

WOMEN IN **Building** CONSTRUCTION 2026



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The women redefining leadership on construction's world stage
Insight from 12 built environment experts advancing industry progress



FOREWORD

RICHARD STEER, CHAIR, GLEEDS WORLDWIDE



When the first Women in Construction special report was published in partnership with Assemble Media Group, its aim was to document and amplify the experiences of women leading change across the built environment.

The response to that first edition confirmed there was both an appetite and a need for these stories to be told, so I am incredibly proud to be able to introduce this third collection for 2026.

Giving space to women's voices is not a symbolic exercise; it is a small but practical step toward change.

While progress has been made and the number of women embarking upon roles in construction continues to increase, advancement remains uneven and slower than one would have hoped to see. Longstanding misconceptions

persist, and dismantling them requires sustained effort and honesty.

This new edition for 2026 brings together the perspectives of a dozen women working across the global construction landscape. Each of their contributions offers insight into how they built their careers, the obstacles they encountered, and the achievements that matter most to them – often earned in environments where recognition was hard won.

I've been working in this industry for over four decades, and in that time I've seen firsthand the positive influence women have had on it – not by contorting themselves to fit in, but by reshaping the sector and ultimately, improving our offering. The conversations captured in this book reflect that reality. They are grounded accounts from women who have navigated complexity, led teams, solved

These perspectives disrupt the narrow assumptions about who construction is for and how progress is made within it

Richard Steer,
Chair of Gleeds Worldwide

problems and built credibility in a sector that is evolving.

Taken together, these perspectives do more than document individual challenges and successes. They disrupt the narrow assumptions about who construction is for and how progress is made within it. By setting out what is possible, they create visibility where it has been lacking – offering reassurance, challenge, and direction to those considering a future in the built environment.

Melinda Gates, philanthropist,

put it well when she said, “When women do better, economies do better. Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a prosperous world.”

This third edition is both a record of the achievements of these 12 impressive people and a reflection of gradual, meaningful change on the wider stage. My thanks go to everyone who contributed their time and perspectives – by sharing their journeys so openly, they will help shape a more inclusive future.





CHLOË MCCULLOCH, EDITORIAL DIRECTOR, BUILDING



For a third year, we have brought together the stories of women shaping construction and the wider built environment as part of Building's ongoing commitment to visibility. When women's achievements are seen, shared and celebrated, the pathway widens for others to follow.

In these pages you will meet leaders working in Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, Oceania and South America; engineers, architects, entrepreneurs and strategists operating at every scale, from local placemaking to national stadiums. What connects them is not a single career path – in fact, many describe theirs as anything but linear – but a shared determination to build, to lead and to change the industry for the better.

One of the themes to have emerged this year is the global

nature of careers in the built environment. Alessandra Peña speaks of navigating different professional cultures and project structures across continents. Tomoko Maekawa reflects on balancing global corporate standards with local realities in Japan. Krithika Ramesh's work sits at the intersection of government, innovation and infrastructure systems. These are women operating confidently in complex, international environments – often in sectors historically male dominated.

Another recurring theme is credibility. "Develop technical credibility early," advises Maekawa. Tania Guerra talks candidly about learning a new language while learning engineering, and the need to ask for opportunity rather than wait to be noticed. Virginia Njoroge built her construction

company from the ground up in Nairobi, navigating late payments, fluctuating material costs and the pressures of leadership. None of these stories are about overnight success. They are about persistence, competence and courage.

And yet, for all the progress represented here, challenges remain familiar. Several interviewees describe being the only woman in the room. Others point to unconscious bias, inflexible working practices or the attrition of women as careers progress. As one interviewee puts it, the imbalance often does not show at entry level, rather it emerges "down the career path". Structural change, not symbolic change, is what many are calling for.

This year's International Women's Day theme, Give to Gain, resonates strongly with

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Chloë McCulloch,
Editorial director, Building

the experiences shared here. It highlights how generosity – whether that's providing women with opportunities, mentoring, training, resources or time – creates momentum for everyone's progress. When we give support and visibility to women, the whole industry rises.

Building's role in this is clear. By publishing these stories, we aim to contribute to that culture of giving: providing the visibility that helps others see what leadership can look like, and believe it is possible for them too. This collection of women's experiences shows that seeing female leadership in action is one of the most effective drivers of change.

I am proud that Building can share these stories. Making women's achievements visible is not the end goal, but it is an essential step towards a built environment that genuinely reflects the society it serves.





BASIMA ABDULRAHMAN, FOUNDER AND CEO, KESK

Basima Abdulrahman's career has been shaped by conviction. A structural engineer by training, she began her academic journey in Iraq, graduating in 2008 before securing a full scholarship to complete a master's in structural engineering in the US. Her future then seemed relatively clear-cut: further study, perhaps a career in academia, and a conventional professional pathway.

That certainty was disrupted in 2015, when Abdulrahman made the decision to return to Iraq just as Isis was taking control of large parts of the country. "I knew I wanted to contribute," she says, "even though I didn't yet know what that contribution would look like."

That decision proved pivotal. She joined the UN, where she spent three years working for the Food and Agriculture Organization – a specialised agency of the UN that leads international efforts to defeat hunger. It was during this period that her passion for sustainability crystallised. Abdulrahman began to recognise that energy – particularly clean, decentralised energy – was fundamental not only to rebuilding infrastructure, but also to restoring dignity, livelihoods and long-term stability. She also realised that to pursue this ambition, she would need to take a risk. "I reached the point where I knew I had to do this on my own," she explains.

In 2017 she obtained her professional accreditation from the US Green Building Council and began building what would become Kesk. The company

was formally established in 2018, initially operating with a small team and limited resources.

Its early years were defined by persistence: it took nearly a year to secure its first two projects. Today, Kesk employs around 30 people across Iraq, working on green energy consultancy, solar infrastructure and software-enabled energy solutions.

As founder and CEO, her role is expansive and demanding. Her days are dominated by strategy, partnerships and relationship-building: meeting potential clients, negotiating with banks and institutions, forming alliances with delivery partners, and representing the company at high-level events. Alongside this external-facing work sits the responsibility of leadership.

"Taking care of the team is a huge responsibility," she says. "You have to be present, be decisive, and ultimately be the problem-solver." Training managers, making critical decisions and steering the business through uncertainty all fall squarely on her shoulders.

