

Hong Kong Green Building CEO Grace Kwok, LEED Fellow 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.

Cichetti ([00:33](#)):

Hi everyone. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. I'm your host, Charlie Cichetti. I get to interview green building professionals all over the world and come to us today from Hong Kong. We've got a LEED Fellow, we've got Grace here with us today, and I can't wait to unpack her story. Grace, how are you doing today?

Grace ([00:52](#)): Hi, Charlie. I'm good. Thank you for having me here.

Cichetti ([00:56](#)):

I've heard amazing things about you. We know each other a little bit in some different green building circles, but let's tell our listeners your origin story. Where did you grow up and go to school?

Grace ([01:07](#)):

I grew up in Hong Kong, in fact I grew up on an outlying island that used to be a small vision village. It's quite an interesting place because it's so small. There are no cars, no highways, and on a small island. It has a wonderful, lovely natural environment. I also went to university in Hong Kong and I studied in a civil & structural engineering department, but majored in environmental engineering. At that time, more than two decades ago, environmental engineering sustainability was not very popular. So many of my classmates in fact after graduating from the university became civil and

structural engineers. Only a few of us are still working in the environmental field.

Cichetti ([02:11](#)):

I graduated a couple decades ago myself, so we're there together. Did you go that route because it was a little rarer, not as many doing it? Did you think you wanted to get into buildings and infrastructure or what kind of nudged you to go that direction?

Grace ([02:30](#)):

I think it's really about the passion to work in the environmental field that kind of steer me into this direction. I think it also had a lot to do with the place I grew up in because if you get the chance to be close to nature, you can walk to the beach easily at a young age. So you just have the heart if you really want to do something to preserve the environment for the future generation. Environmental engineering at that time was the first course in Hong Kong focused in this area. We didn't know what kind of job we were going to get after we graduated. We didn't know we were going to work in buildings or infrastructure. And it turns out I worked in both.

Cichetti ([03:26](#)):

And that was a leap of faith, but you knew it was the right path. That passion led you there. It sounds like your upbringing where you grew up and nature just really had an influence on you. Connect the dots a little bit. When you graduate, tell us about the early part of your career. What were you doing there?

Grace ([03:42](#)):

The early part of my career, I've done lots of projects related to environmental impact assessment. For example if it is an infrastructure project, like building a new railway, then I would conduct an incremental impact assessment. Like very hands-on noise measurement, noise modeling, and then designing a barrier or different mitigation measures to make sure the new railway won't pose any adverse impact on the nearby residents. Also lots of projects related to land contamination how we investigate land contamination and conduct those site remediation work.

How I started my career. I came across a green building. I remember my first green building project was in 1999. At that time, green buildings were very new in Hong Kong. I still remember why my clients wanted to do it because he received a call from a potential tenant, which is an American company, a very big client. He asked if he wants to rent this building if he can make sure it is a green building. Then my client contacted me and, and asked me if I could figure out how to make a building green?

Cichetti ([05:26](#)):

You're right, that was right before LEED really was rolling out. 2000 some of the first LEED projects. So that's how you got into buildings, your first exposure to green buildings and LEED. When you look back, maybe your upbringing, maybe college, maybe your career, did you have any mentors, grace, anyone that you either looked up to or maybe someone that opened a door for you?

Grace ([05:52](#)):

Yes definitely. My mentor's name is James. He used to be my boss, and then he later became my business partner, but sadly, he passed away last year. He's a mechanical engineer near himself, and he's very creative and he always encouraged me and other coworkers to think of the box. I think he's the one who instilled the business mindset in me. He kind of taught me the commercial side of a business operation. Which is very important. Especially, when you first get your career you like the blank sheets, and then all you learn in college is more like the technical side of things. He's someone I respect a lot.

Cichetti ([06:52](#)):

What a great friend and mentor and business partner and I'm glad you were able to honor him here. Tell us more about the next chapters in your career. You start working on green buildings and then what piece together your kind of career timeline for us, please.

Grace ([07:09](#)):

I mentioned a bit about coming across the green building projects in 1999 and then 2000 and at that time only a few, not many green, green building

projects in Hong Kong. And then later on after we have LEED certification and Hong Kong also has its own local building rating tools which we use in a more local context. I started to work more in this area and then also spent a lot of time to enrich myself in that, because we talked a bit about education earlier on the call. I think it's very important because when you start a new scope of your work it's important to equip yourself.

