

## Stantec's Sustainability Design Leader: Blake Jackson | Transcript

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

Welcome to Green Building Matters. The original and most popular podcast focused on the green building movement. Your host is Charlie Cichetti, one of the most credentialed experts in the green building industry and one of the few to be honored as a 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](#)):

Hey everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. I'm your host, Charlie Cichetti. This week I've got a green building professional with us from the Boston area, but he's actually got ties close to where I grew up in the north Georgia mountains. I can't wait to learn a little bit more of how Blake Jackson got to where he is and his green building career. Blake, welcome to the podcast,

Blake ([00:58](#)):

Charlie. Thanks for having me.

Charlie ([00:59](#)):

I know you're a sustainability design leader at Stantec. Can't wait to talk about that, about your LEED Fellow that you got this year. Congratulations. We've got to give everybody a little bit of a background. Where'd you grow up? Where'd you go to school?

Blake ([01:13](#)):

I grew up in Chatsworth, Georgia, which is a Northwest Park, close to Dalton where all the carpet in the world comes from. Graduated high school in 1999 and went to Southern Polytechnic State University, which is now Kennesaw State University. Did a five-year bachelor's there partially because I worked three out of the six years that I was there. A lot of experience, construction work and some swimming instruction, all kinds of stuff and got my start that way. I went to graduate studies in London, England. I started looking at out-of-state tuition fees, and said, "Might as

well make an adventure out of this." Also the sustainability train kind of took me over there as well.

Charlie ([01:54](#)):

A lot to unpack there. I grew up in Blue Ridge, Georgia. I know your 30 minutes over the mountain in a small town. Did you know you really wanted to get into buildings, A certain degree, or were you still discovering what you want to do when you grow up? How'd you make those decisions going through college?

Blake ([02:12](#)):

I was one of those people that knew pretty early what I wanted to be. A lot of architects have that in common. I knew when I was in seventh grade that I wanted to go to that specific school, I wanted to go to architecture, and I got my start in buildings as my father's apprentice. I was basically his unpaid labor until I graduated until I got a public job. I got my first job at 16 at Kmart and I was happy as could be because I was finally making some money, but I was his helper and crawling around buildings, under them, over them, through them, helping them do wiring plumbing, carpentry work, you name it, we did it. It was a natural extension to sort of satisfy my technical and physical likes and whether I liked it or not. Also had an artistic lens I wanted to fuse the two together and it was a natural extension of my upbringing.

Charlie ([03:09](#)):

Great experience. I know that had some influence on. You say you went over to London when sustainability started to show up. Tell us about that time. What did sustainability look like then? Tell us more about that.

Blake ([03:22](#)):

It's not something that came to me. It came to me very organically. My career started in architecture because I wanted to really express that side of myself, that artistic vision. I thought of myself as a visionary. While in school I was trying to be a sort of visionary. The more outlandish the projects, the better, the bigger the models, the better. It was more about what I would almost call my ego. I would say that I was touting and went into the profession, having not been given any skills in sustainability. I Had never really talked to anyone outside of architecture about architecture. I

was finding myself early in my career, I just kind of had a bit of a breakdown with the theory and the ego and all those things.

Blake ([04:09](#)):

At that moment sustainability, LEED started becoming a thing. I got involved in it and I finally found my place because I said, "These are actually concrete facts that we can base architecture off of." If we respond to climate and respond to the environment, wind and light that will show us the right answer. I kind of came to it at the ripe young age of 25. I'm on my own after seeking out a lot, I don't want to call it fruitless. It got me to where I was going, but after finding a lot of dead ends trying to seek truth, ironically, it was true. They got me to sustainability and that's sort of where my trajectory went and it's kind of still what I'm doing today or trying to.

Charlie ([04:52](#)):

I like that. I always want to know how to get into this. Let's talk about mentors for a little bit. You mentioned your dad. Who else maybe would you call a mentor?

Blake ([05:03](#)):

It's funny, I'm still in touch with some of my professors from Kennesaw State. It was like a family over there and I liked it a lot. There were certain things about it I didn't love. Being a small community, 3,500 students in the architecture program, it grew a lot while I was there. It started with about 200 students. Now, there are many more hundreds of students in that. It's great to have been a part of it when it was smaller and a bit more intimate. The same professors are still there. I recently connected with Dr. Amine Fluke, who I met 20 years ago. We're still very close friends. Sometimes we see each other if we're going to be in the area. Every time I see Dr. Fruck, he gives me about 10 years worth of homework. I appreciate that about him. He still sort of sees me as a student, but he always treated me sorta like a father would treat his son. I always appreciated that about him.

