Recovering from the 1982 recession and rebuilding the North American business proved more difficult than Andy Robertson had expected. The handful of people in the Denver office had survived the slump without too much difficulty, thanks to the solid projects they already had on the go. In fact, the Denver office grew from 13 to 18 in 1982–1984. Ian Hutchison continued to develop the water practice and John Welsh’s geotechnical section provided the bulk of the work, primarily the Thompson Creek tailings project. During his regular visits from Vancouver, Robertson was involved at an executive level — working on tenders or contract bids, reviewing major projects, recruiting staff, keeping track of the financials. Everyone was fairly independent in terms of pursuing clients and projects.
We were doing okay,” Hutchison says. “When I got there in 1981, we started getting more into groundwater and surface water management — building on what SRK was doing successfully in South Africa as we had with tailings.

Still, three problems were recognizable: The distinct technological advantage SRK enjoyed in geotechnical work — particularly its understanding of mine waste and how it behaved — had vanished by the early 1980s as the technology spread; at the same time, more and more American companies were taking at any connection with South Africa. More critically, for the North American operations, however, was that Welsh was feeling constrained by his relationship with SRK. In early 1983 particularly, Welsh was feeling restless. He nursed ambitions that were larger than SRK could satisfy. He wanted more freedom.

Like SRK’s founders, Welsh had big dreams. The allure of mining had captured his young imagination. His father had been a miner, but Jack Caldwell persuaded him to remain to handle the consultant: he wanted to sink a shaft, move a mountain. He became so disenchanted that he decided to leave the company that summer, but Welsh was feeling early. He wanted to be the miner, not just the consultant: he wanted to sink a shaft, move a mountain. He became so disenchanted that he decided to leave the company that summer, but Welsh was feeling restless. He nursed ambitions that were larger than SRK could satisfy. He wanted more freedom.

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In 1981, the Homestake job was the beginning of the company’s acquiring an understanding of mine-closure issues. The celebrated work, though, wasn’t enough to keep Welsh at SRK, and in October 1984, he moved to Reno and opened his own office. Mike Henderson went with him. Caldwell left the following year. “I was offered a job on a project with five years of secure work,” he recalls. “That would take the two older kids through high school. The city, Albuquerque, is warm and much like the Witwatersrand where I grew up; they offered me American citizenship; and the work was fascinating. In good times, small consulting companies are good; in bad times they are not.”

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Geochemically active slag was isolated by surrounding it with thick clay liners topped by 15-foot-deep clay caps topped by 5 feet of soil. Local dirt roads were watered to keep down the dust raised by the huge trucks moving tons of rock. It was a textbook case of mine planning and a model for how worked-out mines can have a second life.

That is not to say there weren’t problems. The amount of rock needing to be contained more than quintupled.

Still, Homestake reinvested about $1 dollar of every 40 operating dollars into environmental efforts. Some $2 million a year when ore was being extracted and waste rock piled for burial. The McLaughlin Mine demonstrated that hard rock mines could be both profitable and environmentally responsible — and that became a burning issue as the 1980s wore on and concerned citizens demanded a say in development.

The construction phase of the McLaughlin Mine in 1983 and 1984 also contributed substantially to the success of the company in North America. Welsh moved to the site to manage field engineering, quality assurance and quality control for the $200 million mine. He was accompanied at the site by Don Poulter, Tony Crews, Gordon McPhail and a staff of up to 25 inspectors and technicians.

Thanks to the reclamation work, native oaks now grow atop waste-rock dumps and no heavy metals from the mine have seeped into the downstream food chain.

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The departure of such high-profile talent was lamented.
Changing Times

Rob Dorey took the helm of the Denver geotechnical team — the largest U.S. practice — while Hutchison became president of SRK US. “We’d go down to South Africa about once a year,” Hutchison says. “And we would have a big pow-wow. I always had an excellent relationship with Oskar and a good relationship with Andy. Hendrik was more on the technical side, so we dealt less with him. But Oskar had a global view, an inspiring figure. Andy was more into the nitty-gritty details. I’d deal with Andy every week and Oskar probably once, twice a year.”

