

Wellness Real Estate Specialist - Simran Safer, WELL AP | 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 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. So settle in, grab a fresh cup of coffee and get ready to find out why Green Building Matters.

00:34

Charlie

Hey everybody, welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. I'm your host, Charlie Cichetti. I have had an easy job over the last six years. Once a week I get to interview a green building professional somewhere in the world. And today I've got Simran Safer with us. She's in the Philadelphia area. Can't wait to talk about real estate. AP LEED grant associate and see what she's got going on. Simran, welcome to the podcast. How are you doing today?

00:57

Simran

I'm doing great, thank you. Charlie, how are you?

00:59

Charlie

I'm doing fantastic. These give me so much energy. I love to ask my guests, take us back. Where'd you grow up? Go to school and university.

01:07

Simran

I grew up in a town called Brentford, London in England, and I was there till about eleven and then my family and I moved to Newton, Massachusetts, right outside of Boston. I went to school at UMass Boston and I majored in exercise physiology. And then I went on quite a few years later. But after working for about ten to twelve years in the health and wellness industry, I went on to get my masters in health communications and public policy at Tufts University. So both in Boston, both great schools.

01:42

Charlie

Coming over from London, I hear the kind of wellness and the healthy side of things. But then there's real estate buildings, green buildings. Tell us a little more about when you first started getting into real estate and were you able to apply some of that health and wellness? I know that's something you're still doing. What was it like early on? When did real estate first show up for you?

02:02

Simran

I worked for a company, Equinox, and I don't know if you've ever been into one of their spaces, but outside of the high level and the expertise that they have within that like the field employees, I think your people are really inspired by the space. And I was inspired by space. I was like how can I have a profession where that really impacts me? I used to go from training and health coaching to massage therapy. And I really, like, found this profound change in the way people's bodies reacted from space to space, going from light energy, energetic environments to then this kind of quiet. So that's when I really was like, wow, real estate space has such an impact on people's bodies. I actually had the opportunity to feel these changes happen. I think right after my master's of public health, AP, like, the building, the ecosystem, I found the course material and just started really diving into like, wow, like the International World Building Institute and

everything that has to offer. So that's when I was given this all this education and expertise into real estate and infrastructure.

03:11

Charlie

Oh, I love that. Healthy buildings affect how we're even going to sleep tonight. And whereas green buildings may have less impact on the environment, we're still navigating both great programs like LEED. But then that's our impact on the people. We were talking earlier, before we hit record about the pandemic and stuff. And so we'll get to that. But so you're making this career in real estate. You've got this healthy building side of it. I call it kind of wellness real estate. You're picking up credentials. Did you have any mentors along the way? Or sometimes a mentor sim, I feel, is someone we look up to from afar. We don't meet someone, maybe over here, could be someone that opens the door for us or have you had any mentors along the way?

03:50

Simran

Yes, and I love how you kind of differentiated that because I think this, like, idea of proxy mentors is always like, it's really nice to have because there's so much embedded in being a mentor. Sometimes, especially like these days, it's like a big undertaking to be somebody's mentor. There's a lot of people that influence me throughout my life. I've always found myself aligning with people that I can learn from and hopefully I can play that forward or give back in some way. Most recently and in my time in sustainability, one of my biggest mentors, whether he knows it or not, is Rob Fleming. And he's our professor. I originally met him through, during the pandemic, and I found out about the sustainability leadership program at Jefferson Philadelphia. And then this realization, the technical expertise when you're diving into this field really is, I think, so important, especially when we're talking about ecology. So that's one. And then another is a woman I met at one of the conferences, her name's Suma Thompson. And

I just connected. She's an engineer, and she is fierce to be reckoned with. When I met her, she had just become like a testing, one of the first testing professionals through. She was an engineer Chicago, and she was really willing to open doors for me in seals that are already so specific. I follow her continuously. She's done so much for schools in Chicago.

05:17

Charlie

Oh, two great mentors there. Rob Fleming. I know he was on the podcast before. I'll put a link to his episode. If everybody's enjoying this chat with Sam, make sure you check out Rob. I love the work he's doing at the universities there. One more look back and then we'll kind of get to the present day. But what are some of your proudest accomplishments? What's on the highlight reel so far? Your career and life? If you look back on the highlight.

