

Building homes, building dreams

Women building homes? It's not as unconventional as you might think. Who better to understand the logic and flow of a home? How comfort meets function? Where the kids' backpacks get dropped and where dirty laundry goes to get clean?

Women are succeeding in the home construction industry in increasing numbers. Meet five women who chose this profession and how they are changing the way homes are being built.

Women lead change in the homebuilding industry

Mixing style and structure

Cindi Farris remembers vividly the most creative home she's ever built. The inspiration began with a mixing bowl.

"The homeowner came to me with this antique stainless steel mixing bowl. It was her grandmother's mixing bowl and she wanted to make it into a sink."

From that one request, a creative marvel was born. "It was the most unusual house," Farris says. "The challenge caused us to brainstorm. We asked ourselves, 'What if we tried this? How about that?'" We used materials we'd never used to build this home. All because the homeowner was holding out this mixing bowl."

The result was a fun, beautiful and functional home, and remains one of Farris' favorite projects.

It's a long way from where she started. Back in the early 1980s, Farris needed a job. A temporary agency

sent her on a receptionist gig to a CPA firm which specialized in construction accounts. Not long after, one of the firm's clients, a commercial real estate developer, offered Farris a job. "At first, everyone thought it was cute to have a girl out on the job site, or to run to the bank," she says. Then, Farris found herself at a crossroads, one of several she would face in her career. "I had to decide whether I wanted to do the sales part or the construction part," she says. Farris thought she wanted a job in sales because of the earning potential, but she kept finding herself on the job site.

When the real estate market tanked in the late 1980s, an architect friend told Farris, "You and I are going to do something different. You'll hate it. Let's build a house together."

Farris didn't want to build houses. But then they built a house. "We had a lot of fun, so we built another one." That was how Impact Homes started. She and her partner got a lucky break early on when they were invited to build for the Parade of Homes. It was only

the third house they'd ever built and it won several awards. "That threw us into it," she says. "From then on, the focus was high-end custom residential."

By the mid-1990s, Farris and her partner started working in different directions. She started Cindi Farris Custom Homes in 1996. "You need a woman's name out there so people know there's a woman behind this."

To build a truly customized home for her clients, Farris studies some of their most mundane, and intimate personal details. "I ask people where they prefer to get dressed, what they do with their dirty laundry," she says. "I ask homeowners what they fight about as a couple," she says. "That way, I know how to avoid potential confrontations or trigger situations. Building a home heightens people's sensitivities and increases the likelihood of misunderstandings and arguments."

The result is intuitively designed homes. "I give people what they need, even if they don't realize it yet," she says.

Farris says that women building homes makes sense. "Your job may be in advertising, or engineering, but your life is your home and family. Women know where the drinking glasses should go, and where that cabinet should be in relation to the dishwasher."

She stresses the fine line between design and the "wow" factor, structural integrity and being able to live with it all in the long term. Farris draws information that she doesn't even know she's looking for to guide homeowners through

the process. "People think they want one thing but don't realize how it will apply in real life. I have to point out logical traffic patterns, remind people that unusual requests can affect more than the cost of the home – you have to think about how you would repair or replace it if it were damaged or broken at some point in the future."

Farris builds only two to three homes a year, so she can focus on the individual details of each project. Each of her homes takes anywhere from nine to 15 months to build. Collaboration with her clients is critical to the timeline. "The more time the client takes with the plan, the faster I build the house."

Although building homes was never in her master plan, Farris is in her natural element. "The houses I build may be glamorous, but I'm not," she says. One of the best parts of the job is that it's great to not wear pantyhose!"

I was just talking with some friends the other day, about what it would take to get more women into this business," Farris says. "There's a lot in this industry that translates well to what women are naturally good at doing."

Balance and perspective

Andrea Grizzle's day includes putting out fires. Literally.

"I just came from a meeting with a financial analyst," Grizzle says, breathlessly. "I was dressed nicely for the meeting, and when I got to

the home site, there was a fire in the dumpster."

