

Two New LEED Fellows: Nick Kassanis and Asa Posner, of SIG Transcript

Introduction ([00:00](#)):

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 ([00:34](#)):

Hey guys, excited to have a chat with you today because you're both about to be elevated to what we call the tier three on the LEED professional scale. If tier one is LEED green associate, we've all taught a lot of those LEED classes over the years, and we've helped a lot of people pass that exam. And if tier two is a LEED AP with a specialty. BDNC, or o and m or I D N C or homes or nd. This next one you can't test into because it's industry and peer nominated. You can't take a test for it. It's very selective. I'm really proud of both of you guys because you're about to be named a LEED Fellow. They let me in the club in 2020 for some reason, and I'm really really happy to see both of you guys gonna be named LEED Fellow.

Charlie ([01:15](#)):

So let's talk about it, Nick. Let's talk about it. Asa, to those listening, those watching this, there's 202,000 LEED professionals over the last 20 years in this industry, in this green building movement. That might seem like a lot of people, but if you add up all the contractors and architects and engineers and building product manufacturers, real estate professionals like this really still sets you apart as a professional credential. The LEED Fellow out of that 200, 2000, there's only about 360 in the whole world. And one of the requirements is you have to have been a LEED professional advocating

for green buildings for 10 years to even be eligible. And you guys have done all of that and more so just 360 LEED Fellows in the world, and now you're in that club. So, I just wanna ask you some questions. First, I wanna say congrats, and I'm proud of you. And let's just start with what's really kinda inspired you guys though, to even get into sustainability or green buildings, maybe when you're getting outta school, you might have had an environmental degree Asa or Nick, you're a mechanical engineer from Georgia Tech, you're at Emory. LEED was just coming on the scene, really, but what inspired you? Well, let's start with you, Nick, to really get into sustainability and eventually green buildings.

Nick ([02:28](#)):

All great to be here, Charlie, I know this is a career achievement. I'm really proud to be here with Asa and, and you as well. And a huge, huge honor to be named a LEED Fellow. I think what really inspired me growing up in Greece I was born and raised there and just experiencing nature all around me in such abundance made me really appreciate the environment, the things that I took for granted, such as local farmer markets or solar thermal heating or white roofs on the Greek islands blue flag, beaches, just anything like that that I just got used to really kind of makes you take it for granted. But really it's a product of a huge kind of cultural upbringing that's rooted in the appreciation of nature and I think that's really what kind of kickstarted my passion for sustainability, nature, the environment. And that really expanded as I started to travel the world and appreciate different cultures. Every culture and every country and every people had a different appreciation for the nature of the environment as well. So I kind of picked up things along the way, which is really exciting.

Charlie ([03:34](#)):

I was in those roots. How about sustainability? How'd you get into it? What kind of inspired you? And then tell us, even Asa, when did you get your first LEED credential?

Asa ([03:43](#)):

For sure. Firstly, thank you for having me here. Again, Nick, super congratulations to you. Just an awesome career milestone. Cool to reach this point. Similar to Nick, I grew up in South Georgia near Savannah. I was a pretty outdoorsy kid, played a lot of sports, just spent tons of time outside in a climate that allowed for that. I did a lot of hiking with my uncle and just sort of being around nature a lot. I have an environmental science degree from Emory University and I did some wildlife research when I was an undergrad. And at that time it was late, say 2007, 2008. Sustainability was sort of a buzzword. It wasn't necessarily a full-blown career path. Green buildings were around, but not to the level that they are now. I was doing some wildlife research. I was an undergrad and kept running into all of these issues of what humans were doing and the actual impact that it was having on the ecosystem. So that was really my first foray into how design and buildings can affect a natural environment and affect a natural ecosystem. And it sort of got me on this path of, well, can't we do this better? Surely there's a way to do this better. And so that's how I found, found this path and dedicated my career to it. Yeah, I earned my first LEED credential all the way back in 2008. It was back when it was the original LEED Legacy AP. There weren't any additional exams. You were just a LEED AP or nothing. So first credential all the way back in 2008. Been in the industry since.

Charlie ([05:14](#)):

I love it. Alright, so that gives us a little origin, a little early inspiration, guys. Let's talk about projects. It's hard to pick just one, but what's a project you're particularly proud of? I know both of your careers. I have a blast working with both of you guys. And I know sometimes you work on a 65 story skyscraper or a new school in a community, and so that's a project you're really proud of that maybe there was some extra sustainability impact. We'll go back to you, Nick.

