

Rebecca Riss, Performance Director at OPN Architects

Transcript

Welcome to Green Building Matters, the original and most popular podcast focused on the green building movement. Your host is Charlie Cicchetti, 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 Green Matters.

Hey everybody, welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. Once a week I get an interview with a green building professional somewhere in the world. Today I've got Rebecca with us. She's the performance director at OPN Architects. Rebecca, thanks for joining the podcast. We're going to know each other more, even on some of the technology side of the house. But today we're going to talk about sustainability. Welcome to the podcast.

00:56

Rebecca

Thanks, Charlie. Good to be here.

00:59

Charlie

Last week connected. You were maybe making a move from New York out to Iowa and this new opportunity, this new position. I always ask my podcast guests to take us back. Where did you grow up and where'd you go to school?

01:14

Rebecca

I grew up in New York, a little outside of New York City and the suburbs there. And I went to Carleton College in Minnesota for my undergrad degree. Wherever I majored in physics and studio art. And then right out of undergrad I went to grad school in New York at Columbia University graduate School of Architecture planning and Preservation. And there I received my master of architecture degree. I had always known I wanted to be in architecture. So it was exciting to finally get the credentials to go along with that. Right out of grad school, I started my first job in sustainability consulting atelier ten in their New York City office.

02:00

Charlie

It almost sounds like, Rebecca, you had some of this planned in here, so let's talk through that. Some great colleges there and then the masters in architecture, Columbia. So you're still in and around New York. So what made you want to go the architecture route? It sounds like you knew that for a while.

02:15

Rebecca

Yeah. Been interested in architecture since elementary school. I remember back in fourth grade saying I'm going to be an architect one day. It was something that was always of interest to me. I enjoyed drawing, I enjoyed math and dimensions and calculations, so it always felt like a good fit and I didn't really know that I was going to be interested in the sustainability component of design until much later, I would say. So that was something that I realized in grad school that would be the right kind of career path for me.

02:55

Charlie

And then you're getting these degrees LEEDs on the scene for a little while. Was some of that being talked about in school? Were you seeing just high performance buildings, saving energy, or were there classes on LEED? I'm just kind of curious there as you're going and getting your degrees.

03:11

Rebecca

I didn't come across LEED too much in my education, as mentioned in a few classes, but I didn't take a deep dive into LEED until I started working after school. But during school, I took courses on sustainability, environmental design, learned a lot of those basics, and then was able to accelerate my learning and professional experience and my job.

03:41

Charlie

You had done some other things there as your finishing degree. But tell us a little bit about that launch into kind of high performance buildings, different modeling, data modeling, and maybe when did you see a program like LEED or even pass one of your first LEED credential exams? I know you have several.

04:03

Rebecca

I initially started work dedicated to LEED certification. My role was to help close out LEED projects that were in construction and get them over the finish line. I dug into LEED certifications really early on and got my accreditation and my first six months of working, and then from there continued to develop other sustainability skill sets and did a lot of daylight analysis, project management, coordinating with energy modeling teams and reviewing energy analysis. Eventually got a really deep interest in embodied carbon and did a bunch of work with life cycle assessments. So it was a pretty broad scope of things that I was able to touch and work with on projects well rounded.

04:59

Charlie

And it sounds like you're doing that early. And a lot of that's just now getting a lot of attention, like a body carbon. Want to talk about it? One question I asked Rebecca is about mentors. Sometimes a mentor could be books you read of a

certain person. You see them on stage from afar. They kind of inspire you. And sometimes it's maybe something in person. You meet in person, they might challenge you, they might open the door as you look back on your career. So far, did you have any mentors along the way?

05:27

Rebecca

There were a lot of mentors. One of the great things about the work that I was doing was that I was able to work with many project teams, many project managers, so they all mentored me in various regards, but I'd say, going back to the earliest mentors, that I'll give a shout out to both Shanta Tucker and Nico Kinzel, who are principals at atelier ten, made me aware that sustainable design consulting and being a specialist in that was even a possible career path. So I took a couple of courses with them in grad school, went on to TA for them, and they taught me the foundational knowledge that I needed to get into that profession and then continue to be really helpful in my career moving forward.

