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Female Disruptors: Ashley Bradley of The Bradley Projects On The Three Things You Need To Shake Up Your Industry





keep a range of projects going. We're involved in a massive hotel project as much as we are constructing new projects at local universities and a restaurant from a Top Chef contestant. Not everything has to be a home run, and keeping the great people we have working for us employed is extremely important to us. The guys in the office maintaining budgets are as important as the day laborers cleaning jobsites each day. We have site signage that says, "Be proud of the work you do on this jobsite," and we want this positivity to permeate not only those on payroll but anyone we subcontract work to. We are creating a business culture that values everyone equally, no matter what your job description is in our organizations.

As *a part of our series about women who are shaking things up in their industry, I had the pleasure of interviewing Ashley Bradley.*

A jack of all trades, Ashley plays an integral part in the success of a vertically integrated organization. As Vice President and CFO, Ashley manages the day-to-day operations of progressive architecture firm, The Bradley Projects; commercial construction company, Certified Construction Services; and real estate development company, The Bradley Development Group. Serving as the clearing-house for all development management issues, Ashley also handles financial and project management on a per-project basis. A strong multitasker, decision maker, and collaborator, she is also responsible for spearheading contracts, billing, budgets, marketing, and overseeing the overlapping interests of the three companies to ensure all details are considered.

Thank you for joining us in this interview series Ashley. Can you tell us a bit about your "backstory"? What led you to this particular career path?

My *formal education is in environmental studies and literary journalism. I have masters degrees in both. Along the way, I lived all over the country, from Anchorage to Charleston, and a couple of years on the road in Perth, Western Australia, and Edinburgh, and was offered a job at the McMurdo Station in Antarctica. I was a nomad until I was 28. When I was finally ready to get back to the US, my first stop was Los Angeles, where an old friend from San*





handles the nutrition of such a large collection of animals, and many of the conservation projects they do worldwide from bears in Peru to saving the mountain yellow-legged frog in Southern California. It was a pretty great job. At the time, my husband Jared was working for an architecture firm and was rather disenchanted with the role an architect has in the big picture of development. I felt compelled to take on a new challenge, and I eventually left the zoo to help his business grow into the vertically integrated development company (architecture, construction, and real estate development) that we run today. Just like the variety of the stories at the Zoo, no two days are alike.

Can you tell our readers what it is about the work you're doing that's disruptive?

For the market we're working in, being a vertically integrated developer that is design-forward has undoubtedly disrupted the Nashville market. The traditional model that has existed for many years is that a developer will hire an architect, and then will put the project to bid to multiple contractors. We are shaking up the industry, there isn't anyone doing it as integrated as we are or conscious of progressive design first.

Can you share a story about the funniest mistake you made when you were first starting? Can you tell us what lesson you learned from that?

I've made so many. I remember sitting in an office in a bank with my husband, talking about quitting our jobs and starting the development company, and the loan officer looked at us and said, "Don't you think you should have a project first?" I didn't have an idea of the leg work it takes to get a project from a concept to a grading permit and then from a grading permit to a stabilized project. After that comment, I learned that there are many months and checks and balances between making a project viable on paper and executed well and built within a budget.

We all need a little help along the journey. Who have been some of your mentors? Can you share a story about how they made an impact?

When we started, female architect Jennifer Luce (Luce et Studio) was well known in San Diego and written about in the New York Times. She befriended me and exposed me to a range of artists and fabricators that focused on progressive design. She shaped design elements in some of our current projects, from custom metal screens to some of her interiors. She had a couple of amazing spaces she lived in, from an ocean-front condo to this industrial space in downtown San Diego with cardboard boxes that walled off the bathroom from the rest of the open floor plan. The juxtaposition of design and the responding to the context of each space and its place in the urban fabric is memorable to me.





One of my favorite adages is about a boy and his father standing on the edge of the sea, figuring out if they should sail. “What do you think?” he asks his father. “Stay or go?”

“What do you want to do?” his father said.

“Well, I want to stay, and I want to go.”

“Then we go,” the father said.

“Why?”

“Because to stay is safe, which is okay. Being safe is okay. But to be safe when you don’t have to be safe, that’s not okay.”

I’m not sure disruption is entirely a conscious decision. We didn’t start out with the plan of building a vertically integrated development company that steers toward progressive design. It evolved organically with the architecture, then integrated the development process to manage the entire process, then the desire to build our projects to better control the quality and financial risks. We are disruptive in the sense that there was a void in the market that we immediately filled, and now almost all of the opportunities we have are evolving in this way.

When do we say the converse, that a system or structure has ‘withstood the test of time’? Can you articulate to our readers when disrupting an industry is positive, and when disrupting an industry is ‘not so positive’? Can you share some examples of what you mean?

