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YSP Podcast Transcript: Episode 311. From the Ground Up - with John Coleman

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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 to this week's podcast episode. I'm Amanda Farmer, strata lawyer and podcast host and it's my job here each week to help demystify the legal complexities of apartment living. Two weeks ago, back in episode number 309, I kicked off our "Strata Powerhouse Series". That episode was the first of what I promised would be 3 interviews with some pretty special people in our strata sector. The first of such people was Bill Coles, sharing his philosophy of "Evolve or Dissolve". You'll hear our chat back in episode number 309. Last week, in episode number 310, we heard from Olivera Ferguson about how she has applied the principles learned from her life in the corporate world to that of strata management.

And this week, my third and final Strata Powerhouse interview is with John Coleman.

After graduating as captain of Sydney Technical High School in 1965. John won scholarships to the University of Sydney to study Arts, with majors in Latin and Modern History. He gained a Diploma in Education from the same university and began teaching History and English in state high schools from 1970 continuing to teach until December 1987. What does any of that have to do with strata, you may ask? Well in January 1988, John left the teaching profession and began work for a small glazing company called Express Glass. Over the next 33 years Express Glass, with John's involvement and direction has become the biggest glazing company in Australia, employing more than 200 people nationwide and, in addition, using a network of more than 250 contracted companies. As you'll hear in this chat, John began with Express Glass in Sales and Marketing and by 1997, he was the CEO of the company, a role in which he continued until 2006.

John is a fascinating man with a wide range of interests including sports; the arts; reading; travel; volunteer community work; and writing books on history, particularly of the local Sydney area.

John has written and published five books on various history topics, the two most recent being on World War One and, last year, he released "From the Ground Up", a history of Strata Community Association New South Wales and the strata industry.

Settle in, this is a wonderful ride through some of the incredibly colourful history of strata title in this country, told by a very accomplished, gracious individual. I'll take you over right now, to my chat, with John Coleman.

John Coleman, welcome to the show.

John Coleman: Thank you very much.

Amanda Farmer: John, you have been involved in our strata sector for many years and experienced many different iterations of strata. We've got a lot to talk about. Let's start with the beginning. It's a very good place to start. How did you come to be involved in strata?

John Coleman: I started in the strata industry when I started with Express Glass. I started there in 1988. I'd been a teacher for 20 years and I knew the family who ran Express Glass. In fact, I taught their son who is now my boss, who I mentored into the role at Express Glass. They made me an offer and I went for a year and stayed, in 1988. I didn't think I would stay, but we were only a small company, we only had about 10 or 12 employees, and my role was to build the business.

We'd just bought a smaller company which had strata clients. I didn't know much about strata, but I got to know these people. Clisdells were our very earliest clients, and people from Michael Roberts. I soon came to know that they were really lovely people and some of them are still there. They were very loyal. They were service-driven, they weren't price-driven. All they wanted was good service and to build a relationship. That suited us down to the ground and they were so easy to deal with. I thought there's other strata clients out there. We've got to get into this sector.

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And so we did. Within 12 months we had Bright & Duggan, Barrass Macarthur, and Bryant Strata, and New South Wales Strata, and a whole host of the bigger and mid-range clients. That's how I came to get involved in strata, and it's been a very rewarding relationship with those people. I haven't always dealt just with them. We do work for lots of the banks and the fastfood chains and the big retailers and that sort of thing. But, strata's always been a particular favourite of mine because of the people and the relationships that I was able to build.

Amanda Farmer: Am I right that your role, back then with Express Glass, was in sales and marketing?

John Coleman: Yes. When I first came to the business I said to my boss, who I'd known before, I can't hammer a nail in straight, let alone know anything about glass. He said, "I've got plenty of people who can do that. I just want you to put on a suit and go and call on people and expand the business." So, business development and marketing, and I wasn't sure that I could do that. But I thought I'd give it a go for a year, and I'm still here. Even though I did love teaching immensely, I didn't go back to it.

But yes, I was in sales and marketing. And then about 10 years after that, I was actually the CEO of Express Glass for about 10 years. And then I mentored the young man who was the son of the guy I went to work for originally, whom I'd taught at school, to be the CEO. And he's still the CEO. I must say, Adrian Grocott, the CEO now, young man, he does a much better job than his father did, and he does a much, much better job than I ever did. That's been a great journey to see him come on board and do that.