05:41

Simran

This is like a pretty cool opportunity because I think, especially coming from our wellness and I was a yoga instructor, we're constantly, like, trying to always be in the moment and be present so that you can make the most of that. And I think, to be quite honest, being in this is a great, great kind of excuse, but this is. This is one of those moments I think that I've listened to your podcast for quite a long time, always looking for, like, where the industry's going and whatnot. And this is pretty cool. I think for me, it shows that, like the risks I'm taking, the avenues I've gone through or gone down are being recognized in some way. This is a pretty cool achievement, I think. Thank you.

06:25

Charlie

That means a lot. Hope I can help. Hope I can open some doors for you. I just love the enthusiasm you have towards this work and continual learning, continual improvement. So never let it up there. You've got multiple

credentials. Any tips for those that maybe are just now studying for the WELL AP or the LEED GA? You've used some material. Do you like flashcards? Do you like the practice test? What helps you study as you pass credential exams, maybe?

06:52

Simran

The AP exam was the most difficult. I remember I took it twice, and I was like, 'oh, please, don't have too long of a lag time between each' and I thought that was going to be like, true, I've got it. I understand the human body like no other, but it was like that. It was a small detail, but the LEED green associate, maybe time helps. And just being I furthered my career within sustainability, so I'm such, not such a newbie. But the testing material, the, like, the practice tests, I think that's where I was. I honed in on, like, where I was when I was studying and I passed it the first time, which is always awesome. I think anybody that's number one studying for those exams just keeps chipping away. When I think you can kind of feel like you're cheating if you don't read the text. Like the text, like, back and forth you have that, like, student hat on, go for the practice test, see where you are. Where your gaps are and the like, chime in on those. And then I think just advice in general, I know so many amazing people that have had or choose to take this. They want to go into a sustainability direction. Most of the people I know have this deep background in biology, physiology, anatomy. I always say, like, once you know the human body, like the buildings are, it's so similar, like the building systems are, there's so much correlation. And if you want to do it, I can jump in. I think the industry is really expanding. People aren't working in silos anymore, and there's so many opportunities to get involved. So just do it.

08:22

Charlie

I love it. And you're doing that. Take the LEED grant associate. If you have any curiosity towards green buildings and of course, LEED AP, while it is

tricky, I think that's a must have for anyone that wants to work in healthy buildings. Wellness and wellness real estate. Tell us about today. I know you're working at a real estate company there in Philadelphia. You do a lot in the community. You're staying active with IWBI and just promoting this wellness movement. But tell us a little more about a day in the life of Simran today.

08:54

Simran

During the pandemic, great questions, too, by the way. During the pandemic, I actually became a mom. I have a wonderful, beautiful son. He's three years old. And I really was like this. Like, I want to make the world a better place. Just When you look at children, you're like, I want them to be able to have clean air to breathe, number one, like, no matter what. I was in New York, but we moved to Philadelphia, and I found a real estate company that really aligns with, like, sustainability initiatives. The owner is an architect. She's a woman, Deborah Solo. And they really, they have, like, two passive houses coming along. And she really. She's always kind of paved the way for sustainability in Philadelphia while also paying attention to, like, the fabric of neighborhoods. And there's a lot of change going on in Philadelphia. It's one of the biggest cities, and it's also had some really troubling times. She really takes this, like, 360 approach to development and real estate. So right now I'm working there, and I am finishing up at Upenn through another program that actually, Rob, I'm like a groupie started, but I think he really is kind of bridging this gap between the technical things that you need to know on top of the credentials, like daylight simulations, understanding how to really assess air quality, thermal envelopes, all of these things. That's what I'm finishing up right now. And it's given me this whole tool set that I didn't really have before. And I think an edge to kind of how you bring the practice together. Those are the things I love.

10:22

Charlie

All of that way to keep going back for that continual learning, too. And best of luck as you finish that program. I love to also talk about what's next in the future. I think the green building movement LEED version five coming out, tweaking some things focused on equity, embodied carbon, quality of life. They're starting to incorporate more wellness. Then we have great programs like WELL and fit well. And I know you're versed on both, but what else is kind of exciting that we should be reading up on?

