

Authentic Green Building Work with WSP's Mohammad Abbasi

Transcript

00:00:01

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. Settle in. Grab a fresh cup of coffee and get ready to find out why green building matters.

00:00:34

Charlie: Hi everyone. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast, where I get to interview a green building professional somewhere in the world. I've got Mohammad H Abbasi with us. He's with WSP and he is a healthy building and green building guru. I can't wait to just learn more about his journey. How are you doing today?

00:00:53

Mohammad: Great. Doing WELL is perfect weather in Chicago. I'm happy as long as the weather is good.

00:00:58

Charlie: I love it. Same here in Atlanta, Georgia, where I'm based and recording this. The beauty of some of the virtual world we're in is we can do an interview like this and it's going to sound great. I know you're going to inspire our listeners. I always like to start with that origin story. Where did you grow up and go to school?

00:01:18

Mohammad: I grew up in Tehran, Iran, like until I got 26 years old. I did my bachelor's degree in architecture there, and then after graduation I

started practicing architecture for a couple of years. I came across an interesting opportunity to do a post degree in Sweden, and I did a one year degree there with a professor studying on sustainability and urban design and mostly doing research and some really interesting activities there. And then I ended up traveling for a couple of years and then coming to U.S. and then I did my master of architecture at Illinois Tech here in Chicago and then ended up in the world of sustainability.

00:02:10

Charlie: Oh, wow. Three great schools and institutions. One of my career highlights is I got to teach a two day lap class in Stockholm, Sweden, a beautiful place. I always like to ask how'd you get that sustainability kind of itch? It sounds like some of that was in your studies. Anything else can you attribute to like getting into the Green Movement?

00:02:38

Mohammad: I've always been interested in sustainability. After finishing my bachelor, I went to a lot of youth conferences and I was always part of the sustainability working groups and I could tell I'm interested in design from that aspect, but the switch to consulting sustainability and green building happened when I had my MEP course in my master degree, and that was the momentum in my life. When in the last session of the class my professor reached out to me and asked a really transparent, straight question, "Are you the perfect student in your design studio?" And I was like, "No, I'm kind of average, but I think about sustainability, I think about design from a performance point of view." He was like, "You should do sustainability. That's what you are best at." Honestly, at that point, this is like seven years ago I didn't know I could have a career in sustainability. There were a couple of firms doing it, but I had no clue about it. His follow up question was like, "What are you doing after graduation?" I was graduating in a month. I was like, "I'm going back home. I have an architectural practice there." And he was like, "No, you should come and do an internship for me and learn the other things that you can do." I did that

and it gave me the opportunity of doing sustainability consulting, energy analysis, and high performance design for a year. And that's truly changed my career, profession and become a sustainability consultant.

00:04:22

Charlie: You're right. Sometimes we might think, "Oh, this has been around for a long time and it's still not right." We're still early in this move. It's still a lot of work to do, a lot of new job titles. I never heard of that just coming out right every six months. How about mentors or anyone along the way that maybe opened a door for you or someone you looked up to have any mentors along the way?

00:04:44

Mohammad: Other than the guy I just mentioned, who was my professor and ended up being my boss for a year or so, Sergeant at Arms in Chicago, my first manager at WSP Jumbhatt, was one of my best mentors, and he gave me the authenticity of how to be different and how to be myself and just opened my eyes to healthy building. So he was also a great mentor. Another person that also used to be my professor at IIT, Matt Herrmann, who is also my current boss. He also kind of was one of the people that encouraged me to do sustainability when I was in the school and I had a couple of courses with him and still kind of continuing doing the mentorship for me in different levels.

00:05:34

Charlie: Thank you for sharing when you look back so far on this career and we'll connect the dots and talk about projects in a minute. What are some of your proudest accomplishments so far? A career and personal?

00:05:47

Mohammad: I had an interest. I've worked on everything in sustainability. I started doing a lot of energy models I designed. I was a sustainability consultant for a Net Zero Quick Service Restaurant, which was the first biggest zero restaurant in the world. I did a lot of LEED LBC research

WELL projects for a couple of pretty good universities and also a couple of community centers and those and stuff. I had the journey of doing analytical work and also high performance design to sustainability certification. And now that I'm leading Health Building Services WSP, I'm focusing on healthy buildings for the most part. I had quite a journey to get there.

00:06:40

Charlie: Yeah, not just some LEED projects but Living Building Challenge projects. I know you've got lots of WELL credentials and air quality. I can tell you go all in if you love the credentials and become WELL rounded. Speak to that for a minute then we'll talk about some stuff you're doing today. What have credentials meant for you? Do you actually enjoy the process of studying or taking the exam? Tell us about Credentials.

