

Visionary Architect James Inedu George from Nigeria | Transcript

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 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. Green Matters.

00:42

Charlie

Hey, everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. Every week I get an interview. Professionals somewhere in the world doing amazing design work, construction work, green building work. And I've got a little of all that here today with James, a special guest coming to us from Lagos Island, Nigeria. James, how are you doing today?

01:00

James

I'm great, thank you. How are you?

01:02

Charlie

I always get energy doing these interviews and just let some others kind of listen in, peek into our conversation. If you could just give us a quick background story about where you're from and maybe how you got into architecture.

01:17

James

I had been interested in building things since I was a kid. Of course, a lot of kids have this natural knack for drawing, so. But I also had a knack for making things on a grander scale using natural materials to make things that look like small stadia. And so my parents made me understand that it was architecture. I started to do the research, and I suddenly realized that was what I felt naturally. That's why I kept pursuing it since I was about five.

01:50

Charlie

Amazing. So that probably guided your studies and your degree. Where you studied and part of your career.

01:58

James

I was born in Zaria, Nigeria, and I studied architecture in the school in Zaria, which is the biggest school in West Africa, actually, for architecture. Very difficult to get in, but it's a difficult program, but we made the best of it. What was more interesting to me during that time was the fact that I got the opportunity to study traditional african architecture before this modern drive, because there's a drive now to wipe off all that history and put new roads, etc. In the historic areas. I was able to be at ground zero to understand exactly what this ancient did and what it meant in real time. School for me was easy, but because I already had a natural talent for architecture, I started to paint a lot more in school so that I developed that. But I haven't been painting for a while now, even if I paint periodically. But I haven't painted for any exhibitions for a while now, so I'll probably get back to that in a short while.

03:04

Charlie

I'll ask you about your bucket list. You can get back to good hobbies and painting. Yes, that'll be fantastic. So this is the Green Building Matters podcast. James, when did sustainability start showing up? Maybe in your studies or in your career?

03:20

James

I didn't know what it was then when I went to university, but I kept understanding that the traditional architecture of the Hausa people, which is northern Nigeria, had a soul. It was able to. It was a citizen. It had a soul. It contributed to its environment much more than the environment contributed to it. It purified the environment and allowed for an alternative, an alternate like environment and climate to happen within itself. So it meant that it was hot outside, the users were cool inside. Little things like that started to pick my imagination. I started to think about what I call an all weather house. A house that in summer can transform itself, in winter can transform itself. Those were my first forays into sustainability. I didn't know what it was then. Then I did my thesis. And in my thesis, I was expanding Lagos into the lagoon. I stumbled across the idea of using the lagoon as an air conditioning unit. So I went down that rabbit hole and sustainability popped up. And this has been since 2006. I've been on that road.

04:28

Charlie

Beautiful, man. I'm here in the United States. I'm in Atlanta, Georgia, and we have programs like LEED. And I've been doing this for 16-18 years now. And I guess I'm fortunate that there already was some curriculum around it. You did some self discovery on it, which I think is amazing. So my next question I like to ask my podcast guest, James, is about did anyone have any early influence on you mentors? You know, sometimes a mentor is someone you read their book to, you see them on stage. Sometimes it's someone you meet with, and maybe they give you encouragement or open the door. Did you have any mentors along the way?

05:01

James

When I started out, of course, like every other architect, there was this position. Everybody took a position stand between Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright. When I was a kid, I was on the Corbusier side, but then I discovered REm Poolhouse

because of his writing. And I must say, I write a lot. I discovered Rem. But then I found Joe Ado, the Ghanaian architect who was making sustainable, who made a sustainable house for himself in Ghana. I went to Ghana to find him after school, and then we struck up a mentorship, a real time mentorship, which is not like the chaps you see in books. And he's been a great support system since. So I'm one of the guys that met my mentor and formed a relationship with her. Another one of those guys is Daniel Lipskin, who I also met and tried to form a relationship with.

05:48

Charlie

Fantastic. Good. If they're still with us, reach out. Let them know what they meant to you. So tell us a little more about the early career and then how you gotta do what you are doing today. So, any other gaps there you want to fill in?

06:01

James

When I finished school, I did some research with the people because I wanted to work in Nigeria. I didn't want to leave. I looked around at the offices in Nigeria at that time, there was nobody pushing the boundaries. There was no avant garde. There was nothing. It was just architects responding to briefs, trying to make pretty stuff. And were living in a postmodernist nightmare. We got into postmodernism by mistake. We never found our way out of it. So we kept building these castles, almost like the Mac mansions. So imagine a math mansion on a large scale. So that was what Nigeria was. So I went to Lagos, and I couldn't find anybody. And I realized that I might have to do this on my own.

