

## **Juan Carlos Valenzuela Castañeda on LEED for Communities & Designing with Nature | Transcript**

**00:02**

Speaker 1

Welcome to Green Building Matters, the original and most popular podcast focused on the green building movement. Your host is Charlie Cicchetti, one of the most credentialed experts in the green building industry and one of the few to be honored as a lead 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. Everyone, welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. I'm starting to sprinkle in some of my own view on the world, but most of the time we're interviewing. We're interviewing amazing people in the green building movement, and that's what I've got today.

**00:48**

Speaker 1

I've got Juan Carlos with us, coming to us from Guatemala. He's a recently minted lead fellow. Can't wait to learn more about his career. Juan Carlos, how you doing today?

**00:57**

Speaker 2

Hi, Charlie. Thank you. I'm doing great. I just wanted to say thank you again for the invitation. It's truly an honor to be here in your podcast. I've listened to the podcast before, but I never imagined that one day I will be sitting here as a guest. So this is a real pleasure. Thank you.

**01:15**

Speaker 1

Well, you've. You've earned it, and I'm. I'm glad you've been a longtime listener. That means the world to me. So for our podcast listeners, I like to just get that origin story. So tell us, where did you grow up and go to university?

**01:28**

Speaker 2

So I was born and raised here in Guatemala City. I studied architecture at the Universidad Francisco Marroquin and graduated in 2003. While I was studying, starting my third year, I began working at my dad's architectural firm. So it's kind of a thing in the family, and I was involved early in housing projects.

**01:56**

Speaker 1

Okay. I always ask, where did you get that influence? Did you know you wanted to be an architect when you grew up? So that. That must have had big influence on you.

**02:03**

Speaker 2

Yeah. And also. Well, my sister is also an architect. She's my partner now in. In the firm. Yeah. She's younger than me and actually she. She had it clear that she wanted to be an architect before. Before I did. So it took me a. Yeah. But even when I studied the career first two years, I wasn't completely sure it became on the third year of college. But then it hit me and it has become like, really my passion, so.

**02:37**

Speaker 1

And the rest is history. I see on your bio that you also went back and also studied some of the technical engineering side. So did you feel that was important to not just have the architecture side, but understanding some of the other technical components? I saw that on your bio there.

**02:53**

Speaker 2

Yeah. And that happened in Barcelona. After I graduated from architectural firm, I worked for a couple of years and then, well, I decided I wanted to go on my education. And I had it really clear that I wanted to study in Barcelona. So I picked the city before of the master. I told some of my students that's not a responsible way of deciding it, but for me, it was clear that I wanted to live in that city because of the urbanism, architecture and all the history. So I went to college there for my master program in housing. And after that I did some postgraduate courses on materials and construction systems.

**03:43**

Speaker 1

Oh, amazing. Yeah. What a. What a great city and all of that architecture. So, okay, how about sustainability though, Juan Carlos? When did it start showing up for you?

**03:54**

Speaker 2

So that happened when I came back to Guatemala. I was really trying to stay for

a little longer in Barcelona, but I conceded with the 2008 real estate crisis there. So for me, it made it even harder to. To find work as a foreigner. So at the same time, a great opportunity came up. Some childhood friends asked me to design a small hotel on the outskirts of Guatemala City. So that project really helped me make the final decision to return home. And so it was my very first project. It was a small 18 room hotel that would be part of a thermal hot springs resort. And the site was really amazing. So from the very first site visit, I think that was the turning point for me.

**04:48**

Speaker 2

It was immediately clear that this project needed to respect and fully embrace the natural context and the natural environment. So I think that was the moment when my mindset really shifted, when I realized that architecture should integrate with this context and improve the natural environment rather than have a negative impact. So I think that was it. That was the moment.

**05:14**

Speaker 1

Big influence. Yeah. We graduated close to each other. You said 2003 undergrad. I graduated Georgia Tech, 2004. And even though those were early days of lead, I didn't get into lead maybe till, you know, 2006, 7, 8. In that range there. Yeah. And then it started ramping up for me. How about mentors? I like to ask, have you had any mentors so far in your career?