Amanda Farmer: Tell me about this change from teaching. You are a head teacher at a high school, as I understand it, and this shift into this role of putting on that suit and tie, getting out there, pounding the pavement, getting new clients, seems to me like two very different worlds. Am I wrong?

John Coleman: That was a very pronounced change. I majored in Latin and history. I don't think there's anybody else in the world in the glass industry who's got a degree in Latin, ancient, and modern history. As I say, I had no practical skills whatsoever, but the people who ran the business obviously thought that I could go out there and talk to people.

Plenty of people said to me, teachers can't do anything else. That was always a bit of a red rag to me. I was a bit like, watch this space. Probably one of the reasons I didn't go back to teaching is, I didn't want to admit that I couldn't hack it. I think teaching was changing at the time anyway, so it was a confluence of things. But I'm reasonably competitive and if people say teachers can't do anything, I just wanted to prove them wrong.

Obviously teachers have tremendous skills that are translatable into the corporate world. They were amazed that I could do a roster for a hundred people, when I said I had timetabled a whole school with 1,000 kids and 100 staff. Then business communication and that sort of stuff, and being able to critically analyse a problem and look at it with fresh eyes. So, it wasn't such a stretch. There are skills that you can take over. I've been fortunate enough to be able to employ other teachers as well and keep that going.

It was a bit of a stretch and a lot of people didn't think that I'd stay. The betting was, that I'd be back in teaching in a year. But no, I enjoyed what I was doing, and I've continued to have different experiences as I've gone on, and mentor lots of other people as well. It's been a great journey.

Amanda Farmer: You set about to build the strata client base of Express Glass. You said there earlier that these were great clients, they were easy, they were good to work with. What was it about the strata sector back then, that made this an enjoyable addition to the Express Glass client base?

John Coleman: One of the good things about visiting strata managers in those days, you almost had unfettered access to them. You can almost walk into their office without an appointment, just call at the reception and say, I'm here to see X, Y, and Z. In you'd go, you'd spend 20 minutes with each of them. You'd spend two hours at a place like Clisdells in the early days. You just walk straight into the office. Hi, John. In you'd go. You'd sit down and talk to each of them for 20 minutes, and two hours had gone.

You'd talk about any problems that they had and sort those out, but generally it was just catch up and build the relationship. It was

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just so easy. It wasn't just like that, the banks were the same, virtually. If you made an appointment, you could see a guy within a few days. That access was a lot easier in those days.

So, you got to build relationships. And there weren't the constraints about receiving a gift at Christmas time, or going to lunch, or taking them to the opera, or the football, or whatever. We had a really high power for those days, program of entertainment for clients. We had a box at the football stadium, we'd have a box at the tennis, we'd go to the opera house. My life was just very events management. In fact, my friends and people at Express Glass called me Sir Lunch-A-Lot, or the Minister of The Good Times, which was my role for a long time.

But that helped you build relationships, and you can do that to a certain extent these days, but it's not as easy. In fact, in the '90s, I started networking nights for ISTM, and golf days for the company, and then for ISTM as well. Those things continue right through to the present day. They were interesting times.

But there were the whole range of smaller companies in those days. There was only one big player, which was Alliance Strata. They were owned by a husband and wife, John and his wife, Janet Scoff. Lots of the people who now have started their own strata companies worked for Alliance. The numbers of people who worked there were huge. They were the only big player in Australia, all the others were mid-range, family companies, or one-man bands.

In fact, in the '90s, 35% of unit blocks were self-managed. They didn't have a manager at all. So, it was a vastly different industry and very family-oriented, very family-based, so you could build relationships quite easily with those people.

Amanda Farmer: You've mentioned there, John, the ISTM. There may be some of our listeners who don't know what that acronym is. If you could share with us, what the ISTM was, what it became, and then we might have a chat about the book that you launched last year.

John Coleman: The ISTM was the Institute of Strata Title Management. It began life in 1980. The strata Industry of Australia Legislation had been passed in 1961, but the professional body of strata managers started in 1980, and it became Strata Community Association (NSW) in around 2010, 2011. It's essentially the same organisation.

In fact, SCA has the same structure that was set up at the turn of the century, around 2000, of the chapters of licensed manager, associates and service providers. That was set up ISTM in about 2000, 2001. So, essentially it's the same organisation, but now it's part of a national body, whereas ISTM was very jealous of its preeminent position in Australia. New South Wales always thought they had more members, they had a better legislation, and they'd have to pay more money to the national body. Until about 2000, they really weren't interested in being part of a national body.

