

# Female mentor at work

Association of Women in Property chair Maria Francké sees planning as a natural career choice for women and is committed to ensuring that they fulfil their potential, explains *Katie Daubney*

Maria Francké did not set out to be a town planner. She admits that she had never considered the discipline at school. Yet she was offered a place on a planning course while she studied for the biology O level required to gain entry to her preferred subject, landscape architecture.

Her interest in planning matters was soon sparked and she never looked back. "The course was quite wide-ranging in the first year, covering everything from urban and rural planning to politics, sociology, the design side and the natural and built environment. I thought wow, this is actually quite exciting."

It is precisely this lack of awareness of the sector that Francké is trying to combat in her role as national chairwoman of the Association of Women in Property (WiP). Although she stresses that men are just as welcome at its seminars and workshops, she is keen to boost women's share of jobs in property from its current level of 15 per cent.

"A lot of girls don't know about planning and institutions such as the RTP, and universities can help in raising awareness," she reckons. "It's beginning to change because planning is higher on the political agenda. High-profile projects are attracting media attention and people are realising that it is the planning system that is behind all this. Anything even slightly controversial brings out the nimbyism in 85 per cent of people in the UK," she reflects.

"Now the planning system is trying to change this negative image. Public participation and community engagement is part and parcel of the process. This is where women's communication skills come into

play. Women can be great instigators of the consultation process."

WiP sends groups of newly qualified women planners into schools to talk to pupils about the profession. "The response has been excellent," says Francké. "The girls can relate to the young women as there is not such a big age difference."

Although degrees in surveying appear to be equally popular with male and female students, Francké notes a continuing disparity in more technical subjects such as engineering and planning. As far as the latter is concerned, she feels that women may find many facets attractive. "Women communicate in a different way to men," she reasons. "It's all about negotiation, persuading local authorities that a project can go ahead and is not going to have the negative impacts that people fear."

"There are hoops to jump through in terms of statutory requirements and environmental assessments to ensure that every box is ticked before you gain planning consent. I love the negotiation and liaison side because I love dealing with people. Women are often better with the softer side of things such as sustainability, ecology and sociology."

A lack of female role models needs to be tackled if women are to be attracted to the sector, Francké recognises. "It's starting to change because there are more women rising to positions of authority and leadership. Women need to start promoting the industry and talking about it," she suggests.

As head of planning and development for Scotland at *Drivers Jonas*, Glasgow-based Francké says she has not found any gender barriers in the

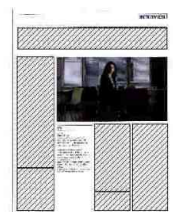
private sector. However, she acknowledges that the going can be tougher in the public sector. "There aren't many female senior planners in local authorities," she observes.

Recognising that staff shortages are a key factor in slowing the planning process, she is convinced that local authorities need to become a more attractive career option. "There are issues regarding salary scales and progression but there just aren't enough people going into the public sector," she notes.

"Scotland can raise its game in terms of the fantastic projects coming forward at the application stage, but they are not getting processed or built because simple applications are taking over a year to push through. Developers are having to budget for the excessive lengths of time it takes to win consent, by which time things could have changed in the market."

As well as attracting young women into an industry that desperately needs them, WiP also provides support. It runs a mentoring programme to give women confidence that they can progress to the top of their profession and exploit their own skills and abilities. Francké is both a mentor and a student. "I get immense satisfaction from that," she says.

The association has more than 1,000 members and holds 300 seminars and workshops a year at which both sexes are equally welcome. "Apparently the men find it a little disconcerting walking into a room full of women. But it's only what many women have to deal with on a daily basis, so it may help to change perceptions," she concludes. ■





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## CV

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**Age** 40

**Family** Single

**Education** BSc (Hons) in town planning, Heriot-Watt University

**Interests** Art, architecture, salsa dancing, tennis, theatre

**2008** National chairwoman, Association of Women in Property

**1999** Partner and head of planning and development, Scotland,

Drivers Jonas

**1994** Principal planner, Chesterton

**1991** Senior planner, Baxter Clark & Paul

**1988** Planning assistant, Royal Fine Art Commission for Scotland