

Sustainable Design Facilitator and LEED Consultant, Helen Kessler | Transcript

Introduction ([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 in 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](#)):

Be sure to check out the green building matters community where you can have unlimited exam prep for any of the professional credential exams. You're tackling next as well as putting your continued education on autopilot, saving time with GBS reporting your hours on your behalf. Check it out. Gbes.Com/Join. Now enjoy this episode of the green building matters podcast. Hey everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the green building matters podcast. I love my job here cause I get to interview really incredible green building professionals and hear more about how they got to where they are. We talk about what's around the corner and that's always fun. Today I've got Helen Kessler. She's based out of Chicago, Helen, how are you doing today?

Helen ([01:21](#)):

I'm doing great. Charlie. Glad to be here.

Charlie ([01:31](#)):

Thank you for that enthusiasm. We are talking here in uncertain times in the middle of a pandemic but I think there is opportunity. I'm sure we'll talk about healthy buildings and they're really green buildings that continue to thrive. Well I've got to ask, Hey, where'd you grow up and where'd you go to school?

Helen ([01:40](#)):

Well, I grew up in New Jersey when I was 14. My family moved to Tucson, Arizona where my father became a professor of physics at the University of Arizona. Actually lived in Tucson for 18 years and went to high school college and worked there. I guess that's probably one reason you wanted to go to university of Arizona. So is that just a sure thing you knew that's where you wanted to go to college? Actually, it's interesting you asked that. I definitely did not want to go to the University of Arizona, but I ended up going to the university of Arizona by accident and it's because of that, that I got into architecture.

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

Oh, that's a funny story. I know they have a great architecture program, big school. And then even today they do quite a bit of LEED buildings on campus. So tell us more about that because I think there's someone listening to the podcast here that may be curious which direction they should go? Should they go the design route or maybe another way. So what helped you make that decision?

Helen ([02:37](#)):

When I just started out in architecture, actually, when I started out in college, I thought I might like to become an art major. And of course the art teacher who has influenced me so much said, don't do that. You can't make any money as an artist. I said, okay, fine. Well, the first week in college I met this guy who was a third year architecture student and I was so taken by the work he was doing and he convinced me that I could do architecture. And this was in spite of the thing that I kept thinking about, well, I didn't study drafting in high school. I don't have credentials to study architecture and there were so few women at the time. In fact, the aptitude tests that I took didn't even have architecture as an option. The counseling office had a brochure, which had a quote by a world famous architect. I can tell you who that was. It was Pedro Belushi. He said that architecture was not suitable for girls. And in fact, by the time I graduated, there were 65 graduates and only five women. And I think only two of us actually stayed in the field.

Charlie ([03:48](#)):

Wow. There's a lot of females in green buildings now, females in architecture, but at the time, was that intimidating or was it motivating for you to overcome the adversity?

Helen ([03:59](#)):

Really intimidating, really? It was difficult. And what it meant is that you have to stand out and excel, if one could, because otherwise you're just crushed. I mean, at that time, the idea behind architecture school in a sense was to let in a lot of people and then, and then kind of get rid of them through attrition.

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

Well you get an architecture degree and sustainability though. Ultimately you get more into green buildings, but did you grow up sustainability minded, maybe your family had some influence growing up in that region or it took a little while before you kind of really learned more about sustainability. How was that early influence for sustainability for you?

Helen ([04:47](#)):

Well, when I was a third year architecture student, my father who, as I said, was a physics professor, invited me to join him and the vice president for research for a tour of the University of Arizona environmental research lab. And this lab had incredibly integrated systems. They used a cogeneration plant to make electricity, use the waste, TT greenhouses used the waste carbon dioxide to help the plants, and the veggies grow. And they were growing plants in all different kinds of ways, hydroponic aeroponic systems. And they were also raising shrimp and looking at how to use the waste from the shrimp for fertilizer and the lab had started out using solar stills to make distilled water. And the idea behind all this of course, was to help to grow the desert, so to speak and build all this in the desert. And there was also a guy who was working on Pass solar and see-through solar collector and it just was really exciting. And so that was my first introduction to sustainability. Of course we didn't call it that. I have to say I was hooked and I immediately decided I wanted to work at this place. And I ended up doing so for about seven and a half years.

