



SOCIETY

Meet The Women Building The Future Of Housing

Does the solution to tackling the housing crisis lie in the hands of women building a future for both people and profit?

By Victoria Spratt • 15 February 2023



Devon Parker, 32, remembers her first time. It was almost 15 years ago. She was 23 when she bought and developed her first property – “a very rundown” two-bedroom end-of-terrace house with a garage and garden – in South Shields for £64,000.

The initial capital for Parker’s now-booming property business – Classhouse Property – came from her savings. “I started saving specifically to buy property when I was 14 years old,” the South Tyneside-based property developer and landlord explains over the phone. “I would save all of my pocket money and I asked for money for Christmas and birthdays instead of presents so I could keep building up my investment pot.”

“I decided to educate myself about property and then I started buying rundown houses and renovating them to provide nice homes for people,” Parker continues. “I still remember how excited the tenants were when they moved into that lovely first property. It gave me a really good feeling and I wanted to keep doing it.”

Britain has a housing crisis and who can and cannot access housing is inherently gendered. Rising house prices and the gender pay gap means that there is no English region where a single woman on median earnings can afford to rent or buy an averagely priced house according to a new report from the Women’s Budget Group and Women’s Housing Forum.

According to Construction Industry News, Parker is a trailblazer. Property continues to be a male-dominated space with an overwhelmingly higher proportion of men (85 per cent) working in property development compared to women (15 per cent) working in the industry and particularly in leadership positions. Few of the major house builders have ever had a female chief executive.

Parker still has the first home she ever renovated in her portfolio. It is home to “a lovely lady and her son who have lived there for four years” But today

to property and her own time here in the north east for four years. Parker's business has come on a long way. She has branched out into land development too and now works with a team of around 35 people including administrative support and solicitors and, together, they buy land and build new houses on it for families.

Parker now owns upwards of 15 homes in South Tyneside with more in the pipeline. They are mostly two to three-bedroom semi-detached and terraced properties which she rents out for anywhere between £550 and £800 per month.

However, Parker doesn't see herself as a property developer or a portfolio landlord, even though that's exactly what her business does. She considers herself as a person who "provides housing" for her local community, all the while supporting it by employing local tradespeople and suppliers on her builds in order to create jobs and support other small businesses within her community.

"We provide long-term rental properties to families and professionals," Parker continues over the phone in between meetings. "The goal really is to provide people with housing stability. Anyone who wants to rent one of our properties is welcome to do so for as long as they like."

This is an unusual outlook for a landlord. There is currently much debate about whether or not the long-awaited ban on no-fault Section 21 evictions will ever be implemented by the current Conservative government after it was first promised by Theresa May back in 2019. Along with living costs and private rents, Section 21 evictions are on the rise – the number of evictions carried out by bailiffs grew by 39 per cent between April and June in 2022 – and losing a home this way is a leading cause of homelessness. Most landlords defend their right to evict their tenants as a 'necessary flexibility' but Parker is clear that she's in this for the long haul.

"The model we go for is that we retain all of the homes that we build or refurbish, specifically with the view to providing long-term, stable housing," she says. "I know a lot of renters are being given Section 21s at the minute if the landlord wants them out or wants to sell but that's not what we're about."

Instead, Parker wants her tenants to know they have "security". As long as they are "responsible tenants" she says she'll never ask them to move out. "The area that I invest in is my home town," Parker adds. "I actually know a lot of the people in the community who we are providing homes for and so I am very mindful (of how we operate)."

"Rising house prices and the gender pay gap means that there is no English region where a single woman on median earnings can afford to rent or buy an averagely priced house."

Like Parker, 39-year-old Jade McNeill is in property development. She also runs her own company, Beespace – a Nottingham-based design-led business which specialises in creating co-living spaces for professionals and students.

McNeill is also a mother of two, a seven-year-old boy and a seven-year-old girl. Her background is in retail store design and display but she and her husband (a builder with his own construction company) have been developing properties for "10 or 11 years".

"We used to live in flips," she explains over the phone. "We started out from a really working-class background. We had no capital from anywhere. The first deposit actually came from moving in with my gran for eight months and saving five grand. With that money I bought a shell of a Victorian house which I lived in for three years while doing it up slowly with my wages before selling it and making a profit."

Six years ago, McNeill decided to set up her own business. Her most recent project was a six-bedroom student house in Nottingham. "All of the rooms

project was a six-bedroom student house in Nottingham. All of the rooms have en-suites and there is a communal space of 40 square metres,” she explains. “It has open-plan living with a big kitchen, big kitchen island. We always make sure that our rooms are way above where they need to be in terms of minimum space requirements.”

Like Parker, quality is really important to McNeill. “I was shocked by the standards in the industry, at what was acceptable as rentable,” she says. “I’ve really tried to do my bit to disrupt the market and show people that you can create a better product without breaking the bank.”

McNeill hopes that this mentality is “having a ripple effect” within the industry. “That’s why I love working with women and mentoring women,” she reflects, “you can show people that there is a better way to do things. Gradually, I hope people are becoming more aware of how to create a better place [for people] to live.”

It’s working for McNeill. The last time she checked, her portfolio was worth £3.5m. And she has more high-value deals in the pipeline. “We’re now looking at properties with purchase prices of over a million pounds which have gross development values of three million plus,” she adds.

Similarly, Farnaz Ari believes having a vision is key when it comes to property development. The London-based 33-year-old’s company Talah Rose Developments, is named after her daughter and co-run with her mother.

“Most of our business is currently in Canada,” she explains “so I work remotely but we are looking to expand to Britain. My mum just loves construction. I think what really sets us apart from other companies is the way we work with architects. When we get a floor plan, we will look and make changes based on what the client actually needs practically. Some developers don’t look at how a space is going to be used.”

This attention to detail might mean something as simple as making sure a laundry room isn’t located at the other end of the house to the kitchen but, for Ari, it’s essential. “We do make a profit and all of our suggestions have to be priced in but we are always considering our clients needs.”

All three women have huge ambitions for the future and each, in their own way, is doing their bit to improve the reputation of property development, landlords and construction at a time when housing is more unaffordable than it has been at any point in history since the late 1800s and, arguably, almost as bad quality. In some parts of the country, private renters are living in what can only be described as slum-like Victorian-slum conditions. But not on either Parker or McNeill’s watch. Ari, similarly, puts her customers at the heart of every project.

Parker has several refurbishments in the pipeline. “I’m looking for new land to develop,” she says. “I really want to build more houses from scratch. It’s really necessary because we have a massive housing shortage in this country. That’s definitely the direction I want to take the business in.”

It is often said that bad landlords put profit over people. Well, Parker and McNeill are showing that it doesn’t have to be this way. What advice would Parker give to any woman aspiring to get into property?

“Above all,” she reflects, “don’t be scared to ask for help. You won’t know everything when you first start... so lean on the expertise of others as much as you can and learn from them.” Tempting as it may be to go in hard, Parker also thinks it is better to start small. “It’s better to learn the ropes and make mistakes on minor projects than it is on larger ones where there is more at stake,” she concludes. “Scale up slowly and in a controlled way to manage your downside risk.”

The Short Stack

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