

# Interior Designer and greenList Founder Megan Thompson | Transcript

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 lead fellow. Each week, Charlie welcomes a green building professional from around the globe to share their war stories, career advice, and unique insight into how sustainability is shaping the built environment. So settle in, grab a fresh cup of coffee, and get ready to find out why green building matters.

**00:34**

Charlie

Hey, everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. I'm Charlie Cichetti. I'm your host. Every week we have thousands of listeners. All over the world. It's been a blast to do this for the last almost six years. Today we've got Megan with us. She's outside of Denver. She's an interior designer doing a lot of really cool work, and I just can't wait to hear her story. So, Megan, welcome to the show. How are you doing today?

**00:54**

Megan

I'm doing great. Thanks for having me, Charlie.

**00:56**

Charlie

We talked a little beforehand, but it's time just to show our listeners a little more of your story. Take us back. Where did you grow up and where did you end up going to college?

**01:04**

Megan

I grew up right around the Denver metro area, and spent a lot of time in our mountains. I was with a family that was like a camping family. I learned really early on about leaving a low impact, leaving nothing but footprints behind, and taking memories. And then I knew from a very early age I wanted to do something creative. So I went to Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design for interior design and earned my BFA there. And I actually, at the time, was one of only three schools that offered a program with an emphasis in sustainable interior design. So I took that emphasis.

**01:36**

Charlie

Wow. That was an earlier program. Now there's a little more of it there. Was LEED on the scene? Was it energy savings? Was it better materials, less toxic material? What was that class, what was it telling you about?

**01:49**

Megan

I would say that I'm going to date myself. I graduated in 2007, in December. LEED was around, but it was relatively early on in LEEDs. What we would do, if you were taking the emphasis, all of your projects that you presented for your finals had to, you had to show the benchmarks that you would meet if you were to go under the LEED system.

**02:12**

Charlie

I graduated in 2004 from Georgia Tech. So you're going in that direction. You grew up around nature and this beautiful part of the country and. But did you know you want to be an interior designer? When did that part come up for you?

**02:30**

Megan

I think probably when I was five. And every other month I would want to rearrange my room or help my dad paint or do those things. Started very young, and then I learned when it was time to apply for college that this was actually a career that I could pursue.

**02:45**

Charlie

That's amazing. And great school there. Okay, so you're in that region, you stay in that region. What was kind of happening there? Maybe when you graduated, what were some early jobs?

**02:56**

Megan

So what was really a struggle for me was I graduated right into the recession. So, so excited to be out and ready to practice and no jobs available. Bounced around a little bit and ended up deciding, you know what? I'll go out on my own, which was not my original planner's dream, but it ended up being the right path for me. Right. So I started my own business in 2013, and that early work was hard. What was hard for me was really understanding how I could get clients as a solopreneur to care about sustainability and work it into my work.

**03:30**

Charlie

Well, I love entrepreneurship. I've been a business owner myself, so we'll unpack that more, too. So it's a way to get that experience. Challenging times. I actually got laid off at the end of 2008, and that was to kick start my own company, which I always wanted to do. And I did that with a co-founder. We started our lead consulting firm, and it's a blessing disguise sometimes, but we all need a little adversity. So how about any mentors? Maybe early on through college, maybe early career. Have you had any mentors along the way?

**04:01**

Megan

I would say absolutely. I have had mentors that are also solopreneurs or entrepreneurs. And just getting advice on how to run a business doesn't have much to do with sustainability or design. I did end up joining a business coaching program specifically aimed at helping interior designers run their practice more efficiently and better business people. And that was such an impactful program. I met so many fantastic designers, and it's actually where I decided I wanted to start. Greenlist.

**04:27**

Charlie

Oh, that's so cool. It sounds almost like a mastermind group or something like that a little bit. And so I'm a big fan of that, too. You're starting a business. What kind of projects? Like, what was your early clientele, what were you focused on?

**04:42**

Megan

Super early clientele are like, you'll take anything. You'll get that bathroom remodel, that kitchen remodel here and there. But then I really wanted to do commercials, so I did get into some commercials. Often we'll be subcontracted by an architect to do the interiors part of a major construction, new construction project. And then we do a lot of renovation and new construction, residential work, too. So just with private clients.

**05:07**

Charlie

Love that. Okay, so you're building up the business. You've got this passion for sustainability. So do you just try to bake in some green best practices? What are some of your own kind of even unwritten requirements?

**05:22**

Megan

What I had found was that, sadly, it seemed that the homeowners if you're getting

into government work or commercial work, I think there's a lot more awareness and some requirements even for some sustainability points there. But with homeowners, it's always like, what's the bottom line? What's it going to cost me? And I was getting frustrated that I wasn't attracting clients who were seeking sustainability. So the business coaching program, interior design, business academy, really helped me target that messaging. So I did change my messaging and say we offer sustainable, healthy solutions in our design work. And then from there, really, I started pulling in more clients who were like, I found you because you're talking about sustainability. And that was really a big shift.