The firefighters who responded and put out the fire asked Grizzle where the builder was.

"I'm the builder," she replied, matter of factly.

"Sometimes I get it and other times I don't," she says of people who might be surprised to see a woman in charge of building a home.

Grizzle isn't at all surprised to find herself building homes. "There's a picture of me as a little girl with a tool belt strapped around my waist, and I'm standing next to an ironing

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Cindi Farris

board." Her other childhood pastimes included playing with Lego and Lincoln Logs. "I liked putting pieces together, figuring out how things work," she says.

She started Summit Homes in March, 2001. "Not a great year to start from a market standpoint, but emotionally, it was a good time for me to start a business." Grizzle signed her first two contracts right after Sept. 11. "It was a scary time to convince people to build a home," she says. "But I knew that the real estate market was still doing well."

Although Grizzle is active in building each home, she says her focus is to grow the company. That means different things on different

days. “I’m out on site every day making sure sub-contractors are working to specification, and I’m also doing the marketing, office work and realtor functions,” she explains.

In college, Grizzle studied urban planning and development and architectural design. “I thought I would do commercial architectural design work, but I learned that I hated sitting at the computer.”

She spent several years in the Air Force as a weapons loader during Gulf War I. After leaving the military, she got into the home building business in 1996 as a construction manager for Medallion Homes, a new company at the time. “It was me and several, much younger men competing for the job,” says Grizzle, who was 30 at the time. “All of us were inexperienced. They hired me because I was in the military, and they knew I would be reliable.”

While she worked for Medallion, Grizzle took advantage of the education the company offered. “Whether they knew it or not, they were teaching me about things like building energy-efficient homes,” she said.

Grizzle says most of her homes take 6-8 months to build. “It starts with the site, then the plan. We need to build to take advantage of what the land offers.” She likens building a home to the structure and sequence of both her work in the military and preparing a meal. “You think things through and you need to know how it will work before jumping in to do it – be quick but don’t hurry,” she says. Grizzle relies on sequencing and lists, with dashes of intuition and

creativity to keep the work on track. “I feel like women do that instinctively,” she says.

Grizzle also favors simple leadership notions. “In the Air Force, I learned to make the “woman thing” a non-issue, and I do the same thing in this business,” she says. “Other than that, it’s Golden Rule stuff. If you want the trash picked up, do it yourself. If you want to move a door, you move it yourself.”

In a world of labels, images, clever tag lines and gimmicks designed to win the hearts and minds of customers, Grizzle offers a refreshingly simple concept. “I offer trustworthiness,” she says. “You get me. There’s no mask.”

And she offers perspective from her own life’s lessons. She reminds herself, and sometimes her clients, that building a house is just that. “My Gulf War I experience redefined life and death situations for me,” she says. “Yes, it’s true that building a house is the biggest investment most people make and it challenges a marriage, but the world’s not going to end and we’re not going to die if the tile setter doesn’t show up on time.”

Grizzle applies the same sensibility to the balance between her work and personal life. “They intermix,” she says. “There’s no 50/50 balance and you can’t shut one off to move to the other, but I try not to come home and talk about work all night.”

“Walking through a home now, I take in so much more now than if I came from a different profession,” she says. “No matter what I’m doing, I’m constantly learning. I’m pretty quiet socially, but I’m listening.”

Managing expectations

Patricia P. Truitt comes from a family of underachievers.

Trisha or Trish, as she’s usually called, claims a doctor, and aerospace engineer and an Army general as her brothers and her father commanded the 4077th M*A*S*H unit of movie and TV fame, during the Korean War and

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Andrea Grizzle

helped start the burn unit at Brook Army Medical Center.

With family credentials like that, you don’t want to fail.

Truitt is vice president of construction for Greenboro Homes, Inc. New to San Antonio, the Canadian company entered the local market in 2004. Truitt began working with Greenboro as a consultant and joined the company full-time last year.

Her credentials in the home building industry include work with several local home builders since graduating with a degree in History and Political Science from Trinity University in 1980. “Little

did I know at the time, but Trinity offered a degree in construction but I had no idea that this was what I was going to do with my life,” she jokes.

