

From Passive Design to Net Zero: Transforming London's Built Environment with Sonal Jain | Transcript

00:02

Speaker 1

Welcome to Green Building Matters, the original and most popular podcast focused on the green building movement. Your host is Charlie Cicchetti, one of the most credentialed experts in the green building industry and one of the few to be honored as a lead fellow. Each week, Charlie welcomes a green building professional from around the globe to share their war stories, career advice, and unique insight into how sustainability is shaping the built environment. So settle in, grab a fresh cup of coffee, and get ready to find out why green Building matters. Hey, everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. I've got the easy job. Once a week, I interview a green building professional somewhere in the world. And today I have Sonal with us. She's in London. Can't wait to hear more of her career.

00:47

Speaker 1

And she's got this amazing project there too, right in London. So how you doing today? Thanks for being on the podcast.

00:55

Speaker 2

Very well, thanks, Charlie. And thanks for having me. Very excited.

00:59

Speaker 1

Well, I'd love to take our listeners back a little bit of that origin story. So where did you grow up? And. And maybe go to university, right?

01:06

Speaker 2

Yeah. So not a surprise there. As the name suggests and as. As the accent suggests, I grew up India and pretty much spent my university degree India in a very modest, humble. I come from a very modest and humble background. And it just so happens that I found myself in architecture school India, although I have to say that was never planned. But that really was the start of me and built environment, me and buildings and me and real estate getting to know each other. So as you can tell from my bio now, I'm not an architect. And I. That was very clear to me right from the beginning that I do not have the creative and the artistic gene in me to be a good architect. That.

01:55

Speaker 2

But what I did thrive off was understanding how buildings work, the systems behind it and what the physics behind it. And that really led me to think about where I take this interest and start my sustainability career in earnest. To be fair, sustainability wasn't a term I'm talking 25, 30 years ago as a labeled term. Then what picked my interest in the topic was this one module we did in university called passive design. And I just, it clicked with me. You know, I could completely relate to the concept and I knew that was the light bulb moment that I wanted to explore this further, and that one thing led to another and I went to Arizona State University to study, specialize in the topic, did a course in building physics and environmental performance. And here I am now 20 years of sustainability, built environment.

02:58

Speaker 1

Oh, love this background. And it looks like you and I graduated our undergraduate degrees the same year 2004. So. So Arizona State has had sustainability programs early. So what brought you there? And then I know even later even more schooling around environmental. So let's talk about that for a minute. So what brought you to Arizona State? They had a good program.

03:21

Speaker 2

Well, to be fair, where I grew up, I had very little exposure on what are the next steps. In fact, there wasn't the kind of degree I was looking for in India available at the time. And I just, I came across those early days research papers on building performance, building physics. And Arizona seemed to be a very inclusive university for international students. And I'm glad I landed up there because that really, you know, it's interesting if you look at a sustainability professional now and they are, they need to have a very broad set of skill sets to add true value to the topic. But what in the crux of it is I think nothing. There's no shortcuts to the technical understanding that sits underneath it. No, I did think programs like Arizona had a very robust foundational setup on building physics and building performance.

04:25

Speaker 2

And that sets you up for success as you start to think about more like innovative solutions. So yeah, I think after Arizona, everything in my life has happened by luck. If you. I don't think I had planned to go to Arizona. I did apply to a few other universities, primarily US and then I found myself as a graduate in New

York working as an environmental analyst for a multinational environmental engineering firm. And again, that exposure was great because I got to work on some of the early days lead platinum buildings, big projects in US multinationally. Did a lot of work in Middle east at the time as well. You know, really where the new and upcoming stuff was happening. I was lucky to have that early exposure.

05:17

Speaker 2

What did happen though is, you know, we are a generation that saw the impact of financial crisis. I mean right now there's crisis after crisis, but I think the way that crisis hit, it really shifted the focus for everyone. And I'm glad I got a chance to observe that because that really marked my exit from US and we landed in UK primarily for opportunities, but also it marked the focus from. It's great to apply the knowledge on new and upcoming leadership projects. But where we really need to have an impact is this existing built environment and do the messy stuff and transform that one building at a time, one portfolio at a time. And I'm in many ways money drying up in the newer projects forced me to work on the existing stuff, which is where maximum impact can be had.