00:07:10

Mohammad: Every year we have I started the Credentials Group in Chicago that we hold for young people and I love it mainly. Honestly, I'm not that interested in bragging and I have them all next to my name. I started to escape some of them to not have a pretty long signature at the bottom of my emails. I love them because of learning. I know we can learn through so many ways, but getting a credential and passing exams is how I used to kind of like to learn and have a goal and be prepared for something. I just got my VPMP like last month and I got it mainly because I felt that I needed that technicality. I'm still not doing energy modeling anymore, but I needed to get that credential to learn more about the process and be able to speak to that. So that's how I look at credentials and it's like they're quite successful. I don't believe that everyone should get all the credentials that I did, but I strongly believe in credentials. Like they are great for learning. They are great for young people to get a job. They are great to recognize your knowledge and make sure that you are relaying that to the people that you work with. There are a ton of good things that I can talk about. Credentials.

00:08:40

Charlie: I'm a big fan too, as you know. Everyone listening, make sure you're getting at least that LEED green associate venture into WELL or fit WELL . But now you can take a look here at credentials and you have some really, really impressive ones. I know you've used it as a building performance specialist and now healthy building specialist. Tell us about today. For those that don't know a lot about WSP and the built ecology side, tell us a little bit about your company and then a peek into what's a day to day like for you.

00:09:18

Mohammad: I worked for a WSC. I'm based in Chicago. And that will be, if not the biggest but, is one of the biggest engineering companies in the world. Especially in the past couple of years, our company has been focusing a lot on sustainability because of our president's vision around climate change. I'm part of the built ecology team that does sustainability within buildings. I lead our LC building services, but I still I manage like our other type of projects to projects that I'm really proud of these days is we do a ton of WELL projects and I do lead our WELL performance testing team that we go in and we verify projects, we measure a bunch of things to make sure that air quality, thermal comfort, water quality is, is all on track and we certify projects on that. A project I'm really proud of is we are helping a community center, a health community center in Milwaukee that provides health benefits for the homeless. We do a lot of rail projects for high rise residential commercial buildings. But that's the one that I'm truly. Because we are adding a ton of value and to show that WELL and our services healthy building re building is inclusive for everyone. The other project which is kind of similar, we are supporting women, black owned energy services in Detroit that is supporting energy services for their communities to design their new net zero office in Detroit. And what we have done in that job that I really loved was like not only doing the design for them, but we taught them the process. We issued a whole separate document to tell them that we would love you to get the knowledge from us

and transfer that to your community. Oftentimes, I understand that we need to kind of keep the process to ourselves. But in so many cases like that, we have tried to relay the information to the community so that that can spread around.

00:11:34

Charlie: We can design and build the Tesla of a building or the healthiest building systems. But if we're also not showing them how to run it right, once we move on, sometimes it's so important. Here's how you can continue and here's what you really need to know. And it sounds like that's some of your excitement is in part some of some of that handoff. What else could we do? You probably can't talk about all the projects, but just, you know, do you work on a large number at any given time? Do you get to do some research? Just where do you see yourself spending a little extra time in your role?

00:12:06

Mohammad: Yeah, on a day to day basis I would manage like 8 to 10 projects at a given time. The mix of LEED, WELL, Living Building Challenge Project I have like a two living building challenge project on my play to reset project. I have a mix of almost all of the certifications plus net zero design and energy services and that's what I'm interested in. I still like to get engaged in delivering the work, but I'm really interested in managing multidisciplinary services, to show that sustainability, all of the things that we do, are not their own isolated, contained things that are all related together. And that's my interest and that's what I do in my day to day. And we also do a lot of research like it's just earlier this year. I did research on the fact that we need mechanical ventilation in residential buildings, and the concept of office and home office is changing. And like in a city like Chicago the ventilation code doesn't require mechanical ventilation. You can get away with natural ventilation, which is not the case in a cold winter in Chicago. I did the whole research to show that we need fresh air in residential areas. Obviously, when we do research, industry is exactly what

we need. I still work with academia. I'm a guest lecturer at IIT and hopefully other schools. I love being in touch with the schools, learning from them and applying to them, and perhaps sometimes they collaborate with them to wow.

00:13:44

Charlie: Sometimes those codes can make it a challenge and we know the best practice. We know we need more fresh air, but over here it's saying, no, you can't do that. Or It's interesting. Let's talk about the future. Let's pretend you had a crystal ball. What do you think's next? What are you reading up on? What are you excited about in this green building movement?

