

Sue Brown

Meet the pioneering voice in the built environment who has shaped the conversation around Equity, Diversity & Inclusion, driving meaningful change across the sector.

“After six years leading Real Estate Balance, you’ve recently stepped down as Managing Director. How did it feel to close that chapter of your career?”

Leading Real Estate Balance for the past six years has been the culmination of a 44-year career in the real estate industry, including 35 years in real estate communications. My earlier work focused on representing clients and promoting their projects, whereas at REB I was speaking on behalf of the organisation itself. Communications has always been central to my career, although from very different perspectives. When I took on the role, I committed to my first Chair, Liz Peace, and later to my current Chair, Jo Davis,

that I would stay until April 2026, because that marked a milestone birthday. I was in two minds about stepping down when the time came, but recent ill health has made it clear that now is the right time to do so.

What are you most proud of achieving during your time there?

I am most proud of taking the organisation from being just about gender to making it be about race and ethnicity and social mobility as well. That isn’t to say that there aren’t still substantial issues around gender, but we have to try to make sure that nobody is excluded from opportunities based on gender, race, ethnicity, social background, sexual orientation,

neurodiversity or any number of exclusionary characteristics (including age, in which I now have a strong personal interest!). While some organisations such as Freehold, focus on LGBTQ+, we at REB chose to concentrate on gender, race and ethnicity and social mobility.

How do you feel about where the sector stands today as you hand over the baton?

We clearly still have a long way to go, especially in an industry where gender entry is 50/50 but as women move up organisations, their number in senior positions drops off considerably. That can be explained by childbirth to a certain extent but not completely. It is still a sector which can be dominated by the hunting, shooting, fishing, golf fraternity. REB has pursued a very strong approach to effecting cultural change which has to continue. A lot of women coming into the industry were put off by heavy alcohol consumption (not me, unfortunately!) but we did find ourselves not always making everything around alcohol. I’m not sure that Real Estate is as bad in this regard as technology, financial services or construction but that is an ongoing debate.

Looking back, what first drew you towards property and the built environment?

When I first left university, as the first person in my family to attend, I had no ambition to work in the private sector. I was and remain, quite left of centre in my politics. After initially being turned down



for a graduate role at the London Borough of Wandsworth because I was a woman (they later hired me but the initial rejection left a very bad taste in my mouth), I went on to work for the Mrs. Thatcher of local government, Dame Shirley Porter at the City of Westminster. I eventually joined the London Docklands Development Corporation under the leadership of the inestimable Reg Ward, and that is where my interest in real estate began. I loved that so much could be changed by the built environment, perhaps unsurprisingly for someone who grew up seeing Canary Wharf being built.

Real estate was a very different industry at that time. What was it like entering the sector?

It was, but because I worked on the communications side, I may have been seen as something of a PR girly (I know how ridiculous that sounds). Real Estate comms had traditionally been done by the sisters of agents. I like to think that my husband Tony Danaher and I set up an agency which was seen to be more serious, in part because of Tony. He was always a strong supporter of women and thought they tended to work harder. In the end, we ran an agency that was entirely staffed by women, to the point where we had to make a conscious effort to hire men.

You were closely involved in the regeneration of Spitalfields during a transformative period for London. What lessons from that era still resonate today? And not just Spitalfields, but also Canary Wharf, Paddington and many other

WORDS OF WISDOM

If you could give one piece of advice to your younger self starting out in property, what would it be?

It would probably be not to work so hard. A strange thing to say, I know, but my generation of women really did have to work three times as hard simply to achieve. We also didn't take proper maternity leave (or effectively no proper maternity leave). Both my kids are highly successful and more importantly, wonderful human beings but as Sue Clayton, one of the founders of REB has said to me, we would probably be charged with child neglect now based on how we dealt with being working mothers!

What leadership qualities do you think are most needed in real estate today?

