

Director of Innovation - GM of Streetbond/GAF - Eliot Wall

Transcript

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

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Charlie: Hi everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. Once a week, I get to interview a green building professional somewhere in the world, and I love just hearing their origin story and how they get to where they are. Sometimes it takes some different turns and then looks at what they're doing now and advancing the built environment and especially green buildings. Today I've got Elliot Wall with us. He's in the New York City area and he's general manager at Street Bond. Elliot, how are you doing today?

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Eliot: Well, thank you, Charlie. Appreciate you having me on.

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Charlie: Good. Well, I love New York City. I'm sure we'll talk about that some more. We get a green up, a lot of existing buildings there. Let's talk about you and a little more of your origin story. Where did you grow up and go to school?

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Eliot: Speaking of cities, I grew up in Los Angeles. I then went to boarding school just outside of Boston and have been in New York, Montreal and Singapore for at least a year, each interviewing period. I've had exposure to wonderful cities the whole time, which has been a big influence on the inflection start.

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Charlie: Fascinating, man. Not just bicoastal, but international early. Was there something that gave you those opportunities? Was that something maybe someone opened some doors, some influence from your parents or how did you get those opportunities?

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Eliot: My parents, I've been very lucky along the way. Both of them have a lot of roots around the world and around the country. They created opportunities and they're actually both lawyers. From a sort of general systems thinking approach, that's been something from an early age that led to part of my decisions in college health care and looking at urban design. The combination of those things has really led to this journey of being able to look at these cities as systems, how the influences of each of the constituent parts ends up affecting the outcomes of people like you and me living in them.

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Charlie: We'll talk about some of that, some of your college work, your undergrad. Where did you end up there and what were you studying at that time?

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Eliot: I went to McGill University in Montreal and I entered school actually wanting to be a doctor. I ended up going into pre-med studies, but after my first year, ended up feeling a greater resonance with urban design and so switched my major, which again was influenced by my mother, who was a lawyer by training, but ended up doing a lot of construction projects

growing up remodeling our house. I originally wanted to be an architect growing up. A lot of this ended up being a combination of the two, as I saw, to gain exposure. Actually, I had an opportunity to work on a social mission in Jakarta delivering care after the Jakarta earthquake in 2005 2006 and really saw how supply chains, the systems of actually delivering care influenced those outcomes on a day to day local level and pulled that back through as I got through my first year of college. I said, "Okay, I don't love organic chemistry, but I like solving problems for people, so how can I do this at a different scale?" Ended up seeing urban design as a way to tackle some of those problems. I'm sure many of your audience members feel some resonance with that. After college I decided to graduate early because then I felt like I was getting too far away from the problem. I had wanted to go back to medical school, and applied to start an actual company because of a problem that I saw in hospitals while I was working there. And then the truth has come all the way back around to saying, let's go back to making a difference in urban areas where it's affecting everyone.

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Charlie: Anyone having an early influence there? I'm curious if you even look at the healthy building movement coming out of this pandemic, but just sustainability? I mean, was that showing up or not until a little later maybe in your career?

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Eliot: I credit a lot to my parents having a creative foundation of looking at. While there was a parallel with the legal systems of sort of how precedents work and common law says you're seeing decisions build upon one another. My mother made that connection very early for me. The drive to Los Angeles being a unique city in a lot of ways. I remember a project even in sixth grade, where we were talking about the development of Los Angeles as a city and one of the few cities in the United States. In fact, the world that really didn't grow up near it developed near a large water source. It was inland for a lot of it. And so it didn't have a natural port. How those

decisions influenced the way the city then grew. I think that was some early influence of being able to look at those decisions that were being made and some of the unintended consequences of that. As we talk about the healthy building movement coming out now, we of course, saw how outdoor spaces became more and more important, which has a lot of relevance to what Jeff and Bree Bond are doing today in terms of trying to create more livable spaces for people.