Grace ([08:08](#)):

I spent like two weeks in the UK , especially to learn about modeling as also C F D because at that time this is something we need to do to study the ventilation performance for no matter the locale or using the local green building too. I also spend more time learning about different green buildings around the world. I think later on, that's a change because there's a policy change in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong government encourages a developer to have more green buildings. And then they calculated an incentive for them so that if they want to have extra g f a floor area, like a con scheme, they need to get a green building certificate for the building.

Grace ([09:15](#)):

So I think that is more than 10 years ago. Yeah, more than 10. After the policy, the twin building mark became more active in Hong Kong. We started early, so we have quite a long track record, then we became one of the key players of green building design and certification in Hong Kong. I start to work on road project and then also more LEED project because more tenants requesting it at that time and then later on because of the rise of ESG and even the finance sector is requesting it when they want to make a wind deal or if they want to make sure it fulfills the green finance framework and that's how it evolves.

Cichetti ([10:19](#)):

I love that where they mandate the incentive, as you said, not mandate the incentive was out there. And look at how many green building projects you gotta work on because of that incentive. If you wanna build a larger square foot building it's gotta have a green certification. And over the last 10 years, it's been incredible for you. Tell us about Hong Kong. How are the building

codes though, how about the minimum to do, has that also gotten more stringent with energy efficiency? Are we seeing building codes catching up? How's that going in your region?

Grace ([10:57](#)):

It does get more stringent the building. We've got something called building energy codes, which gets reviewed every three years. So every three years they'll tighten a bit, like raising the bar a bit. When we conduct the Green building design and study the energy performance we need to use the building energy codes as the baseline, we need to compare the design building's energy saving performance against the baseline, so the baseline gets, and keeps getting more stringent over the time. I think it was just good because with technology becoming more available and also more accessible. In fact there's a big room for the building to be designed and constructed in a more energy, efficient manner.

Cichetti ([11:58](#)):

This makes sense these days. As you look back on life and your career, what are some of your proudest accomplishments?

Grace ([12:05](#)):

Helping clients solve challenging problems, definitely would count as one of my proudest achievements. And later some of those solutions become like an industry standard. I will give you one example in Hong Kong: traffic noise is a big problem because we've got so many buildings and very close to the highway, but we also don't have a lot of land to build those buildings. There's a housing problem here and also a noise problem here. So this too invites a conflicting issue. I think less than 20, maybe 15 years ago we encountered a big traffic noise problem in a project. We try to propose a very creative solution to it, which is a facade modification. We propose something like a special window design to reduce the traffic noise intrusion into the room.

Grace ([13:15](#)):

At that time this was not widely accepted by the authority here. The authority here is the environmental protection department, and then we

spend a lot of time trying to convince them. We've conducted lab tests, markup tests, calculations, demonstrations, trying to convince them that we could use it in an easier way and spend less time if we want to just make money out of the pressure. But because we really want to try a different approach as something new. We spend lots of time convincing them to let us use an alternative solution to it. In the end, they did accept, but 15 plus years ago is something they don't really like. But in the last five years you know, 10 years later the authorities think this can be really a solution to the problems here.

Grace ([14:18](#)):

Then they contacted us, and then they made it like a new industry standard. So now in Hong Kong, lots of buildings are using those kinds of special window designs. I think this counts as one of my proudest moments. I would like to share two more. The second one is being a woman in the construction industry. It can be considered a minority, especially one or two decades ago. I also try to gather more women professionals in the field. I initiated some professional groups, like women in acoustics and to encourage more women to participate in this kind of professional activities and to find the sense of belonging and empowerment through this.

Grace ([15:24](#)):

I think this is also one of my proud moments. Of course getting the LEED Fellow definitely found that one of my proudest note achievements. In fact when the first LEED Rochester project in Hong Kong was also done by us. A story behind and the reason is because the client wants to get scout TV at that time, Murdoch on Scout tv, to get them to be the tenant. They asked us to help them get the building needs certified. But in the end, Murdoch didn't win that building so much to thank him for that.