**05:39**

Speaker 2

Yes, actually it was on that specific project. Andres Pereira and Julio Alvarado were the first people to talk about LEED in Guatemala. And they were the ones who initially suggested that we should certify that Hotel. And so I learned a lot from them during that process. So I would say they were my mentors early in my career. But lately. Well, also during that process, I met Kath Williams. I had the honor to meet Kath and she was incredibly supportive with us in founding the Guatemala Green Building Council. And she has been a really close friend and mentor for me for the last year. So we are collaborating in projects and we develop a really close friendship. So.

**06:34**

Speaker 1

Well, I mean, you know, there's so many people that are in and around the screen building community to our listeners. Just there's a lot of people that want to share, want to help, want to open a door and just get to reach out and ask.

Okay, so how about just some of your proudest accomplishments so far? What's on the highlight reel?

**06:53**

Speaker 2

Okay, definitely the Kabila Hotel is one of my favorite projects. Achieving Lean certification was a huge learning experience for the entire design team. This was the first project to accomplish LEED certification, new construction. So for me, it was a project that opened doors in our country, showing that we could do building in a different way and that we have the talent and vision to make it happen. So definitely that's one of my proudest achievements. But I would also like to mention that I'm very proud of the growth and impact of the Guatemala Green Building Council. Last year we celebrated the 15th anniversary and it's exciting to see how much impact the movement has had on transforming the construction industry in Guatemala. And being part of it has been a really great experience.

**07:53**

Speaker 1

Well, let's talk about that. And then I want to talk credentials and more about that project at hotel. So you know, there's the U.S. green Building Council. I'm in the U.S. i'm in Atlanta, Georgia. Right. And they invented LEED. They keep it updated. But. But there's these Green Building Councils in other countries. A lot of people and to our listeners don't realize that there's the world GBC and it's made up of all these countries, GBCs, Green Building Councils and so. So it sounds like you've been pretty active there for a while. I mean, what does that meant for you? Have you volunteered there? Tell us about that.

**08:25**

Speaker 2

Yeah, actually I had the opportunity to be part of the 12 people group that founded the Malagreen Building Council. And on that process, Kath was very supportive. She was our mentor and how to start the GBC and what would the roadmap should look like? And she had been supportive for these 15 years that the organization has been Working. I've been volunteering in the GBC and I think it has been a great opportunity to learn around sustainability, technical, but also to meet very interesting and visionary people. And the third I think is the opportunity to serve my country and maybe also serve the region and the world and the transformation we need for the green for the build environment. I love that.

**09:29**

Speaker 1

Thank you. Thank you for sharing. Let's talk about credentials next. So I know you've had to pass certain credential exams. I have too. And eventually you get nominated for lead fellow. But any tips for someone that maybe hasn't taken a lead exam yet? How did you study for it and which credentials, maybe even in Guatemala are recognized?

**09:50**

Speaker 2

Yeah, first credential was LEED Green Associate. It was during this hotel project that were working on. I really went deep into lead. I want to understand what the requirements were, which design strategies we could implement in the project in order to get the certification. So as I said, for me as a designer, lead became a really powerful tool. So we started and I said we because of the design team with some of the engineers, architects, interior. We started a study group and we studied together for the vga and that was the starting point. And then I went through the lead AP and I also been studying and learning on other rating systems like Edge, like Fitwell, and also CASA Guatemala, which is a national rating system developed for housing that has a strong base on lead.

**10:59**

Speaker 2

So that's some of what I have been learning and doing that.

**11:04**

Speaker 1

And thanks for just walking us through how you studied. Those study groups are so important. I was a part of gbes.com we have practice tests, flashcards and then just those groups. And you're not alone, but there's 200,000 lead professionals in the world ever over the last 20 plus years. That might seem like a big number, but it's not right. If you add up all of the architects, all of the contractors, all the suppliers, all the real estate, I mean this credential really still can set you apart. Tell us a little more about that hotel project and then what's easier and what's harder to do with green buildings in Guatemala and then we'll talk about your business.