Dorey’s main task was the design of a massive tailings impoundment for the Thompson Creek Mine in Idaho. He created one of the largest artificial structures in North America.

Dorey and Hutchison grew the Denver office to more than 100 staff. “We had some of the best brains and best talent because we offered something special,” Dorey says. “Within the constraints of a fairly loose corporate structure, you could go off and do what you wanted. It attracted some brilliant people and those people were just bound to make an impact on an industry that was strangling itself to death in North America. We did a bunch of things that were unique.”

Mining changed in the 1980s, he explains. Clients had to consider all aspects of project development, regulatory approval and compliance for their project because of burgeoning environmental concerns, legislation and inspections. No part of a project could be designed in isolation anymore. SRK had a whole spectrum of specialists in its offices and a roster of people who could be called on when needed.

Dorey and others across SRK in those days maintained that requirements such as the environmental criteria for the World Bank approval of developmental funding were driving a uniform and international approach to the concerns around mine design and off-site impacts. Both development and operating projects carried the potential of long-term liability and “design for closure” was essential. SRK wanted to be a leader in that area.

Success, though, was dependent on the development of a strong technical and integrated multidisciplinary group of professionals who could provide specialist input on projects while keeping the larger picture in view. SRK’s work with Homestake was a paradigm of the kind of work SRK wanted to specialize in — multifaceted, multidisciplinary, state-of-the-art showcases.

But the company had to expand. That was imperative. Offices were opened in Reno, Seattle and Columbia, SC.

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MINING CHANGED IN THE 1980s. CLIENTS HAD TO CONSIDER ALL ASPECTS OF PROJECT DEVELOPMENT, REGULATORY APPROVAL AND COMPLIANCE FOR THEIR PROJECT BECAUSE OF BURGEONING ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS, LEGISLATION AND INSPECTIONS.
Reno

Dorey and Jeff Thatcher, who were running the permitting division in Denver, saw the potential in Nevada. They rented an apartment in Reno, registered SRKCA, and made regular marketing trips to the southwestern city. The work they landed, a steady stream of contracts, was done out of the Denver office. They were thinking of something more permanent when Debra Struhsacker in Denver announced she was considering a move to Reno. Her geologist husband had been transferred to Reno, so she offered to turn the apartment into a real office in 1986. Struhsacker was a geologist hired in late 1985 to work on environmental assessments related to mine-closure contracts that were a product of SRK’s expanding reputation from the Homestake project. The collapse of mineral prices increased the amount of work that came SRK’s way. Dorey and Thatcher thought she was perfect. Struhsacker found commercial space, hired a receptionist and hung out the SRK shingle.

In 1981, after weeks of searching for a place to live, Joseph McGinley, a specialist in industrial site cleanup and remediation, came aboard after Parshley. Born in August 1968. Born in Boston, Parshley grew up in New Jersey into a military family, McGinley had lived all over the U.S. before his father settled in Las Vegas. He graduated in 1980 with a degree in geological engineering from the Mackay School of Mines at the University of Nevada, Reno. He worked for a year and then did his master’s in civil engineering at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

McGinley returned to Vegas in 1983 to work as a geotechnical consultant. He hated it, and couldn’t wait to get back to Reno. In 1987, he saw an SRK ad in the newspaper, applied and flew out to meet Dorey and Thatcher, who hired him on the spot. Although McGinley joined SRK thinking he would be immersed in the mining world, he spent the next 15 years doing environmental regulation that SRK had anticipated had now materialised. Struhsacker’s first hire was Jeff Parshley, a geologist, in August 1988. Born in Boulder, Parshley grew up in Portland, Oregon. After he finished university, he drifted into exploration work with Chevron Resources, which still used a minerals division back then. Parshley was there for five days in deposition as part of the lawsuit that arose from the contamination. McGinley says, “It involved a number of SRK people. I spent five days in deposition as part of that. It was probably one of the largest projects in the state of Nevada at the time.”