I worked for six months, went back to my hometown in the north, started a studio in my family house, built one house, got distillation by that, and went back to Lagos. And then I started to. I became a ghostwriter. I described myself as a ghostwriter of most Lagos architecture. Yes. So I became a ghostwriter for people doing their facades, doing interior design facades, sometimes taking an entire building and planning it. But then my name wouldn't be anywhere on it which I mean, which happened. I did that ghost writing for a bit. And then I founded my own firm with two other chaps at that time. Then I wrote a manifesto about

sustainability. Again, I didn't know it was about sustainability. But today, that manifesto has turned into a drive for adaptive reuse and transformation. That partnership ended, and then I started my office. Now, this was 2011, so we've been doing this for a couple of years now.

07:51

Charlie

Love the story, the self discovery, and that manifesto. Okay, so now we're talking about the present day. Tell us a little more about your firm, what kind of projects you work on, your team. And then, what's a day in the life of James these days?

08:07

James

Maybe I should start with a day in my life today. For instance, I woke up at 630. I went to the gym, then had breakfast, did some reading, maybe drew a little. I didn't this morning because I had some interviews. And then the typical day starts. I have some interview press or with another architect or with a client. I'm there until midday. I take a break, then I spend the rest of the day drawing, if I don't have to go to sites, etcetera, or traveling. So my day ends at about eleven, 11-12 at night, depending on between nine and eleven. It depends on the day. Then I sleep for a couple of hours and that's it. My life is quite boring.

08:50

Charlie

Happy that some would say you're a creator, and I know architects already work a lot of hours, but you're the entrepreneur too, so. So there's a team counting on you. What kind of projects do you really enjoy working on? Are these residential? Are these commercial?

09:06

James

I like to work on very small residential, very large residential and performance buildings. We're doing two museums, but I like the museum designs. But it's quite

simplistic because we've reduced museums into that death spiral so every museum is kind of a donor with a death spiral and that's it. I'm not very comfortable just making facades. So housing is quite challenging and there's so much that can be added in layers to housing. Also public buildings and performance buildings. Quite challenging because of the teamwork that's involved and all. But I also like to make very small pavilions too. It's something I'm very. That gives me so much joy, like to make these very small buildings that two people can use in.

09:53

Charlie

I love that man. From complex high performance buildings to the im Pei, museums with residential. Talk about green buildings here, maybe green homes. Do your projects pursue a certification and plaque or do you do green best practices? What's your take on how to measure the sustainability you're designing?

10:16

James

We've never pursued a plaque, but we use a checklist from the plaques from what they call it, the councils that give the plaques. But we also have something that we call local sustainability, which is how to tie contemporary high end design with traditional practices to create something that is very livable, for instance. So we've been studying permeability for a while now. It started as a joke in the office. Why do we have windows? It's so hot. A window doesn't do any work. Why do we have windows? Why is it that our skin cools itself and allows air flow through it without you seeing that anything is happening. Your skin is one of your biggest breathing organs. So why doesn't our building behave like that? We've been for a while now pursuing that, like tunnel focus, pursuing that permeability, to allow buildings to breathe differently, to bring in light in a certain way, so that throughout the day, until there's no light outside, you never have to put on a light in the house. You can stay in the house without using cooling. So by even dropping that energy bill, what we're trying hard now to pursue, however, is how to holistically use different materials, especially because these materials, like hemp, concrete, aren't available

locally to us. So it's difficult to substitute the conventional c 30 concrete with any new thing, because as much as we want to be sustainable, there's also the availability. And that availability also has to do with finance.

11:59

James

So if a project is being financed and you're using an extra 30%, for instance, to create a sustainable edge, that project won't fly. What we've been learning is that sustainability has to be ingrained in it. In that sense, a building must be responsible first and foremost. When I say responsible, like how you and I are responsible, it must act as a citizen, so it must pay tax. So if you look at it from that perspective, that our buildings are paying tax because they outlive us. So if they pay tax and they are responsible citizens to the environment, sustainability starts to rewrite itself and develop differently. So that's the trajectory that we've gone.

12:42

Charlie

Very holistic. I love it. It sounds like you're trying to bake in green best practices everywhere you can. You're right, the certifications, and I could imagine a lot of my career. James is the online lead for premium buildings but take those best practices, work it in here. So one follow up, what part of green buildings is harder to do in your region? It sounds like sometimes certain materials, maybe certain skill sets, don't recycle the construction material? Is it energy efficient because of climate? I don't know. What's still a challenge, would you say?

