

# THE CLARKE'S TALE

Claremont boss **Ann Clarke** tells Dean Gurden how she's carved out a niche in a male-dominated sector

“It's a man's world,” sang James Brown back in the 1960s. Women's emancipation may have come on leaps and bounds since then, but when Ann Clarke entered the job market in 1979 Brown's lyric still rang true in the design and construction industry.

Clarke, now joint managing director of Claremont Group Interiors, started her career with Liverpool City Architects as an architectural technician. She worked on large public sector projects such as the Merseyside Police HQ and several schools. She then joined Liverpool City Council and the Liverpool Housing Trust doing refurbishment work for housing associations in the aftermath of the Toxteth riots.

Clarke readily admits it was hard work for a woman in that environment. “The world is a very different place now,” she says, “with a lot more emphasis on supporting people in the workplace. Back then I was the only woman involved in the construction side of things at the housing association and it was difficult to get taken seriously. At that time it was perfectly acceptable for the walls to be covered in page 3 girls, for example. It was a very male-oriented environment.”

But this simply made Clarke more determined to get ahead. “You either find it just too hard and give in or, as in my case, the fact that people were throwing obstacles in my way simply made me more determined to succeed,” she says.

Having married in 1986 she spent a few years in Singapore. But her return to London also coincided with a realisation that she “didn't want to carry on doing what was essentially muck and bullets work on the likes of old houses”.

She continues: “I always felt I was more interested in interiors than the exteriors, so I started working at a small practice and at that point fell in

love with the world of interiors.” It was in that environment, working for a women who headed her own interiors practice, that Clarke realised her passion and, importantly, that being a woman would not be an obstacle.

“The thing about interiors, fit-outs and refurbishments is that you have to have a very clear view of what you are trying to achieve and then communicate that well,” she says. “I think women can sometimes draw more out from a client; they sometimes listen a little better and are

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good at trying to understand what the real drivers of a project are.”

Clarke goes on to cite the many workplace consultancy projects undertaken by Claremont. “It's all about trying to understand what the client is trying to achieve,” she says. “Not just in a physical sense – they want an office that seats 600 people, for example – but other issues such as culture, brand and working practices.

“It's about moving people along the road from very traditional ways of working to more contemporary ways. I think sometimes women have more of an understanding of how to get that information out of a client in a collaborative and listening way.

“I'm not saying men can't do it, but I just think we're a bit more intuitive at picking up signals. Clearly, you've got to have a project plan and a process that makes sense and delivers the end result. But applying a bit of subtlety around that structure can often get you a better result.”

Clarke's message to other women thinking of entering the industry is not to be put off. “There are lots of women

in engineering now – but still probably not enough,” she says. “There are more women in the design side of the construction industry than the delivery element. But my advice is to just keep at it.”

She also believes that the greater choice of courses available now can only encourage more women to enter the industry. “When I was looking around it was a case of doing architecture and the RIBA route or doing architecture and the RICS route. There weren't a lot of alternatives. Interior design was still in its infancy. Now there are lots of courses out there.”

Despite the challenges, Clarke firmly believes it's a great industry to be in. “The sense of achievement that comes from designing something and seeing it being created in front of your eyes is really exciting,” she enthuses. “I've been at Claremont for 23 years and I still get a buzz when I see something go from a blank piece of paper to something that physically exists to live and work in.”

Having worked her way up from associate director to design director and then joint managing director of Claremont, Clarke is living proof that this is a buzz that can be enjoyed by all – regardless of gender.

### ANN CLARKE'S FAVOURITES...

**Book:** *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel

**Musical artist:** Paul Weller

**Holiday destination:** Laos

**City:** Vienna (pictured below)

**TV programme:** *Inspector Montalbano*

**Hobby:** Travelling





## People moves



### **New MD for Komfort**

Komfort Workspace has appointed Nick Prosser managing director. Prosser brings to the

business extensive experience at MD level, with a strong history of strategy development, manufacturing, contracting and distribution.

His career has included seven years as managing director of Solaglas Contracting. Before this he was with engineering company IMI, where he ran a number of engineering businesses before heading its corporate development team.

Says Prosser of his appointment: "It's an exciting but challenging time in the industry and I'm looking forward to leading Komfort forward, growing the business and improving our product and service offering to customers."



### **Burgess adds to manufacturing team**

Noel Doyle has been named as the new manufacturing director of

Leicestershire-based Burgess Architectural Products. Bringing to the role a solid background in works manufacturing management, he previously worked for Ingersoll Rand and Signature. Doyle takes over from Richard Whitehouse, who has been with Burgess for 16 years.

Whitehouse will retain his position as a member of the Burgess management team on a part-time basis for the foreseeable future.



### **Naylor makes management move at CPD**

Alex Naylor has been appointed to the position of branch manager at

CPD's Nottingham branch. He brings to the role plenty of experience and commercial knowledge of the business, having spent 10 years with the firm. He started at the Sheffield branch and has been sales office manager in Nottingham for five years.