

Partner and LEED Fellow at DIALOG, Mara Baum | Transcript

00:02 Introduction Welcome to Green Building Matters, the original and most popular podcast focused on the green building movement. Your host is Charlie Cichetti, one of the most credentialed experts in the green building industry and one of the few to be honored as a LEED fellow. Each week, Charlie welcomes a green building professional from around the globe to share their war stories, career advice, and unique insight into how sustainability is shaping the built environment. So settle in, grab a fresh cup of coffee, and get ready to find out why green building matters.

00:34 Charlie

Hi, everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. Once a week, I get an interview, a green building professional somewhere in the world. And today I've got an old sustainability friend. I've got Mara here with us. She's in the Bay Area out in San Francisco, and can't wait to learn more about her green building career. How did you get into this? She's a LEED fellow and doing some really cool things at dialogue. Mara, thanks for joining us today. How are you doing?

00:57 Mara I'm good, thank you.

00:59 Charlie

I know we've got to catch up, and you've done so much more than just that. When that wellness movement came on the scene, I know you were already early in it. We'll get to that, but we got to go way back. Where did you grow up and go to school?

01:12 Mara

I'm from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. And the relevant point there is that falling water, Frank Lloyd Wright's masterpiece, is about an hour outside of Pittsburgh. And I happened to visit when I was around nine years old, when I had family visiting town and that was the moment that I knew it was it for me, that architecture was my thing. And so from there, I went to school at Washington University in St. Louis, studied architecture, and then stuck around there working for a while after college.

01:40Charlie

That's how you got the bug there, Frank Lloyd Wright. And so when did you first start seeing sustainability? Was it any of your studies or not until really your early architecture career? When did sustainability start showing up?

01:53Mara

That's a funny thing, because it was only a little bit in my studies. I was actually pretty jaded about being an architect. I thought since I was nine, I thought that was the end game. But when I got to college, maybe. For me, it just wasn't quite the right fit at the time. And I know it's different now, but at that time, Washington University wasn't really heavily focused on sustainability or social issues or really anything beyond making beautiful objects. And I'm sure others would have a different perception of that. But that was my experience. I wasn't so sure I wanted to be an architect. I did take one sustainability focused class. I had to talk my way in. It was a grad level class and I was a senior, but I managed to do it and it was great. But still, I wasn't so sure afterwards, I, through a total fluke of coincidence and a random layoff, ended up taking on a temporary position with Hok And St. Louis with Bill Odell and Sandy Mendler, who at the time were writing Hok's first guidebook to sustainable design, which was really, I know that is kind of old news now, but at that moment, it was really one of the first sustainability green building books oriented towards professionals. And working there, working with them, I really figured out that actually architecture could be okay after all. And I was just incredibly lucky to fall into that opportunity and to work with really, when I was so young.

03:21Charlie

I like to ask about mentors and I have a good friend, Hoks, you know, Annika there, and we do some cool education together. And so I've just seen what you've been a part of there and I know we're going to talk more about the present day in a minute, but let's talk, mentor. Mara, mentor, someone you just look up to, you might not ever meet. Maybe Frank Lloyd Wright inspired you. But some you get to meet with and they open doors for you. Is there anyone you would call a mentor as you put together your green building journey?

03:49Mara

In those early days, certainly Bill O'Dell and Sandy Mendler were pretty high on that list. And they were both just incredibly generous with sharing what they knew and helping me to build my expertise and my professional career overall. Soon after, I also connected with Marianne Lazarus, who became, after Bill, the next director of sustainability at HOK. And she's really been, even to this day. We're still in touch. She's just been a fantastic mentor for me over the years.

04:23Charlie

Love that. Thanks for sharing. As you build this career, I'm a big fan of credentials. I think you are too. So could you speak a little bit about credentials? Which ones do you have? And certifications? What did that do to help you as you were, you know, doing your architecture and sustainability career?

