

## From LEED's Arc Tool to Master Planning Sustainable Communities - Gautami Palanki

00:00:01

*Introduction:* 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 green building professionals from around the globe to share their war stories, advice and unique insight into how sustainability is shaping the built environment. Settle and grab a fresh cup of coffee and get ready to find out why green building matters.

00:00:34

*Charlie:* Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters Podcast and happy new year! As we're here in January, we've got a special guest here today, not just a LEED expert but a green building expert. We've known each other for several years when she was at the Green Building Council and then went over and really focused on art and building performance. I can't wait to hear more from Gautami Palanki. How are you doing today?

00:00:59

*Gautami:* I'm doing very well. Thank you for having me, Charlie.

00:01:03

*Charlie:* Already you're bringing good energy to those podcasts. This is where I get to interview a green building professional somewhere in the world and hear your story. How did you get to what you're doing, the successes, and the challenges. Take us back, where did you grow up and where did you go to school?

00:01:20

*Gautami:* I'm from a wonderful city called Hyderabad. It's in the south of India and I feel very proud coming from the city because it's a historic city. You have an old city and a new city, so growing up you could see how architecture really defines the space here.

00:01:41

*Charlie:* It seems like you had an eye for architecture. That might come up in a little bit. Did you know you wanted to go to school there? Tell us a little bit about your schooling.

00:01:53

*Gautami:* My entire young life. I've grown up in Hyderabad from kindergarten, all the way through architectural school. It's the city I live and breed, even though I live in Washington, DC. Now, my heart is still there.

00:02:11

*Charlie:* It's amazing and I understand you got an undergraduate degree in architecture. Did you have family members in buildings and architecture? How did you get into architecture?

00:02:22

*Gautami:* A great question. I haven't thought about it that much, but I did not have a family in the real estate industry. From a young child, I was very interested in art. It was definitely something I did a lot of, whether it was mature but dabbling in different artistic media and classical dance forms, learning about textiles. The historical, cultural relevance of everyday life was very exciting to me and I think that's what led to the intersection of science and art being architecture. I'd like to think there was a very well thought out process, but it wasn't. It sounded very exciting and something I wanted to explore more.

00:03:17

*Charlie:* It sounds like you had some self-awareness at a young age. You pursued some of your hobbies and passions. Really cool, did you have any early mentors in your career?

00:03:31

*Gautami:* I think it was an exposure, the desire to learn more. For example, my parents always encouraged us to seek new adventures and explore before saying no. As a child I was one of those kids who did classical dance, sprinting on my school athletic team and then everything in between. I think this idea of exploration is probably like a mentor. Travel helped me along the way, and when I was looking to do something new I definitely wanted to engage in a conversation with someone else who was doing that too. So maybe there was more than one mentor. I think that's how I would think about it.

00:04:24

*Charlie:* It's great and it sounds like very encouraging parents to explore. We're talking next about what brought you to the United States and then green building.

00:04:37

*Gautami:* When I was in architecture school, a lot of my courses and studio work focused on vocular bioclimatic architecture. Growing up in India you're influenced by the history of architecture. It's everywhere. You won't buy a building and it could be 200 years old. What I wanted to explore was given the history of architecture. How do we incorporate what's today, what's current, and what's the future? Learning more about current technologies and innovation. I wanted to pursue a master's degree, and that's what brought me to Pittsburg, and that's where I went grad school.

00:05:25

*Charlie:* Carnegie Mellon, was Vivian Loftness there at the time? Does that ring a bell?

00:05:30

*Gautami:* Yes, for sure, such such a lovely person and just so inspirational. No matter how much experience you have, when you're so approachable and kids from different parts of the world can come and talk to you, that's definitely someone I've looked up to for a long time.

00:05:48

*Charlie:* She was on the podcast a couple of years ago. For those listening and maybe for you, if you haven't heard it, go back and listen to Vivian's podcast. Very inspiring. Sustainability? You've been doing green buildings for a long time. I've been doing green buildings for a long time, but what made you want to get into sustainability? How did you know this is what you're going to do?