That's been one major change, but essentially ISTM and SCA are the one organisation that just progressed along the way.

Amanda Farmer: With your love of history and some more time on your hands in recent years, John, you have had a close look at the development of the strata sector in Australia. That resulted in a book that was published last year. Can you share a bit about the book and where the idea came from, for the book?

John Coleman: The book, it's called From The Ground Up. As I mentioned earlier, it started from a lunch, surprisingly. People who know me, they'd be unsurprising about that. I was having lunch with Phil Duggan and Robert Anderson and Francesco Andreone at a lovely restaurant, Bambini Trust, in the city, as we did every 3 months.

I made them a throwaway line, about 2007, has anybody ever thought about writing the history of this organisation? Phil Duggan said, "You should be talking to Chris, my son," who was the president of SCA. "You should be talking to him because he's been talking about getting someone to do it." I said, if somebody's going to do it, I want to do it myself.

I spoke to Chris that day, and the board came on board and then they said, yes, they'd love me to do it. I had to go and tell them about what I've done before and books I'd written before. But after that, I had their full support and I went away for two and a half

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years and interviewed about 80 to 100 of the people who'd been involved in strata, particularly in the early days. I thought it would be dry, dry as dish water, but it turned out that particularly some of the earlier people, had fantastic back stories, really great back stories.

The book traces the history of the legislation, how it started in 1961, and who were the people who were the main players in that. The two main players were a guy called John Bowman who wrote the legislation. He'd been in ANZAC military veteran, back in 1915. Then he fought in France and decided that was all too hard. He joined the Royal Flying Corps and flew against the Red Baron and Hermann Göring and all those people. Came back to Sydney, became a lawyer, became the Registrar General. And in 1958, started to write legislation for strata, in his spare time as a hobby, because there was a need for it.

The other guy who drove it was Dick Dusseldorp from Lend Lease, who started Lend Lease, who had a marvelous story being captured by the Germans in World War II, and taken to a work camp and escaping and coming to Australia. He drove the legislation. It was about the beginning of the legislation, and then it was also about the history of ISTM or SCA, and looking at all the people who were involved there. Some of those stories were terrific too.

If you know something about the industry or you're interested in it, it's quite a good book because you know the people who are involved, or some of the stories are great. If you're not interested in strata, it's probably a cure for insomnia.

Amanda Farmer: That's all right. If you're not interested in strata, you're probably not listening to this podcast.

John Coleman: Exactly.

Amanda Farmer: I think we have just the right audience here, John.

John Coleman: The book took two and a half years. It was supposed to be launched in 2020 for the 40th anniversary of ISTM's foundation, but COVID put a stop to that until November 2021. It was a great night during the conference last year, when it was launched. I think 5 or 600 have been distributed already.

Amanda Farmer: That's great. If our listeners want to get their hands on a copy, can they purchase it somewhere? Can we give them a link?

John Coleman: Yes, they can just go to SCA New South Wales and they've got copies. I think Scott Martin's been selling some of them, and I've got some copies as well, if they know me and they want a copy and haven't got one.

Amanda Farmer: Great, I'll make sure I put some direction in our show notes under this episode, so listeners know where to go to find out more. I would definitely like to get my hands on a copy and do a deep dive there, into the history of strata.

I know, John, that you continued to be involved with Express Glass until, I think, about 2006. I imagine you saw a lot of change in our strata sector in that time. You've mentioned already that the ease of access to strata managers, the family businesses that have now changed a little bit in our strata landscape with some larger conglomerates growing up. How else have you seen change? Do you think it's been for the better, it's been for the worse?

John Coleman: I think mainly it's been for the better. I think computerisation and digital technologies just revolutionised strata and made it far easier for strata managers to do the day-to-day hack work that used to take up so much of their time, and now concentrate on bigger issues. And there are lots of bigger issues these days. Digitisation of minutes and agendas and that sort of thing, in COVID times, have just revolutionised.

With Zoom meetings... I spoke to a girl yesterday from Bright & Duggan, who said, "People are running portfolios in one state and living in another state because they don't really have to ever appear all that often, and people are quite happy about doing that." I think that's been a real positive. And things like Macquarie Banks, debt payment scheme has just revolutionise the way people pay strata fees and that sort of thing.

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On a broader level, I think strata managers are better educated, but I'd like to see them even better educated, but the level of education is certainly much greater. I think that's a great thing. And the fact that SCA New South Wales is now part of our national body, I think is a great thing. I think in this state, they have become the preeminent go-to group for all things strata, which wasn't always the case. We used to have to compete with the REI and other groups.