04:40Mara

That's a laundry list if you really want all the credentials. But I'll start. Maybe I might not hit all of them, but the main ones for this group is that I became one of Hok's first LEED AP's. I was number three in the system, I believe it was 2001, and then took on all of the early LEED AP education there. So helped to train a number of people who then sat for the exam a lot easier than it is now. We didn't know that at the time. It seems like a pretty big hurdle. But I realized pretty quickly that there were really two benefits from the credentialing. One was the learning that you have to go through in the process. So what do you get out of studying? The rote memorization, maybe not so much. On that side, but what are you able to learn from that? I've always gotten a lot out of that process. Not fun admittedly, but an important growth opportunity. And then second, the credential itself has. In some cases it really helped me to legitimize my perspectives and my work. And in some cases that was helpful because particularly in that era, but still to some extent today as a woman in a mostly male field, and at least at that time, not so much anymore, but at that time I looked really young and architecture is inherently a profession that favors age and experience. And so being a woman, being someone who looked like she was twelve, was not necessarily always to my benefit. And so having the credentials behind my name sometimes in some cases would really help to move me forward. The LEED Fellow in particular also has helped with that. When clients and colleagues see the LEED Fellow designation after my name, or if I'm introduced in that context, then. They have a greater sense of comfort, particularly. Specific to LEED in what I'm bringing to the

project and my level of expertise. I also am licensed as an architect in a gazillion states, so there's that. And I'm a fellow of the American Institute of Architects as well. FAIAI am a WELL AP and WELL faculty. I also have the EDAC credential which is evidence based design accreditation and certification.

07:05Charlie

You got so many credentials. Living buildings. We know regenerative design is the future. I think you also have what? Lfa? What's that? That's living future accreditation. Is that right?

07:15Mara

Yes, LFA living future accreditation. It's the accreditation by the International Living Future Institute that focuses on living buildings and living communities.

07:26Charlie

You have lots of them. Some of those are newer and so I think a lot of our audience, I always recommend starting with a LEED green associate. Green buildings, but WELL, and healthy buildings. I know we've got to talk about that some too. Why don't we talk about that? When did you start seeing healthy buildings show up? If memory serves, you're doing healthy buildings way before the pandemic. Could you speak to that for a minute?

07:53Mara

I would actually say that I was working on healthy buildings before that term was even widely used when I was with HOK in St. Louis in the late nineties, early two thousands. Mostly related to air quality that was at that time when you talked about healthy buildings, air quality was really the only significant topic of consideration. But I found a gap in the skill sets of the St. Louis office at that time. I was really interested in the technical aspects of air quality and was able to step into a role in that area. And I've been interested in health, I think, intuitively my whole career. As it became a more substantive aspect of our profession, it became more. And more of what I focused on. I also fell into doing healthcare work in around 2006. And initially I didn't think that was a great idea because the buildings can feel large and overwhelming and not necessarily as great for someone starting out. In their career in that aspect. But as I got into it, I realized that wasn't necessarily always true. And in particular, it was one area where I

could talk about health day long and not be laughed out of the room. I really felt a lot of alignment with that and was able to push health and wellbeing into those projects again, really before the industry started to take that on as a bigger topic. As WELL came to the table and then later, Fit Well, not much later, I was involved. I am also a Fit Well ambassador. I don't really see that as much. As a credential, but I checked that Box too, when it came around as those came forward, I also became active in those movements and credentials and certifications and have kept going.

09:39Charlie

I love the credentials, too. It gives that benefit of the doubt to that client or that colleague. It's like, well, this person probably does understand this program, maybe even better than me. I don't have that credential, so I'd like to earn it. I'd like to learn. Speaking of learning, tell us about teaching. As I understand it, looking at your bio there on LinkedIn, you've kept up instruction over the years. What do you like to teach? And give us a peek into that world, then we'll get back to what you're doing at your firm.

10:05Mara

This will sound wild and crazy, but I've been teaching online since 2006. Not the teaching online part is the wild and crazy because most people haven't been teaching online until really the last couple of years when it became forced on us during the pandemic. But Boston Architectural College has since that time had a sustainable design initially certificate program and now a master of sustainable design that is really focused on allowing. Anyone, no matter their location or background, a point of entry into sustainability as a career path. It is really something that I've been very passionate about the courses I teach personally. At first there was a LEED specific class, not the most exciting, but in 2006 that was still new material. I taught that for several years before it started to fade away as being really necessary in the industry, really, because it was covered in so many other great places like the work that you do. Then from there, I shifted to teach sustainable design for healthcare facilities. I still teach that once every year or two. And then in 2014, I started teaching a second course called green buildings in health. And I think that one has really grown interest over time, and I continue to teach that periodically now as WELL.

11:29Charlie

You were a busy person doing great things. Let's talk about, about eleven years at HOK, the last few years here at Dialogue. Tell us what kind of projects you've worked on over that time and some roles you've taken on, and then we'll get to the present. So can you tell us more about that?

