

Sustainability Career Tips with Aaron Rask Codden

Speaker 1 ([00:01](#)):

Welcome to Green Building Matters. The original and most popular podcast focused on the green building movement. Your host is Charlie Cichetti, is 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. Settle in, grab a fresh cup of coffee and get ready to find out why Green Building Matters.

Charlie ([00:34](#)):

Hi everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters Podcast, where usually every week I interview green building professionals, somewhere in the world. Today we've got Aaron coming to us from Salt Lake City, Utah. I've got Aaron Rask Codden with us. He's a project architect at GSPS Architects, and I hear he's a fan of our Green Building Matters Podcast. Aaron. I'm interested to learn more about your green building journey and even your architecture career here. I really have a lot of fun every week recording a new podcast interview. Take us back. Where did you grow up? Where'd you go to school?

Aaron ([01:20](#)):

I am from a small town in Minnesota called Big Lake. The biggest big lake in that town. It's actually nine. I grew up there. My wife and I actually met in high school. She just went to the neighboring high school. We met at a grocery store, actually, she was working and then I went to North Dakota State University for school. Did my undergrad in Spanish and architecture. Oddly enough, I was thinking about teaching high school Spanish and then I took a total of 180 and pursued architecture. I did my master of architecture at North Dakota State up in Fargo. I worked with a firm called JLG architects, and I was there for a little over three years. My wife got a great opportunity at the University of Utah and we packed up and moved right about when COVID started and we've been here since.

Charlie ([02:17](#)):

I love it. Spanish and the architecture. What made you want to have that Spanish component? I actually started college at 16 in Minnesota. It's pretty common actually. It's a long story, but that's what I thought I wanted to do. I didn't want it to be an architect at that time. When I started architecture school, I just decided to finish that degree because it's something I enjoy and it's a good skill set. I'll actually be using that Spanish coming up here for some user group meetings all the time.

Charlie ([02:55](#)):

I love to hear you started early. I grew up in the North Balance of Georgia. They have a post-secondary option where you can go ahead and take some classes. Architect, how did you know you wanted to get into buildings and maybe design? Did you have any influence there and early mentors?

Aaron ([03:19](#)):

I really didn't. It really was a process of elimination. I couldn't see myself pursuing some sort of art degree and really being fulfilled personally or financially. Architecture really was the only option. Yeah.

Charlie ([03:32](#)):

What about mentors and how did you know you wanted to get into architecture?

Aaron ([03:36](#)):

I really knew I wanted to be an architect after I graduated undergrad. Pretty much was clueless all throughout undergrad of what architecture really was. I had this supervisor boss, whatever you want to call her, Linda. A very, very competent, great architect that inspired me. He used to teach at the University of North Dakota State quite a bit when I was at JLG. He really spoke about being an advocate not only for the client, but a steward for the environment.

Charlie ([04:10](#)):

Two too early mentors there with buildings, architecture, and it sounds like sustainability. I love to ask those that I have on the Green Building Matters Podcast. Aaron, were there any aha moments? I know I want to do green buildings.

Aaron ([04:23](#)):

You know what there was. When I was in school, we had our USGBC student chapter and they hosted a study session for LEED Green Associate and really had no clue what that was. I attended the study sessions, but never took the exam. I put that in my back pocket and in our final year of school, everyone kept talking about how their final projects had these LEED ratings. Of course we were pretty clueless on what LEED was and we're just kind of slapping these LEED logos on our projects saying it's platinum. I kept that in my mind and when I got to Utah, my employer offered to pay for my WELL and LEED credentials. I thought, why not? They're going to pay for it. I'm going to do it. I'm interested. Then I started my first LEED project last year at a local community college building and really fell in love with the process. Honestly, it makes me really happy and I wholeheartedly support that movement.

Charlie ([05:25](#)):

It all starts with that education that LEED GA, LEED Green Associates. Let's talk a little bit here about your career path. You had mentioned a couple of the firms you've worked with. Connect the dots. What kind of buildings are you usually working on? What kind of projects are you usually working on these days?

Aaron ([05:51](#)):

Sure. I'm working on more higher ed projects for local state schools down here in Utah. My prior experience actually is very interesting. I was not working directly for the national park service, but they were our clients and I was on a contract with them. There are some crazy, crazy buildings and infrastructure you wouldn't know about unless you were involved with the park service. That was really fun to get involved with and also have a lot of experience with sports and recreation. Overall more community focused buildings and I really enjoy this higher ed that I'm working on now.

Charlie ([06:34](#)):

You have to have a master's in architecture 4.0 GPA. It's amazing and went into the other projects. When did LEED first come on the scene? You had mentioned you're working on one of your first LEED projects. What kind of project is that and how did that come about?

