

## Senior Sustainability Consultant from Atlanta: Allison Cunningham | Transcript

Welcome Announcer ([00:02](#)):

Welcome to Green Building Matters, the podcast that matters for green building professionals. Learn insight in green buildings as we interview today's experts and LEED and WELL. We'll learn from their career paths, war stories and all things green because green building matters and now our host and yes he has every LEED and WELL credential. Here's Charlie Cichetti.

Charlie ([00:33](#)):

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Charlie ([01:00](#)):

Hi everyone. Welcome to the next episode of the green building manners podcast. Today I've got another Atlanta sustainability expert with us. This is Alison Cunningham. She's a recently minted LEED Fellow and a senior sustainability consultant at Eco Work Studio. Allison, how are you doing today?

Allison ([01:19](#)):

I'm doing well. I'm happy to be here. Thanks for having me, Charlie.

Charlie ([01:23](#)):

I'm really excited to have you on and I know we've crossed paths in Atlanta sustainability over the years and just decided to learn a little more about you, how you got into this movement, and we'll give a little encouragement here. I always ask my podcast guest, "Hey, take us back. Where'd you grow up and where'd you go to school?"

Allison ([01:44](#)):

Sure. So I grew up in Indiana in a very small town but on a lake, one of the largest natural lakes in Indiana, which was a huge part of my upbringing,

which I didn't realize until I moved to the city, how much of an impact that had on me, just how quiet it is there so much room to think and be free and be in nature. I really appreciate it, that's where I started. I grew up in the same house my entire life and then went to Purdue University where I studied interior design also in Indiana. That's really sort of where I was introduced to sustainability, the concept and that was sort of the earlier days of USGBC and LEED. I was introduced to LEED by a speaker that we had come into one of my classes and from the moment I heard about LEED and what it was about, I was sort of hooked, hooked on it and knew that I wanted to focus my career on that after I graduated. So that point on, I think that was maybe my sophomore year, I sort of just dug in and learned everything I could learn about LEED and sustainability from there on.

Charlie ([03:07](#)):

Oh, that's fantastic. Pursuing interior design there when you're at Purdue as I understand it maybe looking at your bio, you were involved with ASID and were some of those classes, part of the curriculum or did you have to seek it out through some other groups that you were involved with there. How'd you get more access to the design side maybe that LEED lecture?

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

Yeah. So what ended up happening is one of my professors ended up developing a graduate level course in the end. So my senior year I took that course that was focused on the LEED Rating System and on the concepts that are in the LEED rating system. I think that that was pretty thoughtful of her to kind of put that together. Indiana is not super progressive. Sustainability at the time was really not on the minds, I don't think, of many people. I thought that was great that she put that program together. So that was one way that I got more information was by taking that course but also I took a workshop that was being held in Chicago by the USGBC. They were holding a workshop in Chicago. So I drove up there and took that workshop to learn more and I was already studying for the exam before I took the graduate level course that one of my professors ended up developing later. I had been integrating sustainability or kind of like a LEED statement in each one of my projects so I sort of took it on myself. I think if you ask some of my classmates at the time, they would probably say, "Oh yeah, she was all about that" because I really sort of dug it and just sort of self started a little bit in kind of integrating it into everything that I was doing.

Charlie ([04:58](#)):

Wow. That's definitely a great approach and see where it sticks. We don't always have to go after the plaques. Right? The official certifications bake in these best practices, see what we could do and that's exciting. Who else had some influence there early on? Allison, did you have any other mentors or anyone else that you kind of followed or opened the door for you? I know you had mentioned that professor had some impact on you, but any other mentors there early in your career?

Allison ([05:23](#)):

Yeah, so my professor and I guess the speaker who came in, she was actually from Knoll, which is a commercial furniture manufacturer. They were early influencers and I ended up doing a cooperative education program, so I worked for a design firm while I was in school. I alternated semesters doing that and then over the summers I worked for the same company for a few years and they actually ended up being, they are a Herman Miller Dealer, which is a manufacturer, also commercial furniture. I think that the furniture manufacturers earlier on were latched onto sustainability and a great proponents for their products. Herman Miller has some wonderful stories about beehives and things that they and their facilities were some of the first elite certified facilities ever. They also were big partners with USGBC, So working during my cooperative education for them, I was able to kind of dig a little deeper into their sustainability story and be really inspired by that and kind of the journey and path that they had taken. That was a big influence on me. I'm still a materials guru. I dig deep into products and how they're made and that's something that I'm really passionate about. So that was a big early influence as well.

Charlie ([06:53](#)):

Take us through that, that early career. You were co-op doing some design work and then tell us what brought you to Atlanta doing some sustainability work. How'd you really know it's time to get more into sustainability? Maybe green building consulting? Maybe make a move to our great city of Atlanta here. So tell us about what was going on at that time.

