



FOREWORD

RICHARD STEER, CHAIR, GLEEDS WORLDWIDE



Despite a global population exceeding eight billion, around half of whom are female, the construction sector has so far failed to succeed in becoming as diverse as the people it serves. There still exists a perception of an industry dominated by muddy boots, hard hats and heavy machinery that belies the incredible range of careers it offers and the huge strides that have been taken towards promoting gender equality in recent history.

We are making progress, but there is undeniably an incredibly long way to go – which is why it is so important to amplify the voices of the many women carving out their place in this male-dominated space, breaking down barriers to access not only for themselves but also for the talented women who will follow after them.

In the following pages, we hear from some of the inspiring women shaping the landscape of the built environment on the world's stage today. From architects and engineers to project managers and tradeswomen across the globe, each conversation offers an insight into their trials and triumphs as they have risen to prominence in a field where they might once have been considered outliers. They discuss the lessons they have learnt, share their wisdom and set out their visions for the future.

I am no stranger to strong women and am proud to have met and worked alongside some of construction's most impressive female change-makers, but this collection of interviews has once again affirmed my admiration and respect for all those who

Each conversation offers an insight into their trials and triumphs as they have risen to prominence in a field where they might once have been considered outliers

Richard Steer
Chair, Gleeds Worldwide

choose to venture into an industry which has for too long failed to set out the welcome mat. It is a celebration of diversity, inclusion and empowerment – and a fantastic call to action for all those women and girls who dream of shaping the places and spaces of tomorrow.

Further, these interviews affirm my optimism that the industry in which I have worked for so many years is moving towards a more diverse, inclusive future – thanks in no small part to the efforts of

these trailblazers. I celebrate not only their personal successes but also their collective success in shifting the dial and showing us that the built environment can be a place where everyone can prosper. I'd like to thank each and every one of them for taking the time to share with us the captivating stories of their careers to date, and I look forward to seeing what comes next for them and for the next generation of women in construction whom they will undoubtedly inspire.





CHLOE MCCULLOCH, EDITORIAL DIRECTOR, BUILDING



The stated purpose of International Women's Day is: "Celebrate women's achievement. Raise awareness about discrimination. Take action to drive gender parity." Construction, given its track record on under-representing women in its workforce, can make a big contribution towards this aim.

In the UK, women make up just under 16% of the construction workforce – and only a fraction of those have site-based roles. This country is not alone; construction around the world is overwhelmingly still a male domain.

Which is why the stories from the 12 women we are profiling for this publication are so powerful. Their experiences are drawn from across five different continents and cover the full range of skills needed by the industry.

Some of our interviewees were encouraged into a construction-related career because they had family already working in the sector; others had a hunch it would suit them and took a leap of faith. What is common to all of them is that they faced some sort of barrier along the way during their careers, either because of wider societal pressures or because they were made to feel different in the workplace.

None of that has stopped them. In fact, it seems to have spurred them on to redouble their efforts and keep doing the work they enjoy most.

Reading about exactly how they have all managed to achieve their own professional ambitions is fascinating.

Kim Kyung Shin in South Korea, for example, says it was curiosity that led her into becoming a crane operator in Seoul – she had the self-belief that she could learn the technical skills and went for it. Having proved to herself and others that she was more than capable, she has progressed to representing other workers through one of the country's trade unions, becoming an activist for women workers' rights.

Each of the 12 accounts is unique, but all reflect an awareness that women are not operating on a level playing field and all share a desire to

Talent, ambition and determination are all traits these women share... though they acknowledge the support from others to get to powerful roles

Chloë McCulloch
Editorial director, Building

do something to bring about wider change.

Talent, ambition and determination are all traits these women share and could largely be said to have got them where they are today. Even so, they

also acknowledge the support they received from other people in their lives that enabled them to get to the powerful roles they now enjoy. Which means they have been able, in turn, to help other women succeed.

We do, of course, have a long way to go to achieve gender parity in construction, which ultimately will benefit men as well as women. These uplifting stories show progress is possible. As Kirsty Shrubbsall at Sir Robert McAlpine says: "If you can't see it, you can't be it."

I certainly intend to tell my primary school-aged daughter about these women and their successes in construction so she knows just what is possible in the future.





SARAH BALL, PRINCIPAL, WOODS BAGOT



From my perspective, it's not necessarily about attracting women into architecture; it's about retaining them," says Sarah Ball, principal and Melbourne studio hub chair at Woods Bagot.

"The ratio is 50:50 out of university – but that drops off as you move towards the more senior roles within practices. That's something we as an industry and a practice really have started focusing on."

Ball, who lives in Melbourne, also leads Woods Bagot's studios in Adelaide and Auckland, meaning she heads a team of around 150 people in total – and she says she is incredibly proud of the fact that her senior leadership team is 50% men and 50% women. In fact, says Ball, this flows down through the various tiers of roles within the Melbourne studio hub.

