



TAMIKA SMITH

BREAKING GROUND:

AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH TAMIKA SMITH...

TRAILBLAZER IN SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS CONSTRUCTION

Omesh Jethwani, Government Projects & Programs, engages in an insightful dialogue with Tamika Smith, the Founding Director of My Bella Casa, Executive Chair of Top 100 Women, and Founder of TSR Property Solutions.

The conversation delves into Tamika's professional journey, notable achievements, and her perspectives on the construction sector, emphasising her dedication to social and affordable housing and women's empowerment in the industry.

Tamika's remarkable accolades include being named the "Most Influential Woman in Construction" by Built International, securing the title of 'Entrepreneur Woman of the Year,' and earning a spot in the Top 20 Under 40 Queensland Entrepreneurs for 2023 by the Courier-Mail. Widely recognised and respected, Tamika is a businesswoman and entrepreneur committed to establishing commercially viable enterprises with a strong social conscience, particularly in delivering social and affordable housing.

Your journey in the construction industry has been diverse, from founding TSR Property Solutions to My Bella Casa. Can you share the inspiration behind venturing into the development and offsite construction sectors, specifically focusing on social and affordable housing projects?

Everything was deeply connected with the problems I set out to solve; like a puzzle, I was driven to solve the bigger affordable housing problem. Throughout my journey,

I would begin by solving one part and then relying on others to connect the other; I felt a profound responsibility to deliver, execute, and get on with it. You either have accountability or you have excuses; however, with great awareness comes great responsibility. The more I understood how, as a country, we continued to deliver short-term solutions, the more I felt compelled not to march to the beat of the drum that only lasted four years in line with election promises, but to create my own.

Getting to the root of the housing problem and a long-term solution meant thinking outside the box. We have significant expectations of political leaders to be our saviour. Still, I began to question whether we had it wrong by giving our community's responsibility to people with a four-year vision. The same problem kept occurring with the same decisions made, and as I sat at the tables, I realised we repeated the same short-term strategies merely to win elections. None of this put people first! The more I saw and learned, the more I found

it impossible to stay seated. I dealt with some of the largest institutional investors. However, I would still take the call from the 80-year-old crying in the middle of the night, saying, "I've been given your number; can you help me?"

The journey to get here has been challenging, but it built the foundations of the humanitarian and philanthropist I would become. I could not wish away all the roads that hurt me when they forged me into who I am today. But through these chapters, I learnt humility. I was no less worthy when I had nothing and once slept in tents.

Through these experiences, I see value within a person regardless of what they have, whether a little or a lot; who was I to become another ignorant leader who dismissed my responsibility?

Behind every homeless person we judge is a mirror of ourselves. I do not believe in thinking we are so perfect that we cannot fall on hard times; most of us do; in fact, all

of us do. But we are conditioned to hide those experiences to present the ultimate perfection. The people I deal with are no different from you and me; they have often experienced great pain, and judging them is not our place. I used to admire the hard businessman/woman, perfect exterior, and untouchable appearance; however, now I admire people with enough compassion to be kind and lead anyway.

In our sector, it is all too easy to be the epitome of 'tough', showing no emotion at all. It is far easier to become the person who shuts off; it is much harder to be open, not judge, and have compassion with those we would too quickly disassociate with.

I began by working with housing providers and servicing the affordable housing sector in the development space. However, upon working more within the regions, the next gap identified was the cost of construction for the most in-demand on these wait lists: one- and two-bedroom dwellings.

There was such inconsistency with the quality of modular housing that I'd then spend the next two years researching the best methodology and product solution. I created it within My Bella Casa when I couldn't find it — all Australian-made.

You work with various organisations nationally as an Executive Director, Chair, Advisor, and Consultant. How do you collaborate with private and public entities to achieve social and affordable housing development goals?

My whole life's purpose has been building the bridge between the private sector and its ability to deliver with people with good intentions. When I began, it was as if they spoke two different languages; to a degree, they still do. But through my education and my experience, I connected the two, and that, unknowingly, for the past 15 years. For the development of my own company, it meant taking on a new perspective as an Impact Group. 'Profit for purpose' with a view of educating others that, yes, it can be done! We can deliver projects that stack up financially and leave a significant impact.

I have advised both the private sector and governments to draft strategies for governments, private sectors, community sectors and even correctional facilities.