That uncertainty is a constant.

Where it might take a man six months to reach a position, it can take a woman seven or eight years. You really have to want it

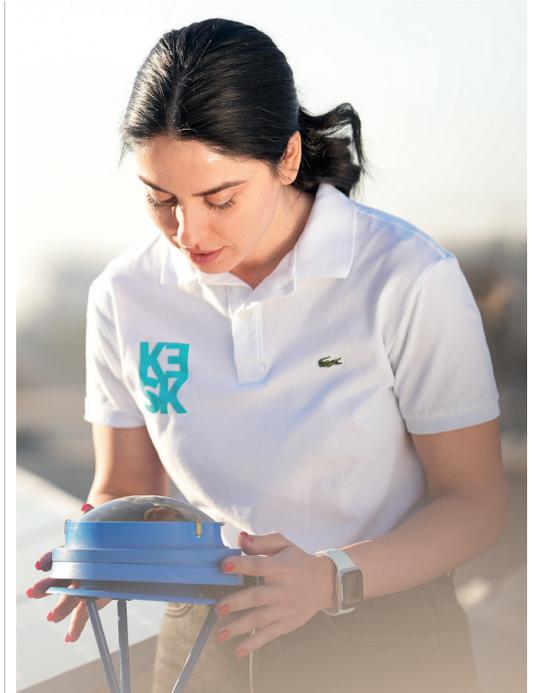
Basima Abdulrahman,
Managing director for regional building, Sisk

Operating in a region affected by geopolitical instability and security challenges has forced Abdulrahman to become highly adaptive. "Every few years, something happens," she says. "You think you've reached a peak, and then a shock comes along that hits very hard."

Projects can be lost overnight, business models disrupted and hard-won progress undone. Her response has been to accept volatility as part of the landscape. "We can never say, 'This is it.' We have to plan for the speed bump – or even the concrete wall – and be ready to redesign how we work."

Among the projects that have defined her career, one stands out for its social impact. Working with an NGO, Kesk supported a displaced community from the Sinjar region, helping around 70 farming families secure sustainable livelihoods through solar-powered microgrids, greenhouses and small-scale farming. Rather than relying on expensive diesel generation, groups of families shared renewable energy systems, reducing costs and creating long-term resilience. Much of the work was delivered at minimal or no cost. "For the team, it was incredibly rewarding," Abdulrahman says.

Her journey as a woman leading an engineering and energy business has not been without struggle, even within her own organisation. "Sometimes I feel like I have to fight for the right to be the boss," she says. Early on, she adopted an open, democratic management style,



but found it often worked against her. Male colleagues were confident, dominant and quick to challenge decisions, while she found herself second-guessing her own authority. "It took me years to realise that I needed to adapt," she says. "Women have to be very aware of these dynamics. We are not given space – we have to claim it."

Her message to women entering the built environment is that while progress is possible, it requires resilience, clarity and persistence. "Where it might take a man six months to reach a position, it can take a woman seven or eight years," she says. "You really have to want it." Despite the challenges, she remains unequivocal about the value of the journey. "There is a lot to fight for," she says. "But it is worth it."



TANIA GUERRA, ASSOCIATE MECHANICAL ENGINEER, CHAPMANBDS

When Tania Guerra moved from Spain to London 12 years ago, she expected her stay to last six months. Her English, she admits, “was terrible”, and the plan was simple: gain experience during a difficult economic period back home, then return. Instead, she built a career – and a life.

Now an associate mechanical engineer at ChapmanBDS, Guerra leads on complex building services projects, co-ordinating multidisciplinary teams and shaping technical delivery from concept through to construction. “I didn’t only learn engineering – I learned a language,” she says. Over more than a decade with the practice, she has progressed steadily, taking on greater responsibility and moving into leadership.

Originally trained in industrial engineering in Spain, she found the degree offered breadth but not specialism. “You study everything – the basics – but you aren’t focused on anything,” she explains. After arriving in the UK, she chose to deepen her expertise with an MSc in building services, completing four years of online learning alongside full-time work and a dissertation. “It helped me get an overall view of building services.”

Her role today is rooted in co-ordination. Designing a roof, she points out, is never just about architects and MEP engineers. “There’s structural, acoustics, landscape, maintenance – there is a lot

Sometimes you think you will get noticed just by working hard, but the reality is if you want something you need to ask for it

Tania Guerra,
Associate mechanical engineer,
ChapmanBDS

more communication required to make it all work.” Buildings are inherently complicated, and the challenge – and satisfaction – lies in bringing competing requirements into alignment.

One of the projects that marked a turning point in her career was 120 Fleet Street. Brought in at stage 2, she stayed through to stage 4 before going on maternity leave. The project demanded technical leadership and confidence, and it was there that a director gave her the opportunity to step beyond her formal role. “I was scared, but I got the opportunity and took it,” she recalls. “If others think I can do it, why should I doubt myself?”

That willingness to step forward has defined her progression. She emphasises that growth rarely happens alone. “There are always other people you can lean on,” she says – mentors, directors and colleagues who create space for others to develop.

Returning from maternity

leave was another challenge. Her daughter is now three-and-a-half, and Guerra credits ChapmanBDS’s flexibility – including six months part-time – with making the transition manageable. “Flexibility is needed,” she says plainly, noting that not all employers offer the same support. Balancing professional responsibility with parenthood requires structural backing, not just personal determination.

Each project presents its own technical hurdles, but Guerra approaches them with adaptability. “Every project is different,” she says. “The best way to resolve challenges is to be flexible and reactive.” In a sector where co-ordination is constant and variables shift quickly, that mindset has proved invaluable.



As the only female associate on the engineering side of her company – with no women currently above her in that discipline – Guerra is conscious of visibility. Asked about being a role model, she responds: “I am becoming one. It is important to be able to see someone you can become.”

She believes the industry still has work to do to attract and retain women. Unconscious bias, she suggests, is often subtle. “It’s just a feeling,” she says, but companies need to treat it as “more serious than a tick-box exercise”. Education and accountability must move beyond policy into culture.

Looking back, her proudest achievement is not a single project but the life she has created. “I came to London thinking it was going to be six months, and I’ve built a whole life,” she reflects. “My colleagues became my family.” Professionally and personally, the journey has been transformative.