11:48Mara

When I was at HOK. Most recently, this is separate from my time there in St. Louis. I was in the San Francisco office for about eleven years. You clearly did your homework there. I started by joining the healthcare team. Leading sustainability for the healthcare practice firmwide. That really tied into a lot of my passion for the health and healthcare sector that had started in a prior job. Then, as the industry evolved such that health and wellbeing was starting to take a more prominent role outside of just the healthcare sector, I took on a secondary, a newer position as sustainable design leader for all of the health and wellbeing practice that included still doing healthcare work, but it really expanded the project types that I had been focused on to include all types of clients that really had a strong interest for various reasons on implementing health and well being. I also drove a lot of Hok's programs around the well building standard and WELL certification, WELL accreditation, WELL AP. I don't have 150,000 people under my certification belt, not even close, but it was quite a lot and that was really rewarding. I still do many of those types of things with dialogue, but in a slightly different context.

13:06Charlie

I know you've taught hundreds of me, probably thousands. I know over the years we've partnered together, you've used a lot of our GPS material, so thank you. When you look back, what are some additional proudest achievements? Anything else that's really on the highlight reel?

13:24Mara

This is a tough one. I feel like there's a lot of little moments, some really amazing project wins. Things I never thought we would achieve. Net zero LEED platinum. WELL, platinums, things like that. But if I had to pick a small subset of those wins, and it really. As for the little things, I think we need to celebrate the little things. But if I had to look more. Broadly, it's the notion of building teams and

growing movements. I have, several times. Parts of my career, I joined a practice. Joined a team where there has been minimal interest or focus on sustainability. And it has been my job, too. Officially or sometimes self determined, not officially in any capacity, my job is to help turn that around. And so seeing an evolution of my project teams going from being like, oh. Man, we have to do this thing, or, no, we don't have to do it. We're just going to ignore it too, at the end of a project, really being excited, taking ownership, buying in, and bringing those ideas to their next project. This has often been the case in large hospitals where a client may not initially see the value or the reason or have any interest in sustainability. As they move through the project and understand what we're doing, they really kind of take that on themselves. In some cases, they've gone on to become sustainability champions within their organizations after our project and that's really what is the most fulfilling for me.

14:57Charlie

Love that. All those little ones. I love that. Okay, so let's talk about your role and first your firm. Tell us about Dialogue.

15:08Maral like to joke that. Dialogue is the largest in architecture and engineering firm you've never heard of. And the reason is that there are about 600 of us in Canada and maybe a dozen or so in the US, largely in the Bay Area, although. Even that dozen is kind of a misnomer because we have a pretty substantial number. Team that is physically living and based. In Canada, but working on our projects locally and supporting our team locally, we really do work across studios and across borders constantly. And so that's a nice help. My work is a little bit split. I LEED architecture and urban planning projects within the US based out of San Francisco, while I also spend part of my time co leading dialogue's practice wide sustainability consulting team. We have about 15 people, sustainability consultants, energy modelers, performance analysts, largely across Canada, that work on all of our various projects there.

So that has been really especially eye opening. Opening for me over the last three years that I've been with dialogue. It's given me an interesting window into the sustainability culture and strategy in Canada. I didn't expect this when I jumped in, but my observation is that they're. Actually really far ahead of the US. Even California, with things like carbon taxes and regulations related to climate adaptation. So that's been pretty interesting. Then, on the architecture and

planning side here in the Bay Area, I'm leading a project that's preliminary design for the transit center in Santa Rafael. That's a small city just north of San Francisco and Marin county. And I particularly appreciate the challenges because they face all of the big issues that I feel like are the issues. Of our time, carbon emissions reduction, climate resilience, active transportation, and a huge focus. On equity and inclusion. Based on the community that this transit center is serving, it's really been exciting to try to take the vision of our client, the Golden Gate Bridge highway and Transportation District, into the city. A certain level of community engagement and community input, and move the vision forward based on that.

17:17CharlieWhat a fun project, right in your backyard, in your community. And you got that whole depth of bench behind you in Canada to do all this good work, design and sustainability. You're in California, as I understand it, there's some embodied carbon laws that have been passed. What does that mean for the work you're doing there? What do we need to know?

