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## Homebuilding Industry: A few good women

**There aren't many women who build homes, but those who do say they are perfectly suited to the task**

July 18, 2009

**BARBARA SILVERSTEIN**  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

It's hard to miss the new three-storey house looming above the Edwardian and Georgian homes in the upscale Casa Loma neighbourhood near Spadina and St. Clair.

The 5,000-square-foot luxury home took a year to complete – exactly the amount of time the builder said it would take from the demolition of the old house to the final carpentry and painting. Pamela Silver, 42, president of Intrabuild Custom Homes, proudly pulls out the detailed 10-page project schedule she devised weeks before construction began.



ILLUSTRATION BY RAFFI ANDERIAN / TORONTO STAR

"I hit every target date on time. I was right on schedule every step of the entire project."

Silver is among a very small number of female builders operating in the Greater Toronto Area. Stephen Dupuis, CEO of the Building Industry and Land Development Association (BILD), which represents 1,450 homebuilders and developers in the GTA, confirms the fact.

Only three out of the 32-member BILD board of directors are women, Dupuis says. "Our board typically is made up of company principals. Fewer principals are women."

Dupuis surmises that the large capital risk may deter women from becoming builders. "It probably appears more intimidating than it is."

Condominium builder [Julie Di Lorenzo](#) insists that it's not the financial risk that keeps female entrepreneurs out of construction. "They have avoided the building industry because there's a perception that this industry is a man's world."

Di Lorenzo, 45, co-president of Diamante Development Corp., ventured into the business when, as a university student in 1982, she teamed up with two male partners to start a concrete forming company. The concrete work provided cash flow for their early development projects.

Di Lorenzo says she's been very comfortable working in this male-dominated environment. "I appreciate the guys on the job and they respect me. They've watched me grow up in the business. They know I understand it from the bottom up."

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In 1992, Di Lorenzo and partners Joe Foti and Paolo Palamara founded Diamante with restaurateur Franco Prevedello. The company is known for such condominium projects as 1 Balmoral, at Yonge and St. Clair, and One City Hall, near Bay and Dundas.

Each partner has an area of expertise. Di Lorenzo is responsible for the financial and development side of the business. She says as a woman she's more on the lookout for obstacles than her male partners. "Anticipating problems is characteristic of a woman's thinking," she says.

Nevertheless, Di Lorenzo is not fazed by the current downturn in the sale of new homes. She's proceeding with construction of the Florian, a 21-storey luxury building at Bay and Davenport with units starting at \$1 million. Having been through three recessions, Di Lorenzo says she's ready to face the latest economic storm. "I'm an optimist," she declares.

Di Lorenzo has weathered many challenges, some by choice, she says. For instance, in 2005 she took on the presidency of BILD when she was eight months' pregnant. "Even with the baby, I never missed a meeting."

The business gives her the flexibility she needs to raise a pre-schooler and toddler. She brings them to meetings and at home she's never without her BlackBerry. "I live and breathe this business 24/7."

Mary Lawson, vice-president and general manager of Dalerose Country Homes, a custom home-building company in Orangeville, was also raising young children when she started a renovation company in the Kitchener-Waterloo area in the early '70s.

Lawson, a 40-year industry veteran, has had a multi-faceted career in construction. She's been an independent and she's held executive positions, working on condominium developments and single-home subdivisions in Alberta throughout the '80s and in the GTA since 1991.

Women are well suited to running construction sites, Lawson observes. "Most women are born multi-taskers. They're more organized than men."

Along with custom work, Lawson is also overseeing a production project of eight homes in the \$650,000 range in Caledon East. "I wish we were all sold out," she laments. "But with the present economic uncertainty, consumers are reluctant to make major financial decisions like buying a new home."

Lawson has been a trailblazer in the residential construction industry. She was the first woman to head a Canadian homebuilders' association when she was elected president of the Calgary organization in 1988. She held the equivalent position in Toronto in 1998 and in 2004, she was the national president. But she recalls being excluded from association meetings in the '70s. "Women were welcome only for ladies' night."

Still, she says she was always treated as an equal in Western Canada. "I think Toronto in the '80s would have been a tougher go."

Overall, she has felt well respected by her male peers. "If you know what you're talking about, you don't get too much flak."

After 23 years in the building and land development business, Laurie Gordon, 46, president of Berkshire Homes, is accustomed to being the sole woman on a building site. She says people are often surprised when they meet her. "They say, 'This is an unusual place for a woman.'"

But the comments don't bother her. "You know your ability to deliver because you understand the business."

Gordon studied urban and regional planning at university in preparation for a career as a developer. She started in land planning servicing subdivisions with sewers and roads. She became a builder in 1997 when she established Berkshire Homes with John Carbone. "It was a natural

progression," she says.

Berkshire, BILD's green builder of the year, just completed a project of semicustom homes in the mid-\$400,000 range on heavily treed lots near Bolton and Orangeville. "Environmentally sustainable projects are the future of this business," she says.

Like other companies, Berkshire has been hit by the economic downturn, and while sales have slowed, Gordon stresses she's still on the lookout for development opportunities.

Silver says that thanks to custom work, she is not as financially vulnerable as people who build on spec. The Casa Loma home is her sixth major project since she started building six years ago. She has a degree in interior design and 13 years' experience as a professional project manager.

"I was managing multi-million dollar projects for a major technology company," says Silver, who is based in Toronto. "That's a skill set that's very adaptable to building."

Her foray into building started with personal projects. First she renovated her house. Then she hired a builder to construct a new family home. "When I saw what he did, I said to myself, 'I can do this.'" So she sold that house and built another one on her own. Then she put up the Intrabuild shingle.

Silver is pleased about the positive relationship she has developed with the male subcontractors. "They like working for me because I'm very organized. I make their work easier for them."

She says a key skill she brings as a woman is her ability to communicate effectively with the homeowner and the people in the trades. "I'm the liaison between them. I'm trying to translate the client's vision into an outstanding finished product."