She believes some of the attrition rate in the industry as

a whole has to do with having children and the way the sector functions. Ball says it is imperative that more is done to make architecture attractive to women returning to work after maternity leave. She says a portion of this is definitely down to increasing the flexibility available within roles.

Asked about her own path into the industry, Ball – who has been with Woods Bagot for 18 years – is frank in her response. "Full disclosure: my dad is an architect, but I wouldn't say he encouraged me into it. I would simply say I was well aware of it," she explains.

"It was also my art teacher who suggested it as route worth pursuing."

Ball, who is also the practice's lead for science and education, explains that she had always had dual passions which made architecture a wise choice: she loved both the creative and logical side, having studied not only art but also two types of maths and physics in her last year of school.

"Architecture makes you feel something, and it has to work, so it really combined those two sides of me," she explains.

When considering how she has progressed to the role she now holds, Ball says it has been a combination of incredibly hard work and dedication along with being in the right place at the right time.

"When I joined Woods Bagot, they were looking to expand the business, to expand the shareholding, so I became a shareholder in the business at



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Sarah Ball,
Principal, Woods Bagot

quite a young age," she says. Ball adds that becoming a leader within the business at a young age and maintaining the role and continuing to grow within it was one of her biggest career achievements.

But Ball says her greatest achievement is being a mum to her three-year-old son. She says it has taught her more about balancing priorities, as well as

deepening her understanding of the world – making her consider the importance of the world we leave behind us.

She says the strongest endorsement she has for the sector is that she still loves it every day.

So, what would her advice be for women considering architecture as a career? "Do it; just do it. It's a challenging industry – but it's an incredible industry," she says. "We clearly make up 50% of the population, so it's important we are involved in crafting the built environment in which we all work. It's something you must love and want to do."

Ball says it is also important to make sure you have a voice and use it, and that you are willing to advocate for yourself and find the people who are willing to support and advocate for you. "There's no limits as to where it can take you," she concludes. "We need people who care about the quality of the built environment."



KIMBERLY DOWDELL, PRESIDENT, AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF ARCHITECTS

“My biggest career challenge is wanting to do so many different things and having to prioritise them,” says Kimberly Dowdell, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) 2024 president and director of strategic relationships at architecture firm HOK.

This urge to do as much as she can in the industry she is so passionate about is clear when speaking to Dowdell – who is in the midst of juggling her year-long stint as AIA president with her responsibilities at HOK. Neither is a small ask.

The AIA role sees her lead an organisation of 98,000 architects

and affiliated professionals, across 200 chapters mostly in the US but also elsewhere in the world.

At HOK she is responsible for ensuring that its 24 global studios are connecting and working together, as well as with clients, in a cohesive manner.

On top of this, she holds another role within the firm as a co-chair of its diversity advisory council – leading on HOK’s approaches and policies for diversity, equity and belonging.

If her current volume of work is not enough to show Dowdell’s unquestionable love for the architecture industry, her path into the sector definitely does.

Asked when she was first drawn to architecture, Dowdell says she was in middle school. “When I was growing up, Detroit was experiencing quite a bit of disinvestment and beautiful buildings were falling into disuse,” she explains. “I had just learnt in art class in middle school what an architect was, and I couldn’t help but think: if I become an architect, I can help this.”

She says that her initial idea on how to do this, which she now describes as reactivating boarded-up buildings in Detroit, saw her first attain an architecture degree at Cornell University – the only institution in the Ivy League to offer a bachelor of architecture degree – and then take a master’s in public administration, urban policy and real estate development at Harvard Kennedy School.

Given this background, it is perhaps unsurprising that Dowdell sees it as a professional

responsibility to ensure that architecture is doing good. She says: “I see the role of the architect as being to plant the seeds of what is possible; they need to be very conscious of doing good for the community they are looking to serve.”

This is why she is using her year as AIA president to advocate for cities to have chief architect positions, explains Dowdell. She says having a chief architect advise mayors on issues such as climate action, affordable housing and health equity could be invaluable in delivering good through projects.

For similar reasons, she says, it is imperative to grow the number of women and those from other under-represented demographics in the profession. “The architecture profession should reflect the community they are looking to serve. That’s the reason I have done the work I have done,” she says.

In terms of attracting women into the industry, she says there is still some way to go. “It is important people can see role models they can relate to in leadership positions; it’s part of the reason I ran for AIA president,” Dowdell explains.

She is the first millennial president of the AIA, meaning she is a role model for not only women and people of colour but also the next generation of architects. “We aren’t seeing those groups elevated, so I hope that providing visibility shows there are pathways,” she says.

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Kimberly Dowdell,
President, AIA





DAGMAR FRITZ-KRAMER, CEO, BAUFRITZ



“During my time at school, I had no personal plans to work at Baufritz (the family firm). My parents didn’t talk much about what was happening in the company on a day-to-day basis, and so I initially had no real idea how I could contribute my talents to the company,” says Dagmar Fritz-Kramer, the CEO and now owner of Baufritz – a German manufacturer of sustainable timber frame homes.