Her advice to women entering the built environment in the UK is direct. “Nothing is going to be given to you. If you want something, you are going to have to take it.” Hard work alone, she cautions, is not always enough. “Sometimes you think you will get noticed just by working hard, but the reality is if you want something you need to ask for it.”

For Guerra, that combination – competence, courage and the willingness to ask – is what turns opportunity into progress.



VICTORIA MARWA HEILMAN, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF TAWAH AND MD OF ALAMA ARCHITECTURE

Victoria Marwa Heilman describes starting her story as “usually the hard part”. But her journey into architecture – and into social impact – is one defined by determination, redirection and purpose.

Based in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania’s largest city, she was born in Mwanza in the north of the country before moving to the capital as a child. Today, Dar es Salaam is home to almost six million people – “10% of the country’s population” – and it is here that Heilman has built both her practice, Alama Architecture, and Tanzania Women Architects for Humanity (Tawah), the non-profit organisation of which she is now executive director.

Her route into architecture was far from straightforward. Growing up, she wanted to become a doctor. “All through high school that was my goal. I just wanted to be a doctor.” But after narrowly missing the grades for medical school, she found herself working as a receptionist at the electric company. It was an uncle who intervened, suggesting architecture as an alternative.

It was only later, after completing her master’s and volunteering with Habitat for Humanity in Tanzania, that she understood the parallels to her original ambition. Working on projects in rural communities, she began to see architecture not simply as buildings, but as service. “Doing something, you feel like it’s small. But then

Make sure there is another woman sitting at the table with you, rather than just sitting alone

Victoria Marwa Heilman, Executive director of Tawah and managing director of Alama Architecture

to someone who is receiving that project, it is huge.” In that realisation, she found her calling. “We could also work with the communities and empower them,” in a comparable way to doctors, she explains.

Heilman initially combined practice with academia, becoming the first female teaching staff member in her department at university – at a time when, she says, “there was only a secretary who was female staff” among the faculty. The absence of visible role models created moments of doubt. “You start feeling: Am I in the right path? Is it this really for women?” she says.

Balancing career progression with motherhood was another defining challenge. “Balancing motherhood, balancing work, that was not an easy thing.” She credits a supportive husband and siblings for enabling her to continue, describing her family as “a community already”. Without that support system, she suggests, the path would have been far harder.

In 2018, she stepped away

from academia to focus fully on her ventures. Alama Architecture – formerly VK Green Architects – runs alongside Tawah, which has grown into a 21-member organisation with 14 full-time staff. Since 2023, Heilman has served as executive director, acting as what she describes as “a connector between partners who are supporting us, communities that we work with and staff that we have in their office”.

Tawah’s most significant achievement to date is its vocational training centre for women in Tanzania’s coastal region. The programme brings women from across the country to learn how to build homes, before constructing houses for elderly residents in rural communities. “I consider it one of the biggest projects that I’m super-duper proud of,” she says. The scale may be modest, but the impact is profound – for the elderly recipients and for the young architects involved. Seeing her team witness that impact, she adds, is equally meaningful.

The work has received international recognition, including a World Habitat Award. For Heilman, the significance lies not in scale but in validation. It demonstrates that “other people who are not architects” can see the value in “that small approach of architecture that considers people”.

Her architectural inspiration is Francis Kéré, whose community-led approach she admires.



Architecture, she believes, must also serve “those who cannot pay us”. It is a philosophy that defines her own work.

Her mission now extends beyond projects, to female representation. Rather than placing responsibility solely on institutions, she believes women already in leadership must act: “Make sure there is another woman sitting at the table with you, rather than just sitting alone.” Support, visibility and collective responsibility are key.

Asked whether she sees herself as a role model, she hesitates. “I feel like I’m trying to be a role model.” Through Tawah, she aims to solve the problems she faced herself – particularly around motherhood and career progression – by creating platforms where women can ask questions openly.



ANNE JOLIC, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, DEVELOPMENT VICTORIA

Anne Jolic's career has been shaped by a commitment to creating places that balance public purpose with commercial reality. As chief executive officer of Development Victoria, she leads one of Australia's most influential public development organisations from its base in Melbourne.

Development Victoria is the state government's preferred development partner and adviser, working alongside the private sector to translate policy into built outcomes. With a workforce of 350, it occupies a unique position within the built environment. It is a statutory authority governed by an independent board, responsible for strategic oversight and approving projects before they progress to government.

As a public non-financial corporation, Development Victoria is required to fund its own operating and financing costs through its business activities, so every project must balance policy objectives with financial discipline and market awareness. Jolic describes the organisation's role as translating "government policy into places for people, homes, infrastructure and precincts, while remaining commercially viable for our partners".

Her own role spans strategy, governance, partnerships and delivery, ensuring government objectives are translated into projects the market can confidently deliver. It is a position that requires clarity of direction, strong commercial acumen and the ability to work

across government, industry and community.

Jolic's pathway into the built environment began with a degree in urban planning at RMIT University in Melbourne. In her final year, she undertook a work experience placement at the Urban and Regional Land Corporation, the predecessor to Development Victoria, and was offered a role shortly afterwards. She was drawn to how the sector brings together geography, commerce and design, and to the challenge of "working through complexity and then actually seeing something tangible on the ground".

Over 25 years in the industry, Jolic has worked with several key development organisations, contributing to some of the most high-profile projects in Australia. Before returning to Development Victoria as CEO, she held senior leadership roles including head of operations at Lendlease, where she oversaw the global

operations of its development business across complex mixed-use, commercial, residential, retail and build-to-rent projects.

Day to day, her focus is on leading teams, setting strategic direction, working closely with partners and government, and ensuring the delivery of critical housing supply and high-quality places for Victorians. Outside of work, family remains a priority, alongside making time for health and wellbeing.

Jolic credits much of her career progression to the people she worked with early on. Her first manager was a female project director who trusted her, as a graduate, with responsibility for whole parts of a project. That inclusive approach, combined with being pushed into challenging situations early, helped build confidence quickly. Having leaders who could see her potential before she fully recognised it herself made a lasting impression, and it is something she consciously tries to pay forward.