06:18

Speaker 2

That was the transition I had. I also took a conscious decision to go back to university in London and I went to London School of Economics to study environmental economics. And the rationale there was primarily to complement this brilliant technical foundation I had built around sustainability with a much more holistic understanding of the political and the economic drivers behind it. So I could present myself and my thinking and my solutioning in a much more holistic way as you start to apply the concepts within organizations.

07:00

Speaker 1

Well, what I heard is you started the architecture around the kind of visioning, understanding why a building. Then you went science, a lot of science. I see that on your advanced degrees. You mentioned physics earlier and then smart move. Hey, how about the economic side of it all? And you're right. In 2008 I got laid off from a very large real estate developer that was an early adopter of leed. It was a blessing in disguise. I started my lead consulting firm right after that moment and gosh, what a great background. Thank you for that. So sustainability though you mentioned early lead projects way back, passive design. Just. Yeah. When did you really know like everything from here forwards gotta include some sustainability for you.

07:46

Speaker 2

Well, it's interesting, as I said, that wasn't a term labeled in my vocabulary when I was growing up, but growing up in a world that was very resource constrained and I to bring it to life. Where in my childhood days we had running water once a day for one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening. Right now we get running water in the same town once in three days for one hour. So you know, you, that really brings to life what a resource constrained world is. Grid failures was a thing which is absolutely normal, you know, for us growing up. So I, I think just general appreciation for doing more with less and being conscious was how life was. And some of those early experiences kind of shape you in your thinking. So I, I have to say sustain.

08:44

Speaker 2

I think my introduction to sustainability was more on the back of my fascination with engineering, STEM and the physics. But the underlying premise around this is responsible way of designing, building or operating. Building came very naturally to me given my background.

09:04

Speaker 1

Thank you for connecting all that. And I like to ask about mentors too. For some, a mentor opens a door for you, challenges you. For others, it's someone you read the material, you see them from afar. But did you have any mentors?

09:18

Speaker 2

Well, lots of people who have inspired me over decades. And you know, going back, this professor who taught me passive design In a way was a mentor in the way it shaped my thinking and professionally again I've had various roles so you know, a clear pivot I've had in my career is I would say the first half of my career has been quite consultancy led where I worked on various projects advising clients, developers, landlords on how to buildings better and how to operate them better. But I would say the second half of my career has been primarily in an in house roles within real estate organizations, really transforming the way real estate is owned, built, managed from a client perspective.

10:12

Speaker 2

And one of the key individuals I remember was very influential in shaping my

thinking on the strategic side of things is my manager at, when I was at JLL in house sustainability role and the remit I was given was I need to embed sustainability within this global organization. 90,000 People at the time and I just, I hadn't appreciated what it means to be embedding sustainability within an organization at that scale. So this individual, Julie, here we go in. Was really the one who had the vision of, you know, just like health and safety, it's sustainability is not the job of three people sitting centrally within a department. In many ways roles like ours are enabling roles that need to and need to have the agency and drive to enable and empower others to do their bits.

11:14

Speaker 2

So I would say she has had a very strong influence in the way I approach things now on how one needs to really embed sustainable thinking. Whether you're working with the client or you're working with a colleague or you're working with supply chain on how to do things correctly. And again, talking about kind of more personal level mentors.

11:37

Speaker 2

I have two kids who do not hesitate to challenge wrong behaviors and I love the fact that it's an inhibited advice I get from them because the intentions are right, the conviction are right and sometimes, you know, I get annoyed when I find people not recycling properly but I do not have the courage to go call out people and I just, I take, you know, I look at my kids and I feel like if I have conviction on what I'm saying is right, I can learn something from them.