Charlie ([06:00](#)):

I know you really enjoyed that time in university and college. You are an adjunct faculty professor. It influenced you and I think you're trying to influence others and that's fantastic. Let's piece together some of the career.

You came back to Atlanta, started practicing architecture. Is that right? How'd you end up in New England? Tell us about that journey.

Blake ([06:26](#)):

I was a victim of the 2008 debacle, and I was actually finishing up my graduate studies in London at the time. A part of the reason why I went over there is because they had programs in architecture that were focused on sustainability and that wasn't really a thing here yet. I saw it as a way to kind of leapfrog what was going to take a lot of time to build here and go to Europe because they're 20 to 25 years ahead of us in all the things that matter, at least for sustainability anyway. That was a great time to be in London and then the world changed and suddenly it was a very bad time to be there. They were getting very Brexit and sort of blaming all the foreigners for taking the jobs and they weren't giving out any of that time either.

Blake ([07:08](#)):

I came back home for a year, did odd jobs to support myself until I landed at a startup company. I just sent one resume out of thousands to a guy that just decided to give me a chance at a firm which is no longer in existence. He gave me a shot and I moved up to Providence and I've been in New England ever since 2009. I got up here and it's been a great place to grow professionally. It's a very different environment here professionally from what I was used to in Atlanta. It's been a great place. It was purely by accident and chance, but all that sort of connected. Once I got here, I just stayed.

Charlie ([07:55](#)):

Tell us about some of the types of projects and buildings you've worked on over the last several years, and then bring us to current. Obviously, a lot of sustainability is focused, but in general, what kind of buildings, projects have you been able to work on?

Blake ([08:08](#)):

Almost everything. It's almost easy now to say the ones that I haven't touched. I haven't done K through 12, which is odd, but I haven't done any of that. No jails and no courthouses. Right now, I'm doing a ton of master planning work and that's really exciting because you're literally getting to

influence the skylines in cities. Being at Stantec, we're a global practice, 24,000 people. You get to see some projects and some pretty cool locations. I've worked on retail hotels, Georgia Square Mall was one of my first designs I did. I don't admit this often, but I did a Medieval Times Dinner Theater once. If you're ever in Atlanta that's one of my projects. Georgia Square Mall is one of my projects.

Blake ([08:54](#)):

The W hotel Midtown Atlanta was a conversion of a seventies era Sheraton into the new mid-size. It's been around for a while. I still think of it like it was yesterday. Those are some of my local projects for folks in Georgia. Doing a lot of housing right now, doing a lot of adaptations (inaudible). When I was at Choi Cova, some years back I had a lot of higher education, a lot of academic projects. Those are some of the ones that I probably would say I'm the most proud of because they really were trying to be innovative and pushing the envelope. We did some really cool things. It's not to say that we're not doing them in other places, but those are the ones that were all interesting. They were one off projects, not any of those were alike and that was a pretty special time in my career.

Charlie ([09:43](#)):

Well, that's a good segue to what else are you proud of? Look back so far in this journey. What are some of your other proudest accomplishments?

Blake ([09:53](#)):

One of the things that I try to promote whenever I'm mentoring students, and it's something that I realized I forget sometimes, how special this is. My job doesn't exist or it didn't exist until it was created. The last two firms that I've worked at I've had to be like an architectural entrepreneur, which is not a very common thing. Most architectural entrepreneurs start their own firms. For me, what I've done is something I think is kind of unique, is go to firms and pitch that they need to hire a person like myself to do a job the way that I think it should be done. And that's a big proposition. It's not always successful, but when you're able to do it and create a role that doesn't exist, it's really exciting.

Blake ([10:44](#)):

To be able to do that and to have done it at a place like Stantec, to have the bandwidth and the sort of stage that that presents is really unique. Being at the right place at the right time. Technically, my first interview at Stantec was a WELL presentation I was invited to give to a staff of 130 people. And that was kind of my way of showing them here's what you're going to get when you get a person like myself. I think that the biggest challenge is to create a role that doesn't exist and to try to give it some gravity and to try to give it some rigor. You get to refine it every single day because people are still confused about it. That's what's really great about it and they didn't know what to do with it. They just know that it is necessary and it seems to be having an effect.

Charlie ([11:34](#)):

That's good. It's not always easy either, but you're a LEED Fellow. Tell us what that's meant for you and kind of just all this sustainability work, especially some LEED work over the years.

