



FEMALE IN FITOUT

BY AMELIYA WRIGHT



INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY 2018



WHAT HAS BEEN THE MOST SURPRISING PART OF BEING A WOMAN WORKING IN CONSTRUCTION?

I don't really allow myself to be surprised by much (working in this field teaches you that), however I think the most refreshing part of working in the industry is that there are males around you in all different construction roles that will support and encourage you to learn and grow. I had a preconceived stereotype of men on construction sites because of the way the industry is negatively portrayed, however the men I have met onsite and worked alongside are by far the most respectful in the industry.



WHY

DID YOU CHOOSE CONSTRUCTION?

Well, my career and love for construction began when I had the pleasure of undertaking a 6-month placement in Mount Isa at the time, Xstrata Copper Mine (now owned by Glencore). At the time my role was to shadow the WH&S National Manager for Xstrata (who happened to be my darling Mother). After finishing my Psychology degree, I took up the really exciting role of WH&S at the mine.

After completing my second degree (Public Relations & Marketing), I decided to take a well-deserved break and travel USA and Europe for six months. Once I returned home, my sister helped me land a job at a shop fitting company where she was currently working. On my first day, I asked one of my colleagues what gyprock was (this is something that will haunt me forever). I never thought I'd end up working in this industry, but when I really think hard about it, I couldn't imagine doing anything else.



WHAT IS YOUR CURRENT POSITION?

I am a Contracts Administrator at arete Australia, the commercial fit out division of Kane Constructions. I am proud to state that arete Queensland has 22% females working for the company. Kane Constructions (arete's parent company) has 19% females within their Queensland office, above the industry average of 11.7%

WHAT CHALLENGES HAVE YOU FACED AS A WOMAN WORKING IN CONSTRUCTION?

For a long time, the biggest challenge was feeling apprehensive about supervising or giving direction on site. I learnt that the best way to earn respect on site was to do my job as a CA and also triple check details before giving site related directions.

Biggest learnt tip: When on the job, don't be afraid to tell people what to do

Another challenge is being taken seriously within your role from external parties which I struggled with for the first two years. I tried several different approaches to be taken seriously until a wise woman told me "I prefer my women with breasts, not balls - be feminine in your approach and watch the tables turn". As raw and confronting as this was, I now don't see being taken seriously as a challenge, instead more of an opportunity to prove someone wrong, in the right way.

THINKING OF YOUR PERSONA AND PERSONALITY TRAITS BEFORE CONSTRUCTION, WHAT TRAITS DO YOU NOW POSSESS?