But now, through some of the really terrific presidents we've had, I think every president we've ever had in the organisation, 14 of them, have added value to the organisation. We are now seen as the preeminent group for strata issues. I think that's a great thing. The fact that we've joined into a national body when we had this really parochial view 25 years ago, I think it's a great thing too. I think they're real improvements. There's still a way to go.

I touched on the fact that it would be great to have a degree course for strata managers, to put them on a similar level to other professional associations. I can't see any reason why departments of land economics can't have a strata in brackets. Bachelor of Land Economics and Master of Land Economics (Strata Management). There's enough material there to provide a really rigorous syllabus for that sort of course, and I think it'd be a great thing.

Amanda Farmer: I feel like we've been talking about that for many years, John, a degree course. I know from the perspective of lawyers, we would love to see strata managers have that higher level of education, be able to demand the authority that we see as lawyers we demand, simply because of that perception that we have that high level of education. What is it that's been standing in the way, do you think, of those qualified people out there to teach these courses? I imagine, is it universities or institutions not able to produce it?

John Coleman: I can't say that there's a lack of people to teach it. I just don't think there's been the will, either from the university's point of view or from the strata management side of things. But, I think as the SCA develops the clout and the significance with government and universities and other bodies, I can see that in the next 5 years that it could very well happen. I'm more confident about it now than before. There's no lack of people to teach it. There's no lack of material that could make a really rigorous course.

Given the fact that universities are struggling a bit, you would think that this is a terrific well to tap into. These are people here who are willing to pay. They're in Australia. This is a course, and there's thousands of them. Given the fact that unis are struggling to attract people from overseas again, this just seems like a no-brainer to me. I'm quite confident that it will happen. I think it'll be a real bonus for the industry.

Amanda Farmer: I think it'll be a game changer. I know our strata managers are just so busy. I was listening to you earlier talk about just walking into a strata manager's office and being able to sit down and have a chat. I'm sure I'm not the only one listening to that going, that would not happen today. Strata managers are hard-pressed to return phone calls and the emails that they get from their clients, let alone chatting to what we'd call a supplier, wanting to solve a problem for you.

I imagine, if this additional education was there and available, that would be the next challenge. To get strata managers to acknowledge, to understand, how valuable it would be to spend the time to do that kind of a course, and the dividends that it would pay down the track, in terms of, as I said, your authority, your ability to command higher fees, respect and understanding for the work that you do. The things that professionals enjoy, lawyers, accountants, engineers.

John Coleman: Accountants, engineers, that's exactly right, lawyers. It would be important too, to have principals of companies driving it as well and encouraging their staff and making it easier for their staff to do that, on the understanding that it's going to benefit their company. Lots of companies outside strata encourage their workers and employees to do courses, and help them with the finance for it, and help them with time off, and that sort of thing.

I can't see that strata's any different. The principals of strata companies should be pushing this along too, by giving some practical help and encouragement to their employees to do that, because it only benefits everyone in the long term.

Amanda Farmer: Aside from that wish, hope, prediction for a higher level of education, John, anything else that you see in the future of strata or would like to see the strata sector grow into?

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John Coleman: Yes, I'd certainly like to see a national set of strata legislation, rather than the piecemeal approach we've got now. We have standard driving laws, for instance, so it can't be that difficult. That's the layman. That's the next thing I think, because it just helps with portability of skills. You want to go to Western Australia and you're from New South Wales, it's difficult, or Queensland or Victoria. If you had a standard set of strata legislation, it would be far easier. I think the fact that we've now got a national strata body makes that more achievable. I think that's something I'd look to, and I'd be looking to make the national strata body as strong as possible.

The other fervent wish I have for New South Wales is, I'm looking for the next woman president of SCA New South Wales. We've had 1 out of 14 in 42 years. That, I think, really needs to be changed. There are so many dynamic, capable women who could do the job and I think would be great. That's something I really feel passionate about.

Amanda Farmer: Any ideas on how SCA might be able to work towards that goal?

John Coleman: I think they're already working towards it. I think, really, it's going to come down to tapping some women on the shoulder, saying, yes, you can do this and we'd like you to do it. There are already capable women on the board.

John Coleman: One of the things about being president I think is, it's rather difficult to be the president of SCA if you're from a small company. The demands on your time are just unbelievably huge, and getting bigger all the time. That's a bit sad, and I think we probably need to look at how we can make it easier for people from smaller companies to come on board as president. Even on the board, the demands on board members are huge.