12:09

Speaker 1

I love how you also included your kids as that additional mentor. Right. And it sounds like you've taught them well, taught them right and wrong. So let's piece together the career some more. You mentioned eight, nine years at jll, this global firm and then from there more sustainability work. So if you could piece together the rest of your career journey, kind of take us to present day. But I Will ask you one more, which is what's one of what are some of your proudest achievements?

12:34

Speaker 2

Yeah, so yes, building that picture I think from New York consultancy, financial crisis, moved to uk, retrained myself, joined JLL and I actually that phase was very interesting in UK because the whole like corporate sustainability movement was being professionalized in the way that these functions were

starting to see as core value add functions, core risk management functions. Reporting was growing within the UK and legislative requirements. But at the same time language had evolved. Certainly things like net zero carbon transition and the Paris agreement had come to fore. So that provided a different way of thinking through organizational transformation. After many years at jll, I then moved to work with a landlord developer called Workspace within UK and you could.

13:34

Speaker 2

It was more like a client side move where it was a very interesting role because what I had to deal with is this very quirky, interesting portfolio which is all essentially pre war industrial assets which have been transformed into modernized flexible working space. So Workspace is not wework but you can say like it caters to the same market in terms of flexible workspace. And the job I had was to take these pre war buildings. They looked modernized because the way they had been decked up but the kit behind it wasn't efficient. So really turned this brown. It was really a brown to green journey at Workspace which I thoroughly enjoyed. And going back to your question about proudest moment and impact, am the proudest when I see results. And just giving you some examples of.

14:28

Speaker 2

I had about 60 buildings to under my remit at Workspace and in my four years there, building by building, we managed to electrify over 50% of the portfolio. Yeah, we managed to year on year reduce the energy consumption by 5%, 10% incrementally stretching ourselves. So it was really those four years was transformational because I could see how things from paper can be put into practice and the business case was stacking up. So it's just thinking about small impact, big impact and how it all cumulatively adds up.

15:09

Speaker 1

Well, I can tell it's all stacked for you and your career and you've had a lot of impact. Some you may not even know. Okay, thank you for the background connecting the career and your proudest achievements. So let's talk present day. So please tell us about King's Cross and other things that you're doing on a day to day basis.

15:28

Speaker 2

Yes, so I was very fortunate when I got this opportunity to join King's Cross and

for people who are not people in us who are not Familiar with King's Cross. People compare King's Cross to Kendall Square in Boston. So you know that square mile, which is the tech hub, industrial heritage, well, a great public realm. This cluster of buildings in kind of a landed estate. So what I've got here is 67 acres, roughly 50 buildings, truly mixed use. You have likes of Google, Meta, Facebook, Harris Universal, Sony, you name it on the estate. Good mix of retail, student housing, residential, 40% affordable. So it's exciting to see like a city within a city and how it functions.

16:21

Speaker 2

The, the main differentiation with King's Cross as group is it's really this unified ownership of one piece of land which you can control and influence as opposed to, you know, most real estate portfolios where buildings are so disjointed, so the control allows you to do so much more. What I am really looking forward to in terms of impact here is again, King's Cross is unique because we have our own energy center and we all know like in terms of the biggest impact, if you tackle power transition first, all the downstream will follow. And I have got this brilliant asset which supplies heat cooling power to our estate and it's very much on my agenda.

17:11

Speaker 2

Working with the group to basically electrify this energy center on site and which is doing it at a scale of Kings Cross will be truly one of the first, you know, first mover initiatives within the industry. We have some answers, you know, electrification will take you this far, but we are also looking at kind of what technologies might come to fore in 10 years time, whether it's hydrogen or whether it's other ways of really decarbonizing the power supply for the estate. So I'm really looking forward to some deep learning and exciting challenges working on this.

17:51

Speaker 1

Yeah. And I hope to visit. I mentioned some of my colleagues are coming to London for the next Build Next dev conference for our tech startup schema. It's exciting, but way to not just focus on certain parts of sustainability. So hey, electrification is inevitable and maybe there are some laws that force it in different parts of the world, but you know, you want to save as much energy as you can first, but we've got to shift over and go all electric and it sounds like you got a big jump on that, so that's something to be proud of. You know with certifications, earlier in your career you worked on some LEED platinum

projects. I've worked on hundreds of LEED projects. You know, you have Brierley in your region. Are certifications as important as they used to be?