**06:05**

Megan

But even if clients say to this day, if they still say it's not important on our intake form, they're going to get it whether they know about it or not in our work.

**06:15**

Charlie

I love that. Well, it sounds like you had the identity inside your firm, but it shifted when you really wanted to make sure everyone knew that of you and it started attracting some business to you. I love that. As you look back, what are some of your proudest accomplishments in life and business so far? What's on the highlight reel, Megan?

**06:34**

Megan

Hitting ten years, I'm now at almost twelve years with my design firm, which is great. And then just launching interior design greenlist, which is my platform, that is for designers. Getting through that struggle on my own and then meeting so many designers who had questions about it really led me to realize that there are many designers who are also struggling with the same issue. How do I do this? How do I talk to my clients about it and how do I provide that? So we have 21 members and we're growing. We just launched on July 1 so that's a huge accomplishment, all of those things.

**07:06**

Charlie

I love your energy towards the day. I can't wait to learn more about it and maybe we can bring some awareness there, whatever would help you. You start with ten now twelve years in business. I think entrepreneurs, we need encouragement. So sure, he's had some ups and downs, but do you feel you've hit your stride? I don't know if most businesses, sadly, don't last that long. And here you are, ten now, twelve years and doing big things. But if you look back on it, is there a certain project that you said, hey, I made it, or just a certain. I don't know. When did you feel you made it there? As an entrepreneur?

**07:41**

Megan

I think as an entrepreneur, just being totally honest, when you can start taking a paycheck for yourself, like, hey, this is a business that is working and that is its success. But in terms of really big projects, getting to bid on an affordable housing project and be part of that, we're actually set to install the furniture and close that project. It's been a very awesome four year project. But working with the government on that and being contracted by the architect, that's our biggest project to date and I'm really proud of it.

**08:10**

Charlie

Oh, that sounds fantastic. Well, that's a good segue to the present day. So tell us a little more about your company today and in a minute we'll talk more about the interior designer and the green list. But your company today, what's an ideal customer and what's a day in the life of Megan look like today?

**08:27**

Megan

A day in the life of the interior design business? Our ideal clients are new construction homes working, partnering with builders and architects, and then

also those full large remodels. Remodeling. If we're doing it right, we can be diverting waste on the demo portion of things. We can be really mindful with our selections and construction methods and selecting things that have low impact to the earth are healthy for our clients. So anything that has a big impact where we can make a low impact makes me happy.

**08:57**

Charlie

Well, that's the tagline there. Big impact, low impact. That's good. Okay, so that's the interior design side. I'm sure you wear a lot of different hats. Tell us about greenlist. You lit up about this. You just launched it. 21 members. So what do we need to know?

**09:10**

Megan

It started with my own internal frustration. It felt like every time I started a new project, I myself, even with a bachelor's in sustainable interior design, had to almost start the research project over with every client. There might be different criteria or desires. Maybe we're doing furniture this time. We're not doing a remodel. It was just an enormous amount of research. I started this little internal catalog for myself. Every time I found a company that was actually doing the things I wanted to be looking for, I would put them on my green list. And then as I joined these coaching programs and mastermind groups, I met so many other designers and I would get texts that were like, Megan, I had a discovery call with a new client and her kid has asthma and I don't know what upholstery I can etcetera. So I'm thinking, gosh, these designers really need help with this. They don't know where to go either. And many designers have been practicing for so long, and many of them also don't have education, the privilege of design education. So they weren't even exposed to this. And now as we're going to trade shows and we're seeing the codes and our different municipalities changing, I feel like the comments I'm hearing from these designers are, I don't understand it. I don't know where to start. They're definitely not at the place where they're going to be striving for lead. That's just, they're 20 years into their business. They don't

have the time to do it. So I wanted to make it digestible, easy to understand, and just give them access to say, if you know today you're sourcing millwork, you can go to our vendors directory, you can click on the millwork directory. And we've pre vetted with a, a lot of questions, different manufacturers, and you can click on who we've ranked the highest, give a little profile about that company, what they're doing. Are they carbon neutral? Are they certified B Corp? Are they low Voc? What is it about that company? And then it takes them straight to the website so they can start sourcing for their jobs.

**10:56**

Charlie

I love how you wish you had that and you've built it for others because, so where can we learn more about that? Where can our listeners learn more? And what would help you there? With greenlist, definitely.

