

Chief Sustainability Officer (Wight)

Lois Vitt Sale, FAIA, LEED Fellow

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 green building professionals from around the globe to share their war stories, advice and unique insight into how sustained ability is shaping the built environment. Settle in, grab a fresh cup of coffee and get ready to find out why Green Building Matters .

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Charlie: Everybody, welcome to the next episode of The Green Building Matters Podcast. I've got my friend, a LEED Fellow from the Chicago area, Lois Vitt Sale. She's the chief sustainability officer at Wight and Company. We're just mentioning there's a lot going in the world, but just enjoy!

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Charlie: I like to let our listeners hear about your story, your green building journey. Let's go back. Where did you grow up and where?

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Lois: I grew up on the East Coast, so while I live in the Chicago area now, I'm a Washington, DC native-born in the District of Columbia.

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Charlie: Did you move for school? How did you get out?

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Lois: It's my husband's fault, but I did most of my early years between New York and Washington, DC. Lots of different schools. I have an architecture degree from a Catholic University, which is in the District of Columbia. I have a master of architecture after bachelors in French. I was a renaissance person, interested in a lot of things and I actually found my way to architecture through about seven years doing clay. I was dreaming in buildings and I had a professor say: "Your work is very architectural." I was working to support myself in real estate and I decided to go to architecture school. I got to architecture school and it was the first time that all the parts of my brain and my heart were happily engaged and happy to be doing what I was doing right.

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Charlie: That's a beautiful story. Do you still do clay work? Are you still into art?

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Lois: I actually set it aside while I had my career and raised my kids. After a 30-year pause I picked it up again and have a clay studio in my basement, complete with a kiln wheel, and have a busk fire cooling. As we speak, I'm waiting for glazing.

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Charlie: It's amazing. Thank you. How did you get into sustainability?

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Lois: My very favourite project in school was a project in the third-year studio class that integrated sustainability. We didn't call it sustainability in the second half of the eighties. It was a design that sort of looked at the path of the sun, passive solar, and how the sun could actually be an organizing principle for this whole. That was a monastery. When I got into practice there was no one talking about sustainability. A few years into practice, was part of a team that developed a center for Physics. The American Center for Physics used passive solar design, daylighting, dark sky, some integration,

and that was in the late eighties. That was a nice wake up call to see real practice. There were elements that were integrated into the design and then in 2000. Actually it was in 1997. Our firm Wight and Company, where I work now and have since 1995 won an Arp, has a design built for the Department of the Navy. The Navy asked for sustainability and we found our way to the pilot project for LEED and we're one of the first projects anywhere to earn a LEED certification. I was a senior project manager on that project. I had just gotten off maternity leave with my second son when I started diving into sustainability. I found my home and it was just kind of like this makes sense to me. I had professionals around me saying: "what do you want to do? If you focus, you could really be something. What would you like to focus on?" I kept saying nothing, I like being a general practitioner in all kinds of architecture. Then sustainability became. There was a vocabulary around it that really and all of the members really helped to articulate and it resonated with me and I found a passion in a focus that has held ever since.

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Charlie: Fit right in! Tell us about one. Those early LEED projects. What was the hardest was the energy efficiency goals. Was it finding the materials? Was The recycling of the construction? Give us a peak back to that early LEED project.

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Lois: The industry wasn't geared up for green building. I remember an example. We were told that light colored roof materials were more reflective and better insulation for buildings. Yet, there was no such thing as energy star labels on rooftops. Lord Berkeley National Labs had done a study looking at albedo and misty roofs, and so we said, "Okay, we should do a white roof, white metal roof." There was no rating on it. We chose it for the building, but the actual industry didn't have the data to back it up. We were kind of going by the seat of our pants in the early days. Those buildings that were early LEED certified buildings today would never make

the cut. But they were good sort of test cases and they helped to sort of organize the approach to delivering more and more aggressive and true green attributes to buildings.