One challenge has been how to balance ambition with sustainability, particularly as responsibilities grew alongside family commitments. Over

time, she has learnt that being deliberate about priorities and boundaries is essential.

A defining moment came when she missed out on a role that felt like a natural next step. While disappointing at the time, the experience taught her that careers do not always move in a straight line, and that openness to opportunity can lead to better outcomes.

Another formative career experience was stepping into her first head of operations role. It marked a deliberate shift from project delivery to business leadership, requiring her to think beyond individual outcomes and focus on strategy, people and culture. She describes it as the moment she learned that "running a business is ultimately about people, culture and long-term decisions, not just delivery".

Under Jolic's leadership, Development Victoria has made notable progress on gender equity. It now has gender balance across its workforce and senior leadership, has reduced its gender pay gap from 16% in 2021 to 1%, and has increased female representation at senior director level from 15% to 55% in under four years. This progress has been driven by a focus on culture and flexible work.

Leadership visibility, she believes, matters. Her advice to women entering the built environment is grounded and practical: prioritise wellbeing alongside ambition, be clear about personal values, and recognise that success does not depend on following a single, linear path.



Running a business is ultimately about people, culture and long-term decisions, not just delivery

Anne Jolic,
Chief executive, Development
Victoria



DEMI KORONTZI-DEAKIN, PROJECT DIRECTOR, GLEEDS

Originally from Athens and now based in Birmingham, Demi Korontzi-Deakin has spent more than 23 years in the built environment, leading complex infrastructure and transformation programmes across rail, utilities and the environment.

Today she sits on Gleeds' UK infrastructure senior leadership team, leads the business unit's management group, and acts as commission lead for the Environment Agency, Scottish Water and Yorkshire Water. Korontzi-Deakin specialises in what she describes as

"turning delivery pressure into delivery performance – clear governance, disciplined controls, strong stakeholder alignment and teams that can execute confidently". In practice, she adds, "I help programmes run more efficiently, teams work smarter, and outcomes land with evidence."

Her route into infrastructure began early. According to her parents, from the age of six or seven she was announcing she wanted to become a mathematician and a meteorologist. Civil engineering became her focus and at 17, she moved to the UK to study, initially intending to return home after qualifying. Instead, she became deeply motivated by the UK's focus on hydraulics, flood alleviation and environmental initiatives – work that felt purposeful and progressive. Infrastructure, she explains, changes lives in tangible ways.

After an MSc in environmental pollution control, she took roles in river, drainage and hydraulic modelling with Haswell, Severn Trent Water and Atkins. She moved into flood defence and asset management at the Environment Agency, before progressing into senior programme and transformation roles at HS2. A defining career moment came at HS2, where she established and led the programme's first internal management consultancy. She created the vision, strategy and business plan, built the team and delivered measurable results in its first year, including significant cost avoidance and

We need to stop treating inclusion as an initiative and start treating it as a performance standard

Demi Korontzi-Deakin,
Project director, Gleeds

more than 10% improvement in on-time delivery.

HS2 also presented some of her toughest professional challenges. She led a major civils client-team transformation and ran the covid-19 emergency and safety measures workstream to keep around 350 main works civils sites safely operational at the start of the national lockdown in 2020.

High-profile programmes, she notes, come with pace, complexity and competing priorities, while everyone expects certainty. Her response has been grounded in composure and clarity. She focuses on strong governance, honest reporting and early risk decisions, while building teams that are trusted and empowered. She also describes herself as an "extroverted introvert", showing up confidently for stakeholders and teams while protecting space to think and reset. That balance, she says, has been essential for performance – and mental wellbeing – on high-pressure programmes.

Korontzi-Deakin is direct about what the industry must do to attract more women. "We need

to stop treating inclusion as an initiative and start treating it as a performance standard," she says. Progression pathways must be visible and fair, flexible working should not quietly limit leadership opportunities, and sponsorship – not just mentorship – needs to be embedded.

Women stay in the sector, she argues, when they can see a future, feel valued in the culture and know their wellbeing will not be the price of progression.

She hopes she serves as a role model, particularly for women who do not fit the traditional mould. Her leadership style, she says, is "direct, collaborative and values-led", and she is proud of "delivering results without losing empathy". The most powerful message she can send, she believes, is that you don't have to change who you are to be taken seriously – but you do have to be excellent, consistent and visible.

Outside work, resilience matters just as much. She is a committed spin and yoga regular, a lover of European cinema, and maintains a shoe collection approaching 400 pairs. She starts each day with a smile and a loud "good morning", determined to bring positive energy to her team. High pressure, she believes, does not have to mean low morale.

Her advice to women entering the industry is characteristically clear: "Don't wait to feel 'ready'. Put your hand up, build your competence fast, and learn the commercial side early, because confidence grows when you can evidence your value."





MÁIRE LENIHAN, OPERATIONS DIRECTOR, STANTEC



Growing up in a rural community in Ireland, Máire Lenihan developed an early connection to nature that would shape her entire career. “I have always been connected to nature and the environment,” she says. That fostered a curiosity about how engineering could both enhance communities and protect the natural world, and led her to study environmental engineering at the University of Ulster in Belfast.

More than 20 years into her career – eight of those with global consultant Stantec – Lenihan is its operations director, based in Ireland but primarily supporting the firm’s UK water business. Her role is strategic and forward-looking, focused on growing Stantec’s national presence at a time when the sector is delivering some of its most ambitious programmes.

Day to day, her work spans the breadth of the organisation. She collaborates with senior water leaders, talent acquisition teams and marketing specialists to identify emerging client needs and new opportunities for

growth as well as finding “new ways to attract the best people into Stantec”.

She began her professional life as an environmental engineer and has worked internationally in both technical and leadership roles. Throughout that journey, she has remained motivated by the idea of creating “positive impacts for communities”. That sense of purpose continues to underpin her leadership today.

Professional development – in particular attaining professional qualifications “has been a key accelerator for me”, says Lenihan. Achieving chartered engineer status and completing a postgraduate diploma in business “opened doors for me almost instantly”. Those qualifications not only validated her technical expertise but also expanded her confidence and capability to move into broader leadership roles, from project management to business development and operational oversight.