06:20

Charlie

Those sound like two great mentors. And tell of our listeners, just, there's someone that opened the door, encouraged you. Just make sure you reach out to them, make sure they know that they had an impact on you. And it sounds like you had some of that early. Okay, so tell us about some projects around that early. Sustainability LEED career body carbon daylight modeling. So what kind of projects still kind of stand out that had some impact on you?

06:45

Rebecca

I have a lot of projects that I remember fondly, but a couple of highlights were the moment expansion in New York City, that project. My role was as a sustainable design consultant, sustainable design strategies, coordinating that with the team along with the LEED certification. And I remember being extremely happy when on my birthday, I got the news that we had achieved LEED platinum.

07:16

Charlie

Nice birthday for us.

07:17

Rebecca

It was really good, not surprising, but exciting to see that we were able to achieve the ambitious goals we'd set out there, and it was a really collaborative team to work with. I also really enjoyed going to the opening or pre opening celebration of that project. It was a really unique experience to walk around the art exhibits before they were open to the public and just celebrate that new project with the team. So that's one of the highlights. I also really enjoyed my time working on the Newark airport terminal, the new terminal that opened recently. That project had been targeting LEED Silver and ended up achieving LEED Gold, which was really exciting news. We had a lot of complicated things to work through on that project, just given the type of project it is and the scale of the project. I learned a lot through that particular process. And then I'd say maybe the final project highlight, I'll note here, Washington getting involved in the Obama presidential Center in Chicago. And I was very honored to be on the team working for that one and incorporating a lot of innovative design strategies as it pursues kind of the top tier sustainability certifications.

08:42

Charlie

Oh, those are great. I remember early in my LEED career just hearing about the Clinton Presidential Library. I think at the time, four green glows may be platinum, hopefully. And sounds like these presidential libraries have to raise the bar, so that's cool. You got to work on that project, too. I love that. So next, I'd like to just ask for a few more. Just what stands out on the highlight reel? You've got a lot of credentials here. How has that helped you? But just anything else that you're real proud of so far here in your career?

09:10

Rebecca

I guess more recently, I'm really proud of the move I made to Iowa and getting the role as performance director at OPN Architects. That's been a great opportunity for me. It's exciting to be working in a region of the US that I wasn't doing a ton of work in before. Learning a lot along the way and enjoying that big, bold move.

09:39

Charlie

Big city, south Iowa. But I'm familiar with OPN and I want you to tell us more. I know Justin and West, their principals there, early adopters of schema, our AI tool, and so just having a lot of fun working with some of the OPN team. Look forward to working with you more, too, because we have that real time sustainability analysis. Let's talk about the present day. For those that don't know, tell us more about OPN and then tell us a day in the life of Rebecca.

10:03

Rebecca

OPN Architects, we have five studios in the midwest. We have a few in Iowa, Des Moines, Iowa City, Cedar Rapids, an office in Madison, Wisconsin, and an office in Minneapolis, Minnesota. We do a broad range of work. I'd say the majority of our projects are public projects. We do a lot of K-12 schools, a lot of public safety work quite a bit with municipalities and also higher ed projects. It's a range, but a lot of exciting projects are coming out of our studios, and we really embrace design excellence at our firm. We integrate the AIA framework for design excellence across our projects and use that as a starting point for talking about high performance design with our teams.

11:06

Charlie

That's fantastic. It sounds like still a lot of sustainability programming LEED. I'm

going to assume some, WELL maybe Fitwell, healthy building work. Where does some of your overall sustainability related work start and stop?

11:22

Rebecca

I work on bigger picture sustainability strategies for the office as well as touch specific projects and get integrated with project teams. It's a balance between both kinds of firmwide initiatives and project specific analysis and work. I don't currently work on many projects that are pursuing formal certification. A lot of them are doing what's right from a sustainability perspective. But not necessarily getting the certification to go alongside of that. So as mentioned before, the AAA framework for design excellence is a big part of what we do. And I'm currently, I'd say, really focusing with our teams on how we can reduce the carbon emissions associated with our projects. So both from an operational carbon perspective and embodied carbon perspective, rolling out some tools and resources that we can use to further our approach there.