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Charlie: Thanks for taking us back and giving us that visual. As you've been building up, have there been any mentors along the way?

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Lois: It's interesting because I consider myself in the early class. I was in the first class of LEED Fellows. My mentors were not green building professionals because I'm in the first class, but what my mentors were were senior people inside the industry that said, "go for it." Honestly, I often talk about the fact that my very own mother, who was a real estate professional and business owner in the sixties and seventies, when it wasn't common, was probably one of my most authentic mentors, because she always said "your only limitations were the ones you put on yourself." When I got to practice, I was fortunate to land on what I call "fertile soil." It really is important where you work. It's important to work in a company that accepts you and gives you opportunities that help you grow, to maximize your potential. I was very fortunate to find my way to Wight and Company in 1995.

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Charlie: I love it. I can't wait to hear more about some of these accomplishments. Tell us about Wight & Company. What kind of work do you do?

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Lois: Wight and Company is a design build firm. We have all disciplines and we've been around since 1939. We're located in the Chicago area and have largely regional practice. Although we've done a fair bit of work in the Middle-East, some corporate work nationally, we really are more of a powerhouse in our region. One of the hallmarks of our company is not only

sustainability in the way that it's really woven into everything that's part of our company, but also the fact that we do design, LEED , design. We're actually able to build what we design and it really creates the ability to innovate and it creates the ability to really create a positive partnership with all of the team members where you're working towards solutions. Not wondering who messed up bills. My background was with Opus and so I definitely really respected having the design team, the construction team, the real estate team, just closely together.

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Charlie: Let's look back. You mentioned LEED Fellow. What an accomplishment! What are some other things you're proud of as you look back?

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Lois: Every day of my career is a new day and I love that. It's a practice. Architecture is a practice and what we do is evolve and learn and grow. I am proud of the fact that I have a sense of creativity and curiosity that has been able to find "fertile soil" again and to be able to grow and lead me to be able to evolve the practice. In recent years we've been doing a lot of net zero energy designs. We have the first project in the state of Illinois, that is verified net zero building. It's a high school edition for a high-performing School in the North of Chicago, Stevenson High School, I have to say, our company and me. We've cut our teeth on learning about net zero buildings because when you look at the performance of a building you have to stay with it and you have to really see how the fruits of your labor are sown into the daily practice in a building. In the first zero buildings that we did, we didn't anticipate the fact that when we said to a-team this is going to be a net zero energy building. I didn't realize how long I was going to be working on delivering that promise because I wasn't going to walk away from it. In traditional sort of delivery, an architect, typically sees a building through occupancy and then says "thank you and enjoy your building." When you're doing net zero energy, you're actually saying "How's it going? How's the

lighting? Is the sun shining? How much snow on-the-ground? What are the temperatures? Is it cold? Is it humid? Are you putting porifera in your building that we didn't account for? Are you operating it the way that we talked about you operating it and saying that you were operating it before we started this? It's a conversation and a dialogue, but it goes on.

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Charlie: I really love that. It's that feedback loop we talked about. You literally have to have it there on those at zero or positive buildings, and that's fantastic. Talking about today and what's keeping you busy. You've had this title, as I understand it, looking at your profile, chief sustainability officer for quite some time, before other companies even knew you needed a chief sustainability officer. Tell us a little more about what that means. Do you set standards for?

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Lois: It's really the umbrella. I have been Chief Sustainability Officer for Wight and Company since 2009. I remember years ago the Department of Labor actually reached out because they were building a job description for chief sustainability officers. That didn't really exist and my responsibilities are kind of as you describe, Charlie. They're both interior and exterior. We set practice paradigms. We provide education, always looking at the horizon in saying, "Is our practice on point? Are we focused in the right direction? Are we relevant to what the industry needs us to be today?" Then there's how we are practicing ourselves? How are we using the resources? Are we burning energy? Are we controlling our own metabolism? Are we throwing lots of waste out the back? What are we doing with samples? On and on and on. There is the resource to clients and participating in conversations and design efforts to really keep relevant and keep our sort of solutions for our clients. You know ahead of the curve and delivering. I've been participating in a few working groups on decarbonization and electrification in the industry. It's keeping fingers on the pulse of the industry and delivering solutions that our clients can rely on like a fine job.