Like many in the sector, Lenihan identifies stakeholder complexity as one of the most significant – and stimulating – challenges in infrastructure delivery. In water especially, projects affect clients, contractors, regulators and communities alike. Ensuring that all parties achieve mutually beneficial outcomes requires careful co-ordination and trust. “Ultimately, communication and building relationships is key to success,” she reflects.

One project that encapsulates that collaborative ethos is Stantec’s strategic technical

partnership with Northumbrian Water and the creation of the Northumbrian Water Living Water Enterprise. Lenihan describes it as “an incredible journey”, particularly during the establishment and mobilisation phases. The partnership challenged conventional delivery models and embraced innovative approaches to carbon reduction and nature-based solutions – a reflection of how enterprise-style models can drive outcome-focused collaboration.

Mentorship has also been central to her development. Over two decades, she has worked with leaders who encouraged her to step beyond her comfort zone. Most recently, she credits Stantec’s regional business lead for water, Scott Jackson, with providing “numerous career growth and challenge opportunities”. Within the wider organisation, she also points to her company’s global chief operating officer, Cath Schefer, as someone who has been consistently supportive and encouraging.

There is so much variety in this career that you can try certain projects or sectors and use the skills you learn to transfer to another area

Máire Lenihan,
UK&I operations director, Stantec

When it comes to attracting more women into engineering, Lenihan believes the conversation must begin early. “The appeal must start in early childhood,” she says, through education, STEM outreach and positive representation. Continual reinforcement – and visible examples of women succeeding in the field – are essential to demonstrating that engineering is not only accessible but also rewarding.

She is keen to share her own experience, in that spirit. “I will always share my career stories in a positive light,” she says. The variety of the built environment has afforded her opportunities to work across multiple sectors and geographies, building transferable skills along the way.

Her advice to women who are considering the industry is characteristically direct: “Do it! I’ve been so fortunate to have so many opportunities in the built environment, working across multiple locations, geographies and sectors. There is so much variety in this career that you can try certain projects or sectors and use the skills you learn to transfer to another area.” Just as important is making sure you have support: “Seeking support, mentorship and guidance from your peers along the way has proved invaluable for me.”

For Lenihan, engineering has never been solely about infrastructure. It is about purpose, partnership and long-term impact – and about ensuring the next generation see the possibilities that she discovered growing up in rural Ireland.



TOMOKO MAEKAWA, JAPAN MANAGING DIRECTOR, ES GLOBAL

“Develop technical credibility early.” For Tomoko Maekawa, Japan managing director of ES Global, that advice is both practical guidance and personal philosophy. Based in Tokyo, she leads the Japanese subsidiary of UK-based ES Global, specialising in temporary and modular structures for major events, exhibitions and complex built environment projects.

Her team is lean but highly specialised. As managing director, she is responsible for overall strategy, client relationships, commercial performance, governance, risk management and co-ordination with global teams.

Much of her work involves balancing “commercial ambition with disciplined risk control”, ensuring projects are delivered safely, on time and to the required quality standards while aligning global standards with local regulatory realities.

Maekawa has worked for over 25 years across international business and the built environment sector. Her pathway, she explains, “was not linear”. For many years she operated as a self-employed freelancer, and her current role is “the first time I have formally belonged to a corporate structure”. She entered the industry through international business and project management, gradually moving closer to delivery and commercial leadership, developing expertise in



cross-border co-ordination and complex stakeholder environments.

She does not identify a single breakthrough moment. Instead, progress came through accumulated experience and accepting increasing responsibility. “Consistency over time has been more important than any one breakthrough event,” she says.

Among the projects that stand out is the Microsoft Shinagawa HQ renovation, which she led as a project manager and considers “the culmination of (her) development in that role”.

Since she became managing director, the company’s most significant undertakings have been the design and build of four national pavilions for the

Osaka Expo – the US, Canada, the UK and Australia. These were the first major projects delivered under her leadership, involving compressed timelines, high public visibility and complex international co-ordination. The scale of responsibility during that period was substantial.

One of Maekawa’s biggest professional challenges has been understanding what clients truly need. “One major challenge has been accurately identifying what clients truly require – not only what they say they want, but the underlying objectives driving their requests.” Through trial, reflection and refinement, she learned to listen beyond the surface and structure solutions that align commercial, technical and strategic priorities.

She also highlights the tension between global corporate frameworks and local market conditions. Navigating that balance requires clarity in

governance while remaining pragmatic in execution – a discipline that reflects her broader leadership style.

Outside work, Maekawa practises tai chi and aikido. She values “calmness under pressure, respect for structure, and the ability to redirect force rather than confront it directly”. Those principles translate directly into how she leads: influence without unnecessary confrontation, discipline without rigidity.

On attracting more women into the industry, she says: “The industry requires structural change, not symbolic change.” Legal and operational systems were built for a different labour market; in a period of demographic decline, they must evolve. If the sector remains unappealing to women, she warns, it will struggle to attract the next generation more broadly.

She does not actively seek to be seen as a role model, but acknowledges visibility matters. If her presence expands the perception of what leadership can look like, that is positive.

Her proudest achievements are not individual milestones but moments when she helped change established industry practices in Japan, contributing to structural improvement.

And her advice remains clear: build expertise first. In Japan, reliability and competence carry weight. “Confidence should be built on capability. Once that foundation is strong, leadership becomes sustainable.”

Consistency over time has been more important than any one breakthrough event... Confidence should be built on capability. Once that foundation is strong, leadership becomes sustainable

Tomoko Maekawa,
Japan managing director, ES Global



VIRGINIA NJOROGE, MANAGING DIRECTOR, DYSHATECH CONSTRUCTION

Virginia Njoroge is managing director of Dyshatech Construction, a Nairobi-based contractor delivering civil engineering, building and water projects across Kenya and beyond. From apartment blocks and shopping malls to roads and diversified civil works, her company operates across multiple sectors – and she leads it from the front.

She was heading for construction from early in life. “I had a passion since I was a little girl,” she says. “I always loved STEM subjects at school.” That early curiosity – wondering “how does this building come to be?” – led her to study building technology. Today, running her own construction firm, she describes her career simply: “It’s a dream come true.”

Njoroge built her business from scratch. After working for other contractors and learning “how it was done on the ground”, she spent five years mastering the

fundamentals before making a decisive move. “I had to start my own business,” she says. Starting from scratch meant risk, but it also meant independence – the opportunity to set standards, choose projects and shape the company’s future on her own terms.