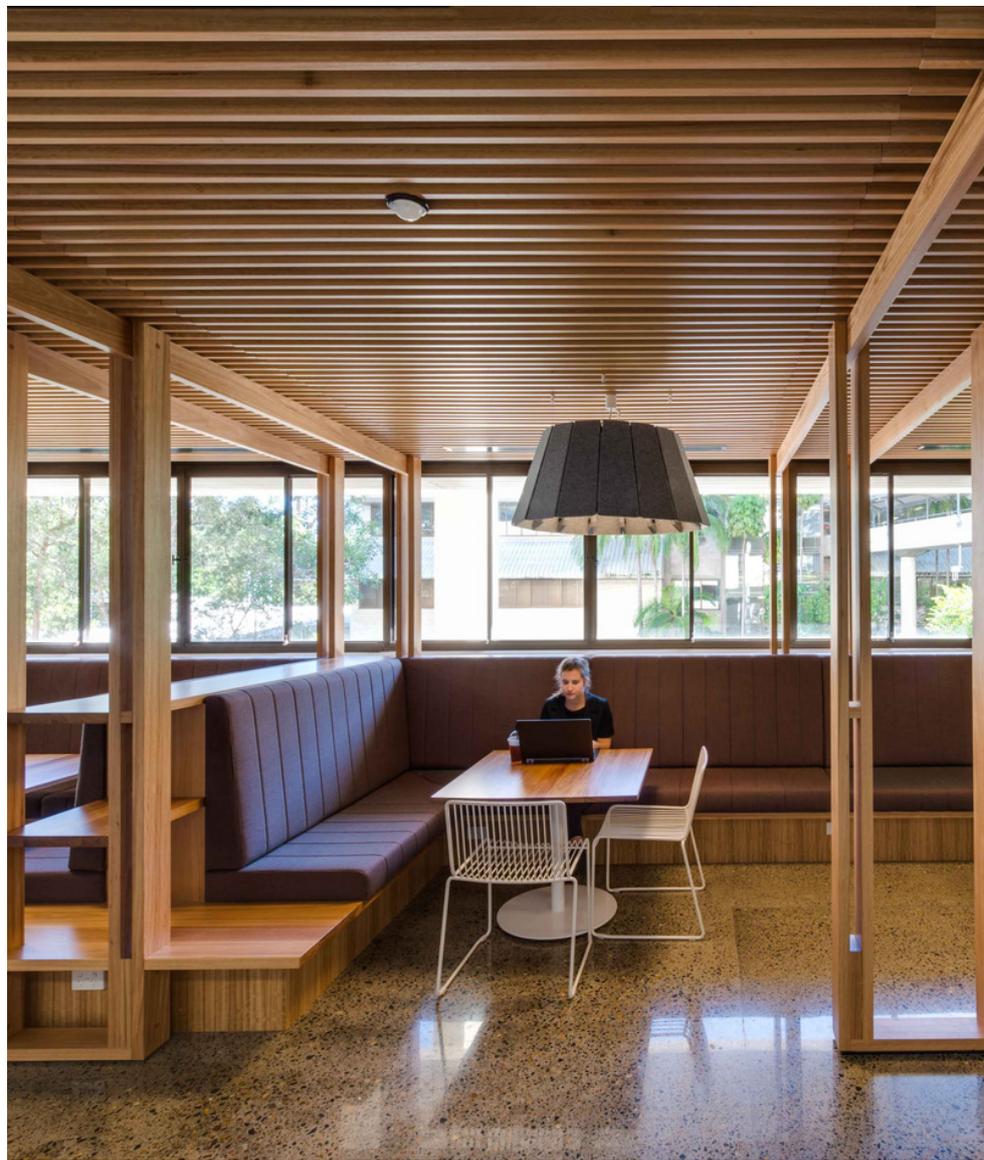
Ameliya circa 2013 was easily intimidated, quiet and would probably cry if anyone raised their voice in her direction. Ameliya in 2018 enjoys a heated debate, is hard to silence and has surprisingly tough skin which are all character traits I give complete credit to the industry and the team around me. My male colleagues have taught me not to sweat the small stuff, don't dwell on a problem for too long because it's a certainty that there will be another one coming tomorrow and you need to be level headed for that.

DO YOU BELIEVE THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY IS HEADING IN A POSITIVE DIRECTION FOR FEMALES?

My personal observation is that the construction industry has come a long way, but I am fearful that the gender diversity on construction sites is slipping in numbers.