McGinley established an underground storage tank team within SRK as a result. Under new federal regulations, owners of such tanks had to ensure they remained secure and didn’t leak. McGinley had done studies across the state and was the recognised specialist in how to deal with contaminants that had been released into surrounding soil or groundwater.
With both the Canadian and U.S. units of the company back on their feet and flourishing in late 1987, Andy Robertson again wanted to focus more on his entrepreneurial interests and his own projects. Once before, in 1981 when the North American business had taken off, he had considered handing over the reins to someone else and withdrawing from his day-to-day managerial responsibilities within SRK. Back then, Robertson had approached Keith Robinson, a geotechnical engineer running a rival consulting firm, and asked if he was interested in joining SRK. Robinson was well connected in Vancouver and seemed a perfect fit.

Born in Duncan on Vancouver Island during the Second World War, Robinson lived in Victoria's Oak Bay enclave until he was 11, when the family moved north to Vancouver. He graduated from UBC in civil engineering in 1962 and obtained a master’s degree in geotechnical engineering from the University of Illinois in 1964 under the supervision of the renowned Dr. Ralph Peck. He moved to Seattle to work for one of the city’s pre-eminent geotechnical and environmental consultants, Shannon and Wilson Inc.

On Good Friday of 1964, the Great Alaskan Earthquake hit — a magnitude of 9.2 on the Richter scale. Shannon and Wilson were retained for some of the restoration work, and Robinson found himself heading north to Anchorage. A year or so later, he moved to San Francisco to appraise dams for seismic upgrading in the East Bay district. With the Vietnam War raging and the draft posing a real threat, the Canadian-born Robinson decided to return home. In late 1972, Dames & Moore (D&M), a major consulting firm out of Los Angeles, hired him. D&M wanted an office in Vancouver, and Robinson found himself back in British Columbia under their shingle. He became a partner of D&M in 1977.

Robinson provided specialised tailings expertise within D&M, traveling extensively across the globe through the 1970s and 1980s. In 1980, D&M Canadianised the local firm by forming Robinson, Dames and Moore (RDM).

“I gave up partnership and took over 51 percent of Robinson, Dames and Moore,” he explains. Robertson first called him not long afterwards. “I just started RDM, but we did have some significant talks,” Robinson says. “I even went to South Africa for a week just to meet Oskar and Hendrik. I came back impressed, but the deal that Andy had offered me at the time was really only to be involved in the Canadian operation. It didn’t make any sense to me.”

However, while he was considering the deal, in 1982, he first shad a realisation his day-to-day commitments and himself, and Robinson and Robertson put the merger talks on hold. Coincidentally, D&M was having problems with its South African offices. The company offered to support Robinson’s Vancouver office staff and pay him to resuscitate the foundering operation. It didn’t make any sense to me, ” he explains. Robertson, who was a strong manager with proven business acumen, looked like a solution.

Adding impetus to the deal was that Robinson had been back from South Africa for about three years and he and D&M were not seeing eye-to-eye. “They had a worldwide practice, a couple of thousand people and the mining work. From then on, about 50 percent of my time was spent on individual projects and 50 percent running SRK. Andy was the CEO and chairman of the board. It went well.”

The two men struck a deal and SRK Robinson was born. It remained a separate legal entity from SRK Canada, housed in a separate office in nearby Burnaby. Robertson would manage both organisations in the new structure, allowing Robertson to take an organisational backseat.

“We bought D&M out,” Robinson says. “My old company did local civil geotechnical work and SRK did the mining work. From then on, about 50 percent of my time was spent on individual projects and 50 percent running SRK. Andy was the CEO and chairman of the board. It went well.”
There were seven or eight people with SRK-Robinson, a few more than with SRK Canada — still fewer than 20 in total. Cam Scott, who had joined the firm in 1986, describes it: “You could walk down the hall to talk to anyone in what we thought at the time was a wide range of disciplines. Under Andy’s leadership, I think we had grown to the point where SRK Canada needed a change to facilitate economic growth. It needed a different framework to grow to the next level.”