10:49

Simran

I feel like I've gotten a lot of credentials and a lot of education here. And for a while, I felt like, wow. My whole first half of my life pretty much was exercise science and understanding behavior change and how do we really promote people to engage in healthy behaviors? And I think through that, I became very aware that we put a lot of responsibility on people, and if the environment isn't there to support them and to ignite this homeostasis, we're going to be running on empty. We're going to keep on running in these circles. I have always been a big fan of biophilia. But recently I've come to this realization that the research has always been there, but now we're trying, we're really tying it together. Like our cities especially, like we, as evolutionary humans on this earth have this innate connection to greenery and nourishment in our environments and to support that. And that was kind of refreshing towards the end of this program, too, because biophilia was the last course I took. And after, like, daylight simulations and all these things, helps energy modeling I didn't have fun learning them, but I enjoyed this, like, understanding them and understanding how to create these models. But it all comes down to this, how do we support humans in the environment and vice versa? And it should be this natural connection. I think that the field is changing and the narrative is changing. And we're connecting that a lot better than we used to.

12:29

Charlie

And you mentioned it earlier, but just this community, the support when we try to do this work. There's so many people that are willing to lend their expertise. Can I open a door? Can I just give you some encouragement? Can I give you some validation? That's one thing I love about this green building and what I call the healthy building movement. I'm glad you're tapping into that. Let's get to know you a little more. I've got some rapid fire questions here. I'm enjoying getting to know you, Simran, what would you say is your specialty or gift?

12:57

Simran

I'm really good at continually expanding my circles. I realize that like our own, my own experiences, and can be limiting if we always look to ourselves as the, like the know it all the creme de la creme. I'm continuously expanding my circles. I think that hearing other people's experiences makes you a richer human being. I'm always good at that. And I bring a lot of empathy to the table. So people like to talk to me and those are two so very important.

13:38

Charlie

Not everybody has those. Thank you for sharing. And that's some good self awareness. I ask the tough questions here. Sometimes they're humbling. So do you have any good habits, routines that help you stay on point?

13:49

Simran

Yes, I do. So one of them is this kind of like east meets west, I think is kind of an underlying theme here. But I have a warm cup of triphala so triphala is like a blend of three Indian fruits. And I try to have that once a day kind of set. Set the tone. Doesn't taste very good, so I really like to drink it slowly. So it kind of just sets a good mindset. And then I wake up. I try to wake up

between 5 and 06:00 a.m. And I don't know if you've ever read a 05:00 a.m., quote, but it's just like 20 vigorous exercise, 20 minutes reading, 20 minutes journaling, and so that also fits in with being a new mom and I guess not new anymore, but it fits in with busy schedule.

14:39

Charlie

I love that. We'll put a link to 05:00 a.m.. Fo. We're going to recommend some more books later, but I'm a big fan of that. Just that kind of morning ritual before you just, we have all these connected devices, right, and noise and everybody else's business. We have to protect that time. And especially raising a family there, too. You get double duty. Thanks for sharing those good habits. I'm a fan of the bucket list. Not everybody has a bucket list, but maybe you do. What are one or two things on your bucket list? Any travel adventure? Maybe you want to write a book one day. What's on the bucket list?

15:12

Simran

So my parents actually grew up in Kenya and then moved to London. That's where I was from. And as I've taken in this, like, where did sustainability really, like, come in? I think it is this, like, seeing different countries and seeing the vast differences that people grow up with. Right. In our childhood, my dream, I think traveling is so important, but I think also more important than that is, like, understanding cultures. And my dream would be to be able to work abroad within sustainability and really embed not just myself, my whole family, in this field, in this environment. And I think that there's so many great things going on in the world. There's also not so great things, but that is my bucket list.

15:53

Charlie

Oh, I love that. Taking this work and taking it much further. There's a lot of

them. I'm fortunate to be able to travel internationally, speak at conferences, and see where some of this work is just getting going. We might have been doing LEED for 24 years here, but some of it's just coming to certain countries, especially on the retrofit existing building side. Wellness, we still have a lot of work to do there. I take what you're doing great and take it further. I love that and including. I love to ask my podcast guests, is there a book you'd recommend? It doesn't have to be about buildings. Just a book you might recommend. Might make a good gift.

16:30

Simran

Yes. I recently just finished two. One of them is called the "Strange Order of things." I loved it. It's all about how people find their kind of homeostasis, how it's we're really engineered to find homeostasis. And then the other one is called "Playing Big" by Tara Moore. And it's, I think it's helpful for anybody. You know, I think she writes it, I think particularly from the female experience. But I think it's so important for so many, for everybody to be wherever you are, put in what you got and expect the best because you're putting in the best.