Cichetti ([16:11](#)):

Those are great accomplishments. I'd like to have my podcast guest look back on the highlight reel. It's important to look back at some of those amazing things you've done and that's a good list. So thank you for sharing and congrats. Your LEED Fellow also. Let's talk about the present day. If

you could tell us a little more about your company, AEC, and then I know you serve on a lot of boards and committees, a very busy person trying to help a lot of other movements. Tell us about what's going on today.

Grace ([16:44](#)):

Thank you. My company, AEC, had the first sustainability service provider listed on the Hong Kong exchange. And this is also something we want to try a new pathway for a consultancy firm in this field. And we've done lots of projects related to green and healthy buildings. In the last seven years we have also worked more on sustainability and E S g advisory, especially E S G in the real estate sector because we have ordered hands-on practical experience with green building. As you said, I also serve on the board of some local ones, some international ones, a lot of them related to green building, but some of them also related to finance now, because the finance sector is now trying to have a green classification, I would say.

Grace ([17:52](#)):

Also the taxonomy for them to drive all those green capitals in the real estate sector. I also try to contribute my experience in this area and help them kind of like to find the common language between the building and also the finance sector. Yeah. And recently, besides building projects we start to work more on sustainable infrastructure and also something beyond building. We're working on a huge need for commodities project in China now. I think this is also an area quite new for us, to be honest. But the commodities and the city pleasure, in fact it's quite aligned with the sustainable development goals. It is also something when we want to look at the ESG alignment for the, where they set, I think it's very useful too.

Cichetti ([19:02](#)):

Think for cities and communities is a fantastic new program. It's great for that green infrastructure. One of my favorite categories is the quality of life category. There's net zero now. I know you work in science-based targets and now arguably it's all E S G, if you will, but how do you stay up to speed on all these different initiatives and how do you present them to a client?

Grace ([19:33](#)):

It's a big challenge to stay up to speed. I spend a lot of time learning and exchanging ideas, discussing things like with the finance sector. I think that is an important dialogue with them. And then you understand the thing they have in mind and also the perspective. They're looking at all the ESG and sustainable real estate. I think the only way really is to learn and to keep myself up to speed about them. I've got to be involved in some of the standard settings, like the Hong Kong Green Building Council, which I also serve as a director. I also help them to formulate something called a climate change framework for the building and construction sector. Through this experience, we get to talk to different stakeholders and understand the challenges they face with all this climate disclosure requirement and also the best practices have been in the industry. So that's quite an interesting experience.

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

Thank you for sharing. What's next? If you had a crystal ball, what are you be excited about? What's next in this green building movement?

Grace ([21:18](#)):

I think it would be more ESG alignment, I would say. Green building in fact, the environmental side I think is already being taken care of. But if you look at the E S G, the social side, so the social side in fact is more people focused. So the health and wellbeing and diversity, equity and inclusion are issues that I think, when we are doing more ESG alignment, it would come up definitely. Also carbon management and climate resilience, I think we need to add more components about carbon management and climate resilience in the green building tools, rating twos. I really want to see more regenerative sustainability design concepts in and in the green buildings movement. Lastly, beyond buildings if we are talking about built and bound we need to look outside the building. And that's why we start to work more on the commodities and also the infrastructure part of it. And like our industry, we're going to see more technology deployed. And then we need that to accelerate the net zero transition of the sector.

Cichetti ([22:59](#)):

I agree with all of that. It's not just one building at a time, the infrastructure of the communities. While LEED version five coming in the future will address some of it. I love what you said is the ultimate is regenerative. Regenerative. Let's get to know you a little more. These are some of our rapid fire questions. Grace, what's your specialty or gift?

Grace ([23:24](#)):

Thanks for the question. I think I always have a growth mindset, and I think that's just something that keeps me learning and growing the business over the years. Also, never give up when we face a solution. We really need that, especially if you're working in the environmental field especially when, see when you're seeing all those devastating news about climate change. We really need that. Lastly, I also have this as something my coworker told me. I have a high EQ, so it can stay calm while in the stall.

Cichetti ([24:17](#)):

Those are amazing gifts for a leader like you. And just that resilience too, even personally as an entrepreneur, but emotional intelligence is so important just in day-to-day life and business. Thank you for sharing. Do you have any good habits or routines, rituals you could share?