Robinson, for his part, directed his attention to growing management issues facing the company and its financial affairs. The firm was doing well in Canada, but for some reason lagging in the U.S., which was difficult to understand because the practice appeared to be booming.

Dorey, for instance, landed the Kennecott Ridgeway Gold Mine project, about 18 miles northeast of Columbia, South Carolina. It was the first truly cradle-to-grave project landed by SRK. The firm even opened an office in Columbia to oversee the work for the mine that operated from 1988 to 1999. SRK was brought in initially to do a feasibility-level assessment of the development. It was a relatively small mine in some aspects, but at that time in South Carolina it was a huge political issue.

SRK came up with the waste-management plan that laid out what the options were, where to put various facilities, how to minimise the footprint and how to minimise potential impacts. The overall concept envisaged two picturesque lakes replacing the two giant pits surrounded by rolling grassland once the ore body was depleted and the mine land reclaimed.

“We prepared the submissions to the local government agency there and they essentially bought into the concepts that we put forward,” Dorey says. “Then a local opposition group sprang up and we ended up in an appeal process with lots of public hearings. We went in front of a board of independently appointed reviewers; it was more like a court case. But we finally got the permit and built it.”

SRK involvement continued during production, providing technical oversight from both a waste- and tailings-management standpoint. The waste rock was fairly aggressive in terms of its acid-generating potential; SRK’s expertise kept it under control. At the end of the mine’s productive life, after just over a decade of operation, SRK executed the closure plan. The land was turned over to a local organisation. This project is one of the few in North America to achieve “walk-away” status.
Mudder says legislation such as the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the need for baseline studies, the rise of environmental concerns and public paranoia around anything to do with hazardous wastes meant permitting of mines became a new and complicated process. SRK realised it could use this work as a way of getting its foot in the door — the environmental and permitting work and the relationships it spawned were leveraged later to win engineering contracts.

Initially, SRK was alone in the field. The Redmond office also expanded its specialised technical capabilities by developing Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) effluent permits for most of the major mining operations in the western U.S. These permits allowed mining operations to discharge treated water into streams and rivers, thereby expanding the type and size of the operation that could be permitted under NEPA and the traditional Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process for which SRK was already a nationally recognised expert.

After three years’ work, Mudder and Adrian Smith (who had left the firm in 1986 but continued to work as a contractor on specific projects) produced a comprehensive text, The Chemistry and Treatment of Cytulation Wastes, as a result of the numerous projects they dealt with. Released in the fall of 1991, it was quickly hailed as a bible for the industry and set SRK apart.

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Leading the Charge on Mining Environmental Issues

Acid drainage and how to control it, for example, became an incredibly important element in SRK’s success. Although it’s not much of an issue for people, acid drainage is a killer in aquatic habitats. Previously ignored, it was recognised as a hazard after three mines in Norway were blamed for destroying a sweeping stretch of fish habitat. Government agencies around the globe were trying to come up with regulations and procedures. SRK led the way.

Robertson was part of the British Columbia Acid Mine Drainage Task Force that developed guidelines for the problem. He also participated in the Canadian federal government’s Mine Environmental Neutral Drainage (MEND) Program. He worked on prediction and control of acid drainage for a number of proposed, operating and abandoned mines — Canada Gold Project (City Resources), Wendy Craggy Project (Geddes Resources) and the Mount Washington Mine. Peter Hazley, John Brodie and Rob McLeans were key players on these projects.

Simultaneously, in the U.S., Hutchison, with Smith, Robertson, van Zyl, Henderson and Poulter of SRK, among other consultants, led the development of a more than 600-page state-of-the-art mine wastes disposal technology manual for the California Mining Association, an important component of which involved acid drainage. Hutchison and Poulter, too, were part of the remediation efforts on the Yak Tunnel and at the Walker Mine.