Empathy; an understanding of what needs to be done in an ED&I sense to effecting change, a genuine love for the built environment and still, a commitment to hard work.

parts of London and beyond. Perhaps the most important lesson I learned was that you cannot successfully transform a place without bringing local communities with you. Equally, those communities are not always represented by the loudest or most visible voices. In Spitalfields, for example, there was strong opposition to redevelopment from some local white working-class residents, only for that to be challenged by young people from the local Bangladeshi community who wanted the jobs and opportunities the development would create. We saw similar dynamics at Canary Wharf. It reinforced the importance of identifying and working with the people who genuinely wanted change and could benefit from it.

You were a driving force behind the creation of MIPIM. Did you imagine at the time what it would eventually become?

I don't think that any of us who were involved in the early days of MIPIM had any idea at all of what MIPIM would become, the biggest real estate show in the world.

What do you remember most vividly about those early years building MIPIM alongside your husband Tony?

I remember the early days, with 2,000 delegates at the first show in 1990, of whom probably 50 were women and 10 of that 50 were working for us. I am very proud of the fact that although MIPIM remains predominantly male, there has been a huge increase in the number of women attending. The number of people of colour has also increased greatly and that is in no small part due to what a

number of us have pushed for but also because of RX, the organisers giving free and reduced rates to people of colour.

You have been described as someone who “virtually invented property PR.” How important has storytelling been in shaping the industry?

We like to think that we changed the way that people thought about comms in the industry. I am bound to say this, aren't I? But of course, I think that storytelling has been important in changing the industry.

Earlier this year you received an Honorary MBA from the University of the Built Environment in recognition of your contribution to the sector. How did that recognition feel at this stage in your career?

I was absolutely delighted to receive my Honorary MBA alongside Peter Freeman, Nick Searle and the wonderful Dr Janet Young getting honorary doctorates. I loved receiving the honour for work that I have done in seeking to change things in the industry. In truth, I was particularly pleased because my husband has two MBAs, our daughter has a BA, a MA and a PhD and our son has a BA, a MSc in real estate and is MRICS and has given me real grief that I was the only one in the family without a Masters degree. The MBA finally shut him up about that!

”

INCLUSION INSIGHTS

What do you think have been the most significant changes in the industry over the past 30 years?

More women, more people of colour and more people from working class backgrounds . . . Not enough but much better than we were.

What progress in ED&I do you think deserves celebrating?

The progress in ED&I is that we now speak about it very openly.

When you joined Real Estate Balance, you immediately broadened the conversation beyond gender to include ethnicity and social mobility. Why was that evolution so important to you?

I broadened the scope of what REB was about with the connivance and agreement of my Board. I have always believed that nobody should be excluded from anything on the basis of gender, race and ethnicity nor social background. I was brought up in multi-cultural South-West London so always went to school with black and brown girls. My own family is a broad ethnic mix, and I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth so always believed that these things were important.

What does a genuinely inclusive industry look like to you?

A genuinely inclusive industry is one where nobody is judged on the basis of gender, the colour of their skin or the way they speak.

Were there moments where you felt progress was moving too slowly?

I've always thought that progress was moving too slowly. Having said that, it is important that change is captured and inculcated in the industry. You cannot change things overnight. Change has to happen and then transformation has to become part of the fabric.

Have you noticed a generational shift in attitudes towards inclusion and workplace culture?

There is definitely a generational shift, thank God in relation to attitudes towards inclusion and workplace culture. My real concern is that things are only going to get worse for Gen Zedders. I think that a lot of problems currently are being driven by the big tech bros. I only hope that particular generation will see it in the same way, although I'm not sure that they will do so.

Real Estate Balance has operated in an increasingly challenging climate for ED&I organisations. What is the biggest challenge it is facing?

Real Estate Balance is totally funded by subscription and there are increasing numbers of organisations competing in the ED&I space to fight for funding. In recent years, this has been made more difficult by a broader political and cultural backlash against ED&I initiatives both in the US and increasingly the UK.

What gives you optimism about the future of the industry?

I have to believe in the future of the industry. We can't give up now.