

Sustainable Design Leader & VP at HKS - Ramana Koti

Transcript

Introduction ([00:01](#)):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.

Charlie ([00:33](#)):Hey everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. Once a week I get an interview at Green Building Professional, somewhere in the world. I'm based in Atlanta, Georgia, and so is my guest today, Ramona Koti. Ramona, how are you doing today?

Ramana ([00:48](#)):Excellent, Charlie. How are you?

Charlie ([00:50](#)):I'm doing fantastic. I know we know each other in some circles here in Atlanta, sustainability, design, and some ties back to Georgia Tech or in our LEED Fellow group. You got into the club in 2019. I know today you're the sustainable design leader and vice president there at HKS based here in Atlanta. We'll get to that in just a minute, but I like to ask all of my guests to take us back so we kind of have that, that origin story. Where did you grow up and go to school?

Ramana ([01:23](#)):I was born in an Indian state called Under Pradesh, and that's where I did all my schooling. I studied a bachelor's of architecture in the state university there, which is Andra University, graduating in 2000 and then spent a few years working. Went to grad school at Arizona State

University in the US here studying master of Science in high performance buildings.

Charlie ([01:49](#)): Those are great schools. Did you know you always wanna be an architect? Like where did you get that influence?

Ramana ([01:56](#)): I can't say that I did. I had an artistic streak in me. I would say I doodle really well, color really well, but you know, in India, the way it worked was you take a competitive entrance exam and people based on how well the score, they take up things and where, based on how I score architecture. So it was a happy coincidence in a way.

Charlie ([02:21](#)): Look at you now, man. Thanks for telling us that. I like to follow up because this is the Green Building Matters podcast. When sustainability, I'm gonna start showing up for you?

Ramana ([02:35](#)): It's hard to put a finger on that. The way we were brought up in India, power was rationed, water was rationed. There were times when we didn't have water for days, so I had to go use a hand pump in a neighbor's house, carry water back. We got a good scolding if it didn't turn off the light after exiting our room. It was built into our lifestyle in a way. When we were studying architecture, I think the subject of climatology sort of helped crystallize the whole view around sustainability. How do different areas respond differently in terms of architecture?

Charlie ([03:17](#)): Start connecting the dots on your career. You've got your master's then at Arizona State, and then what were you doing early in your career after that?

Ramana ([03:30](#)): I did work for four years in India between my undergrad and grad school. I had a great opportunity to work with some of the leaders

in the Indian industry, specifically Niraj Mana is an architect in Delhi, a very inspiring approach to aesthetics, materials, and architecture. And the next boss was Ari. And then kind of a modern architect is no more, but it, again, very inspiring design. The inspiration from there and after my masters, I had the good fortune to interview with BNIM, and, and start working there. I felt like that just gave me the right start and momentum in the green building industry.

Charlie (04:18): Love that. Well it sounds like you worked with some great mentors there in India, then came, got the masters and you've worked with some really great design firms, so we'll have to get to that. Any other mentors that brought that up that you want to give a shout out to? Mentors or someone that influences you, but you may not meet or they literally open some doors for you? Anyone else that kinda you would call a mentor?

Ramana (04:44): A few names come to mind. In the town I lived in with Shakur, there was an architect named Madras Tri who kindly trained me to take the architectural entrance test. He will always be fondly remembered. One of our professors, Ash Patel, who taught us design, and then an American architect who practiced in India, his name is Joseph Allen Stein comes to mind especially, I visited a few of his projects when I worked in Delhi. What's inspiring about Joseph Allen Stein was that he would not start designing the building without involving a landscape architect. At that moment, all the architects I saw, they would design the building first and let the landscape architect do the landscape around. But I felt that was very inspiring. I think his focus was mainly architecture, light and landscape kind of blended into each other. I found that truly inspiring.

Charlie (05:46): Thank you for sharing that. What great mentors you had along the way. Let's talk a little more about the career timeline. You're at a few very large firms. Can you talk about what were some of those early sustainability or LEED projects? Was sustainability in lots of projects or no,

you really had to fight for it? Tell us about those early days when you first got exposed to say a LEED.

