

Abby Shapiro

Meet Oxford Properties' Senior Vice President for Europe whose international journey underscores the importance of adaptability and embracing varied perspectives.

“Tell us how you decided to get into real estate?”

I grew up helping my parents manage 12 apartment units they developed and owned in my hometown in upstate NY. I went to university thinking of pursuing international relations, following a suggestion from a great Aunt who noted my eagerness to travel and interest in public policy, but I quickly realised that I was terrible at foreign languages and had no desire to figure out how to stop nuclear warfare (how the professor of my entry level world politics course pitched the profession to us) but rather I loved the rationality of economics and math and

could apply these to the tangible world of real estate – all solidified after a junior-year internship with a local developer in the Baltimore-Washington area. And so, I ended up majoring in Business Administration with a concentration in finance and real estate and my CV has remained consistent on this topic since.

What are you most proud of in your career to date?

Having navigated career opportunities to work across four countries with meaningful successes in each despite being told on numerous occasions that such experiences could hold me back professionally – if

anything, I have found quite the opposite to date.

You worked both in the US and the UK – we won't ask you which you prefer(!) – what is your favourite thing about each place?

I love Americans' general optimism towards others and opportunities. We are living longer as a society and I think that requires us to be more open and agile to changing circumstances. This innate sense of optimism can support such a journey. For the UK, I equally respect having a level of skepticism before running headfirst into commitments and so I try to marry these to values into what an old boss of mine called having a healthy level of 'Skeptical Optimism'.

What do you value most about your work?

That it contributes to pay the simple goal of securing the average ~C\$30,000 per annum pension payment to the OMERS members, made up of the good people who keep Ontario running day to day.

Who has been the best mentor to you over the years and why?

There simply isn't a single person I could point to. I look to a handful of mentors depending on the circumstance and juncture of my career. That said, amongst them I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Michel Vaclair, Jo McNamara and Paul Brundage who have given me a tremendous amount of guidance and support over my tenure at Oxford. On a personal front,



my grandmother, who is about to turn 100 years old next month, has probably been my single biggest source of inspiration for the type of person I want to be in life – someone who respects others and themselves and is always willing to lend a hand.

Is there anything you would change about the industry today?

I'd love to see more women in senior investment roles.

Who do you admire most in the RE industry and why?

Angélique de Rouge who is the founder of Strategies in Corp – a boutique agency based in Paris. Angélique started her business after she had children and saw a gap in the market to map detailed data on every transaction that was happening in Paris and leverage this when finding opportunities for clients to lease or acquire space – an advanced concept at that time. For a small team who have maintained a core culture and focus they pack a big punch in the market.

What part of your upbringing has been most influential to your career?

I had a disastrous first internship experience in university where on the first day, which was meant to be a trial, I messed up every single task given to me with meaningful consequences to the agent I was interning for. After each error, this agent would explode and tell me I was an idiot and within the first two hours, I was nearly in tears and broken. However, I stuck out the day and was diligent to fix each mistake in turn and when 5pm finally came to relieve me of the torture, I was shocked to hear

WORDS OF WISDOM

What advice would you give to your younger self?

To trust myself and the process of living / life to gain greater wisdom and value. Be more confident to tell people what I need and ask for what I want.

How did you find the transition from US to European real estate? What advice would you give to those looking to make the move?

Before I moved to London, I was advised that if I wanted to 'make it,' I should stay focused on building my experience and network in the DC area. While the transition is a learning curve full of interim setbacks, I'm incredibly thankful I ignored this advice.

I fundamentally believe that 'more experience is better than less' and if you back yourself, you will come out the other side with even more 'value'. After all, the fundamentals of the sector aren't different – a property cash flow has the same key elements, just nuanced for how local lease contracts work, which anyone is capable of learning within a few months. So, if you have an opportunity to work in a new geography or part of your business, 'lean in' and take it.

the agent offer me a part time job. While I immediately (and politely) declined, the experience taught me the power of perseverance and second chances as well as my boundaries in terms of the type of people I wanted to work for / with – which has helped me positively navigate difficult career decisions and setbacks.