The family-owned business, which is based in Erkheim, in the south of the country, now employs 300 people and has been a pioneer of sustainable construction for decades.

Despite the family history, it was not a foregone conclusion that Fritz-Kramer’s path would be in construction and housing.

A creative flair saw the now mother of two spend her university years studying interior design, but within 12 months of graduating it had become

clear the family business was more than in her blood – it was in her heart too.

She left university in 1998, started at the company as an interior designer in 1999 and by 2004 was running the show. “By then, I had the confidence and experience to take over the management. Together with a co-managing director, I have been responsible for the operational management of the company ever since,” she says.

Despite her rise to the top in the sustainable housing space in Germany, Fritz-Kramer is only too aware that there is still a perception problem for construction in her country which acts as a barrier to entry for many, especially women.

The innovative nature of her business has also been, for Fritz-Kramer, part of the longstanding devotion to her work. “We have developed several patents over the years. Today we have around 40 to 50 of them. For example, the patented HOIZ natural insulation – made with wood shavings – is the world’s first sustainable ecological insulation. It has been certified with the cradle-to-cradle gold standard.”

She says the industry is still often viewed as both “dirty” and lacking in the flexibility many women require to balance work and family pressures.

She says the latter of these in particular is a factor of which she has always been only too acutely aware. “As a mother of two children, I have always understood the challenge of reconciling work and family



life for myself and its under-representation,” she says. “Our head office is in a rural area of Bavaria where we have to do everything we can to attract women to the countryside.”

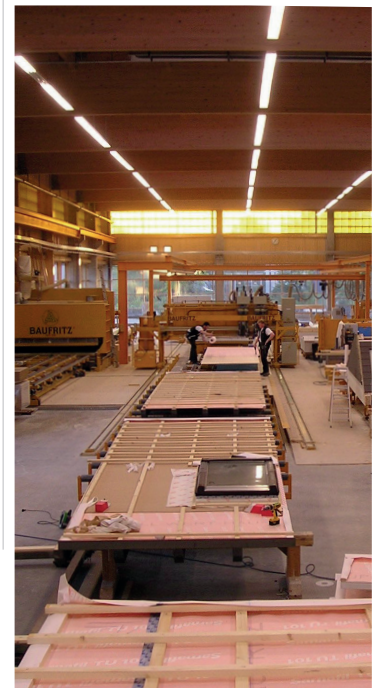
She says that her company is attempting to support women within the business through flexible working options, regardless of experience level,

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Dagmar Fritz-Kramer,
CEO, Baufritz

along with business coaching and mentorship in order to support them into increasingly more senior roles if that is what they wish to achieve. “We have some inspiring women working with us. I am one of them, but fortunately by far not the only one,” she says.

Fritz-Kramer adds that women hoping for opportunities within the built environment should look to work in businesses where there is a culture of open dialogue. She says that if businesses are not open to having the necessary conversations and unpacking the challenges through open discussion, then it is much more challenging for women to feel empowered within the workplace – regardless of if they are managers, whether they’ve had to take career breaks or are just starting out.





TRACEY HUNTE, **COUNTRY DIRECTOR FOR QATAR, MACE**

An architect and design professional, as well as a project and business leader, Mace's country director in Qatar, Tracey Hunte, has no shortage of experience or advice to share.

With more than two decades of experience – Hunte has worked in the Middle East, New Zealand, the US and the UK – her perspective on built environment careers is as well-informed and varied as you might imagine.

"The way to flourish in varied cultural environments is to be more accepting of cultural differences," she says. "Once you can accept a different cultural context, it allows for you to succeed in that arena. It can't be considered a

hindrance – you need to work with the stakeholders; you need to operate in the same way but from a different perspective."

Her built environment career began as an architect in Washington DC in the year 2000, followed by stints in New Zealand and Bahrain in various design and project roles.

Following a stint in the UK, the opportunity to join and subsequently lead Mace's team in Qatar presented itself – an opportunity Hunte describes as among her greatest challenges and achievements.

"The role as country director for the business unit in Qatar has been a stretch for me, and of course it hasn't been without its

challenges," she explains.

"But it is the kind of stretch that is so rewarding. It's been really, really rewarding to see the way colleagues from Mace both within the Middle East and wider business have been there to support me and the operations of the business here in Qatar."

This ability to have others to learn and bounce ideas off is something she feels is very important for women in built environment careers.

"Mentorship is important, of course. But I believe it is important for women to have a diversity of mentors. People tend to stay within their comfort zone – they tend to look for someone who is a mirror reflection of themselves to mentor them," she says. "But we really should be looking for those who are different, whether from a gender perspective, cultural aspect, or those from a different background. That's how we learn."

She says this is also key to driving inclusion within businesses and the industry at large, as it creates links between a wide range of people.