Aaron ([06:48](#)):

It was for a Salt Lake Community College, maybe 14 campuses across Salt Lake Metro, a very huge institution. When they do new construction, it's always a topic about how we are going to do LEED and do something or are we going to shadow it? And luckily they chose to do LEED. I came in during the documentation portion and we did a LEED 4.1, which was a total learning curve, but it was great. Definitely got my feet wet and used my LEED GA right away, a huge learning experience. I have that first project under my belt and I'm ready to do a lot more.

Charlie ([07:31](#)):

Yeah, that's good. I see the WELL credentials. Let's look at the career so far and some of this going back to you and your schooling. What are some of your proudest achievements so far in your career?

Aaron ([07:44](#)):

Ooh, that is a good question. I am a new architect, very young, 26. I'd say probably my proudest accomplishment professionally is I'm a licensed architect. I'm also a certified interior designer. I took my NCTQ exams. I have both hats right now, leaning more towards the architecture side. I'd say maybe another one I'm probably even more proud of is I've mentored dozens of individuals currently in school, a lot that are even older than me through this whole licensing process, even helping with the GA and NCDIQ. That's really what I enjoy doing. I hope in the future, I can be a face set and be more people oriented to get my feet wet in green design. I just love working with people who are very much extroverted, enthusiastic. I love to talk, so naturally those were all a good fit.

Charlie ([08:23](#)):

If you need any resources as you're helping others we help a lot of people not just pass exams, but it's all about teaching. I'm really happy to hear you like to teach as well. You're practicing architecture LEED and WELL, but if we were to look to the future, Aaron, what do you think's coming at us? What should we be reading up on now? A

Aaron ([09:09](#)):

I promise this is relevant. I am 26. I was born in 1995 and I don't consider myself a millennial by any means. I don't really relate to that scene at all. It's Gen Z that grew up with the cell phone and with the internet. I don't remember dial up internet, VHS tapes are pretty much a distant memory. I had CDs. I grew up in that era. People my age, what's really important is mental health because my generation struggles with that. I think moving forward this is my conspiracy by idea, but I think we'll see more of a shift towards the WELL AP and maybe even some other movements. Ideas that relate more to impact on mental health and how we can really cater to that new generation and the individuals that's my 2 cents on that. I think there's going to be some more movement, more people oriented like we're seeing with WELL and fit WELL. Also funny enough, I had a discussion with my director of sustainability yesterday and he was saying, it's a new, cool thing for everyone my age to get thereWELLAP. He said, there's a little clout with it. I think it's kind of funny, but that's what my generation values. I think we'll see a lot more WELL APS popping up the younger folks, new architects being more champions for mental health.

Charlie ([10:04](#)):

And that's really good. I liked that. There's 200,000 LEED professionals over let's call it 20 years. The WELL AP continues to grow 16,000 or more and counting. I like where you're going with that is a lot more WELL AP. It's that focus on health. It's so important, especially here during the pandemic. A lot of things have changed and there's more isolation but our buildings can help or the green building projects we do in the community can help. There's resources there. I'm glad you shared that with us. That was really good. Let's talk a little more about what you're seeing in your region. Tell us about what's happening there in Salt Lake City? A lot of green building projects? Is there a focus on energy savings or water savings? What are you kind of seeing in your community?

Aaron ([11:25](#)):

Yeah. In Utah, we have a huge drought issue, but I haven't seen that spill over into architecture yet. Maybe I'm just really not aware of what's going on there, but what's common down here is just a high-performance standard. I believe it's set by the state, but I always see people talking about it if they're going that route or LEED. It really falls into three categories because most big projects here have some sort of sustainability aspect to it.

If it's not LEED, it's high-performance, and it's not either of those two, it's kind of shadowing, which I'm not a fan of because there's no way to measure the whole shadowing process because it's so vague. Another interesting thing I'm seeing is every once in a while, I browse the WELL directory for buildings. I think we have maybe 13 WELL spaces down here in Utah, and most of them are for Wells Fargo for office buildings. We're seeing that, but actually I had a conversation this morning with my team and we're doing the new WELL health and safety rating for our office. Starting a remodel actually next week, we'll be done by Christmas. We'll have that and I'll be helping with communicating that message because it will be all new habits and new things in the office and all these different changes. We'll have to essentially have an onboarding to our new space. We're seeing that it's taking a whole day and I'm excited to be on the ride. I just hope it spreads more because it's something that I really enjoy. I think others do too.

Charlie ([12:32](#)):

I'm happy to hear that. WELL Health Safety Rating, WELL, HSR, that's going to be great for your office space to get more colleagues to understand that this is a healthy space. Here's what we've done with our policies. I think WELL in general and FitWELL are going to continue to grow as a healthy building or what I call WELLness real estate program. Tell us a little more about your firm. That's cool. You're doing a renovation here at the end of the year. Tell us more about GSBs about your company.

