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Interiors

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TO NANTUCKET,
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THE SEASON

REAL TALK

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INSIDE A BOSTON
DESIGNER'S
INCREDIBLE NEW
KITCHEN

BY THE PUBLISHERS OF BOSTON COMMON

THE UNICORN

Sarah Lawson discusses leadership, design and why so many Bostonians have home offices on their minds right now.

By Michael McCarthy

Five years ago, Sarah Lawson took a leap of faith and bought S+H Construction (shconstruction.com), a Boston stalwart for 40 years. This wasn't a lark by a neophyte; Lawson was a longtime building-industry veteran who garnered lots of respect for her work. Still, shepherding more than 60 employees used to working for Alex Slive and Doug Hanna—and convincing customers that a woman could lead the charge—was no small undertaking. Under her guidance, the company and its work have thrived. We asked Lawson to share her thoughts about the wild ride.

How do you think being a woman in a leadership role in a male-dominated industry has actually helped you?

Well, people remember me because there are so few female owners in the construction industry, and that's an advantage. But I think there's both freight and benefit with being an anomaly in your industry. People want to feel comfortable with their builder, and, in some cases,

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From left: A tranquil living room designed by S+H Construction; owner Sarah Lawson.

FROM LEFT: PHOTOS BY ERIC ROTH; COURTESY OF SARAH LAWSON

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From top: A sweeping window providing domestic views of an S+H Construction-designed home; a picturesque loft overlooking a scenic cityscape.

having a woman in the role feels better to them. In other cases, it just doesn't feel right. But of course, you never know if gender has anything to do with it. And the customer might not even know. These decisions are very subconscious.

And once you get going, construction is quite personal. It involves family, money and home—and sometimes a wedding for 300 taking place just after the completion date! When customers feel stressed, we're skilled at reassuring them and finding a good way to move forward. Our job is to be capable guides and always a force for good.

You took a leap of faith and bought S+H. After five years, what are you proudest of?

I'm the proudest that we've modernized and continued to improve, while maintaining the heart that makes S+H so special. It's also worth noting that transitioning a company from the founders to new ownership is harder than it looks—and doesn't always succeed. We've done it really well, and I'm proud of the whole group for making it happen.

What do you love about your work?

The daily challenge of moving the company forward and constantly finding ways to improve what we do—it's fun. I also love that we make people's lives better through design and craftsmanship. I can just picture how happy customers are going to be in the space, and how it will enhance their daily experience. Good design is powerful stuff.

Is there a project that stands out to you over the past five years when you thought, 'Now, this is why I love what I do...?'

The first project that comes to mind is actually still under construction. It's a townhouse. First of all, it's for a really nice family, and they're so excited about the project. The building looks like it was built in the 1980s and appears to be nothing fancy. But when you get inside, you see that it was designed on multiple split levels, with an open staircase and a beautiful modern rail system going up the center of the space. You can really imagine how great it's going to be to live in. It turns out it was designed by a famous modern architect—you can't hide good design—so it is also really special to be able to honor his work.

What are the biggest renovation requests for work you're seeing right now?

We've definitely seen an uptick in home offices—creating them in people's homes and upgrading the ones they already have. But the big trend we've seen in the past year is an increase in partial renovations. Not necessarily gutting an entire house, because these customers are mostly happy with them, but renovating the kitchen, putting on an addition, updating all the bathrooms or finishing the attic or basement. It seems like staying at home during COVID allowed people to really evaluate how well their houses were working and making the necessary changes. o