Ramana ([06:11](#)):Professor Harvey Bryant taught us a course on LEED during our master's program. And most of us, I would say, all of us took the LEED exam while we were still in grad school and became LEED aps. Our resumes were well prepared for job applications by the time we were graduating. I think one of the memorable things that comes to mind while I was at B N I M was the entire town of Greensburg, Kansas was wiped out by a tornado in 2007, and the city made a resolution of building elite platinum standards and doing renewable energy and whatnot. And via B N I M got the project and I had the good fortune of working on a few projects in that town. We helped design a school there for several other projects. There was another project up in Reinbeck, New York, which is the Omega Center for Sustainable Living, which was both a LEED and living building challenge. One thing I really like to brag about was Jason McLennan interviewed me and selected me.

Charlie ([07:31](#)):That's amazing.

Ramana ([07:31](#)):Three months after I started, he was leaving BNIMI to set up ILFI and Living Building Challenge. I was bummed about that, but it was a truly amazing experience. The initiation inter LEED and Living Building Challenge.

Charlie ([07:48](#)):For those listening that don't know, take a look of course at the Living Building Challenge and ILFI. What Jason had gone over and helped build out and now there's some amazing living buildings, right? It's one thing for LEED platinum net zero net positive regenerative design. I think you've got a nice balance you get to work on, not just some advanced green buildings, but some really advanced, even regenerative buildings. I'll have to talk about that more as I understand it. Then you ended up for many years when Lord X Sergeant came to Atlanta. Tell us about that time.

Ramana (08:22): It's been six or seven months since I left Ldx Sergeant, but I feel like a teenager who's just left his house in many ways, my heart is still there. I think higher education is the mainstay of athletic surgeon or and I think the way universities you know, do their homework and come up with their own sustainability standards and a minimum of LEED goal, LEED silver. It's a very methodical approach and you kind of get the requirements from the owner. You're not trying to sell LEED or sustainability to the owner which helps kinda, which acts as a forcing function in a way, but sustainability. 10 years of that, working with great people like Jim Niccola, Joshua Gasman, and getting to the point where I about 10 years experience as a LEED AP and I could apply to become a LEED Fellow.

Charlie (09:26): You got it there in 2019, so just congrats on that. All the amazing higher ed and green building work he did there at LAS and and then, like you said, is after almost 12 years there, now you're at HKS and still doing all things sustainability. Maybe just a minute, I want you to kind of tell us what's your responsibility today, but one more look back, I like to give permission to my podcast guests. What are some of your proudest achievements?

Ramana (09:56): I mentioned Logic Sergeant and in the same vein, and I would say just being a team member on the Candida building for innovative, sustainable design, I think that's right there at the top. I can't imagine anything more humbling than that. One other thing that comes to mind is my master's thesis, which was kind of a happy coincidence. It took two different pieces of software, one that does energy modeling but kinda does daylight analysis more roughly. And then fetched the results of a more detailed daylight analysis software and what are the differences in decision making based on your own analysis versus looking at more detailed analysis? I think that helped push the industry tools in a certain direction, I would say.

Charlie ([10:42](#)): Oh, that's fantastic. I know you mentioned the LEED Fellow, those, they dunno. We've had Sean a RO on, we've had folks scan, it's great to talk to someone that was on the design side of the kina building arguably. One of the green buildings in the world right there on the George State campus. What else? Anything else stand out as you look back? Any other really cool projects?

Ramana ([11:03](#)): I would say more than projects. I would say my community engagement through writing, volunteering, and teaching has been also pretty. I'm proud of those accomplishments in a way and kind of not only do the work, but help spread the word and make it available like you're doing with the podcasts.

Charlie ([11:29](#)): No, the message of my podcast is teach everything so I can tell you you love doing that too.

Ramana ([11:36](#)): One last thing I would mention is in 2007 while I was living in Kansas City there was a competition called Sustainable Kansas City. And everybody was welcome to provide entries, not just architects on ideas that would make Kansas City more sustainable. And me and a few others presented ideas and both of them made it to the top 25. I'm very proud of that.

Charlie ([12:06](#)): Congratulations. That's a big deal. We look back, where'd you come from? How'd you get into sustainability? We talked about some accomplishments and mentors. Let's talk about the present day. What excited you about hopping over to HKS last year? Some of your roles, what kind of keeps you busy today? For those that don't know, tell us more about HKS and a little more about your role.

