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Deconstructing gender roles

Women making strides in male-dominated commercial construction industry

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Heather Merz, left, chief financial officer at Burt-Watts Industries Inc., and Sarah Scott, the company's business development director, are among the women breaking barriers locally in the commercial construction industry.

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The staff at **Burt-Watts Industries Inc.**'s offices in downtown Austin doesn't quite resemble most construction companies. With the dozen women who help run the business, including its chief financial officer and project managers, bustling around, the company's makeup goes against national employment statistics and local anecdotal accounts that show an industry still dominated by men — but becoming less so.

“Much of the labor side of construction will continue to be dominated by male workers, but I've started to see more and more women at meetings and work sites who have more powerful roles in projects,” said Sarah Scott, 32, Burt-Watts' business development director. “I'm out there with my hard hat on ... literally getting my hands dirty on projects if something needs to get done.”

Ask any woman in construction and she'll likely be able to tell you vividly what runs through her mind being the only woman in the room discussing a project or walking through a construction site catching stares. It's a feeling of self-awareness often experienced by women throughout the commercial real estate industry.

“You have to learn to hold your head up high and not be scared to be assertive when you have to,” said Kathy Carr, Austin-based senior manager of facilities for St. **Jude Medical Services Inc.** and a local real estate veteran. “That may get you a reputation associated

with a less than pleasant name, but it's important that you know your stuff so no one can point to you being a woman as a reason why you're not knowledgeable. You have to work twice as hard to gain that respect."

Women in the local construction industry say the working environment, including relationships with male colleagues and superiors, has improved in recent years. But they quickly add that the glass ceiling remains very much in place.

"There are many different types of careers for women in construction and commercial real estate, but I don't think the educational system nor the industry has done enough to help [women] understand that," said Scott, who started in real estate as an interior designer at age 19.

Statistics bear that out, especially in construction.

The **U.S. Department of Labor** reported that women accounted for about 3 percent of the total construction workforce a few years ago. And a study in 2005 by the **Commercial Real Estate Women Network** showed that 17 percent of women with six to 10 years of experience in commercial real estate held positions of vice president or higher, compared with 43 percent of men having the same amount of experience.

CREW Austin President M'Lou Patton Bell, a real estate lawyer and partner at **Munsch Hardt Kopf & Harr**, remembers when she started in the early 1990s that her male colleagues insisted on being with her during one-on-one, closed-door meetings with some clients who they worried could harass her.

"They said these clients would look at me not as a lawyer but just a woman they could dismiss or make a move on," Bell said. "I think most men know that's not professional, and I'm more established now, so there's no major concern there, but it's intimidating walking in as a young woman and knowing that's all someone sees."

Jan Cannaday, 63-year-old owner of construction company Architectural Habitat of Austin, is regarded by many as a trailblazer for her three decades in the industry. She bought out her male partners in the 1980s during the roughest downturn for Austin's real estate market.

Back then, Cannaday said, men often assumed women with high positions were unknowledgeable figureheads, as many construction companies were listed as women-owned to qualify for set-asides while actually being run by their owners' husbands or boyfriends.

"So when I would show up, people would meet me with skepticism until I was able to articulate that I knew what I was doing and showed them what great work we have done and could do," she said. "That's all they care about in the end."

Women in the CREW Network's Austin chapter, during a recent roundtable, recounted many incidents involving ageism and sexism they encountered and still do. Some told of being ignored at meetings as clients preferred to speak only to men of the same level or even lower. Others joked that men take women more seriously as they age because they aren't as objectified sexually as when they were younger. And some recall acquiring a reputation for being a "bitch" when disagreeing on aspects of a project, even as their male counterparts were lauded for the same behavior.

Yvonne Parra, a 32-year-old business development manager for O'Connor **Commercial Property Tax Division**, recalls often having her peers in property tax consulting, usually older white men, ignore her, speaking only to other older white men while waiting for their cases to be heard.

"They'll talk to my co-worker about what I am up to as if I am not there," she said.

There are growing networks for women in these industries, such as CREW Austin, which is open to men also. Since it was founded nearly 10 years ago, membership has grown from 25 to 125 people, six of whom work in construction. There's also an active Austin chapter of the **National Association of Women** in Construction, an organization founded in 1953 in Fort Worth.

Such networks do more than provide moral support, often helping lead to business.

"I just landed a \$90 million deal because of CREW connections," Parra said. "Now my male co-workers want to know how to join."

Meanwhile, the women stress that many men, from bosses to relatives, have been mentors and unconditional supporters.

"We all have men in our lives, of whom many are great and whom we love," Carr said. "That's something that gets lost sometimes in having to address this issue."

Tommy Burt, a principal of Burt-Watts, said his business is better for diversifying its workforce.

"I think women have different perspectives that help broaden how we look at things, internally and externally as a company," Burt said. "I find them to be better communicators, note more detail and often know how to control their emotions better than I do because us guys are taught we have to have a bull mentality that's not always necessary."

Burt also thinks more men need to appreciate that many career women perform well even as they continue to bear responsibilities at home, such as caring for children or parents.

"They often take their work home if something comes up," he said. "They get it all done, though, and show it's possible to be committed to both career and family."

Jane Snoddy Smith, a construction and real estate lawyer and partner at **Fulbright & Jaworski LLP**, said women need to champion diversifying their industries' workforces by building awareness of their presence, mentoring younger women and being themselves.

"That's true progress," Smith said to sounds of agreement from the recent roundtable at Burt-Watts. "Women have different personalities and different strengths, just like men do. We should be allowed and encouraged to just be ourselves and do our work the way we know best."