Grace ([24:39](#)):

I treasure mindfulness, so in fact, I practice yoga. I think it helps me a lot, you know, to relieve stress and also stay focused because there's so many things going on no matter if it's in the news or at work. I think that really is very helpful for me. For everyone, it's different. A lot of people also quite exercise a good routine for them.

Cichetti ([25:15](#)): Mindfulness. That's amazing. Have you been practicing yoga for many years?

Grace ([25:20](#)):

I stopped for a while to take care of my young babies. But then I picked it up in the last few years, and it's very helpful.

Cichetti ([25:33](#)):

Okay. There's a pro tip right there a little bit. I'm a fan of a bucket list, maybe some travel or adventure. Maybe you wanna write a book? What are a couple things on your bucket list?

Grace ([25:47](#)):

Yeah, definitely travel. I really love to have a trip to the South Pole, Antarctica. I hope I can have it in the next few years, before it's too late. Another bucket list. This one is an interesting one. Last year on my birthday, I certainly came up with an idea: to start a planet tree on your birthday campaign. So to encourage people, everyone has a birthday, so encourage them or have, have this campaign to help them to plant a tree on the birth.

Cichetti ([26:32](#)):

What a trend who knows that could go viral on social media and see a lot of trees planted. I love that. Thank you for sharing. That's a good one. Oh so is there a book you'd recommend to our podcast listeners or a documentary or a Ted talk? Just, it doesn't have to be about buildings?

Grace ([26:55](#)):

I do like all the BBC documentaries about the planet. This is really something I found. I even find it healing for me. Sometimes when I was too stressed out at work or my kids were frustrated with them. I would watch it and then find it had a very healing effect on me.

Cichetti ([27:34](#)):

Three boys and plenty of work. I love that it's a powerful word of healing. Is there anyone in particular? No, just any of those about the planet.

Grace ([27:46](#)): I really like the blue planet. The blue planet. Ok. Yes, yes.

Cichetti ([27:51](#)):

Link in the podcast show notes. So everybody questions as we start to come to a close, grace, when you look back on your career, is there anything you wish you had known earlier?

Grace ([28:04](#)):

Looking back, I hope I can now find the soft skills, the importance of soft skills earlier. When we study in the university we always think all those

technical knowledge are something we should prioritize and learn. When I started my career, maybe because of the job nature as a consultant, I really found the soft skills like communication presentation and also management, no matter if it is managing a project or managing B people. All those management skills, they're also very important. For those starting the career, I think they could also look into that and maybe spend some time learning more about all these very important soft skills.

Cichetti ([29:03](#)):

Practice some, maybe join committees, volunteer and be able to go out. I enjoyed our conversation tremendously today. I've got one more question. Let's say someone listening is getting really inspired by your story, Grace, and they're just now jumping into the green building movement. This movement's been good to you. It's been good to me. What words of encouragement do you have for them?

Grace ([29:29](#)):

Green building is very dynamic and it's got a changing landscape. I think explore more about all the areas related to the green building movement. It's not only about buildings, it's about the people in the built environment as well. When we are working on a project we always remind ourselves so that we won't lose the focus, not just in the number or the modeling. Lastly, encouragement. When we're working on a green building project, you can expect it (the building) will stay there for a long time. You need to consider the whole life cycle of the building. It could become a legacy because it is going to be standing there like for 50, 60 years.

Cichetti ([30:44](#)):

That is encouraging. It's exciting. I know you're still very excited about this movement. I am to all of our podcast listeners, thank you for listening. Make sure you connect with Grace on LinkedIn and have an awesome day. Grace, thank you for your time today.

Grace ([30:59](#)): Thank you so much, Charlie.

Charlie([31:02](#)): I just wanna say thank you to our loyal listeners. We actually are celebrating over one year here on the Green Building Matters podcast.

Me and the entire team were stoked and just so glad you continue to listen every Wednesday morning to a new interview with a green building professional here in this industry, or just some pro tips that we wanna 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@gbs.com. Our mission is to advance the green building movement through best in class education and encouragement. Remember, you can go to gbs.com/podcast for any notes and links that we mentioned in today's episode, and you can actually see the other episodes that have already been recorded with our amazing guests. Please tell your friends about this podcast, tell your colleagues, and if you really enjoyed it, leave a positive review on iTunes. Thank you so much, and we'll see you on next week's episode.