That being said, Hunte also lists her experience with the Women for the Future group in 2021 – a selected cohort within Mace – as being particularly instrumental in her career. The group was designed to help participants reach their potential by building their skills, networks and confidence.

"It was meaningful to connect with others within the business who have similar goals, wanted to redefine their own boundaries

Mentorship is important, of course. But I believe it is important for women to have a diversity of mentors. People tend to stay within their comfort zone – they tend to look for someone who is a mirror reflection of themselves to mentor them

Tracey Hunte
Country director for Qatar, Mace

and were prepared to be challenged as well as rewarded," she says.

She adds that it has been great to look back and see the achievements of all those who had been in the group over the passing years.

Despite all her achievements in business, Hunte says that being a mother to her two daughters is the biggest achievement in her life. She says she takes every opportunity to share experiences with her daughters and goes into their schools quarterly to speak about her career and being a working mother.

"If my daughter turns to me when I'm off to a Google women's workshop group and says, 'Mum, when I grow up I want to be as strong as you are,' that for me is a win," she says.





TETIANA KANASHCHUK, SUSTAINABILITY CONSULTANT, GLEEDS UKRAINE

Tetiana Kanashchuk's past two years have been more challenging than most people on the planet could imagine. A sustainability consultant in Gleeds' Ukrainian business, Kanashchuk has spent the past couple of years living with the ongoing conflict with Russia.

But Kanashchuk, who lives with her 10-year-old son in a small town near Kyiv, speaks with a passion and optimism that many in more stable situations would struggle to produce.

"Things have improved from 12 months ago," she explains. "This winter was better than the previous when we had a lot of blackouts and Gleeds had to help us with appliances. We did not have blackouts this year, so things are definitely better."

She continues with discussion of balancing her ongoing

commitment to her work with the responsibilities of being a mother – saying her son nearing teenagerhood has helped her resilience continue to grow.

But what is clear when speaking with Kanashchuk is that resilience is something she has in spades.

Her journey into construction was not typical – not least because it has traditionally been an incredibly rare route for women in Ukraine.

She joined Gleeds as an office manager and pursued a number of qualifications once in work to develop further skills and expertise in both construction and sustainability.

"It was a challenge. At that time my child was a small toddler; it was tricky to juggle," she says. "I had to do things like scheduling mock exams for

5am to guarantee uninterrupted time. Parenting and learning, along with ongoing work, were a lot of different threads to keep together.

"I originally moved into marketing, and then when the market in Ukraine was ready for sustainability, I pursued that," Kanashchuk says. She explains that sustainability in Ukraine had been behind other parts of the world, and at the time when she finished her BREEAM assessor qualification it was still no more than a burgeoning sub-market.

"At that time there were about five assessors for the whole country – it was a brand-new thing for the country," she says. "The market grew and grew, and that also meant my path within Gleeds grew. I was supported by our sustainability teams from other offices, though – they already had the experience."

When asked for her heroines within the sector, Kanashchuk names three colleagues from within the Gleeds Ukraine team.

The first is Svitlana Bozhko, senior project and cost manager, who will next year be celebrating her 20-year anniversary with Gleeds.

Kanashchuk says Bozhko, who is the former general director of Gleeds Ukraine, is a role model for her as a woman in a leadership position in an industry that has very much been considered a male-only sphere.

She also has the utmost respect for Valeriia Garkavenko, senior works specialist – mechanical, and Oleksandra Harashchenko,

junior cost manager, who she says have both shown a passion and commitment for the industry they have chosen to join.

Asked whether she would consider herself a role model for other women aspiring to enter the built environment, Kanashchuk replies: "I would love to believe so, yes. My hope is that everyone I engage with would feel inspired to grow, learn and realise that anything is possible if you really want it."

So, what would Kanashchuk's message be to other Ukrainian women considering a career in construction? "Be brave. Our women are brave – and we have no choice but to go into spheres that have not been popular with women, to rebuild the country," she concludes. "It will be our will to carry on and survive that sees us recover and rebuild – which we already are."



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Tetiana Kanashchuk
Sustainability consultant, Gleeds Ukraine



KIM KYUNG SHIN, TOWER CRANE OPERATOR



A tower crane operator in Seoul, South Korea, Kim Kyung Shin has paved a fascinating route through the construction sector – and continues to play a significant role in carving out an improved path for other women who want to follow in her footsteps.

“There are so many things women can do on construction sites if we just forget about the stereotypes about men’s work and women’s work,” she says.

Kim’s journey into construction began with a key consideration: what sort of career would best suit her, regardless of gender stereotypes within her country.

She says she felt sure that a typical office job would not suit her, nor a more technical career route, so she sought out a job in the heavy machinery field.

“At that time, working as a tower crane operator at a high altitude looked cool to me and I was curious about the job.

I decided to try it,” Kim explains. She says it took three months of training to get a certificate at a heavy equipment institute, before starting work for a tower crane rental company, which provides clients with the machinery and operators who run it.