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Charlie: Oh, this is great. Parents that clearly mentors anyone else you might call a mentor or someone you looked up to along the way?

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Eliot: I've been very fortunate to have, particularly my professional business career, several mentors, including actually my current boss, Ashish Kulkarni, who again looks at all of these problems and how do we solve them looking at the status quo. And one of actually my favorite things about my job now is really pushing to creatively solve problems. And one of them, for instance, my favorite example right now is when you walk outside your door, Charlie, what's one thing you're guaranteed to interact with?

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Charlie: Well, here outside of Atlanta, Georgia, I mean, definitely some nature here, but I don't know. Help me out.

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Eliot: Pavement out of what?

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Charlie: Some hardships. All right. Gotcha.

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Eliot: So in that process, when we think about what's required to maintain pavement, it's one of these problems that's so ubiquitous and frankly

overlooked from a highly data driven perspective in terms of when a road is going to be maintained or when your sidewalk is going to be maintained, it's only when it gets so bad that there's a desire to change that. I think Ashish and other mentors earlier in my career helped me push on problems like that and see those problems as the best types of problems to solve.

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Charlie: I can tell you a problem solver and then your title of director of innovation. We're going to get to that in just a minute. I do love it when the guests ask me questions. So that's good. Connect those dots one more time with your health care journey. I know you worked in some different places there. How did you know it's time to get more into the built environment? What happened there in your career?

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Eliot: Over the last a decade or so I've evolved to understanding what my true north has been in my professional career, and it's looking at quality adjusted life years. Not just life expectancy, but what are the quality years each of us are going to live. My mission in life, I hope, is to make a difference and point out one of the differences in terms of quality and see that improvement through the work that I'm espousing and people I'm working with. How do we make a difference there in terms of the quality of life for people? Health care, really tangible way to make a difference in people's lives. Urban design, urban planning as a way to do that, a larger scale, more systematically. I think there's a clear draw in how we look again, healthy buildings, for example, how we can improve people's lives.

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Charlie: I agree. One more look back, then we'll go to the present day. What's on the highlight reel? What are some of your proudest accomplishments so far?

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Eliot: I founded a company called Beacon Sight back in 2013, and it started with a similar type of question from a problem that I had experienced both as a patient and as a spouse being in the hospital. Charlie, We're going to do another one where I question the audience. Have you ever waited in a doctor's office? You ever know how long you're going to wait?

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Charlie: No.

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Eliot: They don't either. When we look at that, there's the connection also to value based care. How do we value physicians, nurses, health care professionals, time, and how do we tie that to the patient experience? So this was an opportunity that I am very proud of. Although the company did eventually not succeed in the way that we all hoped, it was a wonderful learning lesson. I think the other one that I'm extremely proud of, particularly right now as it's ongoing, is the community work that we're doing and performing in Los Angeles.

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Charlie: Thank you. I think it's sometimes important to look back on that highlight reel. Present day, what's keeping you busy today?

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Eliot: About a year and a half ago, and that I'm working for a building materials company. They've got a really interesting mission. There's a very interesting culture and passion driven, in fact, not only by Jim Shepard, Jeff's CEO, but David Winter and David Millstone, who are investing 1 billion into innovation. He described his own mandate as, how do we take a company that's over 120 years old like Jeff and create new avenues of growth for? How do we push the envelope and innovate? I was intrigued. I hadn't thought about going back into the building materials space really since college. As we talked about, I've been in health care. But when he started talking to me about that opportunity in terms of trying to make a

difference and trying to do something really tangibly different that affected people's day to day lives. Again, Jeff protects what matters most. It's a roof over everyone that's essential. When you look at a satellite photo looking down the tube, man made structures you see here, roofs and roads. And here is an opportunity to tackle roads. It heartened upon, again, the passion there. And this was a product line within Jeff that they were trying to make into an entire company that was, as she should say, an idea. In taking that on, that has been a large process and undertaking of trying to launch this company as well as the numerous projects that we have ongoing and continue to espouse. For instance, the core community project I mentioned before, as well as other projects like the school that we did in Atlanta just two weeks ago. Looking forward, what we hope to accomplish in 2023 itself.