17:37Mara

It's pretty exciting, loosely speaking. We know any project that applies for a building permit is required for any project that's over 100,000 sqft, over 50,000 sqft if it's a k twelve school. All of these projects are required to document a 10% embodied carbon emissionsreduction based on a whole lot of gobbledygook in California code language. But simply put, a 10% reduction that 4Mirrors actually a number of code city of Vancouver, a number of other canadian jurisdictions also have similar thresholds, or in the place of implementing similar thresholds. So we're seeing this across our practice in both the US and Canada, but it really is raising the floor, so to speak, around embodied carbon thinking. With embodied carbon, over the last about ten and 15 years, we've been pushing to raise the ceiling, try to push us as well as we can to get the absolute most savings on the rockstar projects where we're able to get a certain amount of traction. Obviously, there are some things we always just do anyway, the basics, but really trying to elevate our work overall now with this new Calgreen update where that is moving up the floor. So moving the floor and the ceiling together are really how I see us changing the industry.

19:00Charlie

Embodying carbon used to be something in the future, but it's happening. It's literally happening right there where you're at in California. What else are you kind of excited about in the future of this green building movement? What else is coming at us? What are you reading up on?

19:13Mara

There's this unfortunate doom and gloom perspective, which I truly hate. But, we know right now that we're at the beginning of the wave of climate change that is going to be followed by an unknown level of biodiversity impact. We know there's some rough stuff coming. But what I'm really excited about is starting to see some movement around huge aGlobal scale, regional scale, industry scale changes. As an architect, I'm used to changing the world one building at a time. But now we're seeing the world change one electrical grid at a time or at that type of scale or major technological shifts that are helping to move us forward. And so those are really, I think those are really where I see a lot of excitement coming to truly accelerate the impacts that we have holistically, making all of our one building at a time better together.

20:13Charlie

Still some work to do, but I think we've made great progress. Let's get to know you a little more, if that's okay. Some rapid fire questions here. I love to ask my podcast guests, what's your specialty or gift?

20:26Mara

I'm not sure this quite qualifies as a gift, but early in my career, I had several friends who were community organizers. They taught me that we really need to know our audience and we need to be able to meet people where they are and not where we want them to be in other words, I may really want you, my client, to already be on board with, say, energy efficiency, and I'm just telling you how to do it and what we're doing But if you're not there, if you think that the project totally should be going in a different direction, or even potentially that you don't think it's important or climate change isn't real, et cetera et cetera, then I need to think about that in the way I communicate and the way I bring you along with me. And so I need to really meet you where you are and not where I want you to be. And so part of that relates to kind of mindset and cultural shift and evolution, but part of that also relates to being able to translate very technical topics to whatever

audience is in front of me. And so I would say if there. Is a gift, that might be it. I am an architect, but I sometimes play an engineer on tv. I spend a lot of my time translating between architects, engineers and others. And so that I do have a building science background from grad school has really helped me quite significantly. So I think that plays in as well.

21:54Charlie

I heard a few gifts in there, more. I heard patience, probably got a good question asker, got to be a good listener, and then you're right translated. And that's amazing. So how about just any good habits or routines, rituals? What helps stay on point?

Mara

I know that this runs counter to just about everyone else out there. But I truly believe in sleep maybe not necessarily perfect sleep every night, but a lot of nights, most nights, that I think that keeps me grounded and able to be just hyper focused when I need to be, which is all the time when I'm not asleep. This isn't quite a ritual exactly, but I also really think it is important to ground ourselves in the natural world. If I'm stuck, I go outside. If my brain hurts, I look out a window and try to find some trees that I can stare at for a while. I really find that helps to reset me. And of course, having studied and worked through a lot of design related to Biophilia, I understand the science behind all that. But it's real. It really does help.

23:02Charlie

I'm a big fan of sleep. I use the oura ring. I've been like three and a half years on that monitor my sleep, and I just. It's so important. So we might even put a link to the top 21 sleep habits just because I want to. We'll put that in the show notes, too. A lot of people have a morning routine, but very few have a wind down evening routine. Do you by chance have that?

23:25Mara

I do. And it's evolved over the years, but currently it's very specific to the time in life. I have a ten year old daughter who I put to bed, and we still, even though she's getting up there in years, we still love reading together at night. I lie on the dark floor of, or the floor of her dark bedroom every evening and read to her for

about 20-30 minutes and then just really relax. So that obviously is an earlier bedtime than mine, but I make sure that at least most of the time, I don't bounce back from that and do something that would wake me up. Like go sit back down at my computer, for example that's a hard habit. I always am tempted to do that, but I really use that as a.