But, Kim says, her most career-defining moments have not happened in the cab of a crane but rather from her work within the Korean Construction Workers Union (KCWU), which is affiliated to the Korean Federation of Construction Industry Trade Unions (KFCITU) and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), over the course of more than 15 years. This has culminated in Kim working as a vice chairperson of the KFCITU for six years and serving as the chairperson of the BWI (Building and Wood Workers’ International) Asia-Pacific Women’s Committee for five years until 2021.

Talking about her career as an activist for women on construction sites, Kim says she owes a lot to those who had introduced a mandatory female representation rule in the union, adding that without the rule she would never have had the chance to engage in the international women’s committee.

She says the rule is particularly important as more than 90% of construction workers in South Korea are men, which means electing women leaders and carrying out women’s initiatives can be very difficult.

“The hardest part of working on initiatives for women in a

construction trade union was to make people realise that there are also women workers at construction sites,” Kim says. “It was and still is very difficult for me to see that people are talking about women workers and not doing anything about them, or women’s issues are always pushed back in priority.”

Asked what can attract more women into construction, Kim says the working environment needs to be improved a lot.

She says that while the number of women working in construction is increasing, there is still a lack of basic amenities such as female restrooms and locker rooms. Kim does say these are on the rise.

She also adds that educational institutions and systems should be created to improve women’s skills so they can work as skilled rather than unskilled workers on construction sites.

Kim says the influx of women into the construction industry will grow rapidly if they are provided with sustainable conditions and opportunities rather than being offered only auxiliary jobs at lower wages.

There are so many things women can do on construction sites if we just forget about the stereotypes about men’s work and women’s work

Kim Kyung Shin,
Tower crane operator





DORIS OKECHUKWU MBADIWE, DEPUTY MANAGING DIRECTOR, INTER-BAU CONSTRUCTION



Having graduated from Carleton University in Canada, Buckingham University and UCL in the UK and Nigeria Law School, it is perhaps unsurprising that Nigerian-born Doris Okechukwu Mbadiwe has gone on to be a construction industry leader in her country.

She is not only a lawyer but also the deputy managing director at Inter-Bau Construction, an award-winning indigenous construction company in Nigeria that has been operational for more than four decades. The firm specialises in building and civil engineering works, erosion control and engineering consultancy, carrying out mostly federal and state capital projects.

But Mbadiwe says that despite her clear passion for the construction sector, it was not always on the cards for her as a career. She says: "It was not

always the plan; my entry into the construction industry was as the company secretary for Inter-Bau Construction."

After holding this position for nine years, she was elevated to the position of executive director, then later promoted to the position of deputy managing director.

During her initial nine-year stint as the firm's legal adviser, Mbadiwe looked to embed herself in the industry by taking courses in business and project management, as well as learning from the construction professionals around her.

"All these endeavours were driven by the passion I developed to be part of shaping the built environment, contribute to sustainable infrastructure development and the desire to see more women participate at all levels in the industry," she says.

On this last point Mbadiwe has been a particular advocate, serving as a board member for Inter-Bau Foundation for Women and Youth, a non-profit organisation established to bridge the skills and gender gap in the Nigerian construction industry. Since its inception in 2021, the foundation has trained around 80 women and young people in vocational construction skills and reached more than 3,000 girls and women in its activities to move construction into the mainstream for these demographics.

She is also the construction sector lead for Nigeria and

All these endeavours were driven by the passion I developed to be part of shaping the built environment, contribute to sustainable infrastructure development and see more women participate

*Doris Okechukwu Mbadiwe,
Deputy MD, Inter-Bau Construction*

West Africa at Women in Infrastructure Community Africa, an organisation that advocates and builds capacity for women to work on sustainable infrastructure development.

Mbadiwe's work in these organisations has been driven by the wish to tackle the barriers within the sector that she herself initially felt obstructed by. She says her two biggest career challenges were, firstly, not being taken seriously by the construction professionals who felt she was not competent enough coming from a legal background and, secondly, being a woman in a male-dominated industry.

"My biggest career achievement is being part of a process and work community that empowers women and youth. This stands out for me

because it improves the life and livelihood of the beneficiaries," says Mbadiwe.

She adds that in order to increase the participation rate of women in the construction industry in Nigeria, the government needs to step in by amending laws, ordinances and policies that foster gender inequality and implementing new laws that ensure gender equality, inclusion and sensitivity. "They should also encourage the private and public sector players to embrace gender inclusion and equality and accord those who are gender responsive some form of preference in bids and procurement processes," she says.

Asked about her favourite project, Mbadiwe says the Port Harcourt International Airport project in Omagwa was the best scheme in which she has been involved.

She says the challenges experienced on this project taught her patience and resilience, while allowing her to work on a landmark scheme that is among the most patronised airports in the country.

Her advice to other Nigerian women looking to enter the built environment industries is to "be 'irresistible and indispensable', in whatever role you seek to participate in". She explains that this means to be knowledgeable and prepared, work smart, choose influential allies, be resilient and adaptable, and have a leader mentality.