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Charlie: One of my favourite questions to ask someone like you, a green building professional. What's next? What are you Reading up on? What can you mention? What is around the corner?

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Lois: We just finished top 26 right and I was reading this morning all of the money that's been set aside globally in agreements to really try and address the climate issues that we're facing. Let me say what I hope is next, because I'm not responsible for the whole world and as sustainability professionals. We have a tendency to think that the world is on our shoulders, but there's a whole lot of people out there that share the responsibility. I hope that we figure out how to decarbonise that. Our practices are fast, but not only in terms of operating energy but in an embodied carbon which we're recognizing more and more. It's the results of our practice today. I was taking a message for a town hall at my company a few days ago and I reminded our professionals that today we're building buildings. It will be still in operation on 27. You hear promises for 2030, promises for 2050. We're putting the future into place today. I'm hoping that the future is resilient and it's responsible. I'm hoping that we really begin to understand the necessity to more and more renovate and extend the life cycle of buildings, reduce the embodied carbon of buildings, continue to deliver healthy buildings that create healthy communities, and we learn how to really recognize and transform our neighborhoods so that they are more equitable and more diverse.

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Charlie: You've summed it all up. It. I agree with every single point and I think there's definitely some hope. I share that hope with you. It's a public-private partnership. It comes on to us as parents and our kids, we're all in this together. You sum it up so to our listeners, go back and rewind and listen to those two minutes, because I think you just nail everything we

got to do for the next ten years. That's really good stuff, so projects. Is there a favorite?

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Lois: One of my very favorite projects was a project that was a single family house. It's not a project that we do at Wight and Company every day. It was a project for a home owner and it was back in 2007 to 2009. The home owner was a sound engineer and he wanted a project that was highly sustainable: walking distance to the train, single car garage, highly insulated geothermal takes, water heater are 40 and triple pane windows and solar on the roof. We watched the meter spin backwards on his house and I remember the day that he was going to the bank for the loan and it was an expensive little house. Remember, this is 2007. This is not 2021 and the bank said "We're not going to make you a loan on this building. This is way too expensive. You'll never get this money out if you appraise it." He said: "If I was coming to you for a loan for a sailboat, you wouldn't tell me what my retail value is. You would just give it to me. Well, this house is my sailboat." When he put in battery backup for his solar, I said: "Wow, you're going to spend 20,000 on a battery backup. That's a lot of money. When you can just use the grid as your bank." He goes, "Somebody has to be the early adopter, somebody has to take the plunge and do the right thing so that it becomes more available for people down the line and I'm going to be that guy." I said, "You're going to be my favourite client."

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Charlie: Great story! What would you say is your specialty?

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Lois: I would say my specialty is curiosity. I like to connect the dots that don't normally connect and I like to ask questions and sort of reach out to people that I might not have known before. I remember calling up factories like drywall guys and asking about renovation, recycling and reclaiming of drywall and what the impediments were to it. Talking to manufacturers,

somebody wouldn't normally talk to learn something and see why practice doesn't go a certain way. I remember hearing manufacturers years ago saying that our job as their customer base is to react to our wants and our needs and our questions. Our curiosity really helps to shape the marketplace and knowing that each one of us has an opportunity and an obligation to be curious and express ourselves. I think that that is something that I can do in a lot of different areas of my life.

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Charlie: I love it and it sounds like you're very proactive to not just do a quick search and assume that's what you need to know. Let me talk to someone and get their wisdom now. Recently, someone told me this statement and instead of giving good advice, which means Lois, you should do something. I speak. Wisdom, which means from my experience. Let me you kind of how it went for me speaking from wisdom. It sounds like you seek out that wisdom when you're curious. Thank you for telling us that. What about habits, routines, ritual? Any good habits?