24:13Charlie

Wind down time as we teach in our, well, classes. We gotta get away from that blue light. It's tricking our body thinking it's noon, and I love that because it's triggering your body. It's time to start. Get ready for rest when you're reading with your daughter. That's amazing.

24:25Mara-Nothing like sitting in a dark room for a half an hour to help slow yourself down.

24:30Charlie

Thank you for sharing. I'm a fan of a bucket list, and not everybody has a bucket list. But, you know, what are one or two things maybe on your bucket list? Any travel adventure? Maybe you want to write a book. What's on the bucket list?

24:45Mara I am most a fan, mostly a fan of other people's bucket lists that I can read and get ideas not unlike most other people. Travel is pretty high on my bucket list, and in particular, family travel, that I've had a lot of incredible opportunities to travel as I've grown through the years. And now that I have kids, I'm really excited to be able to travel with them, help to open their eyes to see other places, other cultures. We're actually about to head to Mexico City in a few days, so that is going to help to. That's our first international trip, all of us together. That will help check one of the boxes off my bucket list.

25:22Charlie

We had taken our boys. My boys are 15, 12 and ten in Canada. But then last year, I went to Belize and they got a stamp and passport. They were so excited. It was great. Let's just talk about career advice here as we start to wind down a little bit more as you look back on your career, what an amazing career you've put together. By the way, Anything you wish you'd have known earlier. Any career advice you wish you'd known earlier?

25:48Mara

I always feel like this is the hardest question that I sometimes get Asked because there isn't necessarily one single silver bullet thing, but perhaps what I would say, and this one is mostly for the women out there, although men can certainly benefit from the awareness as well. I started my career during an era where it was pretty male dominated, really male dominated, certainly more than today, but some of the issues still remain. Much later, I started to pick up random tidbits that collectively have helped me to get a better understanding of while not necessarily universal, there are some common types of differences in habits, in mindsets, in ways of working between men and women. And just understanding some of those common differences has been really eye opening for me. And so there are a lot of resources out there. There is no one specific handbook. There's no one thing I can point you to, unfortunately. But as an example, I read a Harvard Business Review article several years ago. Pretty recent, but several years ago now, that talked about how men stereotypically, obviously, Not all men and not all women. But stereotypically mentally, I feel quite comfortable going. Into a room, speaking up and putting forward ideas or talking about a topic. Where they're not totally sure about. Whereas women generally need to feel that they really do know the answer or even feel expert in a specific area before jumping in and talking and moving something forward. And that is certainly something that I have personally felt and have been just shocked at some of the crazy things. That my male colleagues have gone out there with. And it's been largely to their benefit. Occasionally not, but for the most part it has and it was really interesting to hear that wasn't just me, that I wasn't crazy. But there's a whole group of things like that have really helped me to understand my colleagues better and also to understand some of the really ingrained, unconscious ways that we tend to move men forward in different ways in their careers than we do with women.

28:06 Charlie

Thanks for going through that dynamic there and what you were up against, some progress, but you're right. Sometimes just the pause that's important, and there's still a lot of work to do on this front. But I mean, you're leading the way here. There's so many not just LEED Fellows, so many female identifying podcast kids I've had on that have had similar wisdom that they've been sharing with all of our listeners, that this is what they had to go through and this is what it should be like. Thank you for sharing that. As we start to wrap up, I've learned a lot about you and felt like I already knew you a little bit let's just say there's

someone listening, they're getting real inspired by your story, and they're just now jumping into the green building movement, a movement that's been good to me. It's been good to you. And what words of encouragement do you have for them if they're just jumping in now as we come to a close?

28:53Mara

Follow your passion and don't give up. I think we need everyone. This is all hands on deck. But at the same time, you need to really find the part of the immense fast and growing green building and sustainability movements. Find the part that really speaks to you, that you're the most excited about, that you want to wake up, live. And breathe every day, and that will really help to keep you through. And you may not hit that the first time out. You may have to go through a couple tries to figure out what you really like, and that's okay. And we all do that. But don't give up and give it your best, because we need you.

29:30CharlieLove it. Mara, thank you so much, everyone listening, reach out. Connect with Mara on LinkedIn. Follow the work she's doing here at dialogue, and thanks for your time today. That was amazing.

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