Nick ([05:42](#)):

Yeah, I think a project that really kind of defined my early career and that I'm very proud of to this day, we really helped it achieve multiple

certifications over time is One Market Plaza. It was one of my first projects with SIG in San Francisco. 1.8 million square feet, dual towers class, an office building with restaurants, Andre Retail located in the iconic era right across from the ferry building. So that was always kind of inspiring to me. Growing up in Greece, being in San Francisco and a beautiful environment I really spent over 60 hours, if I recall onsite doing full retro-commissioning very complex systems, chill water plans, more than 30 air handlers all across the towers. Full testing of H piece equipment. And then also going through a full ASHRA to energy audit, did a complete critical zone walkthrough for I H G one and all the LEED documentation that comes with a LEED certification.

Nick ([06:46](#)):

So we were able to recertify the building through the LEED Dawn m rating system Platinum which is really exciting in 2016. And we had upgraded from Gold from the initial certification. And then having worked with just the exceptional property management team there and facility operations team, we were able to continue to work with them throughout the years, all the way up to just last year where we recertified again platinum, but now through the V four point grading system. So that was really exciting. One of the projects I would say I'm the most proud of and it's one of the projects that we've maintained over time and really had a big impact on the local community working on those certifications. So I think it's just some fun facts. I think it's the largest LEED on platinum building in San Francisco and one of the top 15 in the world just by size. So really, really proud of that project of the team that I work with.

Charlie ([07:38](#)):

Love that project. Alright, that's a great one there. ASA how about you? What's a project that you're really proud of? I know you've worked on a lot of 'em and where maybe have that extra sustainability impact.

Asa ([07:49](#)):

Having LEED certification efforts for probably 220 projects and 70 million square feet there's no way I'm gonna be able to pick just one. So I have

three and I'll go quickly. So my favorite one probably is the New Orleans Jazz Market. It's the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra in Center City in New Orleans. Just from a sustainability perspective in history the site goes all the way back to 1848. It was an outdoor meat market, and the site took a number of different forms over many years. And the current state of the project, we worked on this project in 20, I think it was around 2015. It was a former dollar store, sort of cinder block building. That's the site that they founded as part of this project. It was a major renovation, turned into the home of the New Orleans Jazz Orchestra. Just a really cool revitalization project in an area in New Orleans that had come through some hard times post Hurricane Katrina. So it really helped to revitalize that neighborhood, take on the core sort of vibe of the city of New Orleans. It's known as the city of Jazz, also a LEED gold certified building. And so really implemented a lot of sustainability metrics, including a lot of reuse and salvage material inside the actual concert hall. So just a really cool, really cool project. And one that I go back to a lot and think about a lot. Also just a beautiful place to see a concert. Another one would be the Georgia World Congress Center in Atlanta. That's the site of Greenville 2019. We've done three different LEED certifications there, including the very original one, which I think was 24 at the time when it was certified initially, it initially achieved LEED silver through the o and m rating system.

Asa ([09:35](#)):

It's now a LEED gold building through its second. But at the time that it was certified, its initial certification, it was the largest LEED certified building that year. At the time it was the 14th largest LEED certified building ever, 3.92 million square feet. So just really cool to be able to apply LEED to a small project like the New Orleans Jazz Market, 15,000 square feet all the way up to an almost 4 million square foot convention center. And I would also be remiss if I didn't mention the third project. We've also certified target seal, which is the home of the Minnesota Twins, the baseball team as a big baseball fan. It was sort of another career milestone to be able to work at a major league baseball stadium and apply some of these metrics and sustainability practices to a facility like that.

Charlie ([10:21](#)):

I love it. For those listening or watching, you really can apply to a program like LEED where I've made a career. Nick and Asab may care about green buildings, but especially lead to a lot of different building types. So don't think you can't do it. Don't take no for an answer. You'll find a way. Let's shift gears. Both of you now are also in a business development role. While you still get to work on some projects, you get to solve and guide and influence ESG strategy and also engage with clients. So if we take a look at just client engagement what are some of the misconceptions that are still out there when it comes to LEED or a sustainable building? Maybe Nick will start with you and you can hand off to Asa. Just what are some of the misconceptions that are still out there?

Nick ([11:03](#)):

Key misconception I would say is that there's only one path to sustainability. And every building is different and you must understand its history and unique characteristics to really address the potential path toward the carbon. Understanding the financial impacts, the lifecycle of equipment and materials but also just the intangible experience that occupants are having in the building is equally important. I think these are the concepts that carry over into development of new assets as well. And as with anything, you're limited by your local resources, the function of the building that's intended for that specific industry. Although there are some really exciting concepts that we're talking about now, and really promoting regenerative design as being an ideal outlook, not every existing building has that potential. They might be in an urban environment, they might be in a major city like New York, and There isn't that opportunity to take advantage of a lot of those features. It is our job as sustainability consultants to do that work with our clients and find the best outcome for their specific challenge. I would say when there's a Will, there's A way I guess.