Allison ([07:15](#)):

Right. So I finished my co-op up and also while I was at Purdue, during that graduate course, our professor was working with Brendan Owens who is the senior vice president for the USGBC now, but he was working for USGBC at the time and also a fellow Boilermaker. My professor was working with him on getting materials for that class, but also she happened to be that Greenbuild was in Chicago that year. So she worked with him to get a trip for some Purdue students for free up to Greenbuild, so we could learn more and just be immersed in, Greenbuild, and all that it has to offer, which is a great experience for college students. So I ended up going to that and meeting Brendan and he said, "Hey, if you guys need anything, I'm happy to help.

Allison ([08:11](#)):

Just let me know." I sort of jokingly, and people that know me, I kind of joke often, but I was like, yeah, like if I need a job, right? He's like, yeah, sure seriously. So I ended up following up with him and he actually hooked me up with my first, well, connected me with my first job here in Atlanta. I was actually not trying to move to Atlanta, but I, I did email him and say, I don't know if this job exists, but if it does, can you tell me who's doing it? I sorta described a sustainability consultant and that's really what I wanted to do and he immediately emailed me back really quickly actually, and said, sure, I'm happy to help connect you to some people that I know that are doing that. One of the people was my, my first employer here in Atlanta. I'd never been here. I knew nothing about Atlanta and it turned out to be a great city to live in and have a family in.

Charlie ([09:10](#)):

That's great. Then you're stuck around, what is it plus or minus 13 years it looks like. Tell us about now the work you're doing with Eco Works and maybe some projects that you and the team have worked on and including the LEED Platinum Mercedes Benz Stadium. I'm sure it's probably a highlight, Alison, tell us a little more about that, that work you've done over the last 8 to 10 years here as a green building consultant. What really stands out and what kind of work are you doing today?

Allison ([09:41](#)):

Yeah, early on I was obviously learning a lot. I didn't have a degree in sustainability. I don't even know that there probably was one when I was in

college. So it was a learning curve and I really dug in and spent a lot of time in the beginning just learning a lot about what sustainability meant and all the different concepts. But I was given, kind of a lot of responsibility and, and early on in my career I worked on some really large projects, a really large hotel in Dallas was one, it was a convention center hotel in Dallas and that was a really big project. We ended up exceeding the silver certification level that they were going for, which was really happy. I think it was the only gold certified building hotel like that at the time.

Allison ([10:32](#)):

That was one of the earlier products that I worked on that was pretty complex. The rating system wasn't really developed for hospitality type projects or with that in mind it was more of an office building kind of thinking through those different strategies, which is something that I've always enjoyed about consulting and sustainability is the creative solution to integrating the concepts that are in the standards. So I've worked on a variety of project types. I've been fortunate to work on all kinds of projects and have enjoyed just the different complexities of, of either the region or the location or the building type. I also worked here in Atlanta at the zoo reptile complex, which was fun. It was called Scaly, Slimy Spectacular, but it was a reptile complex. They're fun clients to work with, but obviously very different building types.

Allison ([11:33](#)):

But by nature, those folks are very passionate about the environment. So it's fun to work with them. I've worked on projects all across the United States, a couple in Canada even, and they've all been different. Mercedes Benz Stadium was definitely a highlight here in Atlanta. One, because it's my home city team, but also just because of the level of commencement that came from the top down from the beginning and the desire to be extremely authentic. Every decision that we made, there was a reason why we did it. It wasn't originally a platinum project, it ended up as one, but they really wanted to do what was right for the stadium and wanted to have a positive impact on the community. There's so much community work that was involved in that project and is ongoing that is ingrained in the philosophy of the organization and that was really fun to work on a sports project

Allison ([12:37](#)):

It was really fun to work on a sports project. I mean, I was an athlete, so I'm an avid watcher of sports. My college team and other professional sports teams that I like to follow. It's funny what you find that people that are in the sports or work with sports organizations by nature tend to be competitive with each other and amongst other teams. So I think that's probably part of what drove the project to platinum as well as just wanting to raise the bar and do more and push as you know, the nature of athletes, athletes and athletic organizations.

Charlie ([13:18](#)):

What a great project a LEED platinum and for those that haven't seen it, you can check out some of it online and Mercedes Benz stadium and Greenbuild in late 2019, had a nice event there. It's good for our other green building peers, right, Allison to be able to see it. I'm curious a \$5 billion stadium, lots of materials, I mean, you know, is it just bigger and more documentation or does it really scale when you're doing a LEED project like that? What tips would you give to those listening that might be on a larger scale project coming up. Any, any pro tips you could give?