00:14:04

Mohammad: Well, I guess I'm excited for the future. That's what I can say in the beginning. I'm really excited about what's coming to sustainability and how we are thinking about sustainability, be part of every project, be part of the policies, requirements and everything. So for that, I'm really excited about what's falling out for the sustainability profession because it used to be a service for some projects for a few number of projects, but now it's getting implemented at the corporate level, in portfolio levels and in every project that is getting built. I'm really excited about ESG reporting and how that is impacting the way that we design buildings. I'm really excited about a lot of policies, bills and laws that are coming that are changing our industry, like the Inflation Reduction Act, like us collectively in our team. I spend a lot of time learning that because it's going to transform green buildings, no doubt and I think that's definitely the exciting part. Certifications like LEED took the initiative and championed that. But the reality is that it is getting much, much bigger. I'm really excited for the next version of LEED to come in and also have more connection with the ESG. But we had a boom for sustainability. We are continuing to have that boom. I think the future is going to be different and

it's going to be more exciting. It's going to be more inclusive. It's going to impact everyone, not just a few projects.

00:15:42

Charlie: I'm excited about the future and I love your enthusiasm towards what's next and it's all coming fast and it's going to be very beneficial. Let's talk about you more. Let's get to know you a little bit more. What would you say is your specialty or gift?

00:16:11

Mohammad: I would say, people oftentimes know me as a healthy building person that knows about air quality, thermal comfort, water quality, circadian lighting. It's my knowledge that I get approached by people from different places from WSP in Reading, UK, Asia or the Middle East. But what I think at least I like to be good at, I'm not, I can't say. I'm able to say that this is my gift. But I think what I like to do the best is having authentic engagement and communication with my clients and the people I work with. I believe sustainability is day to day problem solving and unique cases. I like to be that person problem solving in an authentic, unique way on a specific case, specific cases. I'm not saying I'm the best at it, but I like to be the best at it.

00:17:14

Charlie: That's very good, man. Thank you for sharing. Any good habits or routines or rituals?

00:17:25

Mohammad: The pandemic was really hard and like many other people, I ended up doing a lot more hiking, a lot more camping, and obviously a lot more cooking and baking. I think that's what was a cliché during the pandemic, that like we were all baking, we were all learning how to bake everything that you used to buy. My daily ritual and I'm still maintaining some of those outdoor activities, and I used to do them in the past. But these days, my routine that I enjoy the most is taking my bikes in the

morning and bike to the office from Lakeshore Trail in Chicago, which is where we get to see the lake for half an hour or 40 minutes. By the time I get to the office, I'm really fresh, I'm really active. It gives me the energy and the same thing in the afternoon, like taking the same trail thing to the lake and the weather is still pretty nice and that relaxes me after a long day as well.

00:18:29

Charlie: Thanks for sharing. Are there any hiking trails that you want to hit near you or just just venture out? There's a good trail near you.

00:18:38

Mohammad: Well, the reality of Chicago is almost flat. When you fly over there, the nearest actual trail is like in Wisconsin, like 2 hours away. There is a trail that I would consider a trail near Chicago, like it's called Orange Palace, which is like half an hour west of my place. That's usually where I go. It has a lake where I can sit and have my tea, but that's a place I go on a weekly basis.

00:19:10

Charlie: Amazing. Thank you. Well, that's good. Segway to my next question, which is a bucket list. I'm a fan of the bucket list. What are one or two things maybe on your bucket list? Any travel or adventure? Maybe you want to write a book. I don't know what's on the bucket list.

00:19:32

Mohammad: I want to travel more. I used to travel, I've been to like 35 countries before coming to the US, but I ended up working hard in the last six, seven years. I really want to have a sabbatical at some point and travel for six months to countries I have never been to. I have never been to Latin America. I've been to Africa, but I didn't explore it. I'd like to go back to Asia and see how things have changed since I visited them. I'm hearing that from people. Traveling is definitely a big thing. I'm at least doing something more inclusive for sustainability. It is also something on my list to come up

with some framework or some educational program that, like underserved communities, not only in the US but everywhere around the world can benefit from. That is a little bit. Relate it to my work. But it's also something that I am cooking in my mind to do when I get to my forties, do something for more for a more public benefit around climate change.