I have met with some of the most significant Funds, and it's been fascinating to see how few had a proper social mandate despite their advertisements. There is a misconception that to have an impact, you are in some way leaving

money on the table! To address this problem and honestly look at the scale, you need to begin with your perception and perhaps your understanding because these do not need to be mutually exclusive!

I encourage anyone investing, particularly in significant funds, to truly understand how their money is making an impactful return and a financial one because it is possible to have both! If you do not have visibility over this when investing, then your money could be better spent with a fund that considers both!

You've mentioned the importance of a long-term view in addressing housing issues. Could you elaborate on the strategies you believe are essential for creating sustainable solutions to the housing crisis and ensuring people have homes forever?

The Government has often invested in strategies that do not consider an exit strategy. To entertain this within the private sector would be ludicrous; we have more accountability than to say – whoops, blame the last guy in power!

But sitting at the tables, I still see the same thing invested in short-term strategies. Suddenly, it becomes incredibly political; one side believes in building bigger governments, and the other engages the private sector directly. But the bigger picture and politics aside, is this truly about the people? And what is more efficient when we look at the math?

We have ignorantly handed our trust and dependency to governments to solve this problem, and when you step back, you question why we did that when their interest will always be party first. Anyone can call a press conference and look like a hero, but the game sits behind the donors of our political system, who funds them to get into power, and that is ultimately who they serve first! And whilst I respect the game, I do not appreciate the lack of accountability and skin in the game when an old lady calls me crying with no place to sleep at night when the short-term plays all fall apart. I have always believed you are measured by the things you walk past and pretend not to see. Having a voice is only sometimes comfortable, but someone needs to speak for those people, and I take that role with tremendous responsibility.

Your recognition as the "Most Influential Woman in Construction" and 'Entrepreneur Woman of the Year' speaks volumes about your impact. How do you see your role in reshaping the construction sector, especially

in delivering socially responsible projects?

Construction in itself has never known leadership through vulnerability. It has known brutality, it has known tough lessons, and it has a reputation for being ruthless! Once upon a time, I used to respect that leader who was unattainable in perfection, untouchable in demeanour and showed no glimpse into a person's compassion. Now, I realise that's easy! Being an asshole is easy! Being kind, showing up authentically, bringing your whole self to be kind and truthful, that's immensely hard!

Getting your ego out of the way and realising that most people are projecting their stuff onto you to see people for who they are is only acquired with time, wisdom, and great experience. Starting on boards early on in my career, I was often the youngest by 50 years, and working on the front line of construction, there is nothing I haven't seen. But back then, if a 70-year-old man was screaming at me, it hurt. Now, I know a child desperate to be heard and validated, perhaps like he never was, and that helps me meet people where they are. When you are comfortable and safe enough in yourself, you show up differently. It doesn't mean you tolerate anything less than you deserve, but you can approach things more calmly and less protectively.

Construction knows to fight fire with fire. I hold no less strength in my approach but will always do my best to greet people with compassion and perspective. I don't need to show up to every fight to validate my worth or protect myself. I'm good in myself, which helps me become a better leader, an open one, respecting that all people are worthy; some lack the love and ability to communicate. It's those that need it the most.

Could you share more about your involvement in the #istandforkelly initiative and how it reflects your commitment to social impact within the construction sector?

I began this initiative when I met the late Kelly Wilkinson's three children within days of her alleged murder by her husband. Moving into their aunt and uncle's home with five children of their own, I was incredibly inspired by their courage to take on the kids without question. Now, with eight kids under one three-bedroom roof and a \$1000/week grocery bill, I began to worry about the practicalities. But worse than that, I was concerned with the children's view of the world if we merely



said, "Such a sad story," and did nothing.

At such tender ages, they didn't do anything to deserve what happened, and when a 3-year-old was holding my hand and asking for her Mum, my heart just broke. And in that moment, I said we're not leaving these kids. I phoned the office, instructed the team to prepare a social media post, and launched the #Istandforkelly, building a new beginning for Kelly's children, now eight.

The funny thing about leadership is that it requires people to be brazen. But it also needs people who stop caring what others think of you and are prepared to take on the job to get it done. This experience did that for me; suddenly, I didn't care what anybody thought. I was clear in my objective: "We are building these kids a home, and if nothing else, we're going to show them in tragic times that there are incredibly kind people as well. Most importantly, knowing a community, a sector, was behind them, and they were not alone."

Within 24 hours, Metricon had generously stood up to take on the build, as did all the incredible contractors and mountains of people who spared their time to make

this a reality. Within 48 hours, we had the land too! The most gracious experience was seeing a sector entirely of 90% men, a sector that is traditionally known for its ruthlessness, stand up to say, Tamika, we are behind you to make this happen when they heard what happened.