Visibility matters in running a business, she believes. “Every single day, my day begins in the office – I have to be a present leader.” From there, her responsibilities stretch across strategy and site. She decides which projects to pursue and which markets to enter, oversees delivery, conducts site visits and supervises progress to ensure deadlines are met. “I would never want to disappoint a client,” she says. Quality control ultimately sits with her.

A defining point early in her company’s life was the handover of its first major project, a 21-storey apartment building. Delivering a high-rise as main

Go for it hands on – do not fear anything. Anything is possible in this sector if you go for it. You won’t regret it for a single day

Virginia Njoroge,
Managing director, Dyshatech
Construction

contractor was a turning point. “Handing over my first project – that was a real milestone,” she reflects. It demonstrated not only that the business could compete at scale, but that it could deliver complex work to completion. The building still stands as a reminder of how far she and her team have come.

The journey, however, has not been without obstacles. Late client payments remain one of the toughest realities of operating in the sector. “They say they will give you the funds at a particular time – many times I’ve had to go beyond that,” she explains. Cash flow pressures, coupled with fluctuating material prices in Kenya, create constant financial strain. “Material costs are quite high, and the price fluctuations are challenging,” she adds. Managing those uncertainties requires resilience, negotiation and tight financial discipline.

Work-life balance is another ongoing challenge, and she acknowledges the sacrifices that leadership can demand. “I don’t

get to spend so much time with my friends – it is a challenge and terrible at times,” she admits. Family, however, remains central. “I always find time to spend with my kids.” The balance may not be perfect, but it is intentional.

In a sector she describes as “male-dominated”, Njoroge is clear about what needs to change. “Many of the men in the industry aren’t so welcoming,” she says candidly. Encouraging more women into construction starts early, she believes, with parents and schools. “I would advise parents of young girls to let them pursue STEM subjects if they are interested.” Engineering and construction, she argues, are not only viable careers but marketable ones. “We are all equal to the task.”

She is aware that others now look to her as proof of what is possible, and says she makes a point at networking events of encouraging young women to consider the field. Mentorship, especially for young women, has become an important part of her contribution back to the industry. “I am grateful they look up to me,” she says.

For women considering a built environment career in Kenya, her advice is unequivocal. “Go for it. Go for it hands on – do not fear anything.” Construction, she insists, is a “beautiful career path” that opens doors and introduces you to people from all walks of life. “Anything is possible in this sector if you go for it. You won’t regret it for a single day.”





ALESSANDRA PEÑA, LIMA STUDIO MANAGER AND ASSOCIATE ARCHITECT, BDP PATTERN

Alessandra Peña leads BDP Pattern's Lima studio at a pivotal moment for sport and infrastructure across Latin America. Based in Peru's capital, where she has lived for most of her life, she is an associate architect and studio head, overseeing a core team of five, with project teams expanding to as many as 25 as needed.

"I was raised in a home where art was always something very important," she says. Her father, a watercolour artist, instilled an early appreciation for creation – a thread that still runs through her life. Alongside architecture, she publishes art books featuring watercolours, preserving and sharing a personal legacy that shaped her own creative path.

Architecture, she explains, offered the possibility "to create something" tangible – to combine design, art and impact. Like many 18-year-olds, she chose her degree with curiosity rather than certainty. "I was very lucky – I fell in love with it and continued down that path."

After qualifying in Lima and gaining additional accreditation in Italy, Peña spent several years working abroad before returning to Peru in 2018. That decision, prompted by personal reasons, proved career-defining. "It's strange how I managed to get this position in an international studio once I got back home," she reflects. A major project was unfolding in Lima at the time – and she found herself at the centre of it.

Since 2019 she has been

part of BDP Pattern, the sports and entertainment division of BDP, and for almost five years has led the Lima studio. Her role spans project leadership, regional business development and studio management. She co-ordinates with support teams in the UK and Canada on payroll and HR, oversees local operations and actively seeks new opportunities across the region.

The project that marked her arrival on the international stage was the Lima 2019 Pan American Games. Eight venues were designed and built in just 18 months – in a country where, as she notes, significant investment in sports infrastructure had not taken place "for 40 to 50 years". International architects and engineers collaborated to deliver facilities at speed, introducing new standards and processes to the local market.

"It was amazing to have the opportunity not only to learn all of this and to try to make it work," she says, "but also to contribute

Don't be afraid of being the only woman in the room. Eventually you enter other rooms where there are more women

Alessandra Peña,
Lima studio manager and associate architect, BDP Pattern

to something that I know is being used by the city." The success of the venues has had lasting impact; Lima has been selected again to host the Games in 2027, in part because the infrastructure is already proven.

For Peña, the experience confirmed that complex sports infrastructure – while culturally specific – benefits from rigorous international expertise. That philosophy has carried into her latest major achievement: leading the architectural design for the redevelopment of El Campín Stadium in Bogotá. Facing challenges similar to those in Lima, she saw the project as an opportunity to transfer knowledge across borders. "You can bring better standards wherever you are in the world and show the proper way to do complex infrastructure," she says. "Knowledge transferred."

Working across Peru, Italy, India and Colombia has required constant adaptation. "It's not just the language barrier," she explains. "It's a totally different culture... even just how projects are structured through their timelines is different in each country." Learning to navigate those variations – technically and culturally – has become one of her strengths.

On attracting more women into the sector, Peña observes that representation often appears balanced at entry level but diverges over time. "It's down the career path that things start to switch and change,"



she says. Flexibility, she argues, is essential. With the right balance, women should be able to continue progressing.

Peña most admires women who pursue what they truly want – not to prove anything, but because it is meaningful to them. "Women sometimes have this incredibly high standard that they need to do it all," she reflects. Instead, she values authenticity: doing what you want to do, and doing it well.

Her advice to women entering the profession in Peru is grounded in experience. "Don't be afraid of being the only woman in the room," she says. "Eventually you enter other rooms where there are more women." The key is persistence – and choosing work that feels rewarding.