00:06:10

*Gautami:* I will admit I did not know the word, but I knew it was the context I wanted to be. As I was mentioning in the underground a lot of my studio work and research was around bioclimatic design, vernacular architecture. My final thesis was actually architecture for cyclone prone areas in India. These words that we use so frequently now: resiliency, sustainability. I think we're part and parcel of the conversation, I just didn't know this is what they were called. With an undergraduate degree in architecture, a graduate degree focused on sustainable design, that probably laid a little bit of a foundation through career and sustainability.

00:06:59

*Charlie:* Thank you for that. I always want to know the origin story, let's talk about your timeline. You got your masters degree in Pittsburg and you moved to Washington DC, where you still are today, and maybe got into architecture. Tell us about that part of your career.

00:07:16

*Gautami:* Can I go back, when I was completing my undergraduate degree and in a month or so I was going to move to the states and folks who may not be familiar with Hyderabad. There's two seasons in Hyderabad, hot and hotter, and to move from there to Pittsburg. I never wore a sweater before I went there. I owned maybe one and to move to Pittsburgh and learn how to wear winter wear was equally as much learning experience as the graduate program.

00:08:01

*Charlie:* Thank you for that. It's not just the culture change, but it's the weather. It's like what I get myself into. Washington, DC is known for some winters and some snow. Tell us about the architecture, the technical and, when you first get into even LEED?

00:08:21

*Gautami:* That's right. I did take a LEED course as a part of the elective course. Several buildings on-campus were certified in LEED , so we were very exposed to what it means in academic terms and in real life. Actually, before coming to the states, I also visited Hyderabad, first LEED Platinum building outside of the state, way back in the early two thousands. Definitely one of the buildings I visited before I had preliminary sense of desertification, the framework and what it means. After graduate school at Carnegie Mellon, I moved to Washington, DC to start a job with ATKAL Associates, it was architectural design, rule and it was very exciting because the group that I was with was the international design group. We focused on a lot of the fine stuff that goes into architectural concept design, to design development, and we were looking at projects across the world, Korea, India and everywhere else. That was my first introduction and opportunity in question.

00:09:43

*Charlie:* That's fantastic. You got that exposure to LEED and then you end up working at the Green Building Council. Tell us how did that come to be?

I knew you then and looking at your LinkedIn profile now, you didn't just help on the technical side of the normal LEED project. We're talking about some of the new advanced ways to apply LEED and LEED for Cities and LEED zero, and so somehow you got to do okay, let's use LEED and other creative ways. How did that come to be?

00:10:09

*Gautami:* A great question. While I was an architectural designer at ATKL, we had also begun to create green teams which would design and accelerate the path of an architectural design firm, to progress towards designing green buildings and certifying green buildings which included LEED. From there I moved to a sustainability consulting firm called AtSite. AtSite was really the cutting-edge of real-time data collection and analysis and it was really there that I regard the notion of how architecture can look forward with data and technology. What I learned during that opportunity, is: we can't sidle the process between design and construction and then operations. It can't be a bridge, it has to be a continuous path forward. Data and sensors and technology can help us do that. With both those experiences in design operations and data, it was at that time when the US Green Building Council, was looking to create a software platform which is now known as ARK, and look at ways where LEED can move from. Perhaps a prescriptive process, farming process, and it was very exciting to be apart of that endeavor.

00:11:39

*Charlie:* What a great transition. I know, under leadership at the time it was moving towards performance based, and that is a very important part of the green building movement. Let's talk a little bit about those that don't know, give us a little snippet at Arc. A lot of the listeners to the podcast are LEED professionals. They've hopefully been able to work on a project they've seen now WELL, Fit well and healthy buildings. Could you just summarize the Arc platform and really what kind of buildings should use that if you were to sum it up?

00:12:10

*Gautami:* All buildings! I think about it (Arc) like a health check up. Every human being might feel healthy and might do the best things that are working in our benefit. But unless you have a doctor check you out on it, you're assuming the best. Think of Arc, as a weight scale. You don't know how much you weigh and how much you should. It's a data-driven platform, it's free and it helps you understand where your building's performance is compared to other buildings around the world.

00:12:57

*Charlie:* That's fantastic green building consulting, for we have a lot of buildings. It's not just a benchmark and set goals, but also even recertifying your LEED for existing building projects, especially it's a new performance base path, not just your certification path. Let's talk about it today. In this role you're in it. Howard Hughes corporation, tell us about the company! What do we need to know about your company and what you're doing today?