Allison ([13:56](#)):

We ended up doing a lot of work throughout the project in tandem with the USGBC and GBCI. So early on we reached out to them and said, "Hey, we have this project. It's not going to fully fit into the typical standards. So can you work with us and can we tell you our thoughts on our strategies and how we want to approach some of these things. We think that it meets the intent, which I would encourage always if you have a unique building type to look at the intent of the credit and don't just dismiss things because you don't think that they are exactly aligned. But try to think of ways that you can meet that intent and in new and different ways, which is what we ended up doing. Working through that with the USGBC we had to agree on certain ways that we were gonna treat the stadium.

Allison ([14:56](#)):

If you don't know, if you're listening and you don't know the stadium, it has an operable roof and they intended to open that roof but it can open and close in seven minutes so they can really weather accordingly, open and close the roof pretty quickly. They can open it as much as possible and we needed to decide how are we treating, is it open or is it closed? That's just

one example of how we kind of had to come together with the USGBC and GBCI to just come on common ground and say this is how we're going to do some of these calculations and the lens that we're going to look at it through. One of the tips is just don't be afraid to reach out to the USGBC and GBCI and work with them. I think there are a lot more mechanisms for doing that now than there has been in the past and they are more accessible and more reachable. They have more staff that can help you. They are willing, don't be afraid of them. They are willing to work with you and hear alternative solutions.

Charlie ([16:00](#)):

That's a great pro tip. Some might look at LEED, Oh, they're the authority at the USGBC and it's their job to make it harder and do you deserve this plaque and that's just not the case at all. I can vouch for that as you are here, Alison just say, no, it's, it's a partnership. We want more LEED buildings out there, so if you have something tricky on your project, yeah, reach out, see if there's an alternative way to get there as long as you're meeting the intent of that credit, that line item. So that's a great tip. Looking back on other proudest achievements, anything else stands out?

Allison ([16:35](#)):

I don't know. I'm a perpetual learner, so I think my best achievement is the next one. I guess I'm always working towards different goals and I've been proud of the Mercedes Benz Stadium as a highlight for a lot of different reasons, but even smaller, my first project was a corn shell project here in Atlanta and I was just as proud of that one. I think anybody going through a certification, it's a lot of work and in each one you should be proud of certified gold, platinum, it doesn't matter. I think everybody's doing great work and everybody has something to be proud of.

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

It sounds like you're definitely a team player here on all these projects. Let's go to one of my favorite questions here. As we think about the future, we're recording this during the pandemic still. Buildings are starting to reoccupy. I think some innovation has been forced to speed up. So if you had a crystal ball, Allison, what's around the corner in this green building movement, what should we all be reading up on now?

Allison ([17:42](#)):

That is an interesting question. I do think that the pandemic is an interesting parallel, right? With change and I think we're already seeing how our behavior works with the environment. I think a lot of people are seeing, you know, now that everybody's, even across the world is staying home. You're seeing different things and research happened around the air quality in different cities. You're also seeing the relationship between how the climate impacts our health, right? So within a real way to where, you know, people are maybe having more of a reaction to the COVID-19 virus because of asthma or other lung impacts from which can be, you know, environmental and air quality in cities that have had poor quality, have had some more cases. So they are drawing those parallels and I think that will make people think of climate change in a different way and maybe focus more on sustainability in the future, whether it's LEED but I'm also involved in, have been in the past few years, very heavily in the WELL certifications. How our buildings can help us stay healthier, right? So I think a lot of people will look to health standards like FIT WELL and WELL a little bit more closely just to find some of those answers as they're opening up their buildings. What can we do and where is the research on how we can make sure that people feel safe when they're coming back to the buildings and then ongoing, what measures are we taking to keep them safe?

Charlie ([19:21](#)):

You're absolutely right. It's top of mine right now. WELL and FIT WELL when you look at, WELL, you're a WELL AP Allison, what's your favorite part of a program like WELL?

Allison ([19:32](#)):

WELL was a really great bridge. So as we talked about in the beginning, I have an interior design background. So I was very focused on the interior environment and while, and its impact on people how people interact with spaces and a lot about, WELL where LEED doesn't have so much of this is more about LEED is more about the building and, and it is about the interiors too. But WELL is fully focused on the people and how the people interact with the space and how the space interacts with the people. And so that's been really great to kind of get back to that thinking. I don't want to dismiss LEED's approach to people either because they definitely have an impact on people as well. But you start talking with, WELL you start talking more about policies that are in place for the people and how the space is going to



operate for the people and some design interventions that you can do to encourage health and wellness. And I think that's been a good bridge and I think that LEED and WELL work really well together as a holistic approach for sustainability and health and wellness. So I've enjoyed getting back into the interior design thinking.

Charlie ([20:48](#)):

Yeah. Creative side. That's good. Well, let's go to some rapid fire questions here. Allison, what's your specialty or gifts?

Allison ([20:56](#)):

I think I touched on it before. One creative thought. I definitely like to think outside of the box. I always have. I think one of my teachers told my mom when I was in fifth grade that I marched to the beat of my own drum and I, I think I never stopped. So creative thinking is definitely something that I think is a gift or a strength.