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Charlie: I'm a big fan of entrepreneurship and I read your bio, Eliot. I see that right. You've been an entrepreneur. You've had these different problems you've solved along the way and some of your other career milestones. And now within Jeff, it sounds like as director of innovation, but also general manager of Street Bond, you can unpack that more. It's giving you that opportunity to be an entrepreneur, run these revenue streams, grow a business, but maybe within a bigger company. Does that resonate a little? Have you ever heard the phrase entrepreneurship? Is that something you could speak to? It sounds like that's what you've been provided here.

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Eliot: Absolutely. This is a wonderful opportunity to live in entrepreneurship. I give a lot of credit to Asheesh and Jim for pushing that. That's a big step and a big opportunity and risk for a mature company to take to invest in entrepreneurship with seriousness and intention. Of course, that starts with Dave. David, at the top, but for a company truly to embody it, I think is a really proud achievement for GAF. I'm very thankful for that opportunity and also recognize how rare it is to really get a swing

and have an opportunity set up with the right mixture of components to be able to go after it. It's an extremely challenging thing to do, period, let alone extremely well. Jeff has created an environment to make that positive exciting.

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Charlie: LEED has been around 22 years now and a program like that has helped all of us. Advance just this conversation around what does it mean to be a green building? Maybe if we just looked at the LEED book, so to speak, you would say, we need lighter colored, hard-scape and surfaces. And that's green. That helps with the heat island effect. But help us demystify like what else are you and your team working on? Like that makes hardscapes, pavement, roof materials eco friendly besides just lighter colored to reflect light and shed heat. What are we missing? Can you demystify some of that for us?

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Eliot: Obviously going to continue being a big issue with the heat dome going on in California and out west right now, Europe experiencing its largest drought in 500 years. This is going to continue to be a large problem. So not to downplay the significance there, but to your question about what else, we're looking really closely at energy harvesting. So not only just reflecting the energy from the front, but how could we then capture that and repurpose it? So you could think about potentially on your driveway having a material coating on it that when it was in the sun led to reheating your water. So an integrated system with your water heater. We also have a partner company in SGI that's part of Standard Industries that's very engaged in carbon capture and how we do this at a granular level. The Holy Grail here is to be able not just to reduce or avoid the effect that solar reflectivity gives us Greenhouse gas avoidance. But then to look at this in terms of how we really draw the carbon out of the air. And then finally I would say Ashish has also been quite a visionary in looking at the electric vehicle tire problem. How do we take these pollutants and electric vehicles

being heavier, end up shedding more of that rubber that ends up in water systems and leaves the pollutants? How do we also then craft a solution to tackle that problem?

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Charlie: That's exciting because I see the Green Build Conference. I see some of these innovations. Sometimes the architecture specifies some of what you're talking about. To our listeners here, they need to take a look at all this new innovation. And that's kind of a segway to my next question, not just in your product line, but where do you see the green building and or healthy building movement starting to shift towards anything coming around the corner you're reading up on you're excited about.

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Eliot: I think, a similar set of functionalities, shall we say, across the building envelope. Again, as Dave and David invested in innovation through Standard Industries, Jeff is looking at a number of different innovations at the building envelope level. So whether that's looking at HFC and how we can recirculate that, we've seen problems, of course, with energy going down. How do we make not only the home more resilient but the community as a whole? As a company we're really excited and I'm personally really excited about energy resilience, temperature resilience and carbon capture still really are the three that I think will continue to take us through and be the prior priorities from leading issues and opportunities over the next decade.

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Charlie: Yeah, you got a good crystal ball there, Elliot. Well, let's do some rapid fire questions and get to know you a little more. What would you say is your specialty or gift?

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Eliot: Nature or nurture combination? I think looking at problem solving, creative problem solving at an assistance level.