As a construction manager and production manager earlier in her career, Truitt learned the importance of organizational skills, but says there’s no right way to be organized. “Find your own way of dealing with five different things that need to be done at the same time,” she says.

She also developed a management style by observing what not to do. “One of the worst bosses I ever had believed in management by intimidation,” she says. “While that approach may work in the short term, it never works in the long term.” Her philosophy is simple and time-tested: “You can attract more bees with honey than with vinegar,” she says.

“When I was just starting out in the single family home business, I gained the respect of the contractors by watching them work and asking a million questions,” she says. “People love talking about what they do and I took full advantage of that and learned quickly.”

Truitt would like to see more women in the industry. She says the stereotypical cat calls from construction crews are being replaced with a lot of “you go girl” comments. “This business is more about one’s management style not about who can swing a hammer better,” she says. She also credits being an Army brat for exposing her to a variety of cultures and personalities. “It helps me relate better to customers and

contractors,” she says. For anyone considering a job change, Truitt says now is the time for women to get into her business. “If you are unhappy in your career or just starting out, this is a very rewarding and exciting choice. Don’t let preconceptions get in your way. This is not just a man’s world. Women can and do make a difference in this business.”

At the same time, she’s quick to say that she doesn’t make gender distinctions on the job. “I really don’t like to make a comparison between a woman and a man homebuilder. It should be based on what kind of person you are. I like to think that people like working with me because of who I am and my management style not necessarily because I am a woman.”

One of Truitt’s prouder professional moments was building a Habitat for Humanity home with an all-woman crew. “That was an exhausting but incredible experience,” she says. “I learned quite a bit about the actual physical building of the home, the nuts and bolts so to speak. I gained enormous respect for my contractors by actually doing the physical work myself.”

“But to be honest, each and every home that I have been responsible for is a rewarding experience in and of itself. What a feeling, taking a vacant lot and building someone’s dream home. I have often driven back to a subdivision I had worked in years later and the feeling that I get in seeing something that I had a hand in creating still being enjoyed by people is really incredible.”

Truitt laughs when she admits that this is far from the life she thought she would lead. “I thought I would be a lawyer,” she says. “This career just evolved. But to tell you the truth, I’m glad I never got around to law school. I can’t imagine doing anything else. I am never as happy as having the phone ringing off the wall and 5 people needing answers right now. This business is **never** boring. Each day is different and brings new challenges.”

The feel of a quality home

Theresa Mauricio grew up watching the South Side of San Antonio grow. Her dad was handy with tools and did some remodeling work, though it was not his full-time job. Somehow, the itch to build homes grew from that seed.

Mauricio started buying real estate to do “tear-down renovations” in the early 1980s. Along the way, she realized that she would be one tough customer to please if someone else built her home. Ready for a change, Mauricio decided to learn what she could about building homes. “I’m self-taught,” Mauricio says proudly. Her learning curve included visiting upscale neighborhoods in development, talked to contractors and met a few who were willing to share their wisdom on home construction.

Mauricio started Craftmen Homes in 1989. Sometimes, she operates under the name Homes by Theresa Mauricio. “People seem to connect better to a person’s name rather than a company name,” she says.

She’s not afraid to say that she looks to some of her best

competitors for inspiration. “I look at the best ideas that other builders are using and I find ways to incorporate some of that into what I do,” she says. “It’s a challenge to keep up with market, things are always changing.”

Mauricio builds about 6-10 homes a year, and believes that a well-built home gives off a certain vibe when you step inside. “When you go into a quality home, you can feel it,” she says.

in an industry dominated by men, Mauricio has a secret weapon. “I don’t tell the men what to do — I ask them what they can do for me. It works well. They feel like I’m treating them like the professionals and the artisans that they are.”

