

Vice President at Moseley Architects - Tom Liebel

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. So, 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. This is one of the funnest parts of my job. Once a week I get an interview, a green building professional, somewhere in the world. And today I've got Tom with us. He's a LEED Fellow and very active with AIA and really been practicing architecture for a long time. I can't wait to learn a little more about his background coming to us from the Baltimore area.

Tom, how are you doing today?

Tom ([00:57](#)): Doing great,

Charlie ([00:59](#)):

Man. I've heard a little bit about you, our paths cross in the LEED Fellow group and probably some green builds, but I'm gonna get to know you a little more. Let's just kinda give our listeners that origin story. Where'd you grow up and where'd you go to school?

Tom ([01:12](#)):

I grew up in Indianapolis, Indiana. This spent my last year and a half of high school down in Charleston, South Carolina. Took off for college. I started out, I did a couple years at Duke University where I started out in marine biology and ended up leaving there as a chemistry drama double

major. What led me into architecture is I really enjoy the technical rigor of the sciences, but there's very little creativity. And I like the creativity of, I was doing set line design and theater, but there's no world rigor to it. And, a couple, two by fours of magic and trying to find a way to fuse the two together, I ended up in architecture. I then transferred to the University of Cincinnati, where I got my bachelor's in architecture. Also with that picked up a certificate, historic preservation back in the eighties.

Tom ([02:09](#)):

Sustainability, green architecture wasn't a huge part of the component of the curriculum there, and certainly was interested in it. From my background, some of the sciences had an interest in some marine biology ecology, things like that were sort of, kind of wired in the back of my brain. But then started working and I first really got plugged into sustainable design back at my old firm in the late nineties. One of the partners came back from a Scott conference, which was the Society of College University Planners, and said, I just came back from a conference. There's a stuff called green architecture out there. I have no idea what it is, but it's gonna be huge. Who wants to get involved in it? A couple of us said in the firm, got together, started exploring what does this mean?

Tom ([03:01](#)):

This is like pre LEED. It was just everyone's kinda going, what is green architecture? What is sample design? And found a bunch of different metrics, and a couple different definitions on it. And then ultimately I came across LEED when it was like LEED 1.0. It was a 15 page pamphlet on how to do a green doling. At that point it got locked in and went, wow, this is great. It takes what's potentially a very complex challenge, creates a common set of definitions and breaks it down into five bite-sized pieces. This is awesome. We now have a frame to which we can start to engage on this. I got involved early on. I actually was one of the first 25 LEED APs because I was looking to see when the exam was gonna come out. And I wanted to jump on that immediately.

Tom ([03:53](#)):

I saw it was really important and was able to convince a client very early in 1998-1999, to look at LEED for the project, which was the adaptive use of a quarter million square foot historic department store downtown in Baltimore. And Kyle walked through the process, the developer. They were long-term old. They were investing for the future. They were built long-term. And I laid out the basic principle and said, this is great. This is what we do. Anyway, let's go ahead and do it. I did my first LEED project in the late nineties, early 2000. At the time it was one of the largest historic preservation sustainability projects in the country. And what I noticed early on, and what kind of kicked into the track I started to follow is back in the day a lot of folks thought that historic buildings were inherently loose and leaky, inefficient and inherently unsustainable. And the only way to do a green project was a boutique high-end, high-tech building. And where I saw maybe earlier in some other folks' opportunity was recognizing the inherent sustainability of historic buildings. If you look both at the embodied carbon process part of it. But then also buildings were originally built for low energy diets back 120, 150 years ago. You didn't have artificial refrigeration. Artificial illumination was expensive. Heating was expensive. You had buildings that were designed inherently to take advantage of cross ventilation, natural daylighting, all these sorts of things. We've basically had to rediscover over time that these low energy approaches towards design used to be the way we did it. Any competent, master carpenter could do it better than a master architect from the sixties or seventies could.

