

# Building a Better Box by Thinking Outside of It

## The Journey of Progress for Women in Construction and Paving a Path to Success



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**HANNAH** | Hello, Catherine. Thank you for sitting down with me today to discuss the state of construction and what it means to be a woman in construction. I wanted to start off by asking you a little about how you got started in the industry?

**CATHERINE** | Well, it all started with my Mechanical Engineering degree. I spent six years in the design world, crunching numbers and sketching plans behind a desk. But I realized I craved something more hands-on, something where I could see my ideas come to life in the real world. So, I made the leap into construction. Having that design background was like having a secret weapon. It not only boosted my credibility but also gave me a unique perspective – I could understand the intricacies of a project from both the drawing board and the build site. It's like having a backstage pass to the construction world!

**HANNAH** | Were there any initial challenges?

**CATHERINE** | Absolutely. One of the primary hurdles I faced was the absence of a supportive network of women to turn to for guidance and insight into navigating the unique situations encountered in the industry. While this presented a significant challenge initially, it also motivated me to actively seek out mentors and build connections within the field. Overcoming this obstacle ultimately strengthened my resolve and fueled my determination to carve out my own space in this industry.

**HANNAH** | You formed CT Mechanical in 2008 and serve as the mechanical-contractor-in-chief. Can you explain why you wanted to form your own company and how you did so?

**CATHERINE** | Truth be told, I never set out with dreams of running my own show, but sometimes you hit a ceiling in the traditional structures of the industry. I reached a point where I realized the only way forward was to pave my own path. Sure, I may have been a tad idealistic at the outset, but that drive to create something special has kept me going. My vision is and always has been a company where people come first, plain and simple. We're all about creating a culture where employees feel heard, valued, respected, trusted and appreciated for their hard work. We're big on job security, accountability and giving folks the freedom to



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make decisions that matter. We are also not about cookie-cutter processes here. We embrace the uniqueness of each team member, encouraging them to enhance our processes in ways that work best for them. At the end of the day, we're all about fostering a workplace where everyone feels fulfilled and empowered to do their best work.

**HANNAH** | And I understand your company mainly does HVAC construction and maintenance, but you also do general construction, subcontract management, as well as design and engineering, which is quite the range of services offered! Do you have any favorite or notable projects your company has done in the past?

**CATHERINE** | What I find cool is when I learn something new because of a project we are about to do. For example, we did some HVAC renovations for a building at the Fish Barrier. Did you know that we electrocute fish before they come into Lake Michigan?! Who knew?! I like the continuous and never-ending learning that comes with doing a variety of projects.

**HANNAH** | On your website, it states your company says "see ya" to conventional contracting with smarter solutions and a team that's so into what they do, you can leave all your construction and maintenance worries behind you. How do you try to implement this into your projects?

**CATHERINE** | Ah, that's our motto in action! When it comes down to it, our clients aren't losing sleep over what our ductwork or piping looks like. They care about reliability, communication and results. That's why we emphasize showing up, delivering on our promises

and being proactive in addressing any concerns. We read the room, adapt to changing needs and pick up the damn phone when it's needed. It's all about providing smarter solutions and a team that's truly passionate about what they do, so our clients can wave goodbye to construction and maintenance worries.

**| HANNAH |** Were there any roadblocks that presented due to being a woman in what is still, in this day and age, a predominantly male profession?

**| CATHERINE |** Absolutely. One of the biggest challenges stems from social constructs and ingrained biases. It's disheartening how often I find myself at a social gathering, whether work-related or personal, only to be met with the assumption that I couldn't possibly be the sole mastermind behind my construction company. Without fail, the next question is always, "So, what does your husband do?" It's like a broken record, playing out at least 3-4 times a year, including just a couple of weeks ago. This recurring scenario serves as a stark reminder of the persistent gender stereotypes that still plague our industry. It's not just a slight; it's a gut punch – one that both men and women deliver without realizing the impact of their words.

**| HANNAH |** What strides have you seen be made for young women entering the industry like myself?

**| CATHERINE |** Ah, the journey of progress. About seven years ago, it hit me how I had been conditioned to navigate this male-dominated space. I found myself softening emails or injecting humor into situations just to blend in. I've always been direct and assertive, but I had to master the delicate dance of assertiveness without being labeled as difficult or, let's face it, the dreaded "b" word. Nobody wants to work with a difficult "b" word, right? My hope is that women like myself have paved enough paths to success in our industry so that the next generation can be unapologetically themselves. True diversity and value come when women feel empowered to be authentically themselves. That's when we'll see the real impact.