LICHELE NEETHLING, DIRECTOR, RLB

“We need to advocate, more. We need to change the narrative – this industry needs women,” says Lichelle Neethling. “Female leaders could and should do much more to instill the confidence in young females to simply believe that they can have a successful career in this industry.”

Neethling, who is a director at Rider Levett Bucknall, is passionate about getting more women into construction both in her home country of South Africa and globally. She says it is imperative to start engaging girls from an early age to show them that there is hope of a

successful career in the industry.

She says that role models and visibility of possible career paths are key to this, as is evident from her own journey. The daughter of a quantity surveyor, Neethling says she is an example of the beneficial effects of teaching young women and girls about the sector. “I grew up knowing what it was like to be part of the construction industry, and I quite liked it. We’d regularly drive around on Sunday afternoons trying to find building sites,” she recalls, saying her father “really ignited the interest for me to work toward a quantity surveying degree. I realised early on that I had big shoes to fill.”

A mother to two daughters aged six and nine, she lives and works in Stellenbosch, a town in the Cape Winelands about 50km from Cape Town. She heads up an office of six quantity surveyors, having been asked to set up the office base by the Africa group chief executive of Rider Levett Bucknall, Nicolas Sheard, in 2017.

Neethling prides herself on being a leader and says her hope is that everyone who engages with her is inspired to work hard and pursue their dreams. “I would have to say, being an empathetic leader – it takes a lot of time, skill and patience to become the leader you want to be and I am proud of the growth I’ve achieved over the years,” says Neethling. “Being a good leader has always been more important to me than any title or accolade.”

While Neethling is now a director and shareholder within the firm, she concedes that her path through the industry has not always been smooth sailing. She says that in the early stages of her career she struggled to earn the respect of clients and colleagues alike. “People tend to think you know nothing when you’re young. And of course, being a female in a male-driven industry has its own challenges,” she says.

She admits this meant she had to work harder to prove herself, but says that this attitude towards work has been the driver for her success. “I cannot pinpoint one key moment that accelerated my career – it’s been a sequence of hard work, right choices and great mentors over the years,

giving me endless opportunities, that have brought me to this point.”

Asked about her favourite project, Neethling is loath to choose just one, saying that all of them have given her an opportunity to grow and learn. However, she cites continuing work with one client as of special importance to her. “If I had to, I would have to mention a client rather than one specific project: Boschendal. It is a wine estate in Franschhoek and we have been involved in all projects on the farm since 2018.” She says the client’s commitment to sustainability has broadened her perspective in ways she has been able to apply to other projects.

This focus on ongoing personal development is at the core of Neethling’s ethos, both professionally and personally, and makes it clear that she is determined to continue growing as a leader within the industry.

I would have to say, being an empathetic leader – it takes a lot of time, skills and patience to become the leader you want to be and I am proud of the growth I’ve achieved over the years

Lichelle Neethling,
Director, RLB





SITI NORMAN, DIRECTOR, DIGITAL, TURNER & TOWNSEND



“I started my professional career aged 19 and, at that point in time, I did not have any concrete ambitions or aspirations,” says Siti Norman, director of digital for the South-east Asian region at Turner & Townsend. “Growing up from a lower-income family, the only goal I had was to help out my family financially.”

Poised to graduate from Singapore Polytechnic when the iconic Marina Bay Sands project – a mixed-use waterfront development located on 16ha of reclaimed land – broke ground, Norman was told by a classmate undertaking an internship with Aedas that the company was recruiting. This was how she secured her break into the sector, working as a technical co-ordinator at an architectural consultancy firm.

She says this is where she first became aware of the significant role advisers could play. On

day one of the job, she met her first mentor, Phil Lazarus, then BIM leader for the Marina Bay Sands project for Aedas – and now Lendlease’s head of virtual design and construction for the Americas. “He noticed that I was very curious about all the features in Autocad and took me under his wing and taught me everything I needed to know about BIM in the early years,” she says.

Norman spent the next 10 years mastering BIM and its standards, and implementing best practice on projects. She says that keeping up with new technology and learning to use it to solve problems is not only part of her job but also a passion, something she says has been helpful as it allows for her to be strategic and add value to the projects she works on.

Inspired by her own experience from the very first day on the Marina Bay Sands project, Norman now invests a significant amount of time and effort outside of work sharing her expertise and passion for digital construction with those working towards their involvement in the sector.

She not only serves as a lecturer at Singapore Polytechnic on basic BIM implementation but is also a member of Women in BIM, a growing community that works with women globally to support career development and attract young women into digital construction.

Despite her clear passion for both the sector and her work within it, Norman does not shy away from the challenges she



has faced as a woman in a male-dominated sector.

Two of the key hurdles she has faced are dealing with imposter syndrome and handling people’s natural instinct to stereotype and make quick judgments.