00:20:48

Charlie: I hope you get that time off and get to travel more and then come back and do more good. Each project, right, we work on it. I think to our listeners of the Green Building Matters podcast, sometimes you need to zoom out. Like if you're working on one project, it is going to influence others and they're going to make changes and their next projects. But also that one project is better for the environment or a healthier space for the people that are going to be in it: a school, a church, an office building. Don't think you're not doing a good job, listeners. Making a big impact. It has a ripple effect. I can't wait for you to do more. Let's talk about books. Is there a book you'd recommend? It doesn't even have to be about buildings.

00:21:33

Mohammad: I told my colleagues these days and I had a lot of conversations around it. There is a book called Emotional Intelligence by Dan Goldman. It's something I read a long time ago. I bought and I read again recently to tell more about that to people because I feel that's a perfect book for the work that we do and also for these days. The other book that I read recently, which is directly related to my work, is also by Joe Allen from Harvard. That's also a pretty good book. Honestly, I'm not a big reader. I listen to a lot of podcasts, mostly Persian. So it's probably not going to be useful for your audiences. I'm a sci fi nerd, so I can tell you a list of like sci fi books by like Philip Dick or others, like around how the future is going to look like and like one of my dream job is always like do and research for those companies like Marvel about tell them how the future could look like with climate change air quality crisis. I also read a lot of novels and like sci-fi.

00:22:56

Charlie: Thanks for sharing. I know we might need this green comic book series or something. Maybe we can work on that. Two more questions here. I'm really enjoying getting to know you more. One is about career advice. Is there anything you wish you had known earlier in your career?

00:23:13

Mohammad: One thing, I don't know what I can call it? The opposite of advice. But one of the pieces of advice and suggestions I've been getting a lot in my early career was like telling me that I'm a good fit to be a head down and do energy modeling. I guess that it was coming from people biases about like the other people they have seen. And I think that's a strong bias that we need to overcome. But I've been getting that a lot, and it took me like a couple of years to figure out that I'm better in sustainability and like a couple of people like John at that, I mentioned the name, they made a role to tell me that know if if like most of people look like me, they do energy modeling. That doesn't mean that I'm going to be a good energy modeler, even if my math is good. Some people like him helped me to understand that, no, I could be a good sustainability consultant, even though unfortunately we don't have a pretty diverse sustainability consultant proficient. But like that's one of the things that I've been getting some mixed advice from people and I was confused for a while, but now that's what I'm trying to give to kind of like people in their careers too.

00:24:30

Charlie: I know you are now the mentor to others, so it's fantastic. The last thing here, let's say there's someone that's listening to your story. They're listening to the Green Building Matters podcast and they're getting real excited. They've decided to jump in. You know, it could be someone getting out of high school or college or it could be someone that has had a career and they're like making a shift and they want to do this green building work

that you do. That I do. And we need some help. What words of encouragement do you have for them as we come to a close?

00:25:01

Mohammad: One thing that I think is important, I have a hard copy of that for myself at home to remind myself that oftentimes we forget that sustainability is what we make living out of it. But we are fighting a bigger battle here. A lot of times I feel we get back to the conversation of the bottom line business case, but we are fighting a bigger battle here. Climate change is more real. I think this is something people are hearing. But I don't mind giving them another alert here, too. This is our business, this is our life. But we are championing a really great cause here that we should be committed to that and remind ourselves every day when we wake up. Yes, I'm going to work 8 hours a day, but I'm also an activist. I'm also fighting a big battle here. It's for young people and especially people that are considering sustainability. I think authenticity and being yourself is a huge thing in this field. And this is one of those fields that if people want to be themselves and just like to do what they're excited about, this is a great industry for it.

00:26:19

Charlie: Is a great industry. We need your help. We need your enthusiasm. And look at the career here that we've been able to go through. Muhammad, thank you so much for your time. Keep up the great work and I know we'll see you at the Greenbuild conference coming up soon.

00:26:33

Mohammad: Yeah, sure. Excited. Thank you, man. Thank you, Charlie.

00:26:39

Charlie: I just want to say thank you to our loyal listeners. We actually are celebrating over one year here on the Green Building Matters podcast. Me and the entire team, we're stoked and just so glad you continue to listen every Wednesday morning to a new interview with a green building

professional here in this industry, or just some pro tips that we want to make sure that you are getting straight from us, straight to you. Thank you for listening to this episode of the Green Building Matters podcast at GBES.com. Our mission is to advance the Green Building Movement through best in class education and encouragement. Remember, you can go to GBES.com/podcast for any notes and links that we mentioned in today's episode and you can actually see the other episodes that have already been recorded with our amazing guests. Please tell your friends about this podcast. Tell your colleagues and if you really enjoyed it, leave a positive review on iTunes. Thank you so much and we'll see you on next week's episode.