

Michael Don Ham, Regenerating People and Planetary Health through Tech & Tea

Transcript

Welcome to Green Building Manners, 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 hey, everybody.

00:34

Charlie

Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. Today I've got Michael Don Ham with us. I can't wait to unpack his story. I want to learn, Michael, from how'd you get from British Columbia to one of my favorite cities, New York? And we've got to talk about this. Your headline on LinkedIn says, regenerating people and planetary health through tea and technology. Welcome to the podcast.

00:57

Michael

Thanks so much for having me, Charlie. Excited to chat with you.

01:01

Charlie

I know we connected at the well conference earlier in the year, and I've been kind of looking at some of your work, and I just can't wait to kind of see what you're up to today. But on the podcast, I love to kind of get a good foundation. So if you

would, for our listeners, take us back. Where'd you grow up and where'd you go to school?

01:15

Michael

I grew up in the beautiful city of Vancouver, British Columbia, all my formative years, elementary school, all the way to university. I graduated from UBC, actually majored in kinesiology and nutrition, which are still two of my passions. And then my first job as a boy was a paperboy. But my first job out of university was a high school teacher. I taught in the high school system for a couple years, and then I had this great opportunity to move to New York. I just made that bold decision in my mid twenties, and it happened to be, it was a week before 911, so it was a crazy time.

02:03

Charlie

Paperboy. I don't know how many of those are still around, but I did that too. You hear some great stories. That was one of mine. I love that. I ask about sustainability. We'll talk about wellness in a minute. But did you have an aha? Do you already know? You kind of maybe one day want to do something around sustainability or wellness. You had the kinesiology, so unpack that. What other inspirations did you have?

02:29

Michael

I didn't know it at the time. Obviously, my focus, even with my university studies and my choice of kinesiology and nutrition, I was really focused on helping people live healthier longer, you know? And I didn't at the time realize it's tied to sustainability. But sustainability and health are tied up at the hip together. And later one of my bosses, when I was in my twenties, actually the reason why I moved to New York, he had a huge impact on me. And he was like, it's very difficult for us as individuals to change the world. We just have to focus on what we see around us, what we can touch. And from there, we model ourselves, we

inspire others, and that grows and grows, and it can move into something much larger. So that was huge. And he always talked about making sure every decision, lifestyle choice, what impact does it have on nature? What impact does it have on our health? So that was really my first, like, deep, conscious state of, wow. We need to really think about everything we're doing in our lives and how it impacts these things.

03:42

Charlie

I love that. Wow, man, that's so good. Did you have any mentors along the way, Michael? Sometimes a mentor, someone we read their material, see them from afar, sometimes it's someone we get to meet with and maybe they open the door for us. But I've had others on the podcast that kind of had to be a self learner or just in some different organizations. What's your thought on mentors?

04:01

Michael

So probably, like most people, I would say the greatest mentor starts from a young age. So your family, your parents? My parents immigrated to Canada in the sixties and without really speaking the language, they pretty much modeled hard work, sacrifice for family. And I saw that every day, so that really kind of solidified my attitude towards how I need to live my life. So working hard for others. Later on, I talked about my previous boss, but he, too, was a great mentor. He's passed since. But he always said, are you living for yourself? Are you living for others? It always makes you question the first thing and it goes back and forth. Cause we're all like selfish beings. But for the most part, the people that I'm surrounded with, we always ask that question, what are we doing for others? I think that's a key, man.

04:58

Charlie

That's really neat. Okay. Great positive influences. And I can tell just that sacrifice your family made to get you up there to Vancouver. So let's kind of keep going

there. Early career, what were you working on and kind of fill in some of that timeline to get you towards what you're doing today.

05:15

Michael

You mentioned my LinkedIn tag. So for those, obviously most of you won't know me, I run two companies. One is a technology design company that optimizes indoor spaces or engineered spaces for optimal air quality and water quality. It's crucial in creating healthier spaces. One of the two major concepts in the WELL certification. And then the other company is a regenerative, organic certified tea company. The way that I like to explain it is that tea is a 5000 year old drink. I would say it's the healthiest natural drink available and it has a lot of antioxidants. When we consume tea, I have it every morning. I drink two liters a day. When we have it every morning, we fill our body with antioxidants, nutrients, minerals and it actually starts repairing the oxidative stress that is damaging our cells. So it's almost like a cleaner for ourselves and our body. But it's not just a drink. You can invite people and have a chat and have a wonderful conversation while you're putting in this awesome. These nutrient dense components into the body. It's very multifaceted. I think relationships are very underrated when it comes to health. Charlie, we may have grown up in the same era in the eighties, right? So would you say we spent more time than kids do today outside?