00:13:31

*Gautami:* At Howard Hughes Corporation, I lead sustainability strategy across the Portfolio. The Howard Hughes Corporation is known for its master plan communities, and was the largest developer of plan communities across the US. When we are talking about master plan communities, such an opportunity because it's an ecosystem that you're building, you're essentially building a new city. For example, we recently acquired 37,000 acres just outside Phoenix, Arizona, and that's going to be 100,000 new homes over several years. A tremendous opportunity. It's not just about the design professionals, but how do we get residents involved? How do we transfer the knowledge that goes into building a really high-performance home office, hotel, etcetera, to the people who are using it? So that has been a passion of mine for a while and I feel like now in this

job I have direct communication with folks who use the buildings we so beautifully design and operate. I'm really looking forward to it.

00:14:39

*Charlie:* That's fantastic. You're right, just when we think we have some sizable projects, 37000 acres, the future of a chunk of an entire state here in the great United States. That's amazing. I'm really happy for you and I know this is an important role for you. Let's look at some highlights. If you look back, what are some things you're really proud of?

00:14:59

*Gautami:* I think I'm proud of keeping an open mind and exploring. I think my career feels a bit tangential, from design to operations to certifications to. I think it all comes together and I'm really proud of the fact that I have a tribe of people like you and everyone who's listening on the call, whom I can rely on and exchange very candid notes and say "Hey, challenge here. What did you do in a similar situation?" I think for any green building professional having that network of a very transparent conversation is key and I'm very glad to have that peer group.

00:15:48

*Charlie:* Are there any projects that you were able to work on that really stand out? One or two of your favorites.

00:16:07

*Gautami:* Yeah, I think if I break that maybe into two different answers, the first one is going to be while working on Arc. I had an opportunity to work with many high school students who wanted to understand what architecture was, what building technology was and how to make their schools better, and that was just thrilling. On multiple occasions, I could speak to third graders and I could speak to 12 graders, and everyone wanted to make the world a better place. That is definitely a smile to my face by then and even right now, as I'm telling you this story. A second example would probably be learning to scale green n in movement or axel rain green



building, movement from individual buildings to communities to cities. Whether it's my current role at a master-planned community level or my previous role at Green Building Council, with the development of needful sites, I think the idea that we are ready and we can accelerate the sustainability movement to a large scale has always been exciting.

00:17:15

*Charlie:* That's great. Now thank you for connecting there on projects with the high school students. The influence you have. You've got several credentials and you're also a LEED Fellow. Congratulations on that high honor. What did that mean for you?

00:17:28

*Gautami:* It was so special, I've recently received this honor last year, and I think it definitely brings a smile to my face and I would say that, looking in completing the information that's required in the application process, you look back at your own work and career and tribe that you've developed along the way, and all of that is so encouraging you want to do more. I was very excited, very excited by that.

00:18:02

*Charlie:* Congratulations, let's come back to today and kind of your day-to-day. You've got these master planned communities, big projects, maybe even some influence on your company's corporate sustainability. Give us a peek into someone with your title at this kind of company. How do you go back and forth between assignments?

00:18:22

*Gautami:* A great question. Howard Hughes Corporation, we are about ten years old. We were part of different, broader companies, but as for the Howard Corporation, we're about ten years old. About four years back, I started on a roadmap to disclosing ESG or our environmental, social governance. Last year was the year where we know where HHC hired me as their first director of sustainability. Why I share this is we're seeing a

similar transition across the board, across multiple companies across the world, and so really what it means is taking the problem- solution driven skills I was taught in architectural school and applying them towards ESG principles. On a daily basis it could be anything from sustainability in development projects, including LEED action. It could be sustainability in operational assets which are data-driven data collection, data analysis and, at the end of the day, how does it all come together, not just environmentally but socially as well? How we're looking to be inclusive across our communities, from our residents to our vendors and the entire supply chain.

00:19:56

*Charlie:* Busy, and that's very important. I love the social side too. Clearly you're not just building communities, you want to know where else you have impact and it's essentially important, part of the part too. Thank you for taking us there. Let's talk about the future. I love to ask this next question: what's next? What are you reading up on, or what's trending or what's coming at us? What's around the corner in this green building movement?