17:10

Charlie

All right, we're going to put links to both of those. I've actually not read those. I think, human nature, we need to remind ourselves, who better to do that than us and give us a little bit of that confidence there. I'm hearing a lot of that from you it's amazing.

17:24

Simran

If I just might add, because that's a great point that you made, she really, you asked a question about, like, mentors earlier on, and she really, Tamar really talks about, like, your inner mentor is going to be somebody that's going to provide you guidance and wisdom and you have to have

confidence in that. And I think that especially when you're in a field that's not easy to get into and you're chipping away, you can lose sight of some things or lose sight of yourself. So, yeah, to your point.

17:50

Charlie

You've taught me two things here. Proxy mentor. I'm going to use that phrase more. And now enter a mentor. You're leveling me up here. This is fantastic. We've got the books. We're going to put links in the podcast show notes, and just a couple more questions here. I'm loving this conversation. When you look back on your career, is there any career advice you wish someone would have told you earlier?

18:09

Simran

I wish somebody had told me to take a gap year, to be quite honest, and I'm going to tell my son to do the same. That's what I wish I would have done. I would have traveled. I think it's so important.

18:20

Charlie

Love that. I didn't do that either. One of my younger brothers did an amazing study abroad in Australia and New Zealand, and I just went to work.

18:28

Simran

Yeah, we rush. You've done some pretty cool things.

18:32

Charlie

There's the sage advice. I love that, before we go to my final question. So you're a parent, and we don't just say it, but we want to leave this world a

better place for our kids and those generations to come. We mean it. I mean it. I think you do, too. The school system is changing. I'm a big fan of credentials. I don't know any. What are you excited about? What are you worried about? Just as we raise kids in this world here.

18:57

Simran

There is so much. And I think that is the thing. Really worry so much. One of the best. Being in this field is difficult. I'm not gonna lie. It's very difficult. But I think one of the most amazing things is that I get to say, like, okay, Hugo, we're gonna go into nature, and however I can fit that into your daily life so that you can. You can be connected with something that. I don't know if I was as appreciative as I am now when I was a kid. I think we start off that way. We're like, what is this caterpillar? I'm not scared to touch it. And then we lose that somehow. The taller we get, and we just. We get disconnected. And I think education. I'm so glad that you said that, because it is changing. And I think we're realizing, especially in the. In the early stages of a kid's life, like, we need this outdoors. Those are the schools that survived. Those are the schools that really didn't. They might have stopped for a little while, but, like, this engagement with the outdoors and connecting that and not having our kids inside all day long for our teachers, too. In that aspect, I actually feel, with the uncertainty that's playing out right now, I'm happy because every time I hear or I read that school systems are changing or we're putting in green landscapes in all public schools, maybe I dreamt that, but I get cheery. I'm like, okay, let's keep doing this. Planting trees. We do this all the time in neighborhoods around here. Phenomenal that there are so many programs. People have been chipping away at this because now you can, in Philadelphia, you can partner with your community group and then Philadelphia Horticultural Society to put trees on your street. And it doesn't have to be your neighborhood, it can be other neighborhoods, which is the best. Because why not just if you travel through a neighborhood, like improve it, help improve that.

20:45

Charlie

I'm hearing so much intention from you. It's really cool. So you've got a good handle on it. My last question, I think you've heard it before because you've listened to the podcast. But let's say there's someone that's chilling now jumping into this green building movement. Maybe it's a young professional making a career. Maybe it's someone making a career change. But if someone's just now jumping into this wellness real estate movement, this green building movement, any words of encouragement for them as we come to a close?

21:11

Simran

Yes, my words of encouragement would be. The beauty of this field is that you can implement it into your own life. You don't have to start your own business, and you don't have to wait for that, like the glittery job that you're hoping for. You can start implementing it, whether it's trees on the streets, whether it's assessing your own indoor air quality. And you can start to navigate it that way so that you can start drawing out your little booklet, our little guide, because there's these big developments and then there's a lot of small scale incremental change that needs to happen. And you can do that. So that's my advice. Do it.

21:47

Charlie

Amazing advice today. I've really enjoyed getting to know you more. Everyone listening, make sure you connect with Simran on LinkedIn. Stay in touch. Tap into her wellness expertise and overall, just doing amazing work. Thank you for being on the podcast today, Charlie.

22:03

Simran

Thank you. I was really excited about this. So worried we weren't going to get there, but we did.

22:09

Charlie

You did great. Thank you so much.

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