06:50

Charlie

Of course, yeah. As much as I like a little Nintendo or super Nintendo, I mean it was just outside. That's what you got to do. You're outside most of the day, right.

06:58

Michael

Back then we were in nature and weren't tied to our devices. I think that's one of the biggest factors impacting health negatively today. All the studies show it too with depression rates. And so we definitely have to go back to nature. We have to

bring nature into buildings and we have to use a bit of technology to fill in the gaps where needed. That's kind of my philosophy.

07:23

Charlie

I love the two and I love how you say that they are connected. I see that as you look back. One more look back. Michael, what are some of your proudest achievements to date?

07:32

Michael

It takes a lot to come up with innovative ideas that can help people at scale. So with our app and operating system to maintain the highest quality air and water in the home, we actually were awarded top health and wellness project of the year as well as product of the year at CES in 2023. CES is one of the largest electronic shows in the world. And so it was such a proud moment for me and my team on the side this year. We got into Whole Foods, which is not easy for a small brand. And so getting into whole foods, we've also won a lot of medals at the top global tea competition. So those are all like, those are all nice achievements, but it's a reflection of kind of why we do what we do. And so that's the most exciting part.

08:27

Charlie

Wow. Those are great achievements. And it's validating. It keeps the team just fired up, fueled. Hey, we are moving in the right direction and having some impact. Thank you for sharing. Back to the present day. If you would kind of unpack a little more of some of the work you're doing today. And what's a day in the life of Michael?

08:46

Michael

In my life, I don't spend one day on this business, another day on that. It's kind of like they're both the same business. I think that's one of the core advantages of

being in two separate industries that are focused on health and wellness. And there's so many things that cross apply to each other where you wouldn't normally think. I have this wonderful opportunity to really implement innovative stuff from one industry to the other and vice versa. That's pretty cool. But these days, with Repure, my wellness technology company, I work a lot with architects, builders, custom integrators to implement and deploy into new projects, as well as retrofits, the latest and highest performing air and water solutions. And it's all trackable through the monitor, so you can see it in real time. You compare their quality with outside versus indoor. You have a localized outdoor sensor right outside your home or building, so you get a very good sense of what's being achieved with our operating system. And I think this is going to go a long way to helping consumers because typical processes, someone comes in and says, I have a great IAQ product and they do great marketing. And so you go like, okay, put it in. But then you never know if it's really working. So that's the thing that we really want to bring transparency to.

10:13

Charlie

I can just tell how excited you are about this work. So anything else? Maybe on the volunteering side or just some other passion projects? Like, what else are you putting your attention to?

10:25

Michael

I love volunteering. I think that's a part of what grounds us. As busy as I am, my team is running around all week long. We always make it a point on the weekends to spend some time with family but also spend time with friends, community. To ensure that you're getting a vast perspective right on things. You need those types of interactions. If you're only just focused on work, you're losing out on a lot of opportunities to broaden your horizons, your perspectives. So volunteering on a farm, talking to other startups like we're not even like that far along our journey. Both companies are only in the five to ten year range. Talking to new entrepreneurs and mentoring them, guiding them. I also have had so many

mentors throughout the years, right? Not just one, I have many. And they're so helpful and you can just text or call them up and they're so helpful. So it's about kind of passing that forward and helping emerging entrepreneurs get a leg up. We already paid the dummy tag so we can help save others from wasted effort and time and resources by just giving a little time to them.

11:45

Charlie

And share that wisdom. One thing I've learned from Michael is don't just give good advice but just share wisdom. Then people can opt into what that story, your maybe war story that you're telling. That's great. Let's talk about the future. Wellness, real estate, health and buildings. Hey, what's coming at us that you're reading up on? You're excited about what's next.

12:07

Michael

Wellness real estate is a very exciting space to be in right now. So the global wellness Institute, it's probably the top think tank for tracking trends and out of the eleven wellness related sectors and this includes like wellness tourism, wellness nutrition, wellness workplaces, wellness hospitality, all these types of things. Wellness real estate is the fastest growing sector out of all eleven wellness sectors. Anyone tied to wellness real estate, architects, builders, designers, technology designers, like anyone implementing things, this bodes well for the CAGR. The annual growth rate is at around 15-16%. Just to put that into perspective, the fastest growing economies are typically 7%. India is at 7% right now so its hyper growth over the next five years. That means there's a market that is looking for wellness solutions, wellness related products, services and I just encourage all people in the wellness real estate industry or real estate industry to take a close look at offering these types of wellness products and services because it's going to not only help your business thrive but it's going to bring that much more value to the clientele you touch.