12:25

Charlie

Love it. I had Tay Walker, LEED Fellow, work there on your team, on the podcast a long time ago, and we talked a lot about AIA 30. And so it sounds like, let's make sure all of your projects, hey, we're really taking a look at our carbon impact, and of course, some of them may pursue, say, elite certification. So that's good. It sounds like you're baking a lot of green best practices on all projects. Track them, maybe track them for AIA 2030. Then over here we'll see about the certification side. So, yeah, anything else kind of present day that you want to kind of mention that maybe your team's focused on? You mentioned embodied carbon, for example. So do you just do that organically on projects? Do you see more clients saying, hey, we really want to do lifecycle models, we really want more detail here. How are those conversations going?

13:14

Rebecca

I think on the embodied carbon side, on a lot of projects, we are the ones advocating for it and pushing for it or educating our teams about it. I'd say there's not been a lot of explicit interest, but from clients yet that they're still building up the knowledge base to know, to ask for that or know specifically, like, what they might want to target when it comes to embodied carbon. But we have seen interest in lowering embodied carbon of projects. We have one project recently that specifically wanted to target embodied carbon analysis and their work, and that's been something we've been supporting. And as part of that, we are taking a closer look at our specifications, trying to integrate, embody carbon, reporting requirements for products that we're procuring, and also educate ourselves on how to integrate material vetting strategies for lower embodied carbon products. So there's a lot to tackle when it comes to actually achieving a project that is reducing embodied carbon. And it's a good learning opportunity, I think, for everyone involved, hugely.

14:25

Charlie

Yeah. A couple follow ups there, one with AIA 2030. To the non-architecturers like me, is it just operating carbon you track there? Is there a place to also say, well, here's our embodied carbon? If we calculate it, what do you submit for that?

14:41

Rebecca

Good question. So for AA 2030, historically it has been focused on operational performance, but recently, I believe this past year was the first year it included this. But it is now asking teams about embodied carbon as well. So you can report your whole building embodied carbon through the AIA 2030 platform. And it's exciting to see that. I believe there's still a lot of work that can be done to get teams to actually pursue that on a lot of projects, but it's great that they've at least put a placeholder there for teams to start plugging into.

15:24

Charlie

Absolutely. It's good to hear that they're adding that in. How about software tools? I think maybe the one click LCA. Athena IeS virtual environment EC three, what is your team like to use for Icas and embody carbon?

15:40

Rebecca

Early design kind of. Before diving into the whole building LCA, we've been exploring the care tool and epic for helping us understand what the embodied carbon savings potential is before getting into the details of specific material quantities or product selection. And then we're still kind of narrowing down and refining our process for the whole building LCA. That would happen later in the project timeline. The two main options that we're looking at on our projects are either one click LCA or tally.

16:21

Charlie

All right, some great tools out there. You heard it here. And we're still relatively early in this. We got a lot of material carbon. I've done a little bit of work on a 485 and the construction impacts carbon. So, hey, this isn't going away to all our listeners. Make sure you check out these tools, read up on it. And that's a good segue to one of my next questions, which is, hey, what's next? What are you kind of excited about? Anything you're kind of reading up on that is coming at us in this green building movement.

16:49

Rebecca

Yeah, I'm particularly excited about the materials pledge and just a lot of the additional effort that our industry is engaged in for additional disclosure from manufacturers. I feel like actually LEED V.4 kicked off a really good movement towards asking manufacturers for some of the information that we needed to have to make informed decisions like embodied carbon and material ingredients. And I think the AAA materials pledges to take that to the next level and get teams to think really holistically about their products and trade offs of those products. So

I'm curious to just see where that takes us. And I know for OPN architects, we've been trying to put together more resources for our teams to really understand both embodied carbon and health impacts of the products we are specifying and doing outreach to our suppliers and our reps and manufacturers to get more detailed data about specific chemicals of concern and products. Hopefully, as the momentum keeps building, we have a really good range of products to choose from that are both low in body carbon and that minimize chemicals of concern that I think are becoming more, people are becoming more aware of those issues and the need to address it.

18:27

Charlie

Absolutely. So for those not familiar with that material pledge, can you impact a little more? We've got body carbon. I started to hear a little bit on even the healthy material side. And I think one thing that happened, the pandemic kind of took a shining light away from some of that, but I think it's coming back here as we want to get back to those kinds of materials. Where can we learn more about that? What should we know on material pledge?