Ramana ([12:31](#)):HKS is an international architecture firm with about 1600 people with multiple practice areas like commercial mix use hospitality, healthcare, aviation and so on. I am the sustainable design leader for the commercial mixed use practice, which has several building types like multi-family, retail hotels office and a lot of times all of them mixed in one project. My role is to start the projects off on a right footing, help us get the right kind of work and start the projects off on the right footing and do periodic check-ins to make sure the initial goals and strategies are being implemented. And then put a bow on the certification efforts at the end and get the targeted certification levels. I report our Chief Sustainability officer, Brian Eckman. I'm not limited to sustain, I mean the commercial mix chief practice area by any means. I'm right now helping on a master planning project by our cities and communities practice also.

Charlie ([13:50](#)):The lot of different rating systems. A lot of LEED work, it sounds like. That's a very large architecture firm. Do you have sustainability team members scattered at various offices and you share best practices? How do you share LEED best practices amongst a large team? Any pro tips there?

Ramana ([14:12](#)):We have a virtual team called Design Green in terms of availability and the financials, we are in the buckets of the formal practice areas. But we are a virtual green team of about a dozen individuals who do energy analysis, life cycle analysis and sustainability certifications and whatnot. We meet twice a week and talk about project work, talk about industry initiatives, talk about firm initiatives, and share not only workload, but inspiration to keep us moving forward,

Charlie ([14:51](#)):All of it. It's everchanging, we've got LEED of course. You've got some living building projects. It's fascinating what's going on in the green building movement. A good segue to my next favorite question,

you're a green building guru. I'm kind of curious, what are you excited about? What's coming down the road if you had a crystal ball what's next?

Ramana ([15:19](#)): I feel like health and decarbonization are already here as design influencers, although in terms of what we can do, I think we're only scratching the surface at this point. I'm really excited to see how incentives from the inflation reduction Act will generally put us on a broader path to decarbonization and also make buildings much greener than they are. Also given the focus and all the buzz about artificial intelligence going on right now, I'm just interested in seeing if we can leverage our artificial intelligence to be more efficient with green buildings than we currently are. That's an exciting prospect,

Charlie ([16:07](#)): Very exciting. We see some new tools like chat g, pt, but you know, there's maybe some construction documents, maybe parts of it can be big data and kinda automate a little so that architects can focus on what they're really needing to focus on. Instead of the smaller task, let's focus on these bigger problem solving things. It's gonna be fascinating. We all need to embrace it. Frankly, some business models might need to adjust a little bit. As they say, what got us here won't get us there. Anything else kinda about the future of green or healthy buildings you wanna add?

Ramana ([16:47](#)): The confidence of health and decarbonization is pretty exciting with all electric buildings. As the grid becomes greener, buildings automatically become greener. You don't have to do anything to existing buildings.

Charlie ([17:05](#)): We've gotta get ready for those renewables to come into our building in the form of electricity. Some don't understand why it is all electric. I know some of your work is also in timber frame structures and

probably embodied carbon, so how are you coaching your team on embodied carbon right now?

Ramana ([17:24](#)):I think quantifying where you are is a great step, and that's what we've been doing on select projects the last five years or so. But just yesterday we got a proposal for doing full lifecycle analysis on two large projects for a confidential client. And there is real interest in actually going beyond quantifying where the embodied carbon footprint falls and looking at design options like concrete mixes and insulation types and drywall types to see how much we can actually not just to earn LEED points necessarily, but to actually green their portfolio in a way. We are currently in the process. There's a structural design team within hks and we work with them on some projects, but we also work with the bigger firms on other projects. The awareness about how structure is 75% of your embodied carbon, and the first thing to address in your design is growing and we're definitely looking for more opportunities to do mass timber buildings.

Charlie ([18:39](#)):Thank you for speaking. It's not just operating carbon, it's embodied carbon too, and you're on top of it measuring where you're at first. Let's do some kinda get to know your questions if you'll, so what would you say you know, maybe is your specialty or gift?