13:34

Charlie

Well this is a great industry to get in. It's related to sustainability. We could talk about where it fits into ESG or sustainability, but wellness, real estate, 13 plus percent growing year over year. I love that. It's exciting. Let's get to know you a little more here. Michael, what would you say is your specialty or gift?

13:55

Michael

I wish I had a lot more. I would say, people say that I'm a very good networker, so I meet a lot of people and connect with a lot of people very quickly. I think that's, I'm an introvert at heart, so I don't like when I go into large crowds, I actually feel very uncomfortable. But when I meet someone that's aligned with the philosophy mindset, how we want to function in the world, then I become very comfortable and I can open up. It's just getting to that point that's very difficult. But I'm so proud to have friends from all over the world. These are not just friends. These are people that I could call my brothers and sisters. Just traveling around and always being able to meet someone and have a nice meal or a tea, I think it's one of the greatest assets a person can have.

14:47

Charlie

Oh, I love that. I was going to ask if you know, we're a little more shy now. We're convinced. But you said it there. You have to quickly get to that connection, whatever that is. And it's not how's the weather? It's, you got to go ahead and just test it with some better opening questions. And when you get a connection. That stress goes away, and it's like, man, I just want to hang out with this person. We might be able to do something cool together, maybe even do some business together. So I love that. Thank you. So do you have any really good habits or routines, rituals that help you stay on point?

15:18

Michael

So my number one habit the last five years is drinking tea every day. When we

started our tea business, my thought was I got to dive deep into this. Before then, I was only drinking once a week, once every few weeks. That's not really an avid tea drinker. If we're going to do this tea company, I need to dive deep and figure out what the magic of this drink is. And so from September 2018, exactly six years ago, or a little longer than six years ago, I started drinking more than two liters every day. I've never missed a day of work. It kind of energizes me, puts me in a zone all day long, and it's fantastic. It's changed my life for the better.

16:04

Michael

And then about a year after, I kept telling all my staff colleagues, drink this sweatshirt, no one would listen. At least a few did, but not the majority. So we decided to put a tea bar at the back of the office and have unlimited tea. And then people would start going back, and our sick days plummeted 80% and our productivity went up. And that's why I think we're getting a lot of gains in the marketplace now. We're in some of the top organic retailers. We're in Michelin restaurants. We just entered the NFL. We got into an NFL locker room. So pretty cool.

16:42

Charlie

That's so cool, man. I'm checking out your different products, so everybody will put a link to wildorchard.com. But just, do you mix it up? You're drinking some matcha. You told me that this morning. But just do you mix it up? Do you have a certain routine, like, you just feel it out? A game time decision here.

17:01

Michael

So every morning, black matcha latte is my go to. I have that every morning. But the rest of the day, it's whatever's at the counter. So people make it. Sometimes they make a green, a black, a blended, botanical green tea. It's always a mix. And I always recommend that because things could get boring. Tea is wonderful because it's so versatile. There's a lot of people I met that tried it once, and they

had a very low quality one, so they're like, they think tea is all tea. But I always say, just find a high quality one and try different kinds. And I guarantee you will love something along the way. I always encourage people to take a journey of exploration.

17:44

Charlie

I love the packaging. I love the logo. That's fantastic. So as you get to know me more, I'm a fan of the bucket list. Not everybody has a bucket list, but what are a couple things that would be on your bucket list?

17:55

Michael

I've traveled to maybe 30 plus countries fortunate enough to do so. Never been to the Middle East or Africa, so I definitely want to go to those places, and I want to bring what I can and be of value. Like you mentioned, about volunteer work. What kind of project? I want to go to places in Africa and help them get set up with clean air, clean water, and introduce teas to them. They could have a lot of teas because Africa is a tea growing region, but I want to introduce southeast asian teas, korean teas specifically. And wherever I travel, I just want to be able to be like an ambassador for health.. And get people to see things in different ways and also learn from being there as well. Africa and the Middle East, Israel and surrounding nations were always, it has always been at the top of my bucket list.

