata cleaners, whether they were essential workers. How did you navigate all of that complexity, that difficulty during that time?

Bill Coles: It was an extremely difficult time. I'll say first up, I had a bit of a pow-wow session going on the side, apart from what everyone saw online. I want to thank Chris Duggan, he was then the president of SCA, and even a competitor of ours, a colleague, Frank Boross from Havencab. We had a three-way chat going through that whole period, and that helped me and hopefully, the

strata industry navigate through it. You touched on it, it was complicated. For us, we used that to our advantage. A lot of these government rules in regards to cleaning and what you could clean and couldn't clean or garden were very grey. We armed our teams on the road with all this grey information, and whenever they got pulled over, they showed the police these things, and luckily, we got through it. We bluffed our way through it, I'm going to say, only because it was grey.

But it had to be done. You can't not clean it. Look, you cannot clean in a little walk-up. You do have issues if someone falls over and gets hurt with things like that. But in the big ones, you can't not clean. There's compactors that have to be emptied, there's pools that have to be done. You just couldn't not clean it. So, we managed, and like three or four other crises that we've faced in our 40 years, we got through it, and we're grateful for that. Look, strata is very resilient and always has been in these sorts of crises, whether it's a health crisis like we've had, or whether it's a financial crisis.

Amanda Farmer: I do know, having lived in a busy strata building, that certainly from my perspective, cleaners are an essential service. The stories I was hearing, the photographs I was seeing of the difficulties that buildings were during that time because cleaners felt that they couldn't attend, I agree with you, the law was unnecessarily grey and really should have been clarified to ease that pain. The work that you do, that your staff do is incredibly important, and we're lucky to have you during the best of times, let alone in a pandemic.

Bill Coles: Thank you.

Amanda Farmer: Bill, what are your hopes or predictions for the future of strata in Australia?

Bill Coles: Look, I can see it just blossoming and getting to the end vision, which is a professional industry that is run professionally, whichever part of the industry you work from and in it. Also, from a living point of view for the owners, that it's an amazing experience, as I said, in a resort-style situation that is built well, again, as I touched on, so that you don't have to worry about leaks or cracks or noises and things like that.

In saying that, one difficulty that I do see in the future in strata living is society in general, people are less tolerant and may be less friendly. I think people have to also look at themselves and the mental side of things of living close by each other. I mean, this can happen in normal housing as well. You might have a neighbour that causes you an issue, but when there's so many people in one strata scheme, it can compound. That's something that has to be looked at, I think, into the future, and maybe laws in place to control someone that is slightly out of control. I'll be politically correct in what I say.

Amanda Farmer: Look, I understand what you're saying, and I do see a change there too. I am often talking about on my webinars, in my education about how to deal with what I call difficult personalities, difficult behaviours. We are hearing the word bullying come up more and more in the context of our strata communities, which is very disheartening to see. But I think more people at home, more of the time, as we culturally come to have different expectations about what we are entitled to or believe we're entitled to in our homes, I do agree with you that that is a real challenge that we're all facing in strata.

Bill Coles: It's a challenge. You talk about difficult people. I like to talk about normal people. We need to focus on them and have more of them. That's how strata works best. If you look at the awards in these stratas where they're a true community and they all get together and they win an award for some project they've done, that's the beautiful part of living in a strata. When that happens, it's really good.

Amanda Farmer: I agree. Do you think, Bill, you're going to it be here seeing the future of strata evolve still at the helm of your company here, or are you passing the baton on anytime soon?

Bill Coles: That's a very good question. It always comes up in family companies. I'm approaching my 60th year next year in age, so I am thinking about the future, but I'm not a retiring type of person, and my wife will attest to that as well. So, yes, we're very happy and proud that in the last year my daughter has joined the company, and she's learning all facets of the company. Simone does office work, she does building management, she does cleaning supervision. The plan is that I will ease back a little bit in a

year or two, and she will take over the helm and run the company. But, yes, I won't be going anywhere, and I'll be certainly helping out where I can. I've made it clear to SCA, even though I'm no longer on the boards of state or national, that I think they should use life members more, and that we can contribute and help in many sides of the future. That's the plan. I will be travelling a bit more, but still have the finger on the pulse somehow.

Amanda Farmer: I love how you say there, Bill, that's the plan. I can feel the lack of commitment there. That's the plan.

Bill Coles: Look-

Amanda Farmer: May not be how it works out, hey?

Bill Coles: ... I actually just put a comment on Bobby Lehane's LinkedIn page. He was talking about plan B. My comment was along the lines of, "Bobby, we've had so many dramas the last few years. I think some of us are up to plan D or E, and the plan is not to get to plan Z, which is probably the end of the game." So, look, I think, as I said, you've got to evolve or dissolve, and you've got to go with the blows, highs, lows, whatever. So, I say the that's the plan, and that is the plan, but sometimes things change and you work it out.