Ramana ([18:57](#)):I think the thing that comes to me most easily, I would say, is writing. And right now I have about 50 plus publications, including papers and blog posts on green building topics. But a close second I would say would be photography. And I did some D D Y I learning, and brought some camera flashes in the equipment. And just every time I need a break from the other stuff I take my camera out and take pictures,

Charlie ([19:29](#)):That's cool. That gets to some of the fun hobbies that I'm in. It's in the writing. Any tips? Is there a certain place you love to write? Do you start with pen and paper first or no, you've gotta type it, but do you get

outta your normal office? Like where do you like to write? How do you get in the zone there?

Ramana ([19:49](#)):It comes so naturally that all of that doesn't matter. I look at articles I've written five, 10 years ago, and I have no idea where they came from. I know they come through me, but the environment and the infrastructure and all that, I would say is secondary.

Charlie ([20:13](#)):A gift, then you're right. Some that's not as easy. Thank you for that. Let's take a look next as we get to know each other more. I'm a fan of the bucket list. Are there one or two things on your bucket list you could share any travel adventure with, maybe you wanna write another book?

Ramana ([20:31](#)):I actually at some point want to finish writing a fiction novel.

Charlie ([20:38](#)):Wow, that's awesome. Most of your stuff's technical writing. So this will be a new territory for you maybe?

Ramana ([20:45](#)):The protagonist might end up being a green architect, but there will be a good amount of fiction in there for the twist and turns.

Charlie ([20:55](#)):I love that, man. That's on the bucket list. Any travel or adventure you wanna get to one day?

Ramana ([21:03](#)):At one point I had a list. Spain, Thailand, France, and then maybe Costa Rica. There are some places I had, but I guess covid kinda flipped the switch on that in a way. I need to get back to it.

Charlie ([21:22](#)):Last week in April coming up is kind of Green build Europe. It's called the Gbci i u Europe's Circle event. I spoke last year. I interviewed Peter Templeton. It was amazing on this podcast. So I dunno, if you need to get to Barcelona, I'll be there, maybe check off Spain, at the end of April.

Ramana ([21:41](#)):This coming April.

Charlie ([21:42](#)):Let's do it. So that's a bucket list. I think it's important to jot down a few things. Let's go on a travel adventure. Let me know when that

fiction book is ready. That's a good segue. You're doing a good job here. Is there a book or a documentary or just a podcast? Is there anything you'd recommend to those listings that doesn't have to be about green buildings?

Ramana ([22:09](#)):

I just finished reading Adam Grant's book or Think again, and I found it extremely inspiring. I think the full title, if I'm remembering it correctly, is think again, the power of Knowing What You Do Not Know. The reason I found it so inspiring is because usually we are in a few modes in our life. We are either a preacher trying to preach our point, or a prosecutor trying to shame the person who doesn't think like us, or a politician who's trying to raise support for our viewpoint. But I think the author urges us to be a scientist who's flexible to the information out there and then change our thinking based on the information coming out. I found that pretty cool.

Charlie ([22:56](#)):Great recommendation. I'll put a link to the book in the podcast show notes. Thank you for that. Two more questions here. One,if you look back on your career is there any career advice you wish you'd known earlier?

Ramana ([23:12](#)):I wish somebody had told me change happens, but it happens more slowly because when you're young, energetic, hungry to affect change, you become anxious when results don't happen within the expected timeframe. But once you spend 10, 15 years in a field and the way things add up and end up in a large outcome that you are not expecting. Things have a way of happening. And to quote Lao Tzu, "Do your work and then step back."

Charlie ([23:47](#)):I love that. A lot of wisdom on here today. Last question. Let's say someone's listening right now, this green building movement's been good to you, it's been good to me. Let's say someone's listening and they're just now getting involved with green buildings. Maybe they're a professional that's changing careers or maybe they're a young professional

that's excited about passing their LEED exam as they come outta college. Any words of encouragement as they jump in?

Ramana ([24:19](#)): I would say sign up for volunteering in the causes you care for and meet as many people as you can because you never know what perspective you get might change your thinking and set you up in a new direction. Again be patient, what you want will come to you. It might take slightly longer.

Charlie ([24:46](#)): It was a pleasure to get to know you more and know we're here in Atlanta. Let me take you up on that lunch soon. I hope you enjoyed listening here to his story, connect with him on LinkedIn, and thank you so much for being on today.

Ramana ([25:03](#)): I appreciate the opportunity. Charlie, to all your listeners, thanks.

Speaker 4 ([25:07](#)): I just wanna 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. We're 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@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.