If there was one business decision you could change, what would it be and why?

There is only one that comes to mind – a deal I worked on for over a year that got away from us: We came close to taking SFL REIT private in 2011 and couldn't quite bridge a 'matter of cents' gap with the vendor owing to our too conservative view on forthcoming rental growth and the falling interest rate environment coming out of the GFC. In hindsight, it would have been a fantastic launch into the French market and an investment with a strong return. This experience mirrors a key takeaway from the book *The Great Depression: A Diary by Benjamin Roth*, which my father gifted me around the same time, that reminds us to find conviction to invest near the trough of the cycle when the momentum still feels negative even if it means hitting a few bumps along the bottom before the market corrects again, often to a higher level than its previous peak.

What is your favourite thing about investing across the continent?

It broadens one's overall perspective of what is an optimal investment and portfolio construction. It enables you to identify

competitive advantages of investing in a certain sector in one country over another. For example, I see an advantage of investing into purpose built residential stock in the UK vs. France given the country's more (generally) liberal approach to rent regulations coupled with a higher yield environment and lack of institutional stock. Conversely, the constrained supply and generally hierarchical working culture of continental European cities may translate into to a more attractive proposition to invest into offices there vs. the USA in the near term.

Have rising debt costs changed how you underwrite your investments?

Yes. To my comment earlier, the more types of products you have options to invest into (e.g. Public, private, credit, equity), which OMERS has, the better you can compare the opportunity cost of an invested dollar. Thus, with rising debt costs, an unlevered equity position with an income yield at say 5.5% feels subpar vs. investing that dollar into a credit position that pays an income yield of 7 – 8% at a lower part / more defensive part of the capital stack and with far less effort required.

How can businesses best futureproof their investments and risk/return requirements in a volatile market?

Through diversification and including a mix of long and short-duration credit positions that can allow you to transition back into equity positions with greater upside risk once there is more clarity on future growth.

If you weren't working in real estate, what would you be doing and why?

While I hope my career will diversify over time, the one profession I'm probably too late to conquer but I've always had a passion for is the law and more specifically the job of the Supreme Court of the United States. Both my parents were lawyers, and I grew up in a liberal household that encouraged intellectual debate about society. In my senior year of high school, I participated in a select Law & Criminal Justice program that immersed 12 students in a year of pre-law coursework, including reading Bob Woodward and Scott Armstrong's *The Brethren - Inside the Supreme Court*. For those that aren't familiar, *The Brethren* goes behind the scenes of Warren Burger's early years as Supreme Court Chief Justice that ruled on numerous monumental cases including the Watergate tape scandal (United States v Nixon), abortion (Roe v Wade) and school desegregation (Brown v Board of Education). Still to this day, I get absorbed with the debates about the rights of the individual vs. society and how our legal system is constantly trying to strike the right balance between the two within societies that are ever evolving.

Tell us something not many people know about you?

I'm a huge fan of Marie Kondo's approach to organising life and home.

What is the best decision you've made recently, and what was the worst?

Best: Moving back to London from Paris after my daughter was born.

Worst: Combining my wider family and my husband's family together on a summer holiday in Germany.

In the past week, what has made you laugh or smile the most?

My daughter, Mila who at 18 months is curiously exploring the world, mimicking laughs and funny faces and practicing walking like a drunken sailor.

Favourite place you have visited in the world?

Vermont, in the summer or autumn. I grew up at the border of New York state and Vermont and we spent a lot of our childhood in the Vermont hills and at its lakes, which will always feel 'like home' to me.

Name one book that changed your life.

Lead and Disrupt – I don't know if it changed my life per se, but it's had an enormous impact on how I think about business, the world, society and sustainability (in all forms).

How do you maintain a good work/life balance?

Unfortunately, I'm not sure I do. I had my first child nearly two years ago and I feel like I'm in early innings figuring this out. That said, I benefit greatly from a flexible work culture and having a mobile toddler forces you to put down your phone when you're on parent duty ■ ”