13:12

James

We recycle materials, but we don't recycle them knowingly. It's only when it becomes a cost issue that recycling happens. In fact, you'd find people say that zoning, poorer people that recycle material. So that's one big challenge that we're having, actually dreaming of making these buildings in rural areas from disused construction materials in urban areas, for instance, scaffolding. There's

decommissioned formwork that is decommissioned broken rubble, etc. Etc. Etcetera. So that life cycle continues. But it's very difficult because there's no chain. There's no chain for that reuse in the sense that one architect reusing other materials is not us. It doesn't make a chain happen in the sense that, you know what I'm saying? There's no secularity. It's a buy, use, destroy chain instead of buy, use, demolish, separate and reuse. So it's those last three that are the most challenging. Energy is quite challenging too, but it's getting better because some of us are baking this energy balance into our buildings from the onset. So because you can't take it out of the architecture, it's like a chair. It has to be made. The architecture doesn't work without. It has to be made. We're learning how to bake in these things into it.

14:33

Charlie

Thank you for giving us a peek into your region for your company. How far do you go? Is it all Nigeria based or your projects?

14:42

James

Currently we have projects in Ghana, Nigeria. We're prospecting for projects in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. We have prospective projects in America. We've done pavilions in America too, but I'm in Europe right now trying to see if I can get collaborations here. So we're kind of.

15:02

Charlie

Let me know if I can help at all as you state. I like to ask this question, what's next? Maybe, what are you kind of excited about? You're reading up on sustainability or design?

15:17

James

I've been reading up on energy a lot, and I've been. There's this thing that's

happening in my head that I'm trying to formalize. I'm calling an energy bill. I'm trying to do an energy master plan for the city I grew up in, which is in the north of Nigeria, so that I can create a new level over the city that generates energy as well as. Not only for survival, but as a business for the city, as a sustenance for the city. I don't want to just put solar panels on roofs. I think that's played out. I think a solar panel is a window. Why don't we make a whole building of solar panels? Buildings live for 50, 6100 years, so inherently they are power stations. Inherently they are already energy harvesters. Why don't we just forget all the drama around architecture and make it a power station. That's what it can do through its life cycle, whether there are people in it, whether it's disused or not. So why don't we do that? I'm trying to do that on a mega scale as a master plan over the CTL group, which is called the energy bill.

16:25

Charlie

Really, man, that's exciting. Sounds like you're doing that work just to help. And it makes sense. Let this be a business case, because that really still drives most of the world. It's wants, desires, and it's a little bit of how do we pay the bills? Or a little capitalism. Like it or not, that's just how it goes. Thanks for sharing that. Let's get to know you a little more. We've got some kind of quick questions here. What would you say is your specialty or gift?

16:54

James

I see space in a different way, and I'm able to combine things at a rapid rate in my head. So it means I can go through a plethora of ideas in a split second. Formal ideas, maybe. Not philosophical ideas, one philosophical idea. I might think about it for 30, 40 years and I might not get it, but I can see a form and x-ray it in my head and spin it in 30, 40 different ways in a few seconds. It means that for one scheme, we can do 3400 options, because I'm on the team. It's my talent, as much as I can create form. And I'm very good with composition and I write properly. I paint, so I know how to articulate things. My real gift is the ability to break down

form into minuscule bits and recombine it as quickly as possible and make several options of it.

17:46

Charlie

Got your own generative design here, man. I love it. How about any good habits or routines? Anything you do on a regular basis? You showed us a little bit in the morning and the workouts. What other good hobbies or routines do you have?

18:00

James

I draw every day. I used to paint two paintings a day, but I'm on the road, so it's difficult to do that. Moreover, there's the office, so it makes it quite difficult. But that used to be very good because it helped me to meditate twice in the day, once in the morning, and maybe in the evening or just in the morning. There's also that habit of meditation that's very important. I would buy a book first before I eat, if I had a dollar left. And there was a book that cost a dollar and a meal that cost \$0.80. I'll buy the book and starve. So there's that too. So those kinds of habits. You'd be surprised how reading helps create architecture. You'll be surprised how running helps create architecture.

18:41

Charlie

Thank you for sharing that. As we get to know each other more. I'm a fan of the bucket list. Not everybody has a bucket list, but if you had a couple things, you could share James on your bucket list, any travel adventure, maybe write a book or two more. What's on the bucket list?