18:35

Speaker 1

Do you go after any Certifications, can you speak to that?

18:39

Speaker 2

Well, I think certifications are absolutely useful and we both kind of got trained at the same time where there was no definition of what good looked like. And frameworks like LEED and BREEAM give you guidance on what you need to be looking at to understand what good looks like. And the really robust verification process behind it gives you also comfort that someone else is marking your homework. You've done really well. What has happened though, and things taken to an extreme is never the right way. A certification only lens will not solve the problem that you're trying to solve. A certification will get ensure the building is being designed with right parameters. But you know, operations is equally important.

19:29

Speaker 2

And I think what has happened is unfortunately in many cases certifications are being used more as a label, a marketing label to get the building let up. And it's quite popular within the developer mentality. But I look at an estate like mine, which is now fully built, operational. Where does the value lie? Does the value lie in doing more and more in use certification or the value lies in using the same time money and resources in actually making the performance better? I am not disregarding certification. I would say it has a role to play. But I think the focus really where I am right now has to be on performance would be my view.

20:14

Speaker 1

Yeah, thanks. I love LEED for existing buildings or Brierley in use. I think the statistic is at any given time only 2% of the buildings in the world are under construction. Right. The other 98% are existing building stock. And, and you're right, there's parts of the world that it's just now coming to where you have to benchmark and you have to disclose and you might get fined. You don't do these things. So it's so important. And there's a lot more buildings that we need to focus on their performance. Obviously LEED has shifted entirely to performance based, not just kind of prescriptive. In other programs I think are following suit. Pream's always been more performance based. Hey, quick

question. You spent months, maybe years earning LEED certification, so why are you still hanging a generic plaque on the wall?

21:03

Speaker 1

With buildingplaques.com you can showcase what actually made your project achieve lead. Highlight your scorecard, your design strategy, your team, architects, engineers, contractors, owners, all in one clean modern display. Their plaques are fully customizable in minutes, built with durable architectural grade materials and arrive ready to install. This isn't just a plaque, it's a storytelling tool for your building. If you're proud of the work. Show the work. Go to buildingplaques.com and design yours today. Okay, so your title also says social impact. What does that mean to you?

21:44

Speaker 2

Yes, and it's interesting because I look back and whilst I called myself a sustainability professional, even 20 years ago, reality is life was all about energy, water, waste, and then came carbon. And it's interesting, but when you look at real estate as an asset class and what does it mean to be good for people, planet and profit in the ug, you cannot even what it means to be good for planet, you cannot ignore the fact that the impact real estate could have or must have, both good or bad on people, whether it's people within the buildings or people surrounding the building. And this is where I, I tend to define my world around the S of ESG is we have this asset class and how can you make sure it's doing that bit to be good for people around it?

22:47

Speaker 2

So even in workspace and now in King's Cross, it is very much core part of my role to try and understand what place based initiatives we can think of running in a way that we are leveraging our buildings as true community assets. Now this can mean many things. This can mean, you know, letting out space at discounted rates or temporarily to charities or VCS organizations in need. It could be provision of meanwhile spaces, it could be provision of affordable workspace or residential spaces or community infrastructure like schools and stuff. Or it could be much more active engagement with your supply chain and your occupiers around things such as skills and employment within the sector. So I think it's the importance of making sure traditionally social impact has been seen not at power with environmental impact.

23:51

Speaker 2

Legislation hasn't kind of standardized it in the way we see already happening with energy and carbon. So it's in our gift to define. But I challenge people that it is our score to business value proposition as environmental impact is.

24:08

Speaker 1

Thank you for that. So I love to ask my podcast guests, what's next? What are you excited about? What's coming next in this green building movement? Maybe we call it decarbonization, maybe we call it resiliency, different umbrellas, similar work. What's next? What are you excited about?