Amanda Farmer: Now, Bill, you've had such a long, successful career in strata. Do you ever think about what you might be doing, where you might be if you hadn't decided to join the family business years ago?

Bill Coles: Yes. I think about that, and I sort of did it in a side sort of thing. Sport is my other passion. I've been lucky enough to represent the country in a couple of sports and still do. So, I would've been doing something in sport, whether it was professional sport or teaching sport or coaching, probably gone down that track, because finance and banking, even though I was fairly good at it, was pretty boring for me.

Amanda Farmer: I find it fascinating, I didn't know that was where you started in finance and banking, and I never would've guessed it, Bill. I think it's too boring for you too.

Bill Coles: My first job was in the Bank of New South Wales, which is Westpac now, in Marrickville branch, because I could speak Greek as well, so they put me there. Then I got poached from there to a company called Custom Credit Finance. Their slogan was good sports with money. I ended up being at a very young age a relieving manager between New South Wales, Sydney, Wollongong, and that's where I ended my career there and came into strata.

Amanda Farmer: Now, Bill, let our listeners know how they can find out more about you and your business. Where can they get in touch?

Bill Coles: Oh, sure. Look, I've got a LinkedIn page, which is under my full name, which is Collaros, Bill Collaros, C-O-L-L-A-R-O-S. Cleaning & Caretaking Corporation has a very simple, generic website, which is commercialcleaning.com.au. You'll find us on those. There's links to that. We're all over social media, both personally and the company. We look forward to hearing from anyone. If we can help anyone, obviously at the moment, I've taken a break from mentoring because I'm mentoring my daughter for the next year, but I will be doing that again in the future for SCA and people who are industry, but I'm always a phone call away or a coffee away if people want to have a chat.

Amanda Farmer: Tell me, Bill, about this change from Collaros to Coles. Is that an Australianism that you've had to adopt?

Bill Coles: Yes, that goes back to the history. I'm born here. Mom and dad came from Greece and Egypt. When dad started the company, he decided back then, look, this isn't politically correct, but it wasn't cool to be a wog. So, he shortened the name, not legally, just on paper, to Coles. I said, "When I come in, I'll be Bill Coles as well." So, that's what we did.

Amanda Farmer: Wow.

Bill Coles: Because it stuck for so many years, everyone knows Bill Coles, but the legal name is Collaros. I changed my email signature about 10 years ago when my kids said, "Why are you Bill Coles and not Collaros?" They're obviously Collaros, Simone is Simone Collaros on emails and whatnot. But that's the only reason. As time, again, evolved, it was okay to have the longer name. Yes, that's the story behind that.

Amanda Farmer: Oh, that is so fascinating, the sacrifices that were made by your parents' generation and your own there starting out to build a business here in this country, and then the next generation questioning, "Why the heck would you do that, dad? That's strange."

Bill Coles: It was a sacrifice, but it was also foresight, but it's also listening now and evolving. It's a combination of many things. Back then, assimilation was much better than it is now as well, I believe, so the immigrants back there really did want to assimilate and they wanted to become part of the Aussie culture. That's how it happened. Not only us, many people.

Amanda Farmer: Interesting. I'm very excited to see what the future of your business looks like, especially under the guidance of Simone. I'm looking forward to meeting her in person very soon now that we can get out there.

Bill Coles: Thank you so much. Obviously, I'm a proud dad, you know what I'm going to say, but I'll let her lead the way and show her dynamic ways and new ideas. Hopefully, people like that. I'm already getting some strata managers saying, "She does that better than you," and I say, "Thank you. I'm happy with that."

Amanda Farmer: Of course.

Bill Coles: That gives me confidence, and I get to see a bit of what my dad saw, I guess, in me when he handed over the reins to myself.

Amanda Farmer: Love it. I really admire family businesses.

Bill Coles: Sadly, we lost him last year, so that was a bit of a sad thing for the company.

Amanda Farmer: Sorry to hear that.

Bill Coles: Thank you. Thank you.

Amanda Farmer: But still going from strength to strength there, Bill, after so many years in this wonderful sector that you've served and has served you so well. Thank you for taking the time to share a bit about your story and what you're looking forward to in the future here with us today.

Bill Coles: Amanda, thank you for the opportunity and thank you for listening to my and our story. Hopefully it helps people along the way in the industry as well. Thank you.

Outro: Thank you for listening to Your Strata Property, the podcast which consistently delivers to property owners reliable and accurate information about their strata property. You can access all the information below this episode via the show notes at www.yourstrataproperty.com.au. You can also ask questions in the comment section, which Amanda will answer in her upcoming episodes. How can Amanda help you today?