**11:08**

Megan

I'm pretty active on Instagram. I think as designers, that's our primary platform. So we've got the id, green list, and interior design. So id for interior design and then just greenlist. All one word and same for the website. Is idgreenlist.com dot. So we're always webinars. So I have everything we have. I ran through IDCEC. I wanted the education to be not only digestible and self paced, but count towards your learning credits that you need to get for your various organizations every year. So everything's accredited. And I'm giving webinars almost every month so you can get into a free webinar if you follow us. And then every quarter we're chatting with people who are in the green sector about either their products or we've got a, well, professional coming up on August 29. She's going to talk to our designers about, well, so it's a good way to follow.

**11:57**

Charlie

Let's get some more Instagram followers for you. I'll check it out, too. So before we move on to the future, just present day sustainability and green people define

it in different ways. You've mentioned that you're baking in a lot of green for your customers. Customers, your clients, whether they like it or not. But what's changed? I mean, is it still a focus on just more eco friendly materials, the toxicity? What was green five to eight years ago? That was hard to bake into a project? Maybe it costs more now. That's just normal. And now this is the new challenge. I don't know what's going on with some of your projects there.

**12:30**

Megan

I would say looking from the past today, it's just gotten easier. Manufacturers have stepped up. I mean, different countries have different manufacturing regulations. Our curriculum focuses a lot on the lifecycle of a product and how it starts in raw goods, all the way to what happens when it's at the end of its cycle. And you'll often find that, like, for example, many of the countries in the EU, some of these really green practices are requirements of the local government. I can feel really confident sourcing from those companies. Now, 15 years ago, right out of college, probably, I would say, , no, it was about 15 years ago. I would say right out of college, we didn't have as many options. I think the field of options has increased. But now what we're really struggling with is identifying who's greenwashing and who's doing and really implementing at the level of things we can select.

**13:23**

Charlie

And the greenwashing, I mean, do you just ask follow up questions? Do you ask them to back it up? Or you can kind of just tell these days if it's a little too thin, right? No, no, you're not. How do you identify greenwashing these days?

**13:36**

Megan

A lot of our questions that we'll be asking the people that are representing the manufacturers, go along that product lifecycle where your rock is harvested. How far are they from manufacturing? What is your manufacturing? Are you off the grid? Are you doing wind power? All these things? We're really looking at what

they're doing. And it's also been interesting, this whole process, to see who's been really excited to share what they're doing with us versus who's really hesitant to answer or doesn't understand. It's really apparent if a company is not willing to answer and play with our questions, that's probably because they don't have any good answers to share. We put them on a follow up in the future list and come back to it.

**14:18**

Charlie

Not now. One day, maybe we'll get back to them. We didn't have it together yet, so. Let's talk about the future. I love to ask my podcast guests, Megan, just, hey, what's exciting coming at us down the road? What are you reading up on? Or maybe it's already happening. But what's kind of exciting in this greenhouse building movement?

**14:35**

Megan

I am sensing just in the last two years, I would say, more energy around the topic of sustainability, decarbonization, water efficiency, those types of movements becoming a real focus. Some might have the opinion that maybe it would have been better to have this level of excitement ten years ago, but it is definitely making a bigger buzz in the interior design community. I think it's probably been in the architectural and engineering and building side for a lot longer, but the momentum is happening. We're noticing a change. Companies are leading with this as their selling point. And that's exciting because I think that people want to step up. I think there's going to be some regulations that are coming, too, that are really going to enforce that.

**15:18**

Charlie

It's just going to speed up all this good work we're already doing. I agree. Okay, well, let's get to know you more. What would you say is your specialty or gift?

**15:27**

Megan

Oh, my gosh. My special tier gift. Well, I have a personal hobby of snowboarding, so that's just my get the gunk out of the head hobby. But really, I think transforming, making major transformations just brings me so much joy. Like seeing a house gutted and seeing the bones and then knowing what it's going to look like and watching it come to life is just something that I think designers, not just me, can see that when we walk in on day one, we know what it's going to look like. And we have that magic ability to be like. It's going to be beautiful.

**15:59**

Charlie

All right, I gave you a tough question there. That one's kind of a humble question. What's your specialty or gift? How about hobbies, habits, routines, rituals? Just what keeps you on point?

**16:14**

Megan

I definitely practice what you preach to people. I try so much to be low impact in my lifestyle. You know, if it's buying from certified B Corps for even just personal products, household items, organic food those kinds of things, to just make sure that my habits are low impact on the planet as well. That's really important to me from just a day to day standpoint, that my household is not having an impact.

**16:40**

Charlie

Love that. At one time in our company, we did a carbon weight loss challenge, so everybody kind of ran their carbon footprint. Now after 90 days, run it again, and there was a lot of change. You know, it's pretty cool. I think every now and again, we might need to even benchmark and see how we are doing. Not just add a little bit more here, but just. I love that. Sounds like you're even doing some of that as we get to know each other more. I'm a fan of the bucket list. Not everybody has a

bucket list. That's okay. But if you had a bucket list, what are a couple things on the bucket list? Maybe some adventure travel, write a book. What's on the bucket list?