18:50

Rebecca

The materials pledge is still in the initial stages. We're just coming up on the first reporting period for that. And it includes five pledges for the health of materials. It's climate health, human health, ecosystem health, circular economy and social health. And I probably need to check that one.

19:19

Charlie

You're teaching me. It's the AIA. Thank you for going. Human health, social health and equity, ecosystem health, climate health and circular economy. This is good. We're going to put a link to this in the show notes, but it sounds like that's important to you. You really want to make sure we're focused on this,

19:35

Rebecca

I think that there's a lot of opportunities for us to just get aligned as an industry and what, in terms of what we're asking for and taking it to that next level.

19:47

Charlie

Circular economy does it come down to specifications? Here is the burden on the architect to specify something that is truly reusable and recyclable. Are you trying to sort out certain building product manufacturers? Because they just can't help with that. Tell us a little bit about that.

20:06

Rebecca

Yeah, I think that for the circular economy, this is an area where most architects and manufacturers are still figuring out how to implement it. And we have goals to specify things that promote or specify materials that promote a circular economy. But I think there's a lot of education to be done and just technical advancements to be done to make that a really integrated and implementable process. I think there's been some exciting work recently from some counties and municipalities around providing resources for material reuse guidelines and specifications around that. Hennepin county and Minnesota recently issued some guidance there. And also there's been more conversations about design for disassembly and thinking about how, as architects, we can design connections and assemblies that actually could be disassembled and reused at their end of life. I think we'll see a lot more in future conferences and resources that get developed around that topic.

21:21

Charlie

Remember some of that back when the World cup was in Qatar, just a lot of the stadiums were built so they could be disassembled and sent pieces into different

communities, including the stands and parking garages. I always hear from architect friends that the buildings that are being built now are going to have to be changed into a different use when we have fully autonomous vehicles. Right. And all the cars don't really need to park. They're just out helping people and working. Yeah. You got to think a lot further out these days, and that's sustainability. Right. So. Okay, let's do some rapid fire questions here to get to know you more. I'm really enjoying this conversation. Rebecca, what would you say is your specialty or gift?

22:03

Rebecca

I would say that I have a great attention to detail and was very useful when I was doing a lot of certification work around leed and well and think continues to be useful and specifications and energy goal setting. So I'll go with attention to detail.

22:25

Charlie

Sure. Those LEED reviewers, they can be pretty picky.

22:29

Rebecca

They can be.

22:31

Charlie

Later we'll talk about which LEED review teams we like, which ones we don't. But that's just an inside joke there. How about any good habits, routines? What helps you stay productive?

22:41

Rebecca

Probably like many, I enjoy daily to-do lists and I've also got into the habit of putting together a quick weekly summary for myself, just jotting down the four or

five main things I got done that week. And I think that has been helpful because you can get into the mindset that things are taking a lot of time or that they're getting stalled. And when you go back and actually look at, oh, I did all these things in the past month or all these things in the past year, it really helps keep me positive about the momentum that is ongoing and from a work routine, those are a few things I like to do. And then personally, I really enjoy gardening after the workday is over and just getting even if its five minutes to step outside and whole weeds or pick a few things, that's an enjoyable process.

23:43

Charlie

It grounded there. Did you do some of that in New York as well? And you carried that hobby to Iowa or is there a little more space here? What's the setup?

23:52

Rebecca

I attempted it in New York, when I had a concrete slab in my backyard, the lighting wasn't quite right for growing what I wanted to grow. So I've definitely picked up that hobby more so in Iowa.

24:06

Charlie

Okay, definitely to do list. I like that too. I don't know what system you use, but there is something about small and large tasks, just checking them off, getting them done, reflecting back on it to show progress. Right. Because sometimes it can get a little overwhelming. What does your to do list look like?

24:27

Rebecca

I use onenote. It's not a particularly sophisticated app for to-do lists, but how I keep track of it.