Tom ([06:06](#)):

It was just sort of knowledge that was resident in the way we built and it was climatically adapting. If you look at the historic typology, buildings that were built in the northeast were very different from those built down south just because different climates, we kind of learned if you lived down south, you really do wanna the big ports on south elevation to cut the daylight down because it was unbearably hot. So I started kind of going down that route and then just did more and more projects and from a LEED perspective, got very fortunate to get involved in a number of projects and in no small part, cause I had that first project early on. I'd only done one,

but everyone else had done none of them. I was an expert by definitions. I had at least 100 bills.

Tom ([06:50](#)):

So was able to build upon that and kind of built a career out of doing a lot of work sustainability, but particularly focusing on sustainable preservation. It's branched into a lot of the work I do now is with affordable housing and community building and looking at expanding down sustainability to talk about how do you build sustainable communities? Let's start talking about resilience, let's talk about how you build it for the long term and engage the residents in a way that helps them take ownership of their futures. All that gets wrapped into sustainable design too.

Charlie ([07:27](#)):

I love that origin story. And even before that, changing degrees and just setting you up, I can tell it just stacked for you, and you really raised your hand there when that opportunity came about. Green architecture in the first 25 LEED aps. That's amazing. I love that. So, build on that a little bit. Were there some mentors along the way that maybe opened a door for you or kinda gave you a little little kick sometimes on the design, but also on the green building side,

Tom ([07:57](#)):

Not so much. I mean, certainly there are people I've respected who I've worked with over the years. Colleagues, but sort of jumping in pretty early in the process here. There's a lot of people I've read. But I can't necessarily have a mentor to help bring me along just because I was kind of early.

Charlie ([08:21](#)):

You were figuring it out. I've heard that from multiple people. I'd just like to ask, and I'm sure you've become a mentor to many others here Tom as you've built out your career. As we look back on some of the types of buildings you've worked on I know you're focused on adaptive reuse, big passion here, affordable housing, but it's hard to pick one or two. Are there a couple cool projects you can talk about you have been able to work on?

Tom ([08:48](#)):

A couple projects and what I really loved about them is that they have been able to synthesize a bunch of different passions all in a singular project. One project I might point to is a project that is called Miller's Court. It's brought up here in Baltimore. It was an historic tax credit project that was also LEED gold that also transformed a community and transition. It was basically a lighted building. It was dragging the neighborhood down, working with the great developer, SeaWorld development who saw the potential there. The program of half of the property was dedicated to nonprofits that supported the Baltimore City school system. So it was commercial law office space. There's a whole sort of collective program where there's all shared conference facilities, shared lunch room facilities, not just in terms, not just to minimize the space they require, but also to foster interaction between the various groups.

Tom ([09:52](#)):

And the other half of the project was apartments dedicated to teachers new to Baltimore. And we got to know folks from Teach for America and other programs like that. And there was a pretty common theme that if you're a Teach for America candidate, for example, you're in college, you apply to be in TFA, it's this persistent program, like 10% people are accepted into it anyway. You graduate, you get a letter saying, you go into Baltimore, you pack up your car, you drive into Baltimore. Traditionally, you find the first department you could afford that you liked. Okay, enough, you went to Philadelphia, you trained for about a month, came back to Baltimore, and you started teaching. You're on your own for the first time. You're starting, you're learning to teach, learning to teach in a distressed urban environment. The common theme we heard from talking to a number of different people was come, October of your first year was a bad day at school. A lot of people were yelling and there was a fight that broke out, and it's raining. It's getting dark way too early and at night, and you come home to an apartment by yourself and you just feel isolated and alone and you quit. You can't hack it. The premise was, what if you intentionally build a supportive community where everyone there is going through it works. So we built a community dedicated to teachers new to Baltimore with some

very tenant specific amenities. But we've been able to show over the last 10 years or so that it actually works. The washout rate for folks who live at Miller's Court is substantially less than folks who dumped in Baltimore and nationally, in fact, Teach For America, had taken this model and promulgated it nationally as the Baltimore model. It works to sort of build a community. But with that, then it was a great story. And once again, the timing was just perfect. We ended up winning the Environmental Protection Agency, Smart Growth and Green Building Award. We won a couple other, national design awards. Got our Urban Land Institutes For Award, Brady Birder Award just a bunch of different national recognitions, it being a really good model for sustainable placemaking.