Still, SRK North America came to suffer from the same growing pains as SRK South Africa. Although there were individual offices located geographically where it appeared to make sense, they all worked in a global industry. They found themselves bumping into each other. There were issues around two offices unwittingly bidding for the same work, questions about inter-office billing when a South African expert worked on a Canadian project and occasional squabbles about fees collected from each SRK unit for collective costs and investments.

It was the dawning of a new era.
WE KIND OF GOT THROWN INTO A LOT AT SRK

was the beginning of the switch to a more environmental focus in my career. Although it was precipitated by an event outside of my control rather than something I chose to do, it ended up being wonderful.

David Bentel arrived from South Africa in May 1991 to take the reins in Reno. Another graduate from Wits, he had been with SRK for 13 years, specialising in tailings and dam systems along with the identification and remediation of environmental hazards. Reno was a lot of culture shock after the Orange Free State.

"I got a fax from Rob Dorey offering me the job," Bentel recalls. "So I sent him a fax back the next morning saying I accepted, because my mantra is: life should not be a series of missed opportunities. South Africa was changing and I could see that. I had a lot of motivation to stay, but you know, an opportunity like this is something you don't let go begging. I didn't want to miss it. " But it didn't take long before Bentel saw that the relationships between the North and the South American offices needed to be a lot more integrated. He had seen first-hand in South Africa how problems with the company's internal architecture could affect the business overall, the organisational issues with which SRK was tough in the 1980s. Prices were depressed.

"I was hired to get the practice going, but oddly, " Bentel says. "I wasn't interested in a lot of small jobs; he wanted to take the reins in Reno. Another graduate from Wits, Bentel ended up in graduate school in Ontario. That led to a job with a local research group and a job in The Netherlands. After four years, he and his wife wanted to be closer to their families. "I was doing a consulting job up in Alaska and flew through Vancouver," he recalls. "I went to a job interview at the University of British Columbia and asked, who's fun to work for in Vancouver these days? He said to call Andy Robertson." He did, and that afternoon he met with Robertson and Hockley.

"They questioned our data and our conclusions, but Kelly Sexsmith and I persisted; Andy Robertson backed us up. We were right, and the client stayed with us for the long term in spite of the bad news we delivered. "

The next big project was in Wismut, in the former East Germany, where SRK had landed a contract to deal with uranium tailings from what, until then, had been a secret mining industry. After the two sides met, Western authorities discovered a massive complex that had been supplying most of the uranium to the Soviet bloc since the end of the Cold War.

"We were making reasonable money, but there wasn't a huge growth market," Hutchison says. "SRK had a common style of running a company, which I felt took too much time away from project work. The partners were spending, I think, too high a percentage of their time on managing themselves and the company."

Hutchison left to join Environmental Solutions, a California company doing both mining and hazardous-waste remediation work, which was a large and rapidly growing market at the time — and one fraught with technical and legal challenges.

"The firm was not working well internally with multiple offices and people bumping into each other around the firm, partners were talking about it — but how to act on the concerns, especially when there was always work to be done!"

The work brought new specialists such as Daryl Hockley, who joined the Vancouver office in 1992. There were 12 to 15 people working primarily in the waste management side of mining — dealing with tailings and acid drainage — at that time. Bentel had raised in R.C., Hockley ended up in North America Challenges 1999

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PROJECT: Wismut Remediation

CLIENT: Wismut GmbH

PROJECT: Closure and remediation of the Ronneburg uranium-mining district in eastern Germany.

SCOPE: Uranium mining in the former East Germany began in 1950 and lasted until shortly after German reunification in 1990. The Ronneburg district then became the site of one of the world's largest mine-closure projects. SRK worked with Wismut GmbH to develop and implement remediation plans for the entire area.

More than four decades of uranium production around the town of Ronneburg and its neighbouring villages had left behind multiple underground mines, 1 open pit and 14 waste-rock piles. The total impacted area was roughly 35 square kilometres. The emission of radioactive gas and water-borne contaminants was a concern, and the acid-generating waste rock posed a significant threat to local surface water and groundwater.