24:35

Charlie

Okay. I use a tool called Trello, but have a system stick to it. As we get to know each other more, you'll learn. I'm a fan of the bucket list. Not everybody has a bucket list, but if you had some things you could share, maybe some adventure, some travel, maybe you want to write a book. I don't know what's on the bucket list.

24:52

Rebecca

One thing that has been on my bucket list for a very long time is fixing up an old house, and that is something that I'm currently in progress with. In my move to Iowa, I moved into my old family from a house that needs a good number of repairs, and has a lot of exciting projects underway. I'm enjoying that a lot in the process.

25:19

Charlie

That's exciting. I'm sure you're putting in some different sustainable features too. How about any travel adventure? A place you want to get to one day?

25:28

Rebecca

Yeah, I was able to do a lot of traveling in grad school especially, and since then, I can't say that I have any destinations on my bucket list at the time being. I typically will travel where the time takes me. There's a friend living abroad or an interesting conference to go to and I'll kind of be. I leave it open ended as to where I travel next.

25:54

Charlie

I love that. Little spontaneous but willing to travel. That's what I'm hearing. Willing to, but that's fun. Thank you. So how about books? I don't know. If you like to

listen to an audiobook, pick up a hardcover in your hands. But first, how do you like to learn? And then second, is there a book you'd recommend to our listeners?

26:15

Rebecca

Yeah, I typically will read books as opposed to listening to audiobooks, though I should get into the habit of audiobooks because I do have some long drives these days. But in terms of book recommendations on a personal, not architectural related recommendation, I really enjoyed the cookbook Salt Fat Acid Heat by Samin Nostrad. And that one, I feel like it was really valuable because it distills cooking into four really simple concepts and really helped me better at improvising with cooking, which usually I would just follow recipes to a t. And that one gave me more knowledge to feel like I could adapt things and work with what I have. And then on a more professional architectural recommendation for books, I will say that I haven't finished reading this. I've really just started it. But I'm excited about the book by Corey Squire called Planet, a practical guide to realizing architecture's potential. Excited to dig into his book more.

27:31

Charlie

Two great book recommendations. I'm really enjoying our conversation here. Just a couple more questions as we start to wind down the podcast. As you look back on your career, is there anything that you wish you knew earlier?

27:45

Rebecca

Some advice that I would give for me and my early career is to welcome opportunities to go outside my comfort zone and to stop asking for permission.

28:00

Charlie

Those are good. That's really good. Can you think back to a point in your career

where it just turned for you? That confidence was there, you just wish you to move that a little earlier?

28:12

Rebecca

I recognized early on that it would be good to do things outside my comfort zone. And I did kind of tell myself that advice. I don't know if anyone ever told it to me, but I had to make a conscious effort to do that. I'm thinking about opportunities to organize events in the architecture community or get engaged in policy work where maybe policy, and was a bit outside of my realm of expertise. And so trying to step into that environment, I think took a little bit of courage for me. I also had the opportunity to do a collaboration and kind of presentation with the bhutanese government, and that was something that initially I was a little hesitant to jump on board with because I didn't really know what to expect.

29:15

Rebecca

But ultimately, every time I went outside of my comfort zone, I really got a lot out of the experience.

29:22

Charlie

Amazing. Thank you for sharing that. I can tell you lit up there. That's really cool. Last question. Let's say someone's listening. They're getting super excited here about hearing your story, but they're just now jumping into the green building movement. They're excited about it. Any words of encouragement for them as we come to a close?

29:40

Rebecca

I think that kind of goes back to what I mentioned before, if you're kind of getting into this green building movement. Just be proactive about going outside of your comfort zone. Take initiative to do what interests you and explore the questions

that you're invested in. And you don't need to ask permission of people to take those next steps and dive into the sustainability issues that you're particularly interested in exploring.

30:14

Charlie

Love it. Don't wait on others. You heard it here. You don't always have to ask for that permission. You can go, especially with something awesome and proactive like the green building movement. Everybody connects with Rebecca on LinkedIn. We're going to put links in the show, notes to open architects, the books you recommended, and just anything else we want to share. So I just want to say thank you for being on the podcast today. I've really enjoyed hearing your story and thanks to all of our listeners for listening every single week. Everybody have an awesome day. Thanks so much.

30:42

Rebecca

Thank you.

30:44

Charlie

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