“Credibility helped me overcome this. I let my hard work and the results I achieve do the talking, as they speak for themselves. I make sure the work I do is of high quality to help solve

problems for both colleagues and clients alike,” she says.

“The years of experience and body of work I have under my belt has helped me to reconcile with the fact that I am capable, and challenges are always learning opportunities that prompt me to think out of the box and improve over time.”

Asked what she believes the industry needs to do in order to attract more women into it, Norman says the answer is simple – visibility, as it is difficult to be what you cannot see.

“When I was growing up, I didn’t see women in the positions that I’ve since taken up, so I didn’t know or even think it was a possibility – and we still have a lot of work to do in this space,” she says.

“It is important for others to see you. By doing that, you are proof that dreams are achievable and others can reach out to you. You can take this opportunity to guide future leaders in the construction sector.”

I let my hard work and the results I achieve do the talking, as they speak for themselves. I make sure the work I do is of high quality to help solve problems for both colleagues and clients alike

Siti Norman,
Director, digital, Turner & Townsend



ÁNGELA PATÓN ROMERO, **SITE MANAGER, ISG**



“**S**ince I was a child, I was attracted to this sector and I fought to get into it. It was not easy at first because, although there were as many women as men in architecture school, 90% of them wanted to work in design or project management. Very few of us were focused on a career in the construction world,” says Ángela Patón Romero, site manager, ISG.

Patón Romero was born and raised in Madrid, with an interlude in Cáceres, a city in western Spain’s Extremadura region where she studied architecture. She then returned to Madrid to complete an internship and to start a master’s degree in interior design and architecture at the Madrid School of Architecture.

She says her transition from the architecture side of the industry into construction was a challenge at points, although her initial introduction was rather smooth.

While still at university, Patón Romero received a call from ISG

in Iberia about a vacancy for a construction manager assistant position, a role she attained in 2014, leading to a decade spent so far at the company.

During those 10 years she has changed role several times. Within three years, she went from construction manager to site manager. She has subsequently become one of the company’s project managers in Madrid, leading teams of 11 people with peaks of more than 200 workers.

Asked about the most influential moments in her career, Patón Romero cites the CooperVision distribution project in Madrid, saying it was the first time she worked in Spain for an English client. She says this taught her a lot about following the instructions of an English contract and dealing with English service expectations in terms of quality, meeting deadlines and procedures, which proved a key achievement for her confidence.

But Patón Romero says that overall her best project is undoubtedly her daughter. On this point, she says her main challenge has been reconciling her work with her private life, especially as a single mother.

“My daughter is six years old, and sometimes I have felt that my professional commitments made it difficult for me to fulfil my role as a mother. It’s never easy juggling schedules and plans,” Patón Romero explains.

In business, she says the most challenging and satisfying project she has been involved in has been the construction of the head office of an international



strategic consultancy from the US located in Madrid.

And while she concedes that the challenges of work/life balance in construction have been amplified for women, she says in recent years giant steps have been taken in terms of the visibility of women in construction, at least within certain quarters. She says this is why it is imperative for women in the field to be

Women who enter the construction sector for the first time with forward-thinking companies will find it easier to adapt to the sector, and they won’t be looked at with suspicion

Ángela Patón Romero,
Site manager, ISG

selective about where they work. “The average in the construction sector in Spain, according to ministry sources, is that there are 9.5 women for every 100

men, while in ISG in Iberia the ratio rises to 27%. That’s why I feel that women who enter the construction sector for the first time with forward-thinking companies will find it easier to adapt to the sector, and they won’t be looked at with suspicion.”

Asked whether she thinks of herself as an inspiration to other women who want to be leaders in construction, Patón Romero begins by saying she has sacrificed much and faced many challenges to get to where she is now. “The trials I have faced, undoubtedly, have been worth it – and they have enabled me to get to where I am, so that I can encourage all women who want to follow me in this journey.”

She adds that her only advice to anyone who wants to enter the industry is that with patience and sacrifice, there are no limits. “It is a long-distance race and requires a lot of effort and time, but the result is always positive,” she says. “Along the way, you learn different things from each site, and it is such a comforting feeling when you finish a project and see the fruit of all your efforts has been worth it.”



JANE RICHARDS, HEAD OF BUILDING STRUCTURES UK, WSP



After 40 years in the industry, it is impossible not to see Jane Richards' passion for her work in the built environment. Richards is head of the building structures team in the UK for WSP. It is a team of about 300 structural engineers and sits within the company's property and buildings business.

An undeniable leader in her field, Richards' passion and commitment to finding her way in the sector was there from the outset. Recalling her pathway through university, she says: "I selected civil engineering at university, but decided to do it as a sandwich course just to make sure that the things that we were studying were of interest to me and see what the possible career options were."

She recalls writing off to contractors, clients and consultancies seeking answers on what her career could look like, in a world free from internet

searches and without clear pathways laid out before her.

This enthusiasm is still something she holds close – saying that her career has largely been shaped by her willingness to say yes.