KRITHIKA RAMESH, HEAD OF BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND URBANISM ENGAGEMENT, CONNECTED PLACES CATAPULT

The sector is so much broader than its traditional perceptions.” For Krithika Ramesh, head of built environment and urbanism engagement at Connected Places Catapult in London, that breadth defines both her career and her ambition for the industry. From her home in Leigh-on-Sea in Essex, where she lives with her husband and four-year-old daughter Kaira, she leads strategic partnerships designed to accelerate innovation across construction, infrastructure, planning and urban regeneration.

At Connected Places Catapult, Ramesh works at the intersection of industry, government and research, shaping collaborations that help built-environment businesses scale solutions that improve “liveability, sustainability and economic outcomes for places”. Over six years, she has strengthened engagement with government departments, repositioned relationships with major industry partners and led high-impact accelerators and place-based programmes. In doing so, she has overseen multimillion-pound initiatives that unlocked investment in emerging solutions and accelerated adoption of technologies that enhance resilience.

Day to day, her role balances strategic leadership with hands-on engagement: building relationships, shaping market strategy, speaking at events and translating industry needs

Organisations must build cultures that recognise different leadership styles

Krithika Ramesh,
Head of built environment and urbanism engagement, Connected Places Catapult

into actionable programmes. A central thread is ensuring that innovation ultimately serves communities and the long-term evolution of places. That often means bridging very different perspectives – from policymakers to start-ups to major contractors.

Her pathway began far from London. Growing up in India, she was surrounded by buildings that reflected “deep history, culture and extraordinary diversity from state to state”. She studied architecture, restored historic forts in Rajasthan and worked with practices committed to local material sourcing, nurturing a deep interest in sustainability and context-led design.

A master’s in sustainable design brought her to the UK. While working on a natural ventilation project for the Senedd building in Cardiff Bay, she realised “designing better buildings alone wasn’t enough”. Reducing environmental impact required influencing wider systems – policy, partnerships and behaviour – and shaping the conditions that allow good design to scale. That insight drew her into public-realm

regeneration, construction and eventually strategic engagement, where she now focuses on convening sectors around shared purpose and long-term resilience.

The transition from India to the UK demanded resilience. Navigating a new professional culture while moving from building-scale design to complex, interconnected systems required a broader perspective. Early in her career, she was often the only woman on construction sites or in technical meetings, experiences that at times fuelled imposter syndrome. She overcame these challenges by investing in preparation and credibility, cultivating mentors and networks and consistently delivering in senior decision-making spaces.

Among the projects she recalls most fondly is a tactical urbanism initiative with Sustrans that reclaimed car-dominated streets and transformed parking bays into pocket parks for children and families. Seeing children play in spaces that days earlier had been reserved for cars reinforced her belief that small, thoughtful interventions can redefine neighbourhoods and spark wider conversations about public space, active travel and healthier urban environments.

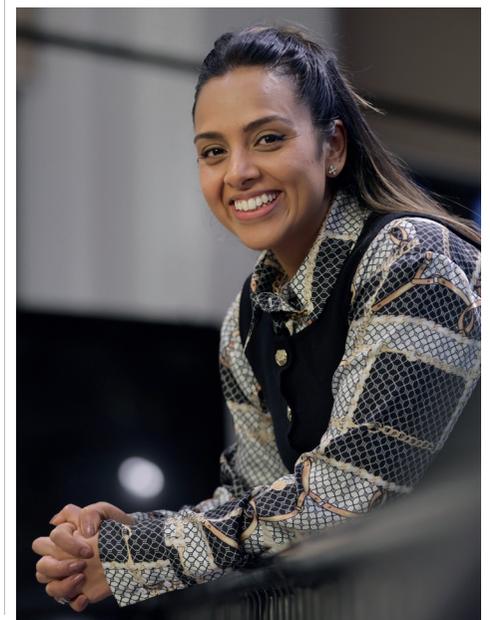
When it comes to attracting more women, her focus is on visibility, representation and culture. Women must be able to see themselves thriving, not simply entering the industry. “Organisations must build

cultures that recognise different leadership styles,” she says, alongside mentoring, sponsorship and transparent progression routes. Flexible working and supportive policies, particularly around shared parental leave, are equally critical.

Asked what advice she would give women entering the sector, her message is expansive: Do not limit your understanding of what the built environment can be. Explore planning, transport, policy, regeneration and innovation. Stay open to non-linear paths. Seek out communities and mentors early. And, above all, trust the value you bring.

“The built environment shapes how people live, move and experience places. If that excites you, there is absolutely a place for you here – and the sector is better for having you in it.”

REHAB JAMIL





KATHERINE STEPHENS, CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, CANADA REGION, AECOM

Katherine Stephens did not set out to forge a career in the built environment. Today, as chief operating officer for Aecom's Canada region, she leads operations across an organisation of 3,500 employees, helping shape the delivery of infrastructure across the country.

Aecom celebrates 115 years in Canada this year, and Stephens sits at the operational centre of that legacy. For the past two years she has led the company's water, transportation, buildings and places, environment, programme management and advisory operations in Canada – ensuring the business scales sustainably while meeting revenue, profit and cash commitments: "In my current role, I live at the intersection of strategy, execution and culture – where great outcomes happen."

With more than 23 years of experience, Stephens has built a career defined by constant "gear-shifting" between short-term execution and longer-term strategy. Her days range from de-risking projects and forecasting quarterly performance to pricing major pursuits, integrating acquisitions and strengthening project-management discipline while "trying to take grit out of systems".

Practically, that means spending time where value is created: resource planning and commercial strategy for major pursuits, portfolio reviews with project managers, and close partnership with HR

and safety leaders. As the business grows, she is focused on embedding a culture that puts safety, quality and ethics first, while positioning Aecom as an employer of choice in a resource-strained market.

Stephens' pathway into the sector was non-linear. With a business degree and early experience in finance and organisational change, she followed opportunities that stretched her. The more time she spent alongside designers, engineers and scientists, the more she wanted to ensure the right systems and tools were in place to enable them to perform at their best.

"My pathway was a series of pivots," she explains. "At each step I was honest about what I didn't know, ready to work hard and curious enough to learn fast." That curiosity, combined with a reputation for execution,



My pathway was a series of pivots. At each step I was honest about what I didn't know, ready to work hard and curious enough to learn fast

*Katherine Stephens,
Chief operating officer, Canada region, Aecom*

built trust across the organisation.