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

Yeah, no, that's fair. Thank you. Do you have any routines or rituals, any good habits that help you stay on point?

Allison ([21:27](#)):

Yeah, so I actually did this before the call, but music has always had a great effect on me, mood and just preparing for anything or studying music just helps me either. It just helps my mood. So that's my tip. Actually there is a lot of research about music and its impact on your brain and it's not just the feeling. There actually is science behind how people are attuned to music and the rhythm and it reduces stress and pain and other things listen to the music as nice.

Charlie ([22:08](#)):

Yeah, that is a great tip. I'm a fan of a bucket list. Are there one or two items maybe on your bucket list you could share with us?

Allison ([22:18](#)):

Sure. Bucket lists. So my personal bucket list or professional bucket list?

Charlie ([22:24](#)):

Well, why don't you give us one of each. I mean in general just, you know, bucket lists, at least mine, I have a few work things I still want to accomplish, but you know, a lot of, it's probably some travel. So the adventure I've mentioned to you, I have three boys. I know you've grown the family, right? What comes to mind when you hear a bucket list? What's out there?

Allison ([22:48](#)):

All right. Well I am an avid traveler. One of my bucket list items and a music goer is to go to a concert at Red Rocks. I have not made it out there yet. And that is a bucket list item for me. And we are also doing a national park each year for my son's birthdays. So all the national parks are another bucket list item.

Charlie ([23:14](#)):

Well that's fantastic. Good. thank you for sharing on the bucket list. I think, you know, it's tough right now with the limited travel, but hopefully that'll all open up soon. I think it's important for everybody to have a bucket list, whether it's five items or a hundred just, "Hey, what do you think makes you happy? What do you want to experience?" So, as we talk about learning a little bit Allison, I'm not sure if you like to listen to audible or if you'd like to pick up a good book in your hands, but is there a book or two you'd recommend?

Allison ([23:45](#)):

I am a reader more so before I had children, less so now. But a book are two, I would definitely say Ray Anderson's book is one that I read back in college and was an early kind of influence on me and somebody's looking at sustainability leaders. So I would recommend that and The Cradle to Cradle book by Bill McDonough was another one that really had an impact on me. Just thinking about materials in a different way.

Charlie ([24:23](#)):

Okay. Yeah. Cradle to cradle, I think even the cover right is made out of some repurposed material. I think, you know, throughout our lives we have reduce, reuse, recycle. And sometimes we forget we need to do it in that order and think of a circular economy. So yeah, just anyone that hasn't read that, let's make sure you pick up a copy and I'll put it in the show notes. I'll put a link to these books in the show notes. Let's start to wrap up here. Two

part question. One, is there anything you wished you had known a little earlier in your career?

Allison ([24:52](#)):

Yeah, so something that I had to learn when I was newly graduated, and maybe this happens often, but I have heard others comment on it, but it's definitely don't be afraid to make a mistake. I think that, or at least I felt when I was new in my career, that the expectation of me and kind of often is when you're being graded when you're going through school is to be perfect or to try to be perfect, 100% right. I don't think that's how the real world works and you're going to make mistakes, but sometimes those mistakes often turn out to be the things that you can learn the most from and you result in growing the most. So don't be afraid to make a mistake . I don't think anyone's expectation of, of you if you're coming out of college is that you're going to be perfect or know everything.

Charlie ([25:47](#)):

Yeah, that's really good. It's not a perfect world we live in, that's for sure and that's how you can learn best. Thanks for sharing that. As we wrap up some listeners jumping into this green building movement right now, maybe they're studying for a LEED green associate exam. So just any words of encouragement if someone's jumping into this movement right now.

Allison ([26:08](#)):

Yeah, it's a great space and it's a small group of people and everybody's willing to help you. So, so reach out to whomever you, you know, in your local community or local chapters or wealth of resource. The USGBC chapters are there to provide education for everyone. But you know, they offer lots of great tools and resources for information on taking exams and exam preps and things like that. So yeah, just reach out locally and find local leaders.

Charlie ([26:43](#)):

Absolutely. And you had done that with ASID when you were in college and now you've stayed active and it was kind of fun to get to know you a little more. I know again our paths have crossed here both being sustainability professionals in Atlanta, Allison I just want to say thanks for being on the

podcast. Allison Cunningham, LEED fellow, WELL AP right here based in Atlanta, Georgia. Thanks Allison.

Charlie ([27:07](#)):

I just want to say thank you to our loyal listeners. We actually are celebrating over a one year here on the green building matters podcast. Me and the entire team are stoked and just so glad to 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 projects@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](http://gbes.com/podcast) for any notes and links that we mentioned in today's episode, and you can actually see the other episodes that have already been recorded with our amazing yes, 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, and we'll see you on next week's episode.