00:20:22

*Gautami:* Acceleration: we have to do more and we have to do it faster. We don't necessarily need a new silver bullet, we need to use all the abilities we have and do it faster. I'm always looking to have the conversation about can data help us move faster? How can we deliver by the intersection of science and technology? What can we do? What have we learned that that can be applied to where we are going next? So I think at the end of it's really acceleration.

00:20:59

*Charlie:* Acceleration. While you got the tools, we got the bullets. Forget the data, use it!

00:21:06

*Charlie:* Healthy building, let's talk about that for a minute. How is that influencing some things now we've got green buildings, we've got our duty. What do we need to do to make sure we're safe, saving water or less impact on the environment? It affects some homes and some buildings you're working on. What are your thoughts there?

00:21:25

*Gautami:* I think before we get to the technical aspect of it, probably education and awareness is equally important. What we do as green building professionals is deeply technical and more so invisible. It's very hard to explain what is being done. Why is it important and the magical effects it has? At the end of that it feels like you're saying: just believe me, this is what this is, what can happen. We need to move from that to a more understandable version of what we do. When it comes, and the reason, even with LEED there's so much health and wellness competence in everything that goes into it right from the integration across the environmental aspects to the testing of the testing of spaces before we move in an overthrow healthy building. Where we can do better is talk about what does that mean? What is a healthy building in very simple terms and just say it more often. Sometimes we tend to talk about it within our groups or within technical publications, and it's not as common practice as we all would like it to be.

00:22:44

*Charlie:* Well said, a lot of people in education talk the same language. What are the options? It's not always about getting a place, it's just to make sure we understand it.

00:22:54

*Gautami:* Maybe talking about what that means right. It is a design and construction or operation achievement, but what does that mean for me as a person in the building? I think that's equally important.

00:23:08

*Charlie:* Good, that's really good. Let's start talking about you a little bit more and some rapid fire questions. What are you best at? What's something that someone might say?

00:23:23

*Gautami:* Smiling.

00:23:27

*Charlie:* That's fantastic and some people are so serious in their data day life. I just don't smile enough and while this is an audio podcast, listeners trust me. I see a great smile and some good inner computer. Does that LEED to encourage those around you? What does that LEED to? Just bringing some joy to people?

00:23:51

*Gautami:* You said rapid fire. That was the first word. I can get it directly. I think Greening professionals are intrinsically optimistic, positive people and I think that's what you need when you're talking about Green Billings, because essentially you're persuading someone to do something all the time, like that's just the job all the time. And so I think when you, when you come with a personality that's open, hearing the other side of the story, which you will often, I think there needs to be a little bit of an understanding of. Where the other person is coming from, what are the trigger points? How do you communicate private benefits to them and again, end of the day, convince them that's the band forward. I think you know a smile is just one option, but any sort of personality trade that helps with that persuasion conversation is really beneficial in this career.

00:24:57

*Charlie:* That is a gift, a fantastic thank you. Give me good habits or routines, rituals.

00:25:09

*Gautami:* The only habit that I have now in my very adult life is probably unwinding by cooking. I like the rhythmic chopping of vegetables puts me into a very can-do state of mind. I've always enjoyed, enjoyed cooking and I do that a lot through the pandemic. I've also taken on coloring by numbers. I don't know if anyone's done that before, but it's essentially you know there's a color and there's a number on the canvas and you've coloured it and it's a very soothing process. Anything that helps you go from the up and down to a steady pace, has probably become some part of my ritual, consciously or unconsciously.

00:25:57

*Charlie:* Those are great. Thank you for sharing the cooking. Is there a certain quizzing you prefer to cook or not, just trying new recipes, trying new ones?

00:26:05

*Gautami:* I think for a calming state of mind it's primarily south Indian cooking. That's where I grew up. That's what I know best. When we eat out or go out, we rarely eat Indian food. It's almost always something else. I think if the podcast was during Open and years would probably talk about traveling to, because it's definitely that fills my soul and unfortunately that's not happened in some time.