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Lois: I would say that my habit is to stay very flexible the way that If you think about your life as as being a navigator on an ocean right, you have small waves. You have big waves. The way to stay upright on that board is to is to embrace all the waves that come at you and to not distinguish what kind of waves they are. This is not a work wave versus a family wave versus community wave. Integrating my life so that personal and professional can freely co mingle as a wave that I've been able to have a career and a family and feel like all parts of my life are enriching me and others.

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Charlie: Thank you. I'm a fan of the bucket list. Is there one or two things, the one or two things? Any adventure travel, write a book on one or two things on the bucket list.?

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Lois: I'd like to work my way up into having a showing of my ceramics, my clay work, and I'd really like to go to Africa, beautiful!

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Charlie: You focused on that. Those things will happen. That's wonderful. Let's say what books . Is there a book you'd recommend?

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Charlie: Absolutely, Paul Hawken recently published his latest book, which is called Regeneration. Matter of fact, I purchased almost 40 copies of it and gave many copies out in my office because I think that the four words written by Jane Goodall there are. You know it really. The book approaches climate change for everyone and really talks about the solutions to climate change, being by everyone, not just the blue stockings among us, the intellectual sort of few to try and figure out and change the world. But it's really an endeavor that we all should and could participate in. I really recommend regeneration. It's got lots of nice pictures in it. It's broken down by different biospheres and ecosystems and it's sort of it's it's I think it's an important read. It's not a doom and gloom book. There's a lot of things that can happen across the planet and are happening across the planet that can really help to continue to promote conditions that are conducive to human life.

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Charlie: Great, and you're doing that! I think I'm going to do that for my employees coming up and I think sometimes it can be gloomy and doom. With this one, it's okay. Here's how it relates and he's kind of how we fixed it. We'll put a link to that book in the broadcast show notes too. Two final questions: is there anything you wish you had known earlier in your career?

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Lois: I'm going to say no, and the reason I'm going to say no is that in some way ignorance, it's a gift. I remember I was riding around in a car with my mom and we had. We would always have these conversations and she

would say to me: I'm going to ask you questions about my business and I want your answer because you're not educated enough to be prejudiced by what your answers might be and the activity that you can bring to the conversation could shed some new light. I'm going to say: embrace your ignorance and don't let it be a stumbling block.

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Charlie: That's the first here on the podcast. I'm glad you went with that. The last thing, let's say, there's someone listening right now. Maybe they're young in their career or maybe they're having a career change and they're getting inspired by this conversation. Let's say they're going into the Green building right now. Do you have any words of encouragement for them?

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Lois: I would say that each one of us are on a journey and there used to be a student that was running around the halls of my architecture school back in the eighties and she used to scream. I wasn't born with the knowledge and I remember feeling so reassured by that. None of us are born with all the knowledge we need. If we remain open and curious and have the energy and passion to find the answers, then we'll do fine. It's a matter of the energy and the desire for quality that we bring to every moment of our life, coupled with making sure that the places that we invest our time are places where the soil is fertile, where you are open, people are welcoming to you and they want your best. If they are willing to let you be the best you can be and you match that with your desire to be the best you can be, you can do great things.

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Charlie: Wisdom. I really enjoyed our conversation. For anyone listening, check out the book that was referenced. Connect with Lois on LinkedIn. Lois. Just thank you for today, for everything you've done and passion. You still have to keep making a difference. Thanks for spending time today. I

just want to say thank you to our loyal listeners. We actually are celebrating over one year here on the Green Building Matter Podcast.

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Charlie: Me and the entire team were stoked and just so glad to continue listening every Wednesday morning to a new interview with a green building profession in this industry giving tips. 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 at 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 the 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've really enjoyed it, leave a positive review on it. Thank you so much and we'll see you in the next episode.