

CASE STUDY: Noelene Russell, Architectural Assistant

My name is Noelene Russell and I am a Part II Architectural Assistant at Claridge Architects, London. I have a Masters in Architecture and have been in practice for the last 3 years. I am currently working as part of a team on the construction and completion of a £30.5m project with the EHA Group, situated in the heart of Plymouth city centre. It involves the conversion of an old disused department store into a 500 bed Student Accommodation, 110 room hotel and the restoration of ground floor retail and commercial space. The 300,000 square foot project is currently on site and due to complete in 2019.



1. What first attracted you to working in the construction industry? How did you find out about the job and what qualifications did you require?

Architecture was suggested as a career by my Art teacher when I was at Secondary school; I have always loved art and have an eye for detail, as well as a keen interest in the natural landscape.

However I wasn't doing the traditional A-levels which you might consider important for Architecture; I was studying Art, Biology and ICT and hated Maths. But I found an architecture degree at Queens University which based its course on 'Creativity with Purpose' and only required GCSE Maths. Here I was able to grow my passion for design, learn about urban and social environments while using my computer skills to communicate and present ideas.

2. Tell us about your current role. What does a typical day look like? What do you like and dislike about the job?

Currently I am part of a team which is responsible for producing a set of construction drawings and details for the onsite renovation of an existing 3 storey building; including the construction of a single story roof extension and a 4 storey infill extension.

The design requires a high level of coordination and a typical day can involve anything from internal design team meetings, strategising about how to achieve internal acoustic and fire stopping requirements, to coordinating structure and services in a series of internal room layouts, elevations and sections or detailing different building junctions. Working through how each building component will relate, be fixed and how it can be constructed on site.

What I love about the job is not only the creative process of formulating ideas, envisioning how a space could be or how a building will look but the responsibility for realising the detail of the design; how a window will sit within the façade or the coordination of elements that make up a building into a coherent project for construction. However, as with any job there are always time pressures and stress which can mean long working hours and always trying to manage a project efficiently.

3. What qualities are required to do your job?

The job requires a variety of skills: creativity to be able to produce ideas for building form and internal spaces; analytical and logical thinking to create solutions to problems faced in design as well as onsite; good computer skills to produce graphics and drawings; good communication skills to present designs and form relationships with clients and consultants.

Projects can be fast paced therefore it is always beneficial to be able to work under pressure, have good time management and organisational skills. And, as with any career and the progression of technology it is also advantageous to have a high level of motivation to constantly be developing skills, growing your technical knowledge and construction ability.

4. What are your future career aspirations?

I am currently working towards obtaining the RIBA Part 3 Examination in Professional Practice to become a registered Architect. After which I hope to take on more responsibility in running projects from design to on-site completion.

5. Is construction a welcoming environment for women?

The construction industry is still a male dominated environment which can be very off putting for women to even look to construction as a career. Women have been studying architecture for over 100 years and enrolment within the course continues to increase, even within my Master's degree there was a 50:50 ratio. However, women in construction are still fewer than 25% of women working within the UK.

6. As a female Architect, have you encountered any hurdles you do not think a male Architect would encounter?

Within my career to date I've personally not encountered any hurdles for being a female. It can be slightly daunting when you step into an all-male environment on site or within a meeting, where your knowledge of construction and understanding is brought under a microscope or automatically overlooked. Whether that is because I am a woman or in a junior role can be debated, but that situation just motivates me to prove my ability, showcase my skills and keep developing my knowledge.

However, I do know discrimination is an issue within the profession, particularly in relation to the choice to have a family. Women within the profession are consciously putting off having a family as they think it will be to the disadvantage of their career due to the inability to commit to the long hours and expectation of working unpaid overtime when they return. The lack of part time senior roles also provides the question of how women are expected to have an architectural career as well as a family.

7. In the time you have worked in construction, do you think the industry has improved its attitude towards women?

Yes, the industry is definitely changing. There are more equal job opportunities as well as the industry offering competitive salaries and the gradual breakdown of traditional male and female roles. Within Architecture especially, the last 5 years has seen women win architectural awards, not only for design but for how they have helped shape and contribute to the profession. This allows women to stand out within a 'gentleman's' profession, gain recognition and provide role models for current and future female architects.

8. Why do you think women remain underrepresented in the industry?

The construction industry still isn't perceived as a particularly attractive career; it is still a male-dominated world, with poor maternity rights and inflexible working hours. There is a lack of part time jobs for parents and poor career prospects in senior roles and, unfortunately, there is still discrimination.

9. Would you recommend that young women seek out careers in construction? What advice would you give them?

Yes I would highly recommend a career in construction. As with any job or career there will always be challenges to face and overcome but as a woman in construction it is a great way to stand out and be noticed as well as change it for the better.

The advice which I would like to pass on is to not let any aspect of a job or career stop you from pursuing it. Whether it is due to lack of skill, knowledge, confidence or experience, conquer the reason that is holding you back and become the best you can be at it.

10. How does a diverse workforce benefit the industry as a whole?

Over half of the UK workforce is female but less than a quarter works within the construction industry. With women actively seeking careers and jobs within the industry it provides a greater skill set for employers to choose from, ensuring they have the right person for the job. This will create a more rounded team and in return create a greater balance within the industry. Diversity will also help keep up with the capacity of workforce required to maintain the increased growth of the UK construction market.

11. What should the industry and wider society be doing to encourage more women to work in construction?

There may be a general acceptance of women currently in the industry but professional bodies can still be seen as old fashioned and firms still need to be actively seeking to change some of the workplace culture which the industry has created and tackle the lack of

diversity. Solutions are still required to eradicate discrimination and certain attitudes by promoting equality and better job prospects. The industry may still be male dominated but with more recognition of women within construction it will promote role models for young women and allow them to become leaders of their generation and hopefully the next.