**11:41**

Speaker 2

Okay, so really? Well, this project was like a really learning experience. It never had been done before. None of us had any idea of what LEED was. But as I told you, the first concept idea of the project was that it has to be respectful with the environment and take advantage of the natural environment. The topography was something special. It has a really steep slope one part of the site and then there was a small flatter plateau and it was covered with trees. I think that was

the beginning of it. As a designer, we took advantage of this environment. We managed to design the project in different models, in small models, so we could adjust the architecture topography or to keep existing trees. And we didn't cut any trees in that project.

**12:49**

Speaker 2

So that was kind of the approach we took for the architectural design of the project. And in that process also I started learning on lead and learned about the sustainable site strategies that we use in the project and how we could be water efficient, energy efficient. Well, all impact categories from lead, they become like design guidelines for us.

**13:22**

Speaker 1

Amazing. You know, I've learned that in Latin America the consultant is brought in earlier maybe than even here in the us So I think you have more influence on projects like that. So. Amazing. All right, let's talk present day Juan Carlos. Tell us about your company that you co founded there. Tell us about it and what kind of projects do you work on now.

**13:44**

Speaker 2

Great. So it's a family business. My sister Sophia is my partner. She's also an architect and we started as a regular architectural design firm doing design and planning and we did this project. So we became interested in sustainability and started learning on that, got involved in the green Building council movement. But it wasn't until some years later that we had our first consulting project as sustainability consultant. It was an interior project renovation that were the lead consultants. So it was like maybe 10 years after the hotel project. But the thing is that our consulting part of the firm has been growing really fast, ironically since the pandemic from 20,020 and now it has become our main practice. It's about 80% what we do is certifications and sustainability consultant and 20% is design and planning.

**14:57**

Speaker 2

Currently we are excited with a certification of a larger project. It's a project over 540 hectares. It's an industrial park that is pursuing lead for communities plan and design. And it's very exciting and motivated to bring the impact of sustainability to larger scale projects. And we're seeing growing interest from real estate developers in using LEED for communities as a framework to align

their sustainability goals. So that's what we're doing currently and what excites us for and what we look forward for this year.

**15:38**

Speaker 1

It's a big site. Lead for cities and communities is an amazing program. It's really grown a lot in the last five, six years. So to our listeners, let's make sure you take a look at that program too. Well, I love the business, I love the entrepreneurship. Sixteen years and counting. Congrats on the success of your firm. Do you still do Sun Residential? I'm hearing a lot of commercial, a lot of certification. I mean, do you tackle any kind of project or which ones do you say no to?

**16:06**

Speaker 2

Maybe. Since last year we are trying to focus more into hospitality projects and in the design part of the firm, we would love to design houses, single family houses that are not very common lately, but we are focusing on housing, small boutique hotels and Airbnb kind of projects on the design part. And as consultants, we work with all different kinds of typologies from corporate to commercial industrial, lots of warehouses and distribution centers that are growing in the country. And so that's a little bit of what we do. More focus on the design part and more open in the consulting part of the firm.

**16:56**

Speaker 1

Thank you so much. Okay, well, let's talk about what's next in the green building movement. What are you excited about? What's coming at us next?

**17:05**

Speaker 2

Well, I think the focus will continue shifting towards quality of life with a strong emphasis on health and well being, healthy buildings. I think that's something that it's important for the moment. And I also believe that in countries like Guatemala, resilience is becoming increasingly important. And maybe not, maybe it won't happen immediately, at least in Guatemala and the region, but I would love to see the conversation gradually, slowly shifting to regenerative architecture in the coming years.

**17:41**

Speaker 1

Well, yeah, let's talk about that. So there's some newer buzzwords. They're more than buzz. But you know, maybe in some areas we don't say sustainability or sg,

but we say decarbonization or we say resiliency. Good point. Regenerative design. So I don't know what's resonating with your clients? Are they coming to you with hey Juan Carlos, I need LEED platinum and maybe we could do a living building or are you showing them options and are you educating them on options? How do those conversations go on what to pursue?