Charlie ([12:13](#)):

I love that. I saw that on your profile too, just placemaking. It wasn't just about this green building effort upfront, designing a little greener look at the impact, and it can be mimicked by others. So thanks love that. One more time though. I love to give my podcast guest just a little permission to look back on the highlight reel. Anything else you're really proud of? Any of your proudest accomplishments, personal and professional? Just as you look back?

Tom ([12:40](#)):

I like to joke that my favorite project is my next one, but there's having great projects with great clients and doing great work. It's hard to pick a favor because they're all meaningful. They've all added to micro growth as an architect. And our ability as a firm to, to really understand the unique challenges that sustainable building presents and ways to really kind of innovate there. I do think what's interesting is what we're taking now is that sustainable design is sort of a baseline, it's kind of baked in our DNA to sort of like, okay, at times when at interviews we almost forget to talk about it because it's like, okay, what do you wanna, do you wanna LEED, do you wanna do I G C C?

Tom ([13:30](#)):

Do you wanna do, know EarthCraft, there's a bunch of different rating systems for Passive House. What do you wanna do? We can do that. So we spend a lot of time talking with our clients about what are your objectives? What do you try to achieve, what's important to you? And we find we tailor the appropriate compliance path through what their goals and objectives are. What we're doing now is taking it and looking much more at the concept of resilient design is kinda the extension of that. About not just designing, if sustainable buildings for now, but looking into the future, what is gonna be happening in terms of changes in climate, what's gonna happen in terms of sea of rise. And we sort of break down our understanding of resilience into kind of three buckets, natural, technical, and social. So, natural resilience is, okay, let's talk, increased rain events, flooding, wind events, all that kind of natural, forces hitting you that the goal, we talk about, infrastructure, what about losing power, water, and things like that that you gonna make sure you build a robust building that can survive challenges. And we talked about the idea of social resilience. How do you build resilient communities so that the communities are engaged and if something bad happens, the community bands together rather than falling apart. And I think all three of those are natural extension and self, but really take it from a designing for now to designing for the future.

Charlie ([14:58](#)):

That's great, man. Now you set up that infrastructure there. First 25 LEED aps, LEED Fellow, congratulations there. You're really active with AI too. So, some of our podcast listeners tell 'em have been doing this a while, you'll probably get a ping on LinkedIn. Hey man, I love hearing that. I didn't know that about you, but they've known you a while and some, maybe you are just getting into this movement. But tell us a little bit about, say, a trade organization like a i a and what has that meant for you in your career?

Tom ([15:27](#)):

It's been huge. It's interesting because back when I first graduated it was a natural progression. What do you do? You graduate, you get licensed as quickly as possible, and you join AIA. It was just sort of, it was a given, it was not questioned. But what I found over time with AIA and with U G C for that matter too you truly get out of it what you put into it. Over the years I had opportunities. I led the committee on the environment here in the Baltimore chapter for a number of years, and then stepped in and kind of worked my way through Leadership as chapter president in 2014, and then got involved on a national level. I worked on the strategic council for three years. Last year I was the moderator or ringmaster of the council.