Blake ([11:44](#)):

Before LEED came around, we didn't have a way of really defining sustainable buildings in a way that was holistic. We didn't have the lingo, we didn't have a vocabulary or a language with which to express it. For better, for worse LEED created that. It came to me in my career, I became a LEED AP in 2006 and have been very dedicated to spreading the message and trying to get projects through and trying to help sell the value proposition of why LEED matters, why holistic sustainability matters, and why programs matter. Yesterday I was giving a talk at AIA, Connecticut. We're talking about LEED and it's been a really exciting organization to be a part of, especially while it was really starting to go up the hockey stick curve of innovation and adoption, and people getting excited about it. To be an early LEED AP and early LEED faculty and to spread my knowledge and passion. Green buildings have given me a platform for that and that's been very exciting. The project work, millions of square feet of LEED projects that helps to fuel the talks and the lectures and the teaching. Something I try to give to my students is a lot of practical advice. It was one thing that a lot of academic institutions don't do enough of, practical advice to students. I feel like they appreciate the hurdles and the lessons learned sometimes the hard way.

Charlie ([13:08](#)):

That's good. Sometimes there's too much theory and you have to give them that hands-on real practical advice. Tell us about some of your lecturing, your work at Boston Architectural College. What are some of the topics you might teach or mentor? Tell us what you're doing with the colleges.

Blake ([13:29](#)):

I've had a bunch of roles at BAC over the years I've been involved with them. Since I moved up here, I knew part of the reason why I went to graduate school too, is because I always knew that I wanted to teach architecture. I just wanted to teach. I like to teach things and I like to be involved in that level of academia because it's kind of pure in a way. The students love their projects and there's no clients, there's no gravity, there is no budget, it's a fun place to play. I've tried to make the courses both practical. We were talking about it a minute ago, but it was also fun. I developed a course after teaching a practice-based course, since 2013 and 2015, I developed a course called Sustainable Building System.

Blake ([14:12](#)):

It's basically teaching the students that architecture, like mechanical systems, is a system and a part of the mechanical systems. It can be driven by the same types of tools and processes that are thinking about thermodynamics and architecture. As a thermodynamic base, so to speak or vessel so to speak. To really get them to understand that it's a part of the ecosystem that it exists with them and the students have. I'm still teaching it today. Tonight's midterms are due and it amazes me what they produce because they come up with things that I would've never come up with. What's wonderful after you've been teaching for a while, is that some of your students go on to do really extraordinary things. Some of them have found a company. Some of them have patented products that we were working out in class, and I was just pushing them and saying, "you can't do that."

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

Does it work because of X, Y, and Z? They showed me but they also gave me credit too, at some point, because you maybe didn't give them the idea, but you gave them the tools that they could go out and they can go further than

you can on things. That's been a really rewarding thing to see still doing a sustainable system. Sometimes I teach studios, sometimes I'll give lectures on helping materials or just things that they need to know like specifications and whatnot. I try to dabble in things and keep it fun. If I get a little burned out, I'll take a break or I'll create a new class.

Charlie ([15:36](#)):

That's good, man. It sounds like you're challenging those students too. Some brilliant minds coming through fast forward to today. Stantec again, sustainable design leader. What are a couple projects you're kind of working on? What's keeping you busy in your day to day now?

Blake ([15:51](#)):

We just finished 500 units. This is sort of a pitch for moving in there. It's a 500 unit multi-family mixed use transit-oriented development at assembly row, which is a Brownfield development site on the Mystic River in Somerville. It's the city directly adjacent and north of Boston. Very iconic building, very beautiful interior. The design team did such a great job on that project. Great views. It's targeting LEED gold which should be fairly soon. I'm very encouraged by that project because there are now bonds available, green bonds available for LEED certification. I feel like that's really going to start to push multi-family, which is an area that LEED hasn't necessarily been successful in pursuing the certification. At the scale that we're going to start developing housing.

Blake ([16:43](#)):

It's really exciting to see that because a lot of other clients are calling, asking about these Green Bonds and doing another adaptive reuse project. This was a cool project. It's re-imagining an obsolete building. We are taking the former Boston Globe headquarters, which was purpose-built for mostly the production of print media. I mean, who reads a physical newspaper now? I kinda like holding things still, but we're transforming 700,000 square feet into a LEED and Fitwell certification office lab, academic potentially, even light manufacturing space. It's a cool building because it creates these really unique opportunities through saving. To create these one of a kind spaces. One of the things I like most about adaptive reuse is just, there's no typical floor in the traditional sense of the things that we typically create when we build new and that's true for any



adaptive reuse project. There's always these special options that you focus on and you celebrate and they become a part of the community still which is exciting.

