

Female Developers: A Difference?

Do female developers differ from male developers in how they approach development?

WHAT DIFFERENCES EXIST—if any—between female developers and male developers? With so little literature written about this topic, ULI Oregon/SW Washington recently explored a variety of questions with a number of female developers, primarily from Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Washington. Their answers—and observations—may be of some surprise to their male counterparts, and may serve to enlighten women who themselves are on a path to becoming developers.

Do female developers differ from male developers in their approach to projects?

Female developers in the Northwest part of the United States tend to concentrate on residential projects, with a smattering of retail developments that focus on creating a sense of community. These areas of concentration appear to be driven by their innate interest, coupled

with perceived market opportunities bypassed by their male counterparts.

Maria Barrientos, who launched her own company, Barrientos LLC, in 1999, in Seattle currently has six urban infill housing projects in development as a fee developer and for her own account. “Not many male developers have patience to handhold novice property owners and counsel extended families,” observes Barrientos, who notes that she seeks interesting Seattle neighborhoods “where I can contribute to neighborhood economic diversity supported by community leaders.”

Liz Dunn left a career as a software engineer at Microsoft and as an executive producer with DreamWorks Interactive “to start my own business because I was tired of being a cog in the wheel,” she says. Dunn is involved with smaller-scale, mixed-use projects than is Barrientos because she says, “I only want to take on what I can personally control and get financed.” But Dunn shares Barrientos’s

emphasis on community. Dunn asks rhetorically: “Do women take on riskier and potentially less profitable projects because they’re more interested than men in nonmonetary paybacks at the neighborhood, societal, or environmental level?”

Portland developer Roslyn Hill was the first in her Alberta neighborhood to build lofts as a way to control tenant occupancy and building overcrowding. As one of few African American female developers, Hill says she understood density’s cost and benefits in the context of community and has included commercial space in most projects as a source of economic development, jobs, and income.

Seattle developer Koryn Rolstad is a site-specific public artist who developed separate studio and living spaces for herself and a community of artists by providing unfinished, high-volume concrete and glass condominium shells much like the original SoHo lofts. Rolstad says she believes that men tend to measure their results by scale. “Can you imagine a woman wanting to build the world’s tallest building?” she asks.

Eve Picker is a Sydney, Australia, native trained as an architect and urban designer. Today, as president of No Wall Productions, a Pittsburgh developer of urban mixed-use infill and adaptive use buildings, she has become fascinated with Pittsburgh’s



Roslyn Hill.



Liz Dunn.



Maria Barrientos.



Eve Picker.



Molly Blasier.



Koryn Rolstad.

historic narrow sliver buildings and, overcoming tall odds, has redeveloped them as loft condominiums. [See “Long Answers for Urban Sliver Buildings,” October, page 205.]

Pittsburgh architect-turned-developer Molly Blasier, says architecture



Sarah Schuyler.



Jane Olberding.



Tiffany Sweitzer.



Monica Smith.

professors would ask, “What does the building say?” to which she replied, “What does the building cost?” Overcoming skepticism, Blasier enticed Whole Foods to become an anchor tenant on properties she and her partners acquired in the East Liberty area of Pittsburgh and persuaded the city to agree to make key road improvements.

How do female developers deal with mistakes?

“I tend to be very upfront in confronting my mistakes, admit them, correct them, and move on,” says Dunn. “It’s pretty powerful to admit a snafu, and correct it immediately. People respect and trust you even more.”

All of the female developers interviewed agree that talking about

your mistakes is a great way to learn from other colleagues. By contrast, they agreed that male counterparts tend not to reveal mistakes because it exposes their vulnerabilities, especially to male colleagues in a competitive environment.

Are female developers more collaborative than male developers?

The female developers also agree that admitting mistakes frees the listener to volunteer useful information, from which the female developers say they learn and which, in turn, helps them collaborate more with others. “I think most women have much less ego involved in getting a project developed,” comments Barrientos.

Women are eager to be mentors, says Dunn. “I met Koryn [Rolstad], Maria [Barrientos], and Sarah [Schuyler, principal of Pike Street Corner Development, Inc., in Seattle] when starting out and all were incredibly generous with their time.” Dunn observes, “When men

give advice, they tend to focus on the numbers and the end product, whereas women also analyze the process, think about relationships, stakeholders, etc.” Dunn notes that males seem more willing to mentor women than men, especially men of similar ages. Men would typically define a man in his age group as a competitor, not a collaborator, and be less forthcoming, she suggests.