**18:12**

Speaker 2

Well, most of the times the clients have an initial idea of what they want. Even they even have the idea of a certain rating system. But we always try to do a little step back and do a feasibility study and what's the maximum potential that you could achieve with the project? What's the best rating system to bring their sustainability goals into real impact? We are LEED fans, so we always try to push LEED because we believe in it as a tool, as a certification program, we love the holistic approach, and that is an integrated perspective. It doesn't leave anything outside. So that's kind of what the conversation looks like in the beginning.

**19:06**

Speaker 2

And what excite us is that we're starting to have clients that really want to go further, that business as usual is not an option, that they are looking for real impact rather than just a plaque in the building. So focusing more on the results than, I mean, like the real impact and on the bringing high performance buildings. And that's where I see the opportunity now to start, like bringing the idea of talking about regenerative architecture. So that's kind of how it looks like.

**19:50**

Speaker 1

Yeah, it's so important. Right. I think, you know, green buildings are still going strong. We might need to focus on different areas. Sometimes you need to bring in the financing. Where's the green financing? You know, what's the roi? But the ultimate goal is regenerative design. And, you know, of course we have programs like Living Building, but one of. One of our good friends in the industry, Emmanuel Powells.

**20:14**

Speaker 2

Right.

**20:14**

Speaker 1

He. He's a regenerative practitioner. I love that in. In Spain. So. Yeah, I agree. That's next. All right, well, let's get to know you a little bit more here, Juan Carlos. So what would you say is your specialty or gift?

**20:29**

Speaker 2

Okay. I think I'm very organized and structured person. Sometimes maybe a little too much, and I'm not sure if that's always a good thing. I also tend to be very demanding of myself, always looking for ways to do things better. And I really love learning. So I don't like to see myself as an expert, but rather than someone who's constantly learning. So very open to new ideas, to learn and collaborate. So I think that's.

**21:03**

Speaker 1

Yeah. And talk through that. I mean, is that internal? Is it external? Like, any tips to a listener that thinks they're not good at that? Like, how do you get better at that?

**21:12**

Speaker 2

Unlearning or on developing?

**21:15**

Speaker 1

Well, I'm sure a lot of it has to do with listening. Right. Just make sure you take it in, pause and think. I don't know. Do you make time to. Do you look back through notes? Do you. Do you repeat things? Do you. Any tips on listening? Then how do you learn best? Why don't you answer those two?

**21:34**

Speaker 2

Yeah, I definitely think mentors are really important. There's a lot of knowledge and people that have gone through the road before, and that could bring you a lot of experience and knowledge. I think that's a Great way to learn. And I also believe in collaboration, and that's something I am grateful the most for me in the sustainability movement is getting to know very interesting and visionary people, which I had the opportunity to collaborate on projects and that also have become mentors and friends and why not family? So I think those are two ways of boosting your learning process through mentors collaboration. That's something I would say.

**22:27**

Speaker 1

Oh, I agree. And now we're in this lead fellow group together, and I'm learning from the other lead fellows, too. It's just amazing you can learn at different access levels in your career. Okay, do you have any good habits or routines?

**22:42**

Speaker 2

Well, I'm not sure if this counts as a habit, but I'm certain that it has a lot to do with my results or what I do. It's that I truly love what I do. I really enjoy my work, and I'm very motivated by seeing sustainability strategies come to life in projects. I believe when you love what you do, you already won half of the battle. I think that's very important. There's no one day I didn't want to go to work. I like it, I enjoy it. So for me, it's something that excites me and maybe in terms of a more concrete routine or something, is that since last year, I started with designing my time. I'm an architectural designer, and there's this concept in a mentorship program. We were introduced to this concept, and it becomes like a key pillar for me.

**23:37**

Speaker 2

Now I take time to design my time, my schedule, my calendar, and to make sure I spend most of my time on what's important rather than what's just urgent. And that has been a complete change.

**23:53**

Speaker 1

Yeah, you got to be intentional, right? It's. Everyone's always trying to ask for a time, but there's, as they say, there's always enough time for the most important things. You just got to put them first. So any tips? Do you do pen and paper? Do you use digital tools? How do you manage your time and calendar?