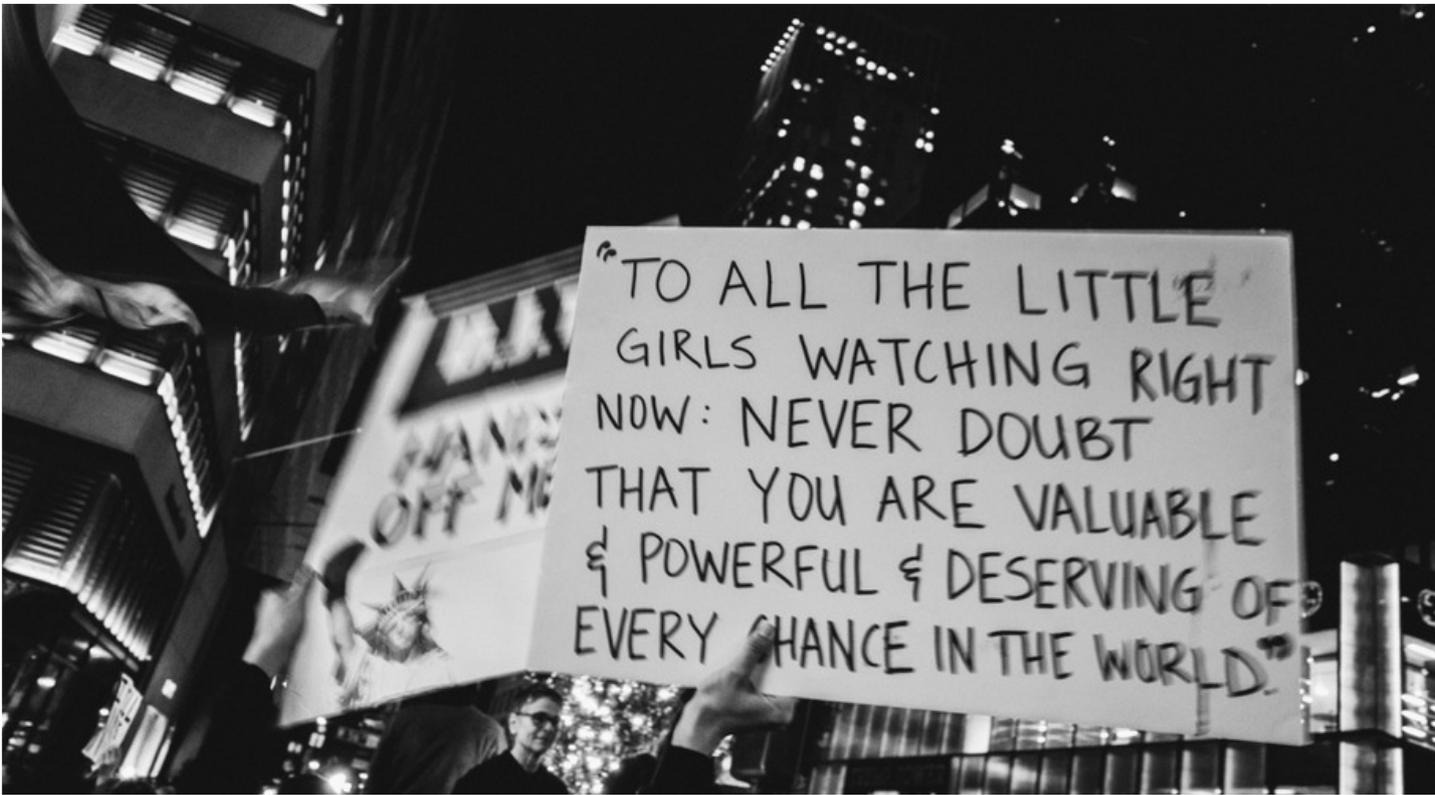
However, I have noticed the upper management of construction companies have an increasing female presence which will ultimately see more women leading, being seen and heard, which will ultimately change the male dominated label of our industry.

I think there will be a lot of positive movement for females within construction over the next ten years because the females entering the workforce now are met with the seasoned female veterans who will be able to provide mentoring and support.



WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO SOMEONE STARTING OUT?

- Use that natural born ability to communicate as a woman to your advantage. This will often have you solving problems with a reasonable conversation in a shorter period of time. There is no room for egos in our fast-paced world of fitout, your job is to solve problems and move forward
- It is okay if you don't know the answer immediately. It is a satisfactory response to say "I'll look into that" then go and do your research. Responding with the correct information will earn you more respect
- Do not question your ability based on other people's perceptions. You will no doubt come across a character or two who will challenge you as a female in this industry. Own it and show them why there are females in this industry.



LASTLY, IS THERE ANYTHING THAT WOULD SURPRISE US ABOUT YOU?

- In grade 12 my maths teacher called my parents into the school to explain the copious reasons why I should never choose a career that revolves around numbers because “She just doesn’t understand math”
- I have never studied Construction Management, Engineering, Architecture or any other related field
- At the beginning of my Construction career, I used to print out drawings and take them home and teach myself how to read architectural and services drawings. I would then come into the office the following day armed with questions for my project manager.



Ameliya prepared this article for International Women's Day 2018.

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