A defining accelerant came when two senior women leaders sponsored her for a director of operations role – a stretch appointment that proved transformative. Stephens credits that sponsorship, alongside candid mentoring, as pivotal in expanding her leadership trajectory.

One of her earliest challenges was credibility. Without a technical certification in a sector where professional lineage often defines status, she encountered scepticism, particularly in a male-dominated environment. Her response was consistency. She explains: "Credibility is built the same way projects are – scope it, do the work, deliver the outcome, repeat."

Among the initiatives she values most is a multi-year effort to strengthen project-management discipline, tools and culture across the business – the "project" that improved thousands of others.

Though less visible than physical infrastructure, the work increased client satisfaction, improved profitability performance and provided faster visibility into risk. It also reinforced the importance of co-designing systems with the people who use them, ensuring change feels enabling rather than disruptive.

Stephens believes that in order to attract more women, the industry must broaden its narrative – highlighting commercial, operational, digital and sustainability pathways alongside traditional technical routes. Sponsorship is critical: "If you can see it, you can be it." Flexible, life-aware policies and investment in safety and wellbeing are equally essential.

Asked whether she sees herself as a role model, she answers with humility. "I'm a work-in-progress leader," she says, though she recognises that her journey helps others imagine their own. She takes seriously the responsibility to open doors and sponsor talent.

Outside work, Stephens is a wife and a mother of two boys in the Greater Toronto Area. From spring to fall, her family can be found hiking conservation areas and the Niagara escarpment – a reminder that resilience and perspective matter in leadership.

Her advice to women entering the industry is straightforward: say yes to stretch opportunities, get out on site to understand the work firsthand, be candid about what you don't know – and seek a sponsor who will advocate for you when you're not in the room.



SANNE DE WIT, CO-FOUNDER AND HEAD OF IDEAS, ENERGIESPRONG GLOBAL ALLIANCE

From her base in Amsterdam, Sanne de Wit has spent the past 15 years working at the intersection of construction, sustainability and systems change – not designing buildings, but redesigning how the industry operates.

She co-founded the Energiesprong Global Alliance, an international foundation accelerating large-scale housing renovation through a performance-based, market-driven approach. The aim was to move retrofit beyond pilots and into scalable propositions, supporting market development teams across Germany, France, Italy and the UK. She stepped down from operational leadership this summer and now sits on the advisory board.

Five years ago she co-founded Bureau Door with three other women. Now a team of nine, the company develops communication strategies and events aimed at driving sustainable change within construction. “Most of our clients want change,” de Wit says. “And real change almost always requires organisational change.”

She explains: “Innovation is rarely about ideas. It is about creating an environment where people feel safe enough to question, vulnerable enough to learn and bold enough to act. If you do not organise that environment, innovation simply does not happen.” Her work focuses precisely on that invisible architecture – culture, positioning and community-building.

Her route into the sector was “quite random”. In a chance encounter, a woman bluntly told her she was “wasting my talent” in the tourism sector. This led to a freelance assignment and a proposal: try it for three months and leave if it doesn’t fit. “That level of directness turned out to be exactly what I needed.”

Construction is compelling, she finds, because it is “extremely traditional and extremely innovative at the same time”. The tension between legacy systems and urgent climate imperatives creates opportunity: “If you can connect those two worlds, there is enormous potential,” she says.

The woman who first challenged her became a defining influence. “I am socially strong, but for a long time I was afraid to fail,” de Wit admits. Social intelligence, she realised, can mask avoidance. Her mentor worked from first

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*Sanne de Wit,
Co-founder and head of ideas at
Energiesprong Global Alliance and
co-founder of Bureau Doors*

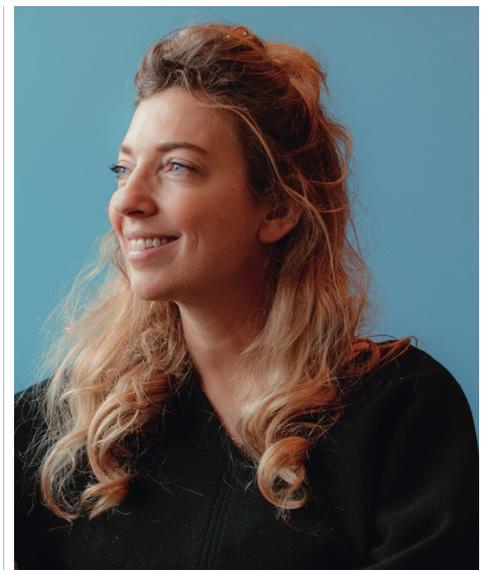
principles and was unafraid to call out weak thinking. “It was uncomfortable. It was also transformative.”

At some point, de Wit decided she was tired of operating from fear. “Whenever something gave me a stomach ache, I went towards it instead of away from it.” The lesson she carries forward is simple but demanding: always return to first principles. Even when a problem appears familiar, treat it as if it is new. Understand it fully before proposing solutions.

Her career has unfolded within a male-dominated sector – and, she adds pointedly, “a largely male-dominated world”. Early experiences working for a dominant leader created a dynamic she now recognises as common among women: disagreeing internally while still seeking validation externally. Sustained over time, that tension contributed to burnout.

“I overcame it by growing up, in a way,” she says. By becoming more fully her own boss and building a company with other women. What she learned is that “resentment changes nothing. As long as we are angry, we remain reactive. And reactive systems do not transform.”

Asked what the industry must do to attract more women, de Wit reframes the question. “I am a feminist, although not always in the way that is fashionable,” she says. The core issue, in her view, is not simply numbers. It is about valuing so-called feminine and masculine qualities



equally in decision-making. Empathy, collaboration and vulnerability must sit alongside decisiveness and control. “If we only talk about numbers, we risk addressing symptoms instead of the underlying imbalance.” Without honesty about the dynamics between men and women in professional settings, she warns, “we will simply professionalise our frustration”.

Her greatest achievement, she says, is not a single project but perhaps “that I no longer organise my career around fear”. That internal shift altered everything.

Her advice to women entering the built environment sector in the Netherlands is nuanced. “Do not change yourself to be accepted. But also, try not to fight people. Fight systems. And if you can, do the hardest thing of all: stay compassionate while you do it.”

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