Tom ([16:13](#)):

What I found was that I got to interact with the best and brightest in the profession. So for everything I got, I was able to give. I gained so much more. Similarly, I've had a chance to work with AIA nationally on sustainable design assessment teams, in which the community submits a request to a i a, not a specific challenge the community is facing. I've led five of these folks from the institute, but you build a team of experts from across the country to focus on this issue. And you come in and you have a charette. And it is one of the most powerful opportunities to have direct engagement between the community and our architects and designers. And you get to play with the smart kids at the table. There's nothing better than just being, every esta that I, I've been a part of, I've learned so much from and be able to bring that back to the office here and apply it to my practice. But it really has been incredibly rewarding. And as I said, the more that you give to the organization, the more you get back outta it.

Charlie ([17:25](#)):

I've been acting with U S U C, boma, others that second that, so thank you. Alright, so let's talk about the present day. Tell us about Mosley Architecture.

Tom ([17:39](#)):

Mosley, we have six different studios that we work in. Civic justice, K-12, higher ed, senior living, and multifamily. I head up our multifamily studio

which is multifamily and commercial adaptive use. It's kind of all the weird catchall things that may not fall under, k12, k12. We get a lot of oddball projects from that perspective. And we also have a dedicated sustainability team. Brenda Dunn, who you might know, is another LEED Fellow, and there aren't a lot of firms I'm aware of that have two LEED Fellows in Charlie (18:18):No, very rare. That's great.

Tom (18:20):

It's something that we've taken very seriously our commitment to sustainability. So we have offices from Baltimore down to Charleston, about a dozen offices, all in all. And I spend a lot of time on the road going from project to project kind of representing our studio in primarily Maryland, dc, Virginia, North Carolina, south and South Carolina. So it's like 80% of our footprint. Yeah. And just trying to make great projects out. Whoa, got a great, got a great team here with a lot of LEED aps. We're all dedicated to some of our projects, so we've got a great staff that does phenomenal work.

Charlie (19:04):

Happy to hear that. And you got a nice chunk of the Atlantic there, not just Mid-Atlantic. So tell us about sustainability. How do you bring that up with clients? Do you almost have an internal green best practice list that almost does a firm, you make sure you bake in and then you're kind of on your way to LEED and you fill out a scorecard for the heck of it to be proactive? Like how do you bring this up with a client on one of your projects?

Tom (19:28):

It's a couple different ways. First of all, we have what we call mostly minimums that are, it's just stuff we do no matter what. It's baked in the process, winning the task because it's no cost or low cost and it's just, we do, it's the right thing to do. What's interesting is that depending on the jurisdiction we work in frequently, sustainability is required. Baltimore City for a dozen years has required LEED silver or the equivalent to pull building permit, not just for, a government work for any building project. So you're kind that's baked in around here. And a lot of affordable housing agencies Virginia Housing has been very aggressive in pursuing

sustainability. So you kind of have to do it. So even if clients aren't necessarily inclined naturally to go that way, they have to do it.

And so that goes back to once, once again we kinda meet people where they are. What is the compliance path you're looking for here? I really wanna strive. Some are dedicated. We've got one client community housing partners who's trying to net zero energy housing and we're there with them for that. We're doing very advanced modeling because of that and, and really creating sophisticated systems other groups are, yeah, just gimme a building permit and we educate as best we can and we elevate the conversation, but we can only go, as far as our clients are willing to go with things.

Charlie ([20:52](#)):

Sounds like you're as proactive as you can there and but you gotta see what the client really wants, how far they wanna take it. Are they asking you what should they do or what, what do you have to do? So that's good stuff. So let's talk about the future. I love asking someone like you who's got a good feel for green buildings, this movement. You've been doing it for a while, but, but what's next? What's something maybe you're kind of even excited about that's coming at us in this green building movement?

Tom ([21:20](#)):

Yeah, it's a couple different things. Clearly energy efficiency has gotten so much better now. The ability to be net zero or relative, I'll say it relatively easily or near net zero the rise of vol takes has been huge. Moving to an all energy footprint is I think really, really solid. But I keep looking towards, once again, the idea of resilience and expanding sustainable design principles from dedicated green projects to every project. Like I said, it's just kind of what we do. What is interesting is, when I'm teaching classes on sustainability and you start to break down, what are you doing? The concepts are so basic that my shorthand is don't build stupid. And literally that's all you're doing is once you know the principles, once you know the basic building physics, you just kind of dance with the building.