Aaron ([13:19](#)):

I've been here just a little over two weeks, I'm a new employee. What I did was research before accepting. The reason I wanted to work here is that they're very sustainable, sustainability oriented. The logo is a leaf now an abstract leaf harking back to green design and a biophilic design. Their main pillar is sustainability. I really enjoy that and that's why I'm here. I'm working with the director of sustainability on higher ed projects. We're a team of about 70 or 60 here in Salt Lake. We have an office of about 10 or 12 down in Fort Worth, Texas. They're not as silent. We work pretty much together. They're involved in all of our projects. It's been good. I'm still learning more about the company. Sorry, I don't have more information for you on that.

Charlie ([14:13](#)):

You answered one of the most important things. What attracts me there is the sustainability work that maybe they practice internally and that you get to work on. I think that it makes a lot of sense for anyone that's listening. It's supportive to ask those questions and make others know it's a great place that you want to work and make a difference. In general what kind of projects or buildings you usually work on or is it a whole tight disciplinary? What kind of project?

Aaron ([14:51](#)):

We really do everything. Even a single family. That's our smallest practice area right now, but we're divided into studios. They're not based on project type. It's just a tight knit team that works together. My focus mainly is higher education doing a little bit of office work, which is really good because it looks like it's heading down some sort of LEED path. In addition to a LEED building thing from 2003, again, when the need was just taking off, which is really cool. My focus right now is mostly college campus, which is a good fit. I teach at the University of Utah and it's been great.

Charlie ([15:00](#)):

You mentioned WELL. One more question and then we'll get to know you even more, but teaching. What are some of the class topics? I went to Georgia Tech and I spent a little while since I've taken college classes. I'm just kinda curious, what is some curriculum like these days? Is it a green building topic? You reference LEED, how do you teach that in a curriculum these days?

Aaron ([15:59](#)):

I'm with brand new students that are totally new to college. Unless they had a career change or a major change, but I'm working with first year students primarily two second years. We're not getting too far into the weeds. We really don't get into architecture at all. It's mostly designed fundamentals, but kind of before or after class one day I presented my portfolio. They really gave them an in-depth look at what it's like to be an architect that really got them excited. They don't know too much about LEED, WELL or that green movement. Honestly, I'm not really sure how far they get into it and their education in Utah. I know that where I went to school, I had a lot of exposure to that. I may not have known every aspect of LEED, but I knew it existed the same with Passive House. Some really incredible Passive

Design classes, some professional practice classes with hearing from practitioners who are implementing those skills. It's there. I wish it was emphasized more, maybe teaching one of those classes that would really be a who'd.

Charlie ([17:08](#)):

I'd love that. College students there need access to some of these study materials. Please let me know. I'll see if I can help. Let's talk a little more about you, some rapid fire questions here on our podcast. Aaron, what's your specialty or gift my gift?

Aaron ([17:25](#)):

I'd say what I'm good at is I am very enthusiastic. I love people and I love to contribute to office culture and really be that fun person, that uplifting person. That's why I think teaching is such a good fit because I'm so enthusiastic and really preach kindness. Many instructors eat their students alive. I don't subscribe to that at all. Students were really surprised with how relaxed and showed my classes. We didn't work and we do incredible work, but you can do it in a fun environment. My gift is being fun, being enthusiastic. I'm enthusiastic, but just an incurred

Charlie ([17:30](#)):

I can tell that from there. I love that. Do you have any good habits, routines, rituals, good habits.

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

Yes I do. This is more of a professional tip. I would say for anybody, especially Gen Z, these younger folks, if you see something and you don't understand what it is, and I'm talking about new green rating systems or new concepts, do a deep dive. Google and figure it out because you may not know you can catch on early to it and you can have that skill that credential, or don't even have to have the credential, the knowledge and just set yourself up for success. I like to keep track of what's going on. If there's new systems or what people are into. I like to look on like Reddit message boards and see what credentials people are pursuing or what they think about it. I just have the habit of researching new ideas and sustainability heavily, and I'm kind of creeping on to what's going on. I like to be in the now.

Charlie ([18:41](#)):

Yeah, we gotta stay curious. Let's talk bucket list, Aaron, as we get to know each other more, I'm a fan of a bucket list. What are one or two things maybe on your bucket list, any adventure or travel you want to write a book?

Aaron ([19:17](#)):

Great question. I think about what I want to do, actually I know I want to do this. My wife and I want to design our own home. Obviously it's going to be some sort of green rating system because why not? Of course I'm going to do it. We're a ways out from designing and getting it built, but I don't know what it wants to be, but it wants to be really cool and wants to be almost a showpiece. When I have people over, I can be really proud about what I've designed and live in a space. That's super cool. That's probably my biggest goal. I mean, every architect wants to design their own home, but as a green architect, I want it to be super special. That's probably the biggest thing that's what gets me going. I love that stuff.