**24:12**

Speaker 2

I use a digital calendar, so I take time. Well, first thing I did this year was designing my typical week, how I wanted to look like, what things must have enough time during the work week. So that's what I did first, and now I check it. First thing I do in the week is plan. I come up with the most important things I have to be that had to be done during the week. And I assigned the time. That's early Monday morning. And I check every day, and I try to follow the plan. You have to be flexible because there are some things that happen that you simply have to take care of. But try to adjust to the plan and avoid the temptation of doing what's urgent and not what is important.

**25:07**

Speaker 1

There you go. All right. I love it. Getting things done, as they say. Okay, so I'm a fan of the bucket list. Not everybody has a bucket list, but if you were to have one, what's on the bucket list? Any travel adventure, write a book. What's on the bucket list?

**25:26**

Speaker 2

I would love to take my family to see the northern lights. When I turned 40, my wife and I traveled to Iceland, but we didn't get to see them. So now we have been talking of trying it again and this time bring our daughters. So that's definitely something that we would also love to walk the Camino de Santiago in northern Spain as a family when our girls turn 15. So those two trips are definitely part of our bucket list.

**25:59**

Speaker 1

Amazing. What if I told you both of those are on my bucket list now with the northern lights, do you. Where do you go these days? Because I know it's pushed down. We've seen it in the last year, but do you still go to, like, Sweden or would you go. I don't know. Where do you go to look that up?

**26:14**

Speaker 2

Yeah, we tried in Iceland, which was.

**26:17**

Speaker 1

Iceland. That's the closest. You're right. Iceland. So the El Camino, for those that don't know, 500 mile pilgrimage. Right. It's. You can hike parts of it. You can hike the whole thing. Right. It's all the way across Spain. It can start in France. It's one of my business mentors, Juan Carlos. He's probably done the full El Camino probably three times. So I'm inspired by it. One day. One day. Okay, so is there a book you'd recommend to our listeners? It doesn't have to be about buildings. If not a book, just something else you'd recommend, like a documentary or a podcast.

**26:51**

Speaker 2

Sure. Well, the last book I read was Grit by Angela Duckworth, and I love the psychological research behind what makes people successful. I really connected

with the idea that passion and perseverance can help anyone achieve their goals. And I will definitely recommend it to anyone, but especially to parents of young children because it has the part that talks about how to teach with. And that was something that I really connected to about that book.

**27:19**

Speaker 1

Great. Okay, we're going to put a link in the podcast show notes, everybody. Check out that book. Thank you. As we start to wind down, it's been awesome to get to know you and your story as you look back on your career, is there anything you wish you'd have learned earlier?

**27:34**

Speaker 2

Maybe I would like to work for. For. For another firm for. For some time in order to. To learn. As I said, I love to learn and to learn about the process of having a business, to learn a lot of how things get done and how works get done. Because when you graduated from architectural school, maybe you came up as a great architect with a lot of skills on that technical part. But in order to be an entrepreneur, I think it will be very useful to work in another company just to see and get to see how things are done. I think you can learn that by yourself, but it takes more time. And that what happened to us. But that's something I would say to my young.

**28:30**

Speaker 1

I like that. Yeah. They say most people change jobs at least seven times in their career. It might even be higher now. But I think even before you take the entrepreneurial leap, it's nice to have worked with a handful of companies. I know I did and then took the leap. But it's good that you recognize that. Okay, so last question as we wrap up. Let's say someone's listening right now. They're inspired by what you've been building in Guatemala and beyond, and they're just jumping in to the green building movement. Any words of encouragement for them as we come to a close?

**29:04**

Speaker 2

Sure. I will say follow your passion, enjoy the process with an open and learning orientated mindset and try to find people to collaborate with. As I said, one of the things I'm most grateful about being part of this moment is the people I met. So that's something I would like to advise to someone who's starting in the movement.

**29:29**

Speaker 1

Well, thank you for being on the podcast. Congrats on all these amazing projects, building up your firm there with your sister and your team, and congrats on your lead fellow. Thanks for being on the podcast today, Juan Carlos. This has been great.

**29:41**

Speaker 2

No, thank you very much, Charlie. Again, it was an honor.

**29:47**

Speaker 1

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