00:26:35

*Charlie:* Keep up the cooking and the color by numbers, and it's good to kind of peak into a high-performance professional like you. What brings balance. Thank you for sharing. Bucket list. What's on the bucket list? Is there any adventure or travel or do you want to write a book? Things where you can get back out there in the world a little safer? Where else might you want to go or some adventures, experiences?

00:27:04

*Gautami:* I don't know if it's a bucket list. I feel like a bucket list shouldn't change and I hope through the conversation I've shown that that's that's

probably the least I'd love to be in inner world where we're all free to travel, meet and see each other and that will LEED to going back to a travel schedule that I thoroughly enjoy. When it comes to traveling because of my affinity to India, I never go east of India, just like all my plans and an Indian stay there. I'd like to travel further east, maybe Ancora, Japan. Let's see when that happens.

00:27:46

*Charlie:* It's down to go a little further east there. Thank you for sharing that with us. That's really good about books. Do you like to listen to the same audiobooks or hold a book in your hands? Or you know some of my guests read more publications and articles. When it comes to books, how do you like to consume information? Is there a book you recommend?

00:28:06

*Gautami:* That's a great question, Charlie. I think there was a time when I would read profusely, but I think in the last several years it's really changed. I think the only books I have right now are sort of coloring books and books that sketch your drawing. I'm more artistically inclined than reading, if I may say so.

00:28:32

*Charlie:* You may be like me. I prefer nonfiction. My wife is all about fiction and so at a certain point there's just not enough room. I need to kind of give it a little time before I'd take more non-fiction in. It's a little bit of that. But if there were a book you'd recommend, though, is there? Is there one we could throw out here to our listeners?

00:28:55

*Charlie:* It sounds like you stick with your fashion fuel. Sometimes we might read books like Drawdown or you know there's a new one for Paul Hawkins Team on Regeneration and you're right, but there's a lot of good

books out there. You know they say there's a book in each one of us. Maybe one day you'll write a book too.

00:29:13

*Gautami:* Maybe I hear you. I think my approach to reading is slightly different. I want that activity to turn off, if possible, my now green building world. Whether it's sketching, coloring. Anything related to art really helps me turn on and turn off.

00:29:45

*Charlie:* I see, well that's great. When I go here I can turn this off. Thank you for sharing that. It's best practice. That's two final questions. I'm really enjoying our conversation. Is there anything you wish you had known earlier in your career?

00:30:02

*Gautami:* I wish I had known how patient one needs to be in the green building industry, falsely assumed that more people are green inclined than I got to know in reality, and I think there are shades of green which I wish I knew before. Everyone's not at the same stage and may not ever be the same tone of green. Either you work at it or you offer the tools and let them work at it. I wish I knew there were shades of green when I was very young and knew how to identify which shade of green the other person was .

00:30:47

*Charlie:* I really know why I've not heard it said like that. That was really eloquent. Just the tones of green, the shades of green and people are of different shades of green in this journey. I really appreciate that you're right. That's fantastic advice. You can't be too overpowering if you're trying to just just show someone, teach someone and influence them. Last question: let's say: someone's listening to this cast while you and I have been doing this a long time. Let's say they're just now jumping into the green building movement, giving words of encouragement for them.

00:31:19

*Gautami:* Keep at it. I'll also say that almost always someone who's interested in the green building industry has probably already done something green, or one has a very unique idea. Please think about it as an incremental process, you're not starting from actually. If you've thought about this, you're already doing something. You might not know how to identify it or give it a specific word that's used in the industry. But again, keep at it. It's an ever-changing world. There's so much to learn and so much more to do. Stay curious and definitely keep at it.

00:32:03

*Charlie:* Well, that's fantastic advice to all our listeners. Make sure you've connected. We've got me on, linked in and checked out the Howard huge corporation. Thanks for spending some time on the broadcast. I've really enjoyed getting to hear your story. We've had some laughter and you've really had some good tips, so thank you so much.

00:32:19

*Gautami:* Thanks for having me.

00:32:22

*Charlie:* 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 Manage Pokes at dot com. Our mission is to advance the Green building movement through vesting class education and encouragement. Remember, you can go to dotcom slash broadcast 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 guess. Please tell your friends about this post, tell your colleagues and, if you've really enjoyed it, leave a positive review on it. Thank you so much and we'll see you next week's episode.

[Green Building Educational Services](#)