Charlie ([19:31](#)):

I expect it to be LEED platinum and living, building, and only the best.

Aaron ([20:09](#)):

There's plenty of it. I think it's the Epstein group. I can't can't remember her name, but I follow this girl on LinkedIn and her new office has like four or three rating systems. It's outrageous. It's super cool too.

Charlie ([20:21](#)):

That's fantastic. Here in Atlanta, I'm in Atlanta. Talking about Lauren Wallace and the Epson group. They got an office downtown and I think LEED and WELL and fit WELL. It's a good group there. That's awesome, man. Let's see, what else do we need to know about Aaron here? Let's talk a little bit about books. Is there a book you would recommend?

Aaron ([20:49](#)):

Actually, no, I kind of detest reading. I am more of a visual person. I really couldn't tell you the last time I read a book for fun, even. I mean, in college,

I obviously had to read, but I am very good at outdoor movies, visuals, and travel. That's my realm. I guess those are my books.

Charlie ([21:13](#)):

That's a unique answer. Is there a movie you would recommend?

Aaron ([21:21](#)):

Well, they're not very sustainability focused. I absolutely love anything World War II in history. That's my interest.

Charlie ([21:36](#)):

I'm always curious about what people do outside of work. It's important. As we started to come to a close here, two questions. Earlier in your career, you've got some experience. Is there anything maybe you wish you had known earlier in your career, maybe right when you were starting out?

Aaron ([21:53](#)):

Yes, I would have. I would have earned my credentials earlier. I would have known about them prior to getting more into a professional setting, because there's absolutely great student discounts I could have taken advantage of, which would have been great to get that head start. It really would have affected my compensation going in as a fresh grad because that stuff does matter. If you're interviewing, if you're interested and Gen Z and you're looking at getting into design. If you're interviewing at a firm, and they don't really acknowledge that you have your WELL AP, where you started, or your need GA, I would think twice. Look somewhere that really welcomes that with open arms. Be cautious and ask the hard questions when you're looking for work. I forget the question you were asking about advice, right?

Charlie ([22:11](#)):

You gave advice. Get those credentials clear and make sure that you have a choice when you're interviewing. I know it can be intimidating. You want that job, you really want to get this career going and make sure someone's valuing that you've gone out of your way to earn these credentials. I think that was great early career advice.

Aaron ([23:04](#)):

What I would recommend doing, I did this since I recently changed jobs and I'm going to do this from now on, but when you have an opportunity, when you have an offer, I would look at people on LinkedIn who have previously worked there and people who don't work there now. Cast a huge net, maybe send a message. It's a larger firm, I don't know, over 20 people. Ask how their experience was and ask about the things you're interested in. How sustainable are they both internally? What do they practice? But that was super helpful for me. I got a lot of insider information. The kids call it "the Tea." I didn't get any dramatic messages from people, but they were honest. It really helped me make an informed decision to hear the insider look.

Charlie ([23:47](#)):

I like that advice. Last question, let's say there's someone jumping in right now to the green building movement. What words of encouragement do you have for them?

Aaron ([24:04](#)):

Words of encouragement jumping into it. I would make it known to everyone. Shout it from the rooftops that you love design and you want to get those opportunities. Often people you work with may not know that you're interested in it. Be very vocal about it. Start asking questions about how green concepts may be applicable to certain building types or bring different ideas, or even propose something in your office, more sustainable practices, or different policies. I would just be very vocal and get involved because 9 times out of 10 people are going to welcome it with open arms. If they say no to something sustainable that has low costs, it's pretty odd in 2021. Know that people support it and be vocal about it and you'll have opportunities.

Charlie ([24:51](#)):

Great. The encouragement, you are an encourager, everybody connect with on LinkedIn. I really enjoyed getting to know you today. Thank you for reaching out and showing your enthusiasm towards the green building movement. Best of luck here at your new firm. It sounds like they are like-minded with sustainability and also just a healthy building. Everybody, listening this has been Aaron Rask Codden, project architect coming to us from Salt Lake City. Thanks, Aaron. Thank you very much.

Charlie ([25:29](#)):

I just want to say thank you to our loyal listeners. We actually are celebrating over one year here on the Green Building Matters Podcast. Me and the entire team were stoked and just so glad you continue to listen every Wednesday morning to a new interview with a green building professional here in this industry, or just some pro tips that we want to make sure that you are getting straight from us straight to you. Thank you for listening to this episode of the Green Building Matters Podcasts @ [gbes.com](#). Our mission is to advance the green building movement through best in class education and encouragement. Remember, you can go to [gbes.com/podcast](#) for any notes and the links that we mentioned in today's episode, and you can actually see the other episodes that have already been recorded with our amazing guest. Please tell your friends about this podcast, tell your colleagues, and if you really enjoyed it, leave a positive review on iTunes. Thank you so much. We'll see you in next week's episode.