18:51

Charlie

Thanks for sharing. That's super exciting, man. All right, so is there a book you'd recommend or a documentary or TED talk? Here we'd like to share best practices. Anything you'd recommend to our listeners?

19:03

Michael

A very timely question, Charlie. So two nights ago, I started reading a book from

my friend, architect Ty Farrow. He's a world renowned architect, and his number one, his book is titled Constructing Health. So every project he builds from a lens of health and sustainability. How does it impact nature? How does it impact human health? How does it impact mind health? It's just fascinating. It's about, I think it's almost 300 pages, but I'm about 20% through. And it's just amazing, the content. So I highly recommend this book. And you can follow Ty Farrow on LinkedIn or other places. His projects are amazing.

19:46

Charlie

We will put a link there in the podcast show notes, everybody. Make sure you check that out. And check out the teas, too. A couple more things, Michael, as you look back on your career, anything you wish you'd have known earlier?

19:59

Michael

Even with good mentors, there's a lot of things that you can miss and that can improve your life, improve the impact that you have. One of the things, it kind of goes back to my introverted nature. I wish people would have just said, hey, just go out there. People don't really care. Just go out. Talk to people. Like, I wish I did it much earlier. I kind of broke out of my shell much later in life, into my twenties. So I always tell youth, even from a very young age, just always try to get a bit out of your comfort zone because you'll get a lot of growth and learnings from that. It's not easy, but you'll gain something from it. Right.

20:50

Michael

I always try to tell young people, the other thing is the importance of traveling from a young age, even as a parent, how important it is to bring your kids to Europe, to new parts of the world, so that our young children can gain different perspectives. That's another thing. I only started in my mid twenties after I moved to New York, but it had such an impression on me, just landing in Europe and seeing a totally different way of life history than in North America. Seeing the

cobblestones, you kind of realize, wow, the world is a lot deeper than I thought. There's history to it. You start thinking about history, you start thinking about humanity, you start thinking about the purpose of life, right?

21:35

Michael

But when you're only in your own zone, comfort zone, at home, in the city you've lived all your life, you are not able to see that wide global historical perspective. I always encourage young people, parents, bring your kids and try to show them different settings, cultures, foods, as much as possible.

21:58

Charlie

Go get that perspective. I can tell you, it is just fun to sit down with and talk about the world and philosophize. And we should do that next time I'm in New York. Man, I'd love that. All right, so as we come to a close, let's say there's someone listening. They're getting really encouraged by your story. Maybe they're jumping into sustainability, green buildings, maybe this wellness real estate movement, as we call it, look at the growth. Any words of encouragement for someone jumping in right now?

22:23

Michael

There's a saying from my industry colleagues, I don't know the exact quote, but there's two that come to mind. If you're in wellness real estate and you touch something that goes into a home or a building or office building or a hotel, you actually have the ability to have a greater impact on public health than the medical community. So what that means is a doctor, you go once a year. Sure. There you need a dog, we need doctors. They're going to do the basic checks. They're going to do the blood tests, they're going to review the blood tests and then let you know, oh, you're in good health. See you next year. That's once a year. But we spend 90% of our time indoors. And so the air we breathe, the sensory aspects of the built environment, how much daylight comes in, how often you're

actually comfortable going indoors and outdoors and accessing nature and daylight, the smells, the sounds, is it acoustic, is it noise pollution? Or is it nice music or sounds of nature that elevate your mind? Health, right. Rather than detract or degrade your health. So those are all things that we touch. And so that's the awesome opportunity we have to impact health. And so I recommend whoever is listening that is interested in design or architecture, really own in on the lens of health. And the other quote that I want to say is, and it's in Ty's book, he says, architecture or design is never neutral. It's either helping your health, constructing health, or it's degrading health. So if we do everything in real estate or the built environment with that lens, we really veer and focus on constructing health. It will have a tremendous impact on human health and environmental health. And that's why I encourage everyone that is interested in this field to really do a deep dive on these things.

24:23

Charlie

Oh, man, you got me fired up. More wellness work, Michael, what a joy. I really enjoyed this conversation. I know our listeners will have, too. So, everybody listening, connect with Michael on LinkedIn. Let them know what you thought of the podcast. Check out the books we referenced, and definitely go drink some tea today. Michael, thank you for being on the podcast.

24:43

Michael

Thanks so much for having me. It's been a pleasure, Charlie, and can't wait to see you up in New York. Here, sir.

24:48

Charlie

Let's do it.

24:50

Speaker 3

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