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Charlie: Do you have any good habits, any routines or rituals that really help you stay on point.

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Eliot: All sorts of buckets under a similar set of things? But every week I look ahead at the week and color code. Can't see this, the color code sort of what needs to be done. So it's Monday through Friday and as well as to do color code, what conversations I'm walking into, whether this is something I have to prepare materials for, whether I'm expecting an output from that conversation or whether it's a touchpoint and what those would be. I also every other week write down all of my anxieties and just say what's on my mind. It's a cathartic process, but also helps sort between what are challenges or problems or things on my mind that our team has agency over which of them we don't. But what strategies could our team undertake to try and mitigate those risks? And the other one that I heard at is having regular touchpoints with the team and making sure that we not only have group settings that don't have any scheduled time, so twice a week we sort of do huddles as well as then retaining all of the one on one with within my team to ensure that we're having a constructive time to just talk about whatever's on anyone's mind.

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Charlie: Thanks for giving us a peek in those seem like really good systems and yeah getting what's what's taking up head space right sometimes even just writing it down right it's I've placed it somewhere for now and I can address it. Thank you for that. I'm a fan of the bucket list. Not everybody is. But what are one or two things maybe on your bucket list? Any adventure travel. You want to write a book that's on the bucket list?

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Eliot: Since you mention them. Actually, I started writing a book a couple of years ago that I'd love to finish. I got about halfway through and then I took on this job and haven't had a chance to pick it up again. But that would be definitely on the bucket list to travel as well through the pandemic. Like many others, I started going to national parks after the first one was bitten, so I have been to eight in the last two years. I plan to go to at least two a year for as long as I can. Professionally, I would say I really love to see Street Bond and remarking on earlier creative, successful entrepreneurship stories. It's not just about software, but really to win that and do that with Ashish and Jim and Dave and Dave and see that kind of success, I mean, that would be extremely exciting.

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Charlie: That's exciting. You're right. The national parks more and more navigated towards that. You can get an annual pass here in the US or you can go to all the parks and I'm sure you've got this basic box. I'm not sure if you like to listen to audible or podcasts or maybe hold a physical book, but is there a book you'd recommend? To our audience. Could be an old one, a new one. It doesn't even have to be about buildings.

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Eliot: Speaker for the Dead by Orson Scott Card. This is one of my favorite books. I reread it every year. It's ultimately about empathy and how you create empathy for others which results in better communication. A lot of that story explores how lack of empathy really leads to miscommunication and suffering. It's something that to me is really important to try and espouse and really understand where other people are coming from. What are the assumptions that are built in? What do we just not understand? And bridging that gap.

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Charlie: Thanks for the recommendation. I'll put that in the podcast show notes. Two more questions. One is career advice. Is there anything you wish you had known a little earlier in your career?

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Eliot: Jason I was just having this conversation. I think the two things that I would take forward. One is a favorite quote of mine, which is "Change is inevitable, growth is optional."

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Charlie: It's good. It's nuggets. Let's say someone is listening right now to this podcast. They've enjoyed learning your story and they're just now jumping into this green building movement. Any words of encouragement for them?

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Eliot: Keep going. This is the problem of our time and know that find the problem that you want to wake up solving every day. Because regardless of what else goes on in your life professionally, this is something that when you wake up, as hard as a job can be, as annoying as small things might end up being, as long as you love that problem, that's your true north.

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Charlie: That's the true north. Hey everyone, connect with Elliot on LinkedIn. I just want to say thank you for your enthusiasm towards this new push that you're doing under a big company. But that entrepreneurship internally. I know I'll see you in the green building circles that we hang out in. If there's anything I can do for you, you just let me know. But thanks for spending time with us today.

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Eliot: I really appreciate it. I think it's a wonderful thing that you're doing through this podcast and excited to be here and excited to see you soon.

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Charlie: Well, thanks, man. 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 were 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.

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