Charlie ([12:16](#)):

Asa, How about you? What whatcha still seeing out there in the marketplace? Some additional misconceptions.

Asa ([12:20](#)):

Yeah, I have an interesting take on this. I've done some work over the last probably two years now with a committee of folks as part of the USGBC, west, north central region that's sort of the upper Midwest. We have a LEED advancement committee and we've specifically been looking at common misconceptions around LEED. But we've done a video series. There's actually a YouTube series video series on YouTube on the U S G B C West North Central Channel. We've even done a couple of panel presentations on this. So we've been tackling a lot of these myths and misconceptions, sort of debunking a lot of these myths over the last several years. Things like a lot of people think LEED is design driven, or maybe it's too rigid or it's only a coastal thing. It only shows up in New York and San Francisco. LEED takes too much time. We've even debunked the one about how a lot of people think LEED is only about earning a point for bike racks. An old misconception that's been around a long time. I particularly like the misconception that LEED costs too much. There's a whole lot of emphasis on and studies and things over many years about the cost of green building and what premiums exist through LEED and through green building projects. And that just that misconception, that myth just doesn't hold any water anymore. It's a first cost versus operational and r o I conversation, I like to equate it to kind of where we are with Led lighting now, if everybody remembers maybe 10 years ago, what an LeD light bulb cost when you went to a home improvement store to buy one versus now it just, it makes so much sense.

Asa ([13:57](#)):

Why would you ever buy anything that's not an L e D bulb value that a sustainability metric like a LEED certification applies to a building inherently is gonna give it a bigger return and better. R o i, Cushman Whitefield did a study a number of years ago called Green is Good that put some dollars and metrics towards what the actual r o i improvement of a

LEED certification versus a non-LEED certified building was LEED building were averaging a 25.3% increase in price per square foot over their non-LEED counterparts. Same exact kind of building, but just that certification and the sustainability metrics provided that added value. So that sort of LEED costs too much myth just doesn't hold any water anymore. Same goes with the E S G investment world. I think the statistic is around 80% of investors intend to incorporate some sort of e s G strategy into their overall investment strategy by 2030. So it is going to be part of an investor strategy and the upfront costs, if there are any, are fastly outweighed by the value that sustainability certification provides.

Charlie ([15:12](#)):

That's a good point. Let's talk about RI there and anyone listening or watching reach out to Asa, Nick or me and we'll give you a link to that Cushman Wakefield study. So Ace, let's go back to you. Do you have a project that maybe you really definitively could measure an R O I on sustainability, the LEED or the ESG work?

Asa ([15:29](#)):

Yeah, for sure. I had a project, it was a multi-family project in Rochester, Minnesota, the same town where the Mayo Clinic is located. It was a multi-family project around a 13 story, big apartment building, market rate, apartment building that their investor decided that sustainability was really important and they wanted to pursue LEED certifications. First time that this particular developer had ever pursued LEED on a project. It was just a really great project from start to finish. Our firm provided the LEED consulting, commissioning, and energy modeling for the project. It ended up being somewhere around 31% more efficient than energy code water savings was more than 30%. I saved about 62,000 gallons of water annually. But the most important part about this project is that the final sale price, when the developer ended up selling the building a few years after it was done, it sold for \$187 million, which equates to somewhere around \$536,000 per unit. It was the highest sale price for a multi-family building in the history of the state. So it was a clear indication that the

investment community and the buyer was really interested in the fact that it had the sustainability metrics and that LEED certification led directly to that significant ROI.

Charlie ([16:46](#)):

A few more things here guys. You're now LEED Fellow careers, but also just share some of your best practices. So Nick, let's talk innovation. This is something you really enjoy reading up on and just also thinking about the future. How about some current innovation? Like what are you seeing out there in the marketplace?

Nick ([17:07](#)):

Yeah, I think you might say today that it's artificial intelligence. Everyone's talked about AI, but I think when you talk about our industry and just PropTech and general, it really lags the overall technology advancement worldwide. There's a lot of things that are happening leading edge across the board that might not be applicable today to what we do. So I would say the cutting edge for the build environment is really kind of augmented. And those are some two technologies that you can really apply to a variety of functions. Facility management training, preventive maintenance, ongoing commissioning site visits and the like. So I think that's really gonna be the emerging technology that's the emerging trend. I would say that everyone should be looking into and trying to apply in their business.