Female developers in Seattle and Portland meet frequently to be mutually supportive of one another. While it might be easy to explain this as a result of not belonging to the “old boys club,” more likely, conclude the female developers interviewed, it is generated by a desire to share mistakes, learn from one another, and assist one another in developing successful projects. They noted they believe that collaboration without competition gives credence in the business community.

Do female developers feel a need to be more competitive with their male counterparts?

“Women are not as competitive, for the sake of winning or just competing,” says Barrientos. “While driven to achieve my goals, I don’t ever benchmark myself against someone else.”

When Portland developer Jane Olberding entered a public development competition as a for-profit developer, she was actually able to produce affordable housing more competitively than the nonprofit community development corporation against whom she competed. But her goal, she says, was to provide the most affordable housing, not to vanquish a competitor.

How do female developers seek information about fields that are new to them?

“I am always willing to come right out and say I don’t know something,” says Barrientos. “That’s the

only way to learn. I don’t think most men do this.”

If female developers did not understand a term or concept used by a lender, would they ask what the term meant, or, if they did ask, would they be concerned that the lender would think them unworthy of a loan? All the female developers to whom this question was posed, rejected the idea that questioning things would make them appear weaker.

“If you ask the question in an intelligent way, it’s an opportunity to make a good impression, not a bad one,” comments Barrientos. “It speaks to trustworthiness and thoroughness. I think this is a difference between most women and men.”

Dunn emphatically agrees: “At Microsoft, we jokingly called it ‘male answer syndrome’: the inability of a guy not to pretend he knew the answer to something, and to make up something plausible sounding if necessary.”

Is there a difference when the person from whom the female developer is seeking approval is a woman? Is there a tendency to appear more competent before another woman? “I don’t think women look at gender differences this way when performing their duties,” observes Barrientos.

Do female developers evaluate markets differently from male developers?

“Women do their homework better,” maintains Barrientos. “Before I started my own firm, I was the only woman partner in a male-oriented development firm. I was shocked at how little market research they did. Even the guys in my office still don’t value market research as much as I do. I spend huge amounts of time identifying the market, product, user, design, and prices.”

Dunn agrees, “At Microsoft, I took a sabbatical to go to business school, came back and introduced product planning—doing market

research into demographics, cultural preferences, etc., before introducing a product. It was a foreign concept. The company had a ‘build it and they will come’ mentality.”

The female developers interviewed say they tend to conduct market research that is as qualitative as it is quantitative, which they report is useful for smaller urban residential projects. They personally “shop the competition” as well as use focus groups. But, says Barrientos, she fills volumes with specific data that are used not only for her own planning, but also for articulating to equity investors and lenders the reasons for her decisions. Doing that is an important way to limit risks, she advises.

Do female developers have any advantages over male developers in retail and residential development?

In light of the fact that men still design and develop most housing and retail centers—why would female developers not have an advantage? “I am currently working on a block in Seattle where I control one side of the street, a male developer controls the other side, and we are trying to collaborate to reposition it as a new shopping district,” reports Dunn. “We are working with a female retail consultant and in our first few meetings he [the male developer] stared at us like we were speaking a different language.”

Dunn crystallizes the difference by declaring, “To the extent that a man is not in touch with his inner shopper, he is not going to be equipped to do compelling retail. Maybe that’s why we have a lot of retail centers that don’t work.” Barrientos agrees, noting, “Since most developers are men, it’s hard to know how much better things could be if the people making the purchase decisions were [also] designing the retail spaces.”

In the area of residential development, the developers still tend to

be predominantly male. However, at least in the more politically progressive cities in the Northwest, women are beginning to make notable inroads.

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Tiffany Sweitzer became president in her mid-thirties of Hoyt Street Properties, the largest developer in Portland’s trendy Pearl District. Also over seeing Hoyt Street Realty, a full-service real estate company, Sweitzer notes that she has an intuitive sense of what works and what does not in residential units, especially kitchens. Her condominium sales centers, she says, have elaborate, full-scale models of several kitchen types and materials finishes.

Dunn’s very first project won architectural awards for its innovative use of roll-up glass garage doors and loft kitchens integrated into living spaces.

Rolstad developed the Banner Building, a Seattle mixed-use project in the now trendy Belltown area, with condominium units that were left unfinished to give buyers the opportunity to complete them according to their preferences.

Are female developers at a disadvantage in office and industrial development?

If female developers have an innate advantage in knowing how to develop retail and residential projects, the opposite appears to be true with respect to developing office and industrial buildings. In this arena, female developers say they must contend with the well-established

network of male developers, lenders, and office and industrial tenants.