Tom ([22:26](#)):

and you sort of try and figure out how you can be clever in the way you're introducing technology, clever in the way you are designing the building so that you are maximizing sustainability and minimizing the energy required to support it. We've got some really talented engineers on staff here and when we're working and collaborating on this, we're doing our energy modeling and all that. The first approach is you design down to the minimum load using basic principles, building, orientation, lighting, natural ventilation, and then rather than bolting on a lot of sophisticated technology to meet a really big energy demand, you bolt on modest technology to solve a modest energy demand cuz you designed it to be as thoughtful as possible.

Charlie ([23:14](#)):

Thanks man. Well said. A lot of wisdom is there. Love that. And I need all that for the future. Let's do some rapid fire, get to know you a little more.

Tom what would you say is your specialty or gift

Tom ([23:27](#)):

As all this goes? Trend spotting that I'm not the smartest guy out there, but like I said, starting off with sustainable design and seeing that early link between sustainability and historic preservation looking where resilience is going. It's looking at 30,000 feet and making connections whereas you're deep in the weeds on things, it's hard to see the forest from the trees and have enough perspective to understand how there are some linkages that are incredibly obvious, but once you see them you can't unsee them.

Charlie ([24:01](#)):

No, that's good. Some will wanna dust it under the rug, but you can tell which one's here to stay. We could talk about AI for example, but let's may you have any good habits, routines, rituals that help you stay on point?

Tom ([24:18](#)):

Try to maintain a diesel word, black balance or, time to get away stay up on things in the, the one habit that I did develop during the depth of, of Covid and, and the big shutdown, I still kind of got up every day, got dressed,

went, I went to work a computer at home, but I, tried to pretend like I was actually working, working and just sort of be inquisitive. What I've always kind of figured out is the minute you think you've figured everything out and you don't need to learn any more, then your growth as a designer is dead. You really do need to keep looking where there are current trends, what are emerging opportunities and making sure you're always trying to stay on that cutting edge to make sure you see what's coming down the mic. Charlie ([25:08](#)):

That's important. And it can be encouraging, right? It doesn't have to be overwhelming. Is there a place, a source? Do you like to read articles, publications, and videos? What do you try to get some of the industry news?

Tom ([25:21](#)):

All the above? I'm a voracious reader, so one of the challenges is it's hard to find a good book these days that's sort of the latest, emerging trends because by the time you edit a book and publish it, it's a fine year on a date. So it's very much, staying on top of the various green building news outlets and just trying to see where things are going and also seeing fields selling at order design and things like that to see where things are going, which may not have an explicit tie back to sustainability, but understanding where things are going to see how you can start to make those connections even if, not everyone is seeing them intuitively.

Charlie ([26:02](#)):

No, that's important. How about a bucket list as you get to know me more, I'm a fan of the bucket list. Are there one or two things maybe on your bucket list you could share?

Tom ([26:12](#)):

More gravel? Yeah, one of the things that's very easy to do is to get really wrapped up in work and just get in, make vacations and things like that. So try to be much more intentional about traveling similar to the world. I've not been to Europe since before the shutdown of my wife and I up to Canada earlier this year. That was awesome. Talking about going out west,

there are a couple places we've never been to before, so just trying to explore a little more is probably the biggest bucket list right now.

Charlie ([26:44](#)):

Love it, man. Yeah, me too. Speaking of reading I'd love to ask my guests is there a book called Ted talk, a documentary just something you'd recommend to our listeners? Doesn't even have to be about buildings?