We’ve been in Nashville nine years now, and the market here has shifted so dramatically in that time. Being named “It” city by the New York Times certainly helped open some opportunities for us. Early on, we heard several times from potential lenders that you can never have the architect and developer be the same person, much less the architect, developer and general contractor. There was a wariness about the model that is now successful for us. When you have the architect, developer and the general contractor working together, there is immense coordination and problem solving rather than finger-pointing. For example, an architect’s biggest fear is that something is left out in the drawings, or something doesn’t work out like it’s shown. That fear is born from the client pushing the costs of that issue onto the architect. And likewise, a contractor’s biggest fear is recourse from the developer for similar reasons. There are countless times in all of our projects where the entire team gets together to resolve a specific conflict regardless of where or from whom it originated.



of what we do is urban infill projects, it is essential we respond to the context and make the best use and scale of a project on the site. I remember when we started our Linden Row project in one of the most affluent and historical areas of Nashville, the zoning was already established and allowed for a mid-rise office structure. The first thing we did as a collective team was to ask “what truly belongs here?”. We decided it wasn’t another office structure, but an urban and progressive reinterpretation of a rowhome. This created a more natural entry into the neighborhood, whereas an office tower would have damaged residential property values immediately adjacent to the site. I think other developers would have force fed a large office building in the neighborhood without blinking an eye.

Our mantra is building great projects with people we enjoy working with. Other companies may focus on getting X million square feet built or making a monstrous return for their investors for every project. And while we are certainly a for-profit company and serve our investors with the utmost fiducial responsibility, we’ve found that focusing on what excites us most and where we can make a difference in our community not only brings a greater level of success, but provides purpose. We strive to bring quality design to workforce housing in North Nashville, create warm modern spaces for people at every socioeconomic level to live, work and play in, and evaluate the larger impact of our work, rather than always driving for the bottom line.

Can you share 3 of the best words of advice you’ve gotten along your journey? Please give a story or example for each.

Trust (followed closely by loyalty). Diversify. Stay in your lane.

While Jared and I are partners in the architecture and real estate development companies, we have a partner in the construction company, Scott DeLano, who is a master of knowing what’s going on at any of our job sites across the City at any given time. The three of us trust each other implicitly that the decisions we make are for the good of the company. And as such, we do our best to stay in our lanes. Scott is extremely dialed in to the day-to-day in the way that I am to the billing and legal and Jared is there at the macrolevel making sure the projects get greenlit and bringing in the next great opportunities all while pushing progressive design. We have had development partners that we continue to work with and others that we realized are not the best fit, but the loyalty that we have on the construction side is palpable; we are very much in this together.

Diversify. If the pandemic has shown us the need to keep a range of projects going. We’re involved in a massive hotel project as much as we are constructing new projects at local universities and a restaurant from a Top Chef contestant. Not everything has to be a home run, and keeping the great people we have working for us employed is extremely important to us. The guys in the office





subcontract work to. We are creating a business culture that values everyone equally, no matter what your job description is in our organizations.

We are sure you aren't done. How are you going to shake things up next?

In a year of downturn for many markets, we've hit a stride of stability and success that we are grateful for. We are thankful for projects that continued as construction materials skyrocketed, and for properties that have sold quickly above asking price, which we attribute to bringing something different to the market, specifically progressive design. We have some opportunities that will take us out of Nashville into Denver and Austin, and we're excited to contribute there as well.

In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges faced by 'women disruptors' that aren't typically faced by their male counterparts?

I seem to see so many hashtags on Instagram with #FemaleBoss, #BossBitch, #WomenPower, and every iteration of that, which I feel is such a negative way to empower women as disruptors in certain fields. I work with primarily men everyday (and have three boys and three male dogs at home), so it is in my vested interest to not be perceived as different or defining myself as categorically separate. By branding yourself in that way inherently creates the dynamic that there's a difference of men and women working together, or in positions of power, a difference exists. That said, there's much less room for error and it's easier to lose trust if you aren't actually one of the boys. I couldn't imagine having a routine "Outfit of the Day" post, or some other self-focused life lesson from me and then expect the guys in the office to take me seriously as a partner and CFO.

Do you have a book/podcast/talk that's had a deep impact on your thinking? Can you share a story with us?

I'm a distance runner and recently heard a Soar podcast (Episode 4) about a documentary team that followed Afghan women secretly training to run a marathon. I haven't seen the film yet, but it puts into perspective the freedoms we have in the United States in something as simple as going for a run when and wherever you want.

On the other end of the spectrum is the chaotic but completely endearing podcast by Dana Carvey called Fantastic (he's also a runner!). Podcasts can be so formalized and edited so tightly, and this one is completely feral and so enjoyable. Sometimes it is nice just to hear people having fun with each other, even when you don't know them at all. It's absolutely infectious.

You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that





Someone already came up with that great idea of the Skid Row Running Club. That's way up there for me in terms of the transformative nature of exercise in the face of adversity at a fundamental level. For me, I truly believe that to succeed in life you have to create a disciplined balance in your life, and diet, exercise, and healthy rhythms play into that balance. I often think of those less fortunate, who may have had the cards stacked against them from day one. What would happen if they had access or means to start a habit of something more healthy, like the Skid Row Running Club? I would love to play a part in a movement like that.

Can you please give us your favorite “Life Lesson Quote”? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?

Doing something great requires a long obedience in the same direction. I wouldn't trade my wanderlust for anything, but for us to be able to build great projects and give each one the attention and commitment it needs to be architecturally notable, fiscally successful and work with great people. That's all we can ask for.

How can our readers follow you online?

For so many years, we've been very under the radar, but we've recently launched our companies on Instagram (@bpi_bdg and @this_is_certified)

<https://medium.com/authority-magazine/female-disruptors-ashley-bradley-of-the-bradley-projects-on-the-three-things-you-need-to-shake-up-a6b32aa73602>