The other thing you could do is quite revolutionary, I think for SCA, is that, you can open the presidency up to people other than strata managers. There are certainly lots of women who aren't strata managers who would be capable, from large companies. There are quite a number of large service providers who could support a woman who was in that role. Maybe a role change might accelerate the process as well, but it's certainly something I see as almost a must for us. We've had 1 woman president in 14, and I'm not denigrating into men.

As I say, every single president has worked really hard and added value to the organisation and the industry, but I think it's time.

Amanda Farmer: I'm glad to hear you call that out, John. Listening to you talk about the history of strata in this country, no doubt will we go and have a look at the book. I hear a lot of male names, I see a lot of men at these reunions and gatherings and celebrations of 40 years of history. That indeed is how it was then. I think one of the changes that we have seen for the better, is to see more women entering the space. What we're seeing now, at least in the last 10 years, is to see women moving up the ranks into those high-level positions.

But I agree with you, we do seem to have hit that glass ceiling when it comes to the SCA presidency, to name one area. I think we all need to be thinking hard about how we address that. I think it may be something revolutionary. Taps on the shoulder, definitely. Maybe quotas, maybe some mandated representation for women at that level is what we need.

John Coleman: I should add that there have been really strong women. Muriel Baraso was our first and only president. But there've been women like Maria Linders, who has been vice president of the organisation, and built a huge company, from scratch virtually. Judith Ferguson did the same, Margaret O'Connor, just to name a few. Certainly those women who've gone before have played a huge part in the industry. Would've been nice, perhaps, to see one of those women as president of the organisation, if they wanted to be. But certainly there have been some strong women who've been involved in board decisions and that sort of thing.

Amanda Farmer: Let's certainly hope that in 30 or 40 years time, someone, if it's not us, having a conversation about the recent, 40-year history of strata, is not saying the same thing. That there's been great women in this sector, but we haven't yet had a president.

John Coleman: You certainly won't be speaking to me in 40 years' time.

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Amanda Farmer: John, share with us, what are you up to these days? What's on the agenda for you at the moment? Are you still involved in strata?

John Coleman: I'm still involved with Express Glass. I still do two days a week and leveraging off the book. Adrian Grocott and Mark Jennings, who run Express Glass, have asked me to continue to do some stuff with them, writing monthly articles about interesting people in strata, either past or present. That's been good. I've written about 4 or 5 of those. Some have been on people in the past, and some have been on people who are coming along in the future.

I interviewed yesterday, Rina Kumar from Bright & Duggan, who was the strata manager of the year, last year. I think she's only 25 or 26. She was nominated twice as the rising star. And then third year, nominated as the strata manager of the year, and won the award. So, dynamic, younger people in the industry, and certainly people...

I'm writing an article about Max Dunn, who was the third president. And fought in the battle of Britain and was captured by the Germans and put into a prison camp after he bailed out of his aircraft over France and was in a POW camp for 4 or 5 years. Came back and had a full career before retiring and going into strata, because he didn't like retirement, and then became president. The Max Dunn Award is named after him. He's just got a wonderful story. I'm writing a few of these stories.

Amanda Farmer: I'll make sure we can get their web link for you. Are you publishing them on the Express Glass website or somewhere that we can have a read?

John Coleman: Yes, on the Express Glass website and also on LinkedIn. But I've written other books. I've just written a book on World War I that was published, and written other books, as well, on history. That's my passion, but my wife and I are great travelers and hopefully we're getting back into it this year, overseas. Fingers crossed.

So, I work a couple of days for Express and I've got more than enough to fill in the other 5 days of the week. Life's pretty good at the moment.

Amanda Farmer: Sounds like it. We have been very lucky to have you, John, as part of our strata space, and continuing to be in that space, recording that important history. If you don't do it, who will, I suppose is the mantra.

John Coleman: That was the aim. I realised that the people who'd started the industry were not getting any younger, and if we didn't strike while the iron was hot, we would miss the opportunity of getting their oral memories. That's proved to be the case sadly, with 3 or 4 people that I interviewed are no longer with us, very sadly. But luckily, we've been able to record their stories. I think it was timely and I'm pleased that I did it. It was great doing it, actually. I enjoyed it.

Amanda Farmer: It's been lovely speaking with you today. John Coleman, thank you for joining us on the show, and I hope to catch up with you in person sometime soon.

John Coleman: Pleasure, Amanda. Thank you very much.