She also feels like being a woman in this business helps her connect with the statistically influential decision-makers in the home buying process – other women. “Women are perhaps more

when they were younger,” she says. “I used to hide the idea that I have another life at home but I think people appreciate that I’m up front about my personal life.” She also says that doing a good job up front helps her make the most of her busy schedule. “I’m able to enjoy my family because I put out a good product that I don’t have to come back and fix later.”

And, perhaps also because she is a woman, Mauricio likens building homes to another uniquely feminine process – pregnancy and childbirth. “The baby develops and then you see something great and beautiful,” she says. “Building a home is like that; it starts with a plan that becomes an idea that transfers to a piece of land and finally becomes a home.”

Her advice to anyone thinking about building a home: “Find the right builder, let go and have fun,” she says. She adds one more piece of advice: “Don’t go cheap and don’t take shortcuts. It will only cost you more in the end.”

Women belong in this business
With a large company behind her, Patty Spangler doesn’t swing a hammer for Pulte Homes, literally or figuratively.

The vice president of operations for the national home builder prefers concepts like teamwork and partnership. She also doesn’t believe that employees work for her. Rather, she works for them. “When people ask how many Sales Counselors I have working for me, I always tell them that no one works for me, I on the other hand work for 50 people, and that’s just the Sales Team.”

What do people want in a new home?

“People starting to ask for the house that they need and not a mansion. I’m building smaller, more efficient homes.”

Cindi Farris

“People are asking for unique designs and features like home office space and kids’ retreats.

Theresa Mauricio

“I’m getting requests not so much for big houses, but homes with no wasted space. People want flexible space – rooms that could be a home office, extra bedroom or an exercise room. The wild, ostentatious stuff is out.”

Andrea Grizzle

She gives a lot of credit to her team of sub-contractors. “I’m only as good as they are,” she says “I’m an instrument to an orchestra. I may coordinate everything, but without good workers you won’t accomplish anything.”

Mauricio sets the tone for a working environment she describes as “professional but fun.” As for the challenges of a team of mostly male sub-contractors working for a woman

sensitive...we listen and we like to give people what they want, and not necessarily what we want for them,” she says. Mauricio also feels like women are just more comfortable working with another woman. “We don’t intimidate each other, we’re on the same level. It’s more conversational and collaborative,” she says.

Mauricio says that, these days, she finds it easier to blend her personal and professional worlds. “My two kids went with me on every job

Spangler began her career at Pulte as a marketing coordinator and worked her way up the ladder, in jobs like general sales management, sales & marketing director, and vice president of sales & marketing. Her most recent promotion, she says, was memorable.

I was on a family vacation and when I returned to work, my office was filled from floor to ceiling with balloons – I couldn't even open the door!" Spangler learned that all 1,500+ balloons were blown up by her fellow teammates, and most of the balloons had a handwritten congratulatory message for Spangler. "Of all the recognition I have ever received, the balloons were the most sincere showing of support."

Spangler's father and brothers have always been in the

construction business, so she never gave it a second thought that this was a hugely male dominated industry. "I think it's important not to expect any exceptions either," she says. "In this business, it's all results-based. Male or female, you have to perform."

She says that an important factor to her success is Pulte's belief in mentoring. "Everyone at Pulte Homes is assigned a mentor on the very first day," she explains. Along the way, Spangler estimates that she's had at least a half-dozen mentors, and considers nearly everyone she's worked with to be a role model. "We are hugely supportive of one another and no one person is greater than the group. We have a foundation of respect. You have to appreciate what every individual contributes. Respect is not something you can demand – it doesn't automatically come with a title."

Like most other women in the industry, Spangler wants to see more women in the home building ranks. "We belong in this business," she says. "Women are the decision makers when purchasing a new home, so women should be involved in every aspect of the business."

Spangler starts her day early. "The Starbucks nearest me opens at 5 a.m.," she jokes. But her goal is to always have dinner as a family, with her husband and three kids, ages 4, 8 and 11.

"Every day, I have the opportunity to help facilitate the American dream," she says. "It doesn't matter if it's your first home or your fifth, there is something personal going on in your life that creates the desire for a new home. To be a part of that experience is a wonderful thing."