18:57

James

You got one. I need to get some books out. That's one. Secondly, more than anything, I want that high rise building in New York, somewhere in Manhattan. A thin, tall. That's a heavy book. At least later.

19:12

Charlie

Easy work, man. Let's do it. That's amazing. Speaking of books, I asked my podcast guests, is there a book you'd recommend to our listeners that doesn't even have to be about buildings?

19:25

James

No, it depends if you want to read on, say, philosophy, I'll take you back to Frederick Niche. I'm trying to think of a very good book I've read in or I read over and over again. Apart from that, there's a book I'm reading on Corbusier life or something. It's quite a good book, but it's 600 and something pages, so that's not a good recommendation for anybody. You just never feel.

19:50

Charlie

I can put a link to it in our podcast show notes. We can connect on that. But in general, it sounds like you love to read. But where else do you consume information that you trust?

20:00

James

I do a lot of research on the Internet with trusted sources. I also go to libraries. I ask questions and do interviews and I travel. I think for me, even reading books is less important than traveling to just touch those buildings. You don't even have to know how to draw. You don't have to take pictures. When you see, for instance, the parliament building in London, you understand what Gothic is. Even if it's not a Gothic building, you understand what the Gothic is. You understand how that building could have been built. Because it's really just structures and windows. It's just the structure and the windows. When you touch those buildings or you see them in life, there's something to your ability to create and also you meet new people. You have to force yourself into either a diet or a behavioral pattern that

enables you to conserve resources and at the same time also be at your maximum. It's like training for an athlete if you travel a lot. I always recommend that. And it doesn't have to be international travel. It can be around your place. It can be. You travel, you take pictures, you draw, you keep those pictures. And once in a while, you go over your archives, you find that. You always find something there that you get points that you can always go on a journey with and ask questions.

21:22

Charlie

You learn so much from just other people. Stay curious. Get really good at asking questions to our listeners. You know, practice inquiry. Just being curious. Peel back the onion. Don't just take the initial answer as enough. That's amazing. All right, two final questions here. As you look back on your career, is there anything you wish earlier in your career?

21:44

James

I wish I would have known that. Look, you need to understand the basis of the most classical of our craft for you to make anything right. You don't start from where you start, because what that does to you is that you live a life of reaction as a life, as against life of proactivity. So one of the biggest things, one of the biggest takeaways for me was, I probably should have gone to a school in Europe, but at that point, I didn't think it was necessary. I'm not saying it's extremely necessary, but I'm saying that in a place where architecture is much more than just shelter, it's. You learn how to think about architecture, not think, to make architecture, that's one of the biggest regrets I had. I've been able to kind of integrate myself into that, helping our work get better so that your work has to have more meaning. Secondly, there's learning how to tell a story, both in words, with your drawings, with your actions, with your model, your architecture is the story of our lives. And it must unfold as that story. There's nothing worse than a place that has none. When you walk down the corridor, there's no. It doesn't touch your soul.

And you can't touch someone's soul if you don't know how to tell him a story that touches that soul. So, yeah, those two things for me are critical.

23:11

Charlie

Well, you're helping others that are listening as they get into their careers here, because one of my mentors, James, said, you can't fake passion. And you've just been laying it on here. You love this work, and now you want to help others. So my last question, let's say someone has listened to this podcast. They're getting encouraged. They're loving your story, and maybe they're just jumping into this kind of building or green building movement. Maybe they're making a career change, or maybe they're a young professional. But any words of encouragement to someone that's just now jumping in as we come to a close?

23:41

James

Keep going. It looks at every step, it's going to look bleak. It's going to look as though you know what I'm saying. But in reality, there's nothing that stops you from becoming as great as you want to become as an architect, except yourself. And that doubt that you feel that someone is better than you, that something can't be done. That's what you need to punch through. Architecture is about punching through your fears and your insecurities and what that does for you. If you keep going, it affects your life positively. So you stop being afraid in life and you find that other sectors of your life become unassailable in their brilliance. Just keep going. Do it every day. Do it twice a day. Draw. Be a child. Be inquisitive. Don't worry about what anybody thinks. Just keep going.

24:33

Charlie

Just keep going. Holy cow. What a great interview today, everybody. Check out James on LinkedIn. Connect with them. Go and check out his website. Check out what his team is doing at HTL Africa. And James, I'm glad we got connected here in our circles, and I wish you luck as you're pursuing that work there throughout

Europe and your region. And please, let's stay in touch. Let me know how it can help. And thank you for being a guest on the podcast today.

24:57

James

Thank you very much. Thanks for your time, too.

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