We handed the home over last year in an incredibly moving moment for all involved. The kids hand-made a card to thank everyone who helped build their home, especially at such a challenging time for the industry. But I learned a lot about leadership; you need someone crazy enough to stand up with force and make it happen, and I am incredibly grateful that everyone suddenly had a vehicle to contribute what they could.

We had trades of all types showing up, some big, some small, and no less appreciated in size. Everyone gave what they could, but I was incredibly proud that the company where I began my career came to the party without question or even being asked. Every major home builder has my number, so showing so much initiative demonstrates Metricon's company's values and forever impacts the kids' lives.

Being shortlisted for Queensland of the Year is a remarkable achievement. How do you leverage your influence to advocate for long-term solutions to the housing crisis and address housing waitlists in key regions?

I call a spade a spade because I believe somebody has to! This accompanies the notion that sometimes you must have the courage to be disliked! I work on the idea that people should come first, and if I doubt my direct approach, I remember who I stand for. I will work with political leaders, but I feel a moral obligation to assist the vulnerable members of our community who do not have hundreds of millions of dollars to champion their cause but need our help the most.

While waiting for others to come to the party, I decided to get on with the job. For a long time, we saw this housing crisis coming. When you go down the rabbit hole to understand the intentionally non-transparent data, I became increasingly concerned with the short-term perspective of subsidies and almost the heroism of small numbers when I could clearly articulate the net position.

With NRAS (a federally funded initiative that filled a subsidy gap for ten years) concluding, the demand is growing, and housing prices are soaring. We are incredibly behind where we were in housing ten years ago. We see media storms of progress, but the net position is never revealed because it doesn't sell the pretty picture, but I call that the truth! We are being distracted by the raw position with another ribbon cutting for three homes when we may have just sold off five and lost 10 NRAS homes. I watch and think, "You're still negative 12; sit down!"

In consolidating the knowledge from working within the community sector for over ten years and the products in My Bella Casa, we are focussed on delivering housing in the regions under a long-term plan to serve key workers and with a plan to ensure that the community has the housing needed, converting into social and affordable housing.

In such a short life, I couldn't waste any more time waiting and wishing for people to demonstrate accountability, so I decided to get on with it!

I am from the country, so it helps me

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understand the issues often faced in the regions and how we can deliver the solutions.

As the Executive Chair of Top 100 Women, you've created a platform supporting and educating women in construction. What motivated you to establish this initiative, and how do you envision its impact on fostering diversity and inclusivity within the industry?

I began the Top 100 Women post, standing in a Supreme Court post seeking to get paid by a builder who was folding. It was hard to fathom how conditioned the sector was to this being 'normal.' I couldn't consciously accept that any part of this was ok. So, I set up an online community to provide our members with support for their career development and progression along the way. I also champion the issues for men, noting the suicide rates, so I try to ensure within the business I founded that we are putting people first – period. This is a global company where individuals can access discounted courses, education and services such as

legal support to provide them with the knowledge and guidance to survive and succeed. Every year, we still announce 100 Women, big and small, to recognise their impact within the sector and now to our male champions. I fully acknowledge that in an industry of 90% men, we need everyone at the table and cannot exclude anyone to support the sector and its people better.

With your extensive experience, what advice would you give aspiring entrepreneurs and professionals looking to positively impact the construction industry, particularly in social and affordable housing?

Please don't wait for someone to give you permission; it doesn't come!

When the entire sector is distracted with 30,000 homes, we need to get on with it as the private sector!

Every business I have created is, in some way, shape or form, an impact business. Money comes, money goes, especially in construction. This sector can be brutal. But don't wait; this is a short life. Do something

great whilst you are here.

What future projects or initiatives are you excited about, and how do you envision your continued contributions to the construction sector's positive transformation?

With the consolidation of the knowledge I have acquired in the community sector added to the development and the offsite construction piece, I'm only just getting started! I have spent 15 years in this sector, and my vision has only come together after what feels like a lifetime of work. Now it's time to execute; watch this space!

We have solutions ready for institutional organisations to commence the change in providing long term outcomes in the regions for key workers and infrastructure projects. Police, Health, Military, Nurses, Employment Agencies in addition to agriculture, meat processing and horticulture. By housing the essential services it helps reduce pressure on housing availability across all tiers and keeps the countries key sectors moving forward.



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