Charlie ([17:49](#)):

Is exciting. Carbon's already embedded, right? There's nothing greener than reusing an existing building. Blake, this next question, I really like to ask a green building professional. If you had a crystal ball, what's next? What are you reading up on? What should we be taking notes on me and our podcast listeners? What are you tracking? What's next in this movement?

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

We've been talking about zero for a long time, but I think that we're going to go beyond zero and it's not an original thought. It's going to start really manifesting itself and fruiting. From a practical standpoint there's two things that we need. One, we need a carbon model. That's the equivalent of an energy model so that we can quantify towards zero carbon in a building. It's really, really challenging to do a life cycle assessment of a whole building. You can do it for a system or part, but a whole building is a real challenge. I think the future will depend on that. Particularly since 2050, the operational carbon is going to be trending down. If we're still all here. And that means the embodied carbon and materials are going to trend up.

Blake ([18:56](#)):

At some point they'll be roughly equivalent to each other. I think that we should build practices and processes and procedures. Now that we anticipate that the other thing that we need are a lot of PhDs. I think health is foremost in everybody's mind during a pandemic that we've been living with for 18 months. The challenge with healthy buildings is that they don't have that sort of black and white return on investment that an energy model can produce for building. What we need is to actually, and I still say this to somebody's PhD project, maybe mine someday, if I totally just decide that I'm tired of talking about it and do it myself. What you need to be able to do is to measure the health of a space, then spit it out and then go back and measure the health outcomes of the people that were there. Nobody's really doing that. With these other rating systems, WELL, Fitwell it's really hard to quantify all the good results that you're going to get,

because how do we prove the return on investment when those things happen? I think that we'll close that loop or try to close that loop. We need a lot of PhDs, I guess what I'm trying to say.

Charlie ([20:06](#)):

Oh, you're advocating for that. There's WELL and even Fitwell. It's research on a certain line item. We don't have 20 years of LEED when it comes to WELL, right. This is still early in this healthy building journey. I echo that. Maybe one of our listeners can connect with you and they'll help you with that research. Let's get to know you a little more. What would you say is your specialty or gift

Blake ([20:34](#)):

My gift? I'm afraid to admit this on a podcast because now people are going to know this about me. I think the thing that served me the most in my career thus far is that I've not waited on anyone to tell me what to do. In fact, I'm a person who sort of hates being told what to do. I hate rules and following rules and have been a rule breaker my whole life. I learned how to leverage that somewhere around 30. The superpower would be to leverage that for good and not evil. Just saying "yes" to opportunities as they came up. Yes, I will write that paper. Do I have a topic yet? No. Do I have a clue how to write a white paper? No, but we'll do it right.

Blake ([21:17](#)):

Yes, I'll join that committee. Do I have a clue what their bylaws or what they do or how to make them better? No, but I'm going to join it anyway. Saying 'yes' to opportunities opens up doors for things that you couldn't possibly anticipate. I think that habit of saying 'yes' to opportunities, whether I know why they presented themselves or not, has been a bit of a superpower. It drives me a little nuts because I take on too many things and I'm very bad about that, but it has served me more than it has hurt me. I hope that stays true.

Charlie ([21:51](#)):

That's a good one. I'm always looking for that window of opportunity and you want to grow. Do you have any good habits, rituals, or routines?

Blake ([22:00](#)):

Not really. I'm not a great person to ask those kinds of questions because I have a lot of unhealthy habits and unhealthy routines, but that willingness to take on risk is sort of a habit and it is a hobby almost. It's a hobby. When you blur the boundaries between your professional life and your personal life. For example, and make, make it a lifestyle, right? I mean, we're professionals in this profession. When you make it a lifestyle, that's a choice that you make. Some people choose not to make that and that's fine. I'm not saying that you have to do that, but that has been a bit of a ritual of mine. Since choosing that has served me well.

Charlie ([22:47](#)):

What about the musical instrument behind you? Is that something you spent some time on?

Blake ([22:51](#)):

I used to be first chair at Murray County High School. I come from a musical family, but I have this here and this wasn't intended to be in the podcast. I think this thing is just so beautiful. They designed this instrument for around 150 years. I'm not sure don't quote me on that day. I'm holding a clarinet and am enamored by how beautiful and elegant it is. It hasn't changed in hundreds of years and someone figured it out without a computer, without rhino. They just figured out this perfect, ergonomic shape that fits in almost 99% of people's hands perfectly. It creates beautiful music. It's almost like a shark it's so highly evolved. It's beautiful and I love having it around. I don't really play it much anymore, but I love looking at it. I never got tired of looking at it.

Charlie ([23:55](#)):

As a designer, you're like, "wow, they got it right." Like you said, 450 years and it's still that form factor.