Barrientos, who penetrated the development world managing the construction of golf courses decades ago, and who later became a principal in a diverse Seattle development company, says: “It is very difficult for women to break into that world on their own. I know several amazing project managers of very large office buildings who are women. But, they are not developers, putting together the deals, bringing in large investors, and getting financing on really large deals. That’s still heavily dominated by men.”

Part of the reason may be that many female developers have little interest in office and industrial development. “I fled corporate America for a reason,” says Dunn. “I get up in the morning thinking about the way people live, shop, and play.”

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Monica Smith, a former Seattle development partner of Catapult Community Developers and now founder and head of Bluegreen Development LLC, relates that she was involved in the office and industrial development world, spending ten years managing international corporate real estate for Novell, Inc., in Bangalore, India, and later doing international property acquisition, leasing, and asset management for Microsoft in more than 50 countries. Yet, belying that office and industrial

experience, she chose to develop townhouse communities and public/private community ventures, like one venture with the city of Tacoma, Washington, creating a mixed-use and mixed-income project for 58 artists and their families.

Smith recounts that she became the international real estate manager for a large software company at age 27 and spent more than half her time in Asia. At that time (1991), she notes there were few women working in the industry in senior level positions in places like China, India, and central Africa. "I was constantly asked about the difficulties of discrimination in my business. What I found is that the way people treated me [was based on] being a Fortune 500 client, not [on] gender, so I never felt discriminated against in the business setting," Smith says. Although she minimizes differences with male developers, Smith notes that she may ask more questions, admit more mistakes, and share more information with her colleagues than do male developers.

Do female developers use different approaches from male developers to finance projects?

Because, historically, men have been more often in control of financial institutions, female developers may appear to be at a disadvantage when seeking financing. Some female developers have responded by putting together much more detailed financing packages for lenders and investors. "I have often had lenders tell me the package I send them is the most complete they usually get," points out Barrientos.

With exhaustive quantitative and qualitative market analyses of the competition, including firsthand shopping of competitors' projects, female developers can often offset the inherent financial network connections. Moreover, rather than simply communicate with financial figures, many female developers say

they are prone to articulate the many assumptions behind the numbers, which may actually give them a significant advantage.

In her two most recent investor offerings, Barrientos reports that they were subscribed within two weeks and that 60 percent of the investors turned out to be women. Dunn reports that she raised outside private equity for the first time last year, and was fully subscribed, turning people away within a month of sending out packages. That reinforced her convictions, she says, "about being patient and reaping the long-term rewards of better design choices."

Another factor that may benefit women is the increasing number of women in financial institutions, which seems to be following their growing numbers in the legal and medical professions. While there are still few female CEOs, this trend has placed many women in the position of loan officers, perhaps of particular advantage to female developers since they are the ones who analyze and dispense loans to the developers. A "new-girl" network may be more important than an old-boy network as there may be a greater tendency for women to help one another. Several female developers have reported that all of the lenders with whom they have worked were women.

As a female developer, Picker says she finds that women in development still face "huge obstacles." Even though Picker was trained as an architect and urban designer, she sees her major strength as an ability to put together complex financial arrangements. Some men do not respond well to an aggressive, detail-oriented woman, admits Picker.

Are female developers more risk-averse; and how do they limit risk?

Female developers may have natural tendencies to be more effective in limiting risks. Dunn suggests that

male and female definitions of risk may well be different. She believes that males tend to view risks as primarily financial, while females tend to view risks in the broader context of relationships with architects, engineers, contractors, consultants, lenders, investors, tenants, officials, users, and the public.

Some female developers suggest they are more likely than men to be fee developers, more likely to develop residential communities than industrial properties, and more likely to hold, manage, and reposition their projects.

What factors affect female developers in their relations with the press and the public?

Are female developers more solicitous of public opinion than their male colleagues? Do city councils and other public decision makers treat them differently—positively or negatively? Is there a difference when the public decision maker is a woman?

Several female developers suggest women are perceived to be less threatening, more cooperative, more concerned about advancing the public interest, and less representative of the stereotypical developer as rapacious and avaricious. Dunn avers, "Being a woman has never hurt, because frankly you stand out in the crowd. Council members, lenders, and the press remember me because I'm a woman, maybe unfairly, but why not take advantage of it?" **UL**

WILLIAM P. MACHT is a professor of urban planning and development at Portland State University in Oregon and a development consultant. (Comments from—and about—female developers are especially welcome in order to test the breadth of these conclusions; direct them to the author at machtw@pdx.edu and/or willmacht@gmail.com.)