Nick ([17:55](#)):

And that, that really starts the conversation around digital twins. Everyone has a different definition for that term. It has a wide spectrum, but really the concept of digitizing a building design at every phase of a project from schematic design all the way through operations is really what's changing the industry? I would say we can know whether project teams are doing it or not, but we can now design buildings and develop virtual twins that can be then used later to operate those same buildings after construction and that's really exciting. To me that's part of the reason Charlie, we co-founded ATOS two years ago and I think something that the world is really kind of

ready for it's how we're leveraging technology to kind of advance the, I would say, efficiency of how we do things. So I'm really excited about that. Charlie ([18:48](#)):

Yeah, thanks for that peak. I'm a fan of technology too. I think it will help solve the carbon side of things and our climate issue. We've got a lot of work to do, a lot of new construction buildings to try to get not just silver, but up towards platinum or net zero or maybe living building, right, regenerative design, but retrofits, we've been able to travel a little bit internationally with some of the work we do, and I'm excited to see that there's also, even in developing countries mandates for greening of existing building stock too. So a lot of work to do, but I think technology will help. Let's talk about the industry guys. Real quick, where have you seen it evolve since you've really made your green building careers? And then how about one more peek, looking ahead. Hey, what's something you're excited about and definitely coming at us in the future of the green building movement. We'll go to Asa then Nick Asa. How have you seen it evolve since you've been involved in the green building movement and what's something you're excited about?

Asa ([19:45](#)):

When I joined the industry, sustainability really was just a buzzword. It wasn't the career path of green buildings that really wasn't there yet. There were LEED projects and the industry was moving in that direction, but hadn't really taken the same sort of market hold that it has now. So it's been really interesting to see it grow like that. I joined this industry when LEED was in version 2.0, so I've seen it go from 2.0 to 2.1 to 2.2 to version three in 2009, then version four, and now we're concurrently running version four in version 4.1 with LEED version fives being released in beta form and get Greenville next week. So it's been four or five different versions of LEED. No. So just really fascinating to see LEED specifically just grow and evolve and what's important in the evolution of the program.

Asa ([20:41](#)):

I think we're seeing a lot of renewed focus on health and wellness with certainly third party certifications around health and wellness, like a well or a fit well certification, but especially post pandemic everyone is really understanding that there is value in having good air quality and proper ventilation and cleanliness, cleaning and sanitization, and buildings not just being designed and built and operated to be better for the environment. But the old statistic of people spending 90% of their time indoors, buildings really do need to support human health and wellness and prosperity. And so seeing sort of a combination of both environmental performance and human performance and seeing those two sort of concurrent pathways start to mesh a little bit more because there is so much crossover. I think what we're going to see, and we're starting to see this now, and sort of the peak maybe in the next say three to five years, is again, the furthering of a lot of these E S G goals. Again, I mentioned a minute ago 80% of investors are intending to incorporate E S G into their investment strategy. So we're really starting to see these ESG goals propagate, and we'll start to see this in sustainability programs and certification programs. We're also going to see it show up. One of the, maybe teasers would be we're gonna start seeing sustainability be incorporated into projects or building types that maybe wouldn't have considered it before, or wasn't normally part of that particular industry. One we've seen just in the last maybe 18 to 24 months is industrial projects. We're seeing a lot of influx into sustainability metrics for industrial projects, and certainly multifamily as well. A lot of industrial, a lot of multi-family projects. Nick, how about you? Where have you seen the industry evolve since you've been in it and then a look ahead with something else you're excited about in the future?

Nick ([22:52](#)):

Yeah, I think in terms of how the field of sustainability evolved over the years. I would say early on there was a big emphasis on building efficiency. And materials. I think that emphasis has shifted with the primary focus really being, and kind of finding the harmony, I would say, between the built-in environment and human health. The pandemic really reinforced our concept and really brought forward the importance of indoor air quality

and the human experience in a build. I really do believe that technology will have a major impact on how we track that, how we improve buildings in the long term, and how we visualize buildings like I mentioned before. But you know, personal insight that I wanna share today is we really need to kind of go back to our roots. We really need to focus on our local communities. A lot of what we do is try to get buy-in for why it's so important to care for the environment, care about the climate crisis and all these. When you kind of have an introspective and look at the community around you everyone, we have to focus on the commonalities. What do we have in common? And I think we all care about our families. We all care about the food that we eat, the air that we breathe, the water that we drink. I think when you look at those fundamental values you can then start caring about why the environment plays a big role in those key things that keep us alive and keep us caring for our families. So if we can focus on helping our local communities and get that buy-in from people that may, may have different opinions from ourselves.