"I'm not necessarily saying that's the right thing and right advice for everyone, but I've tended to just take any opportunity that comes along, and I've rarely said 'no, I'm not interested in that one'. And I think that has actually been the thing that has really changed my career."

However, Richards concedes this can bring its own set of challenges. She says that, as a woman, construction can be an environment where you feel a lot of pressure to fit in. While this is a challenge, she says, it imperative that people – or, in the frame of this conversation, women – remain true to who they are.

"What we do is very complex and challenging at times, and that does create all sorts of tensions – but also I think it really does foster a lot of collaboration as well," she says.

A mother to two adult children and a grandmother of just a few months, Richards adds that there are obvious challenges when it comes to balancing home and work responsibilities. However, she does feel the industry as a whole has made huge strides as a result of the flexibility in hybrid working that followed in the wake of covid.

She adds that in order to ensure women have equal opportunities within construction professions, it is important these flexible options

are also taken up by men – otherwise women can still fall behind in the eyes of managers, colleagues or companies.

While the extent of flexible working will vary depending on what exactly you're doing and how you like to work, she says, it's definitely an option that improves people's work/life balance. "It's also just about being able to give their most to their career as well as their home lives. It's about enabling them to contribute to their maximum – which is, I think, sometimes a message that gets lost a bit," she adds.

This work/life balance is something on which Richards has long prided herself, saying that deciding to return to work when her children were young was one of her proudest career achievements. "I was taking on new things and progressing; balancing all of that, I think, was pivotal then. You never do that alternative parallel path to see if anything would have been different, but I'm proud of what

I achieved on both fronts."

Richards adds that she is hopeful the increasing number of women in senior positions will inspire more young women to stick with the industry. She cites both Ann Bentley and Rachel Skinner as inspiring leaders for the sector, but stops short when asked if she would consider herself to be an inspiring role model. "That would be incredibly big-headed now, wouldn't it?" she says with a laugh.

What we do is very complex and challenging at times, and that does create all sorts of tensions – but also I think it really does foster a lot of collaboration as well

Jane Richards,
Head of building structures UK, WSP





KIRSTY SHRUBSALL, HEAD OF SUSTAINABILITY, SIR ROBERT MCALPINE

“Construction is a brilliant industry; I wouldn’t have worked in it for 20 years if it wasn’t. It’s just a question of how we level up opportunity, education and understanding across the industry to make it a really great place for everybody to work,” says Kirsty Shruballs, head of sustainability and buildings for the southern region at Sir Robert McAlpine.

Born, raised and still residing in Norfolk, Shruballs says there is much to recommend the construction industry as a workplace of choice for women but there is still a significant way to go.

“We want the best talent and we want the best people for the job, so we need to create the environment that is going to attract them,” she explains.

“That means creating diverse and inclusive, safe spaces for the best talent to join and thrive, being aware of our behaviours within our businesses, and making that as attractive for everybody as we can.”

She says she is a big believer in the phrase: “If you can’t see it, you can’t be it.”

As for her own journey in construction, Shruballs says that while she has a great passion for the industry, it was not a path she

had planned from the outset.

“Though I have always loved working in the industry, like a lot of people I fell into construction,” she says.

“Sometimes construction chooses us; we don’t necessarily choose it.”

She adds: “I have been working in construction for as long as I wish to remember! My first job was as site secretary when I was in my early 20s, and I have been in the industry ever since.”

Shruballs goes on to explain that she had a very supportive boss when in her first site secretary job and he gave her increasing amounts of responsibility. She says this led to her discovering that she had an affinity with the industry and went on to work on more of a pre-construction assistant role.

She said her next employer, Wates, was working on a prison project near where she lived. It was there that she gained an opportunity as an assistant design manager.

“This was back in 2008, when sustainability organically fell into the design function. The responsibility for BREEAM assessments and any of the other sustainability requirements fell with me, and that was where my passion for sustainability developed,” Shruballs elaborates.

“As I had the opportunity to do more technical training, I decided sustainability was the direction I wanted to take my career.”

She says that this taught her

that when you are passionate about something, you see beyond the tick-box approach. She says she has found it exciting to see the sustainability agenda move beyond environmental assessment methods and carbon reduction and develop into more of a holistic approach.

When it comes to advice for other women looking to enter the built environment, Shruballs says that being prepared to step out of your comfort zone is key, and that she herself did this when she joined Sir Robert McAlpine 12 months ago – leaving a role she had been in for a decade and a half.

Shruballs also says it is important to hold onto a sense of self in what is still a male-dominated industry. She finishes by saying: “Don’t change who you are as a woman to fit a mould you think or you have been told exists. You are as good as anybody else to do the job that you have chosen to do, and don’t ever be told otherwise.”

We want the best talent and we want the best people for the job, so we need to create the environment that is going to attract them

Kirsty Shruballs,
Head of sustainability, Sir Robert McAlpine



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