For the initial project, the Vancouver-based team decided to develop a complete understanding of the Ronneburg district — geology, mining history, surface water resources, groundwater and regulatory requirements — much more than consultants concerned only with the project budget would have done. Yet it was time well spent. The benefits of that investment proved invaluable on subsequent Wismut projects over the next decade.

The first job at Wismut involved support for the decommissioning and flooding of the extensive network of underground mine workings, highlighting the importance of remediating the surface waste rock that became the focus of SRK's efforts. SRK developed a preliminary design for relocating waste rock to the Lichtenberg pit and placing it in a series of layers to limit future acid generation. SRK's geo-environmental engineers designed and assisted with extensive laboratory and field tests to delineate the most problematic waste and determine the lime amendment needs. Its mine planners produced programs to sequence and control the relocation so that the worst acid-generating material was amended with lime and placed in the bottom of the pit where it would be flooded by groundwater.

SRK's later work included periodic progress reviews along with the design and testing of soil covers to be constructed on the surface of the backfilled waste.

OUTCOME: Between 1991 and 2008, 12 dumps comprising 125 million cubic metres of waste-rock material were moved to the Lichtenberg pit, and by 2012, more than 210 hectares of the new surface had been safely capped with a two-layer soil covering. The former waste dumps have now been remediated and a 19-kilometre trail network has been constructed on the backfilled pit, returning the entire area to safe public use.


Photos © Wismut GmbH
Second World War. The contamination from the lack of safety procedures was extensive, and some $13 billion was allocated for remediation. It was a huge job, and it cemented SRK’s reputation in the mine-closure world.

For the following decade, Hockley, John Chapman and a multi-hyphenated Canadian-Austrian engineer-geologist-translator named Helmut Wober went back and forth not only monitoring the project, but also watching a nation changing from Stalinist to modern times.

A Groundswell of Frustration

SRK North America had grown in size to more than 100 people by the early 1990s. Yet the profits flowing from the U.S. practice remained lacklustre. Neither Robertson nor Robinson could quite figure out how to fix it. Both could sense a growing discontent within the overall practice. Some problems were nothing more than the standard disagreements that arise among large groups of professionals. Some reflected deeper clashes in views about how SRK should develop in North America and how it should develop internationally.

Robertson and Robinson were the major shareholders within the North American group, holding control and making most decisions; that chafed on some. There were also concerns about Robertson’s entrepreneurial pursuits and the amount of SRK group cash used to finance them.

“There was a groundswell of frustration among the consultant practitioners,” Robinson says. “It all came to a head — eventually. It took a while, but Oskar Steffen got involved and came to North America. He basically said, ‘Look, we’ve got to change this.’”

Robertson felt torn. He wanted to find a way of working at SRK in a capacity that appealed to him.

“I told the partners the role I was playing did not work for me; I wanted to step back from the business side and focus more on my practice and other ventures,” Robertson says. “I think Oskar took it quite personally. Oskar’s always been the father figure for the company because he has such a big presence. It wasn’t that I wanted to leave — I simply no longer wanted to be involved in running the business from the top-end.”

But with SRK North America’s complicated share structure and its interconnectedness to the other companies, it was difficult for Robertson to give up managerial responsibility without also changing his shareholding status. That would entail substantial tax liability for everyone involved, Robertson as well as the other SRK shareholders. And there were other forces at play within SRK.

SRK was confronting on an international scale structural problems similar to those that in 1988 bedeviled the South African practice — growth brought its own serious challenges. Aside from the sprawling South African unit and what was happening in North America, SRK was on the cusp of truly establishing itself in the United Kingdom. What had been little more than an address in southeast England throughout most of the 1980s was a going concern by 1993, thanks to the ex-pats who returned home from SRK South Africa. As well, there was so much work in South America that a Chilean-based continental consultancy was being mulled over. SRK was at a critical juncture in its institutional life, a generational crossroads that posed vital questions about the company’s core values and corporate succession. The firm’s tremendous growth, its moves into the U.K. and South America, would bring the organisational issues to a head.