Nick ([24:38](#)):

It's good to listen, to have conversation. That's how you really get through to the other person. You can start to kind of really focus on those key elements. And then from there once you care for your neighbor, for your family, for the people around you and why it's important that they have clean dredging water and fresh air to that's not polluted, being able to swim on a beach that doesn't have plastic in it just like the basic concepts of sustainability, then you can start looking at the worldwide picture and the climate crisis and what we've all need to do together. So I think that's really important for us in the next decade. Is to come together at a fundamental level and grow from there. That's what I'm excited about. That's what I try to preach with my team and with our clients too. I love it.

Charlie ([25:26](#)):

Alright, last, last thing, and I'll say a couple closing words. This is a time to celebrate someone maybe watching this or listening just, Hey, where do you guys go to learn about what's going on in the green movement, the healthy

building movement, or where do you go see what's next? Maybe you volunteer, you read, you listen to any quick pro tips. Asa then Nick, Asa ([25:48](#)):

I find that I learn the best from other people, maybe a little bit less so sort of reading articles online and watching the news and things like that. I really enjoy getting out and meeting people and specifically speaking with experts on particular topics. I feel like I have the, maybe the LEED expertise that's sort of what I've dedicated my career towards. But there are other things tangentially around the sort of green building movement and sustainability movement in general that I know what I don't know. And so I really enjoy learning from others who are specifically dedicating their careers in a specific area of expertise. You know, panel conversations at conferences, meeting folks at networking events. I find that I actually learn quite a bit and get a lot of data and a lot of information from just meeting people and having casual conversations in networking scenarios. I tend to learn best from people in person.

Charlie ([26:49](#)):

Love it. I know you do a lot there with your local U S G B C chapter, lots of conferences, some of you speak at, some of you attend and network and learn. I love that. Asa how about you, Nick? Any tips here?

Nick ([26:59](#)):

Yeah, for me it's very important to network and stay connected with people. And I think the best way I've found to do that, and I've been fortunate to be able to do that, is through travel. Traveling around the world, different conferences. I know Charlie and I were at G B C I circle earlier this year, Barcelona, which was an exceptional conference, kind of the green build of Europe, you might say. And years from different industries and from different companies and seeing what new ideas and technologies are out there that's straight, straight to the source. And I would say, obviously I think I've missed only a handful of green builds since starting my career in sustainability. But Greenbuild is an excellent way to go to the expos and

really engage with a lot of these companies that are out there talking about products and technologies.

Nick ([27:50](#)):

Another thing that I try to do it's, it's like where do you get your news from? I think I try to kind of source independent news from online and different areas. And that helps me really not only stay up to date about sustainability, but just around geopolitics. What's happening around the world that might affect our industry? What are the different areas that we need to be mindful of and share with our clients as they come about? I think whether it's EU policy, like taxonomy or the inflation reduction act, just knowing what we need to kind of stay ahead of to inform our clients and really help contribute to that.

Charlie ([28:32](#)):

That was some good paella in Rio. We'll all have to go back there. So as we wrap up this impromptu interview and celebration, just a few notes I gotta echo what both of these guys said. Both of these LEED Fellows, Asa, Nick people. Because one day, especially if you wanna apply to get and be nominated for your LEED Fellow, you need people to go to bat for you. You literally have to have other professionals that will write detailed letters on your behalf and see if you can make the cut. But along the way, it's sharing intel, sharing encouragement. I think that's very important for just human nature, but especially when you're in an industry that's mission-driven and we really wanna make change and we need that encouragement that we are making progress. To those listening to LEED Fellow, if you wanna look into that, we can put a link here in the notes. But essentially you have to have first been a LEED professional, a LEED with specialty for 10 years. And if you can get past that, then you can look into the other requirements.

Charlie ([29:30](#)):

Believe now we're one of the only companies in the world that has three or more LEED Fellows. There may be about four companies. What an exclusive group here. Hope you guys feel it's validating on the career and all the buildings you've worked on, all the people you've inspired and also

taught classes to. And for those listening that don't know Ace and Nick, I wanna give you a super quick anecdote about their character as a company. We use Slack. When this announcement came out recently, it was posted. Everyone's given high fives and all kinds of emojis and congrats. But both of these guys, the first thing they said is, Hey, thank you for helping me earn this, and I can't wait for you to get yours because there's an incredible team of subject matter experts between SIG and GBS. So proud of you guys for even how you acted in the moment. And congratulations on your LEED Fellow status. Thanks guys. Charlie, thanks Charlie.

Speaker 4 ([30:22](#)):

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