24:25

Speaker 2

I am excited about. You know, we have seen flurry of commitments coming through in the last decade as people in the real estate industrial built environment have realized that there is opportunity, there is responsibility to do. I work with many businesses that made their net zero carbon commitments to very robust disclosures. And I'm excited About now turning those commitments into actions. So I think what's next for our sector is show the evidence that you can deliver impact and more importantly that it is a value add play. Whether it helps you save money right now or it builds resilience and future proofs you're building in the long term helps you manage risk. It's really this is the year to act and show the evidence.

25:24

Speaker 1

These are powerful words. I love it. Act and show the evidence. Let's get to know you a little more. So now what would you say is your specialty or gift?

25:34

Speaker 2

Well actually picking up on just what I was saying, my specialty, anyone who knows me will say is I am very commercially minded. For me it is never about sustainability at any cost. You know, yes, I see the moral imperative but I always lead with commercial imperative and that's something I've learned the hard way because when the times are good. Now you and I have seen many recessions and crisis so you know, we've learned a way that when the times are good. I reflect on the post Covid boom. Everyone suddenly realized how much you know, more we have to do. There's deep care behind the agenda and you know, we have also seen the regression in the past few years and which is where I see the long term conviction will stay only if there is a strong commercial behind it.

26:27

Speaker 2

And I think that is my superpower. I think through sustainability and the initiatives I run through the lens of commercial value proposition for the end.

26:36

Speaker 1

That's how the world works. Even in a mission driven scope like you and I work in green buildings and now I've applied technology with our startup. You got an advanced degree in economics. For someone listening, where do you suggest they kind of level up with the business side of sustainability? Is there anything you'd suggest There's.

26:56

Speaker 2

Well, you know, to be fair it's. I don't think it's the way you think about it. I think it's the application of sustainability in the business context. It's asking the right questions. It's firstly fully understanding what are the business drivers, you know, what is needed to make this business successful in the long term, what is needed to manage the current and future risks. And then you layer in this, this question around now, how can sustainability help? So I, I think it's not a skill, it's. It's asking the questions slightly differently around the application of what you want to do within the business context.

27:39

Speaker 1

That's really good. Yeah. Make sure it's in that framework. That mindset I worked with a Coach for many years, wrote a book called Inquiry Method how to ask the right Questions. So do you have any good habits or routines that keep you on point?

27:53

Speaker 2

I'm all, I'm one of those kind of women who gets really excited about boiler rooms. So it just, I, I think for me a habit I, I always like to keep front of mind is finger on the pulse. You know I specialize in this product called buildings. I, I need to know what my product, how my product works, what's behind the false and the rooms we see. So I, I mean I would say throwing myself deep end of kind of a what sits behind the building, querying everything, challenging myself on some of the core habits that have ensured I've asked the right questions and learned the right way.

28:38

Speaker 1

All right, now I'm going to push a little bit more. How about maybe some personal habits? Any meditation or walking or workouts or nutrition or cooking? Yeah, what else?

28:48

Speaker 2

Yeah, well I think on personal habit, absolutely. I mean I, I think we live a very sustainable life. It just in many ways I, I think where we live, having lived in US for many years in UK as well, I, I think there is public transport everywhere. I own a very small electric car. Recycling is mandatory. We'll get fines if we don't compost, for example 100% renewable tariff. So things are very easy to implement. Some out of kind of day to day green hacks. Big fan of platforms like winter ebay. We think twice before buying new for example. I'm also a big health firm in the way how I like to spend my time whether it's exercising or being out in the nature. And a big fan of eating only what I cook. So trying to really limit my exposure to ultra processed foods.

29:47

Speaker 2

So yeah, that gives me good.

29:50

Speaker 1

Well, it sounds like you practice what you preach as they say. I'm going to ask the follow up question there. So I like to ask my podcast guests about bucket lists. Some people have one, some don't. But if you have a bucket list, what are one or two things maybe on your bucket list?