Tom ([26:57](#)):

There's two books I've recommended for a very long time because I found them to be very eye opening. And they're not necessarily technical books, one of which is Omnivore Dilemma, which is by Robert Poland. Richard Poland. What's interesting is that he traces four meals that he consumes to its root origins. One's a fast food meal, it goes back to factory farms, one's a forged meal that he goes out in the woods and forages for himself. But what I took away from it is being very mindful of where things come from and not just, from a building perspective, not just what you're putting into building, but where's this being sourced from? Where's this being made from? Where are the constituent components to it?

Tom ([27:47](#)):

And like I said, the building, the book itself has nothing to do with architecture, but I directly applied it to architecture in terms of being much more thoughtful about knowing where your stuff comes from. And the other one is a book called Bowling Alum which is by a demographer named Robert Putman. And what that book does is it shows the decrease in social engagement over the last century. And he shows a number of different reasons why that happened. Back when you used to go to the movies, rather watching tv, you used to sit on your front stoop in a row house in the city on a hot summer night rather than sitting in air conditioning in your living room in the suburbs, you used to take a bus or the train to work rather than driving by yourself in your car.

Tom ([28:40](#)):

There's been decreasing opportunities for civil and civic engagement and trying to see from that ways that we can start to rebuild that. And certainly

one of the things we tried to embed in all of our projects is soft ways to get people to bump into one another and get to acknowledge one another and be aware of other people to start to build those soft bonds of friendship that can LEED to really remarkable partnerships, but also just creates a more thoughtful and more caring community where you're aware of others.

Charlie ([29:21](#)):

I think you and I think alike. I think isolation. That's tough. We want this community, just human nature and just humanity, right? I love how you're putting that into your projects and just to let it happen with a little spark, hey, hopefully that encounter happens right there. Thank you for that.

Tom ([29:39](#)):

It's just a matter of you setting the conditions up for those interactions. You don't force the interactions, you just make them possible.

Charlie ([29:46](#)):

I love that. Kinda two more questions here as we start to wrap up. I'm really enjoying our conversation. Looking back on your career, is there any career advice you wish you'd known earlier?

Tom ([29:56](#)):

What I have always found to be successful for me, which is just for me, but to remain open to possibilities as they present themselves. And a lot of folks have graduated, they have a five-year plan, then another five-year plan. And if I had followed that process, I would've been very linear. Here's what you do to be an architect, say, join the ia, become a project manager, da da da da. And you sort of, you end up in your career having followed a very linear path, I've been much more open to let's look at historic preservation, that's kind of cool. No, look, sustainability and maybe we can blend these. So that kind of worked and then this led to these kinds of innovations and just as new information presents itself, being open to the opportunity of where that can LEED you and not being too ossified in your thought about, no, this is what architects do. I have to do this, but rather than going, it's interesting. I'm gonna go meander down that path and see where it takes me.

Charlie ([31:02](#)): Well that's good. Good career advice. Let's say someone's just now jumping into this green building movement. It's been good to you, it's been good to me. Any words of encouragement for them, as we wrap up?

Tom ([31:15](#)):

Yeah, just jump in and do it. That's like, try and find opportunities. There's, way back when there, sustainability was few and far between and you really had to, beg to get on a team and, find one of the very, very few boutiquey firms who were doing it to get that experience. Now any competent firm is probably doing a couple sustainable projects and there's enough demand for it. Step up, volunteer, say wanna get involved, certainly working with our staff, folks who really express an interest in sustainable design. We put 'em on more interesting sustainable projects because they have built a passion for it, and we wanna try and encourage that passion.

Charlie ([31:55](#)):

Love that. And you can't fake passion. Gosh everybody check out the good work. Tom and his team are doing it. Boley Connect with Tom on LinkedIn. And I just wanna say thanks as a Fellow LEED Fellow for sharing more of your story today. Tom, I've really enjoyed getting to know you and thanks for your time today.

Tom ([32:12](#)):

Thank you. And thank you Charlie, for doing this. Sharing a word is one of the most important things you can do.

Speaker 4 ([32:20](#)):

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