**17:16**

Megan

Bucket list. For me, like, number one that pops into my head is, I would love to just spend, like, three months in Japan. I've never been there. I want to go there. I've wanted to go there since I was 14, and so that is, like, my long term big bucket list item, and then smaller items are just keeping this business running and growing. I know that might sound really nerdy, but when you do what you love every day, it's not labor.

**17:42**

Charlie

And once you experience it, like, oh, they were kind of right I love that. All right, Japan. I hear it's a very magical place. So let's connect on that. As you kind of look a little bit towards how you learn, whether it's reading or listening or audiobooks or podcasts, I don't know, give us a peek into how you consume information. And then after that, maybe, is there a book you'd recommend to our listeners?

**18:09**

Megan

Absolutely. I am kind of a learn by doing person, so I guess a tactile learner, kinetic learner. I get much more out of conversation or like webinars than I do reading. Not that I. I don't love reading. I do, but I have to make time for it. And a book that I would recommend. This might just be a very basic level, but the cradle to cradle book was really what opened my eyes so many years ago. And your listeners might already be very familiar with that. That certification process, but also just that, the way that he talks about thinking about the way that we design and redesigning the way we design everything was, I think, probably the catalyst for me, I could put on my bucket list would be meeting William McDonough. That'd be cool.

**18:55**

Charlie

That'd be cool. Okay, there you go. We'll put a link to that book and some of our other discussion points here. And don't forget Instagram. A couple more things. Love your energy here. As you look back on your career, is there anything you wish you'd have known earlier?

**19:12**

Megan

I wish that I would have known. How to phrase this. I wish I would have known that it's okay to charge what you're worth as a solopreneur, I think many of us go out and we're really trying to help people, which is such a great desire, but we undervalue ourselves in the beginning, and that can make your business really challenging to run. Trust that you're worth it and charge what you're worth. For sure.

**19:38**

Charlie

For anyone that's out there thinking of starting their own business, or like you said, solopreneur or small business, maybe you want to grow it, I would totally agree. You alluded to it earlier, is, hey, we got to pay the bills, we're going to get some money. And so I build on that, if I may. And if you're ever asked to, if you send a client or a prospect proposal and they ask you, what can you do on price? I learned it took me a while. But you don't just sharpen the pencil because that devalues your work, and instead your response needs to be, well, we can adjust scope to adjust price. That would be my next best tip to build on what Megan's saying here to all those that are business owners, or maybe even if you're within a firm and you're sending proposals, is never to sharpen the pencil. The client will always wonder, oh, wonder how much lower they could have gone. But it's just devaluing your work. And you'll probably still deliver the full scope and you've just cut your margins and then that's going to slow you down. You can't hire that next

person, etcetera. Adjust scope to adjust price. It's along the lines of what you're saying.

**20:43**

Megan

Absolutely. What do you want to take out?

**20:45**

Charlie

Right. Any other pro business tips here entrepreneurially.

**20:50**

Megan

To our listeners network, get to know people. Genuinely, though, don't go to just collect ten business cards and leave. I think that some of my most impactful business relationships might not even be within my industry, but being able to connect with other business owners who identify and who can help you, and you just never know who you're going to meet. Make friends.

**21:08**

Charlie

Make friends and be genuine. And then follow ups. Follow up right away. Don't let that sit. You got to jump on it right away. Last question for now. Let's say someone listening is really getting excited about your story. They're either maybe making a career change, really want to get into this more. Maybe you're in tier design, maybe green building work, or maybe they're young, professional. You know, maybe they're going for their LEED green associate professional credential right now, maybe using GBS flashcards and practice tests. But say they're jumping in right now. Any words of encouragement for them as they get into this industry?

**21:42**

Megan

Yes, I would say it's very easy to become overwhelmed with the negativity that is

accompanying the reality that we're facing with the climate issues. And there are so many beacons of light and hope. So if you can just keep leaning into what's positive and what is going right and what things are going well, what countries are doing, and just stay away from that negativity. You know, don't just focus on the world being on fire. There's a lot of good happening, too.

**22:09**

Charlie

In your own circle of influence and make sure it's a positive circle. That's amazing. Well said. So jump in. Let's get going in this industry, Megan, that we moved quickly. You had a lot of energy, and I think everyone's going to be inspired by your story. Everybody listening, connect with Megan on LinkedIn. Check out the book recommendations, and definitely, I expect more Instagram followers here for the id and green list. Megan, thanks for being on the show today. I really appreciate it.

**22:34**

Megan

Thanks, Charlie. It was fun.

**22:37**

Charlie

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