30:05

Speaker 2

You know what, I took my first flight when I was in my 20s and I just, I have realized how much I love traveling and seeing places and I think seeing all those gorgeous places from Amazon to Indonesia to New Zealand and my bucket list is traveling and Antarctica and you name it. So I just, it's always going to be seeing those places and seeing the true beauty that we can experience and more personally, I've set myself a personal challenge to ski down a Black Slope. So we'll see when I can hit that.

30:48

Speaker 1

Oh, what a good bucket list. All right, thank you. Just a couple more things here as we start to wind down. I love to ask either about a book you'd recommend. It doesn't have to be about buildings or podcasts, just something for our listeners.

31:01

Speaker 2

Well, let's on podcast. I think many people within your listener groups would probably know this, but I'm a big fan of outrage and optimism. Have been for a few years. It's just such a good way to see wider perspectives around our agenda and you know, brilliant hosts there. I also like to follow this podcast called In Good Company by Nicola Tangen. And I like that because in coming to what were discussing, how do you apply in a business and sustainability don't stand in isolation how you apply some of these commonsensical approaches in a business context. So I like that podcast because every episode is about different businesses and how they have transformed their approach in thinking. Sustainability being one of the elements on books, I would say I like a lot of. Dale Carnegie is one of my favorite authors.

32:03

Speaker 2

How to Win Friends or Effective Speaking. I am a big believer of a lot in my role can happen through powerful narrative and storytelling and I'm always looking for more ideas and tips on kind of how to improve my agency in that space. Those were some recommendations.

32:23

Speaker 1

I'm learning a lot about storytelling as we fundraise for our tech startup. We're about three, four years in and we have investors and I've learned it is just that you just, you tell the story. It's inevitable people will either opt in or not. But you just got to tell your story. Tell your story.

32:39

Speaker 2

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Bring people on the journey. Yeah.

32:43

Speaker 1

Oh geez, that's good. Okay, last two things. If you look back on your career so far, is there anything you wish you'd have known earlier?

32:50

Speaker 2

I think I wished I had known that it's important to first build a self conviction around the area so you can really stand behind the various competing arguments. And I say this is because many people would have experienced what I've experienced over the years about there will be 10 reasons why not to try something, but if you have conviction, then automatically solutions come to fall. So I just, I now really take the time to build a solid conviction around why I am trying to do this and that long term bit because again things, you know, very rarely in our world things stack up on a one to three year horizon. So you really need to think long term.

33:42

Speaker 2

What, how will this situation or solution play out, whether it's electrification or designing buildings that way, or investing in something which is not stacking up currently, it's that 10 year play and I am already doing that with King's Cross right now. On paper, it is a tech in AI hub. Will that be the case for King's Cross in 10 years time? Who knows? Sergina, what will the future occupier of King's Cross need from a sustainability point of view? And just reflecting that in my thinking now.

34:16

Speaker 1

And you're a futurist. I love it. That's good.

34:19

Speaker 2

Well, trying to be.

34:21

Speaker 1

It's exciting. I look forward to the future. It sounds like you do too. Last question. Let's say someone listening to this podcast, they're inspired by your journey, all the accomplishments you've had, your outlook on sustainability. If someone's just now jumping into this industry, it's been good to you, it's been good to me. Any words of encouragement for them as we come to a close?

34:42

Speaker 2

Well, I think firstly this industry needs really, it's a demanding role and industry to be in and you need to wear multiple hats. You need to be a thinker, you need to be a futurist, you need to be an operator and doer at the same time. So I think my advice would be, you know, build solid grounding on both hard and soft skills. And actually if you can this quicker you build soft skills in the space, the

more agency you will have to drive impact. But very, I mean, you know, honestly, it's a career that is so rewarding and impactful that you do not think twice about like do I want you to commit in the space?

35:28

Speaker 1

Well, come on in. We need help. So to our listeners, please make sure you connect with SOTOL on LinkedIn. If you're in London, you got to go by and see this amazing overall estate. As I was studying, you even have some land I saw in Scotland and other places and so you're just expanding your impact. Thank you for being on the Green Building Matters podcast today. I really appreciate it. Thank you.

35:50

Speaker 2

Thanks Charlie.

35:53

Speaker 1

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