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

Yeah and that goes with anything too. I do get fixated on things and I look at it and I just wonder, "God, how did they do that? How did they make this? I hadn't even imagined such a thing." Somebody had created that or probably a bunch of somebodies but it's amazing.

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

Let's talk about a bucket list. As we get to know each other more, I'm curious, I'm a fan of a bucket list. One or two things may be on your bucket list? Any adventure or travel or do you want to write a book?

Blake ([24:37](#)):

Oh man, I would love to write a book. I would love to do that. One of my passions is writing. I don't have enough time for writing. I do a lot of professional writing, but I would love to do it for fun. I don't want to do a lot of things for fun and not make them work. I love to travel. I miss traveling. I'm looking forward to going internationally. Once that's a little bit more healthy, safe, and things are a little bit more regularized. I'd love to go to Japan. I've always wanted to go to Japan because it's just this proximity to nature and just so different from here or where we're from. I'm fascinated by places like that and places that are different cultural centers.

Charlie ([25:19](#)):

I love to go to Japan too. It's great. You need to connect with Herokui who is a LEED Fellow I had on the podcast there when you go on that trip. A few more questions here, books? I'm not sure if you like to hold a book in your hands. Sounds like you like the newspaper sometimes. Is there a book you'd recommend to our audience here?

Blake ([25:38](#)):

Absolutely. I always recommend one book of fiction to every audience and it's Atlas Shrugged. It is still the greatest book that has been written as fiction. It's just an absolute game changer. It's incredible. If you haven't read it, it's absolutely profound. It is absolutely profound. It puts into words things that I had only there to think. The fact that somebody wrote it 70 years ago blows my mind. It absolutely blows my mind, but it speaks about the power of the individual and just what the individual is capable of when they are true. It is something that I get strength from when I reread it. It's a bit of a daunting book. It's about 1100 pages. I couldn't put it down though. I could not put it down when I picked it up and I burned through that thing in seven days. I did it again and I love that book.

Charlie ([26:38](#)):

Great recommendation and it gives you that confidence and encouragement. Two final questions here. Any advice you wish you to perceive a little earlier in your career?

Blake ([26:51](#)):

Yeah, yeah, yeah. God, this could be its own podcast. I think that most architects don't know anything about business and I've learned the hard way, how to run a business. Most people go to architecture and design school and even master in sustainable design school because they love design and they love art and they want to make, and they want to create, and, and nobody goes to run the show. Nobody likes to do HR and all this stuff that comes with my business. And that's why we're really bad business people. We make really bad deals because see, we're too close to them, we just want the project. And I wish that we, as an industry, we're a little harder to get because it makes us very bad business people. And like, I aim to try and be a better business person, but it's hard because it doesn't come naturally.

Charlie ([27:49](#)):

Wow. Great advice site. And it's not even just the business of architecture, it's just business. Right. I mean just, people and HR, just understanding how to run, not just a firm, but a project. The project has all those things too.

Blake ([28:03](#)):

Right, right.

Charlie ([28:04](#)):

That's good, man. All right. Well, last thing let's say someone's listening to our podcast right now. They're getting courage at a chuckle here. They learn more about you. But they're just now going to jump into this green building movement. Do you have any words of encouragement for them?

Blake ([28:20](#)):

Let's see. Where's the encouragement for new green building practitioners? Well, I w I would, I think this is encouraging actually, choke a little bit because the getting was good sooner rather than previously, but they're getting is still good because I'm reminded in the thought about the getting

in while the getting's good is that this industry changes a lot. And one of the things about sustainability that's encouraging, I think is it draws the change agents to it because we become the catalyst at the firms that adopt all the new ideas and people sort of look to us or you, if I'm giving the advice, they look to you, whoever you are to be a change agent and a catalyst, wherever it is that you go, whether it's a firm, whether it's a construction company or even ESG right now is huge. And corporations and corporations are starting to really buy into sustainability and leverage it in a way that's conducive to both business and higher goals of the planet and health and other things like that. I think that that's super encouraging because you're never going to stop learning. You're never going to get bored and you're never going to do the same thing twice. And hopefully you're comfortable with that because a lot of people that aren't

Charlie ([29:27](#)):

Good stuff. To all of our podcast listeners make sure you connect with Blake on LinkedIn to know what you thought of the podcast here. This has been Blake Jackson coming to us from Boston. He's a sustainable designer at Stantec, AIA LEED Fellow wealth back to a lot more. And from the north Georgia mountains where I'm from Blake, thanks for spending time with us today. Thank you so much for having me. 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 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.

Speaker 4 ([30:19](#)):

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