

Finding your own Place...at the Table

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Tabula Rasa

“A need or an opportunity to start from the beginning.”
American Heritage Dictionary

“A tablet from which the writing has been erased, and which is therefore ready to be written upon again.”
Oxford English Dictionary

Finding my own place at the table has been a process of both building and wiping clean a tablet.

A table, by its definition has a foundation (the legs) and a surface (the top – the functional area of the object).

A ***tabula rasa*** literally is a “scraped tablet”. We like to think of it as an empty slate – but it’s not really empty – it contains the residue of what was inscribed on that tablet before.

To describe my current place at the table I must describe the table’s foundation and the residue on the table.

But, as by one definition above, there is a school of thought that says a ***tabula rasa*** invokes a need or an opportunity. It is that need and opportunity that I will also discuss which has placed me here today.

First the foundation: having studied the Classics in college I faced a future with dim prospects in the recessions of the mid 70’s. Accidentally embarking on a career in the trades I was immediately fascinated and challenged by the building process and committed myself to laying a foundation, by learning on the job and working my way up in the field, for a career in this industry.

Over a period of 18 years I embraced increasingly difficult and different positions to build the foundation for an undefined future but one which I knew absolutely would benefit by the experience and challenges I would encounter. Looking back those positions have been characterized by an enormous breadth and scope, particularly at the Boston Harbor Project and the Central Artery/Tunnel project. Early on I was not only going where few, if any, women had gone before, but I usually also lacked any “proper” credentials that would, on the face of it, qualify me to do the job.

It was my own recognition of my lack of “proper” credentials (call them PC’s) that guided the process from my first day on a real construction site, paint brush in hand. I can’t tell you how I knew that a person could be successful in this field without the PC’s but I did. I assumed that a careful, patient, and deliberate approach, combined with a confidence that the technical aspects were just as translatable as Latin and Greek, was the path to that future.

There were two common threads: perseverance and diversity.

Perseverance (and maybe stubbornness) was an essential ingredient. I had to see beyond the present (lured by that undefined future) and endure adversities that would have broken many women, and men (extreme cold on the fortieth floor of a building in the middle of winter at 10 pm four nights per week; at times **complete** ostracism by my (male) peers; figuring out how to manage hordes of Engineers by carefully concealing how much I did **not** know while developing authority and credibility). I am not a glutton for punishment, although I frankly questioned myself on occasion. I considered the pain the price of admission leading to the equivalent of two or three master degrees, but – they were paying me! Paying my dues seemed a small outlay in comparison to the experience, the thrill of the projects, and the excitement of success.

In addition I sought out diversity, in organizations, positions and responsibilities that were varied and increasingly interesting. I recognized years ago that repetition equals boredom and I cannot tolerate boredom. Anxiety creates for me personal motivation; the associated rush of adrenaline is a requisite ingredient in my work life. Seeking out diversity meant taking on challenges to satisfy me personally and to lay the foundation.

Diversity meant moving from the field to the office; it meant migrating from the general contractor to representing the owner; it meant four years working on the consultant's side of the table. It meant exposure to the private and the public sector. It meant leaving managing construction projects to managing community relations and mitigation at the Central Artery/Tunnel project – an opportunity on grand scale to continue to develop and hone simultaneous translation skills so important to that task.

Diversity meant also making other preparations to open more doors. In 1987 I received an MBA at the Simmons College School of Management; another set of tools in my tool box.

Each step made a significant and specific contribution to the foundation

Then there was the **tabula rasa**.

In 1996 I took a sabbatical and had the opportunity to live in Europe and not work for two years. What a shock but what an opportunity. I became for a time a tabula rasa – not defined by my work and free to re-invent myself. Upon return I had to figure out what to do and there are two aspects of my personality that are key here. One, I tend to arrive at decisions by a process of elimination. Secondly, I have always strongly identified and been more comfortable with the underdog - an affinity that most likely contributed to my success in the construction arena but also motivates me today.

So, during the reinvention process a whole range of options was eliminated. Eliminated the idea of working for a general contractor. Same for a

consulting firm. Eliminated the idea of working for a developer. Not the least of my reasons was – why work hard and make someone else rich?

Having discarded the familiar options and with time on my hands and the **need and opportunity** to establish a brand new milieu, I got involved with non-profit boards, with organizations focused on affordable housing and on real estate development in those areas of Greater Boston where economic prosperity had been elusive.

Perfect, I said to myself. Here is an opportunity and a need. An opportunity to design a business built on my foundation, transferring the residue on the tablet to a new table - utilizing the skills for the benefit of the non-profit owner and developer.

I was certain that professional project management skills were lacking or in scarce supply in this niche of the development world and would be considered equally, if not more, valuable to deliver projects with the kinds of budget constraints that face this market.

And then, what better place to use the translation skills perfected over the years; skills essential to ensure that the client's interests are accurately represented while interpreting the process and the problems to optimize the decision-making process and the outcome.

And finally it afforded me a chance to fight and produce for the underdog and maintain the diversity I value. It married my desire to do well by doing good - as the saying goes.

That was 1998. And after working as a sole-proprietor by myself for four years (again the perseverance, the dues paying- and reputation- building period) I brought on one colleague part time. In August of 2003, when I saw that a critical mass was in place, I then committed to growth and now have five employees. We have a roster of clients and projects we love and the satisfaction of contributing buildings to better lives.

And while I may not end up rich in the monetary sense of the word I certainly end up knowing my financial rewards are commensurate with and mirror my values and my beliefs – values and beliefs that I won't sacrifice and which are essential to the company's orientation.

I also have the satisfaction of hiring and developing others who too have the talent, the perseverance, and the diversity to succeed at Pinck & Co while creating a work environment where we will not face the same adversity or ostracism I encountered and where values I care about - trust, honesty and collaboration - can be integral to all that we do.

Finally I have the certainty that I will be continually challenged with a healthy supply of adrenaline to keep me motivated.