**| HANNAH |** Do you have any advice for women in the industry?

**| CATHERINE |** Embrace Challenges: My advice to women in the construction industry is simple: embrace challenges. In a field traditionally dominated by men, you're bound to encounter obstacles along the way. Instead of viewing these challenges as setbacks, see them as opportunities for growth and learning. Each hurdle you overcome makes you stronger, more resilient and more capable of achieving your goals.

**Stay True to Yourself:** It's easy to feel pressure to conform to certain expectations in a male-dominated industry. But remember, your unique perspective and authenticity are your greatest strengths. Stay true to yourself, your values and your vision. Don't be afraid to speak up, share your ideas and assert yourself. By staying true to who you are, you not only

empower yourself but also pave the way for greater diversity and inclusion in the industry. This authenticity is the key to making a real impact in our field.

**| HANNAH |** I know you are a founder of She Builds, an organization that provides networking opportunities that bring women together from all aspects of the construction industry. What made you want to form a networking group like this, and what has that been like for you?

**| CATHERINE |** I am still blown away by what this continues to become for me. She Builds came together in 2017 when the idea came to me at a WCOE Cocktail Hour, that's Women Construction Owners and Executives, when I found myself surrounded by a room full of women. I heard so many comments about how great it was to have us all in one place, so I decided to make it a "Thing." Our first official event was in 2018. Our entire intent is to create space by women, for women. I like to be clear that we are not excluding anyone; we are just focused on the women.



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We want She Builds to be the kind of event that women genuinely want to attend, like a fun night out with their girlfriends. And from there, the magic happens. Women forge authentic connections, boost their careers and grow their businesses. There's nothing quite like the feeling when a woman reaches out to me for advice or support, especially those out in the field. It's moments like those that remind me why She Builds is so important.

**| HANNAH |** As a proponent of women helping other women in this field, I know you try to work with other women when you can. Do you find that having a female contractor or designer brings a different perspective to a project that might otherwise be missing?

**| CATHERINE |** Absolutely, without a doubt. Let's talk office temperatures, for instance. Ever notice how they're often set for men in suit coats, even though it's 2024? It's like we're stuck in a time warp from the 1950s! But that's just scratching the surface. Imagine what could happen if we shook things up a bit and had women designing offices for women. I'm not saying it's the answer for everyone, but the possibilities are endless. This insight is precisely why we need women to be authentically themselves in this industry. When women bring their unique

perspectives to the table, we challenge the status quo and open up new avenues of innovation and inclusivity.

**| HANNAH |** Switching gears a bit, what work you are seeing in the current market as someone who works primarily in the office space industry? Overall, how would you describe the construction volume in this sector?

**| CATHERINE |** In the current market, I've noticed a slight decrease in activity, but nothing too drastic. As someone primarily involved in the renovation sector, I've found that renovations remain steady regardless of whether businesses are expanding or downsizing. Renovation projects continue to be a constant in the industry, providing opportunities for growth and adaptation in the ever-changing office space landscape.

**| HANNAH |** Would you say this area has recovered from the effects of COVID-19?

**| CATHERINE |** Yes, I'd say we're about as recovered as we can expect to be at this point. We are seeing minimal supply chain issues. However, the landscape has shifted significantly, with much of the focus now on how offices will evolve in response to the work-from-home trend.

**| HANNAH |** Are there any other trends you are seeing right now in your work?

**| CATHERINE |** Customers seem to be more apt to giving a down payment for long-lead equipment. I think they understand now since we had those issues during COVID.

**| HANNAH |** There is also new technology constantly being developed and implemented in the construction world, such as the utilization of AI into design and project management. How has new technology impacted your approach to your job, if at all, in the field or in your office?

**| CATHERINE |** Honestly, my main interest in new technology like AI lies in one crucial area: getting paid quicker! It's a lesser-known fact that in our industry, we often shell out hundreds of thousands of dollars for labor, materials and equipment, only to wait 90-120 days for payment. It's a constant struggle. What I'd love to see is smart solutions leveraging AI to prove the progress of our work to clients, ensuring timely payment for completed tasks. Not only does this provide us with much-needed cash flow, but it also offers clients the reassurance of seeing their investment at work, preventing any surprises down the line.

**| HANNAH |** Thank you so much for your time today, Catherine, and for your insightful answers.