Charlie ([06:08](#)):

That's great. Tell us about some mentors or some that you really had influence on you. Who would you look back on and say maybe it was a mentor or head influence?

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

I went to school for a year in London and I took some classes there on solar, they were ahead of us at that time and my fourth year in architecture school. By the time my fifth year Larry Medlin had become a professor at the University of Arizona and he taught the very first solar class and the first solar design studio. So that was really important. Obviously my father had a huge influence and interestingly, by the time I started architecture school, he had moved away from kind of traditional physics to also integrating biology into his work. So I saw how somebody could be very creative and curious and think outside the box and other people, I would call futurists like Carl Hodges, who headed the environmental research lab. I was attracted to people with these big ideas like Carl and also James Rouse, who I eventually worked for. James Strauss was the inventor of Festival marketplaces like Daniel Hall and Quincy market.

Charlie ([07:23](#)):

Those are big influencers and you got to work with some of them and connect the dots, architecture, get into renewables early, but those next couple steps early in your career, where were you at and what were you doing?

Helen ([07:38](#)):

Oh my gosh! That's such an amazing question because early in my career, I felt like I was all over the map in a way, because I was interested in solar. I also did a lot of work on historic preservation for a number of years and did a preservation study together with one of my professors for Florence, Arizona. And so I was in the solar and historic preservation. And then eventually I actually got involved in real estate development and went back to school and got an MBA and I worked in hotel development. So for many years I sort of looked at my career as kind of having all these disparate parts. And eventually, sometime after the hotel work, everything came together and I started doing consulting in the energy efficiency and sustainability world.

Charlie ([08:32](#)):

LEED at what point of the credit did that come around and was that just a good tool for you? Was it something that could help carry a conversation you'd already been doing on your projects? When LEED came on the scene, how did that really help?

Helen ([08:45](#)):

Well, so you can see that I was working early on in the solar world. LEED was amazing when it came to be, I knew all the people who I shouldn't say all, but many of the people who started LEED and many of them I would call my friends and at the time it was just a little movement and solar was a little movement. And all of a sudden with LEED things just pop because the whole idea behind LEED was that we would create a market transformation. And I would say that in fact it really did that. So LEED became a very important tool, but even for the 12 years or so before we came to be, I was working in the area of energy efficiency and integrative design. I would say that LEED just became something that helped many other people see, Oh my gosh, this is something really worth doing now and could see that, that benefit in particular from that market transformation. And in fact from the marketing of buildings,

Charlie ([09:54](#)):

Helena, I love to hear those origin stories because a lot of people don't realize all our listeners here that the US Green Building Council was formed around 1993, but the first LEED projects weren't coming online until about the year 2000. So you're right. There was a lot of work there in the nineties. Late nineties sounds like you were hanging out with those folks. And then LEED came on the scene.

Helen ([10:15](#)):

I will say I worked on actually the very first LEED platinum municipal building, which was in Chicago, the Chicago Center for Green Technology.

Charlie ([10:25](#)):

It must have been if LEED Platinum is still hard today that must've been really hard to do at the time. What are a couple of features on that early project? What helped it to get

Helen ([10:36](#)):

Again, it was a very integrative approach. Looking at how all the systems work together, super energy efficiency. There was some solar photovoltaics. I was responsible for the lighting design actually. And that was very, very efficient and cutting edge for the time. And then taking a very serious look at the site and how integration of systems in the site and wetlands. The whole thing was of a piece, I should mention it was designed by the LEED architect Doug Farr, Farr Associates, and it was really through his vision. He said, the AIA committee on the environment in Chicago needs to get involved in a project. We all want to be part of a project and that project included just about everybody who was on that committee. So that was really formative for all of us, all who are interested in the environment in Chicago, all the architects.

Charlie ([11:38](#)):

So relationships probably help launch your career even further and your firm, right? I definitely want to talk in a minute about some other highlights, but tell us a little more about the last 17, 18 years and the work you've done at your firm.

Helen ([11:54](#)):

I've worked on, I have to say Charlie, I've been so fortunate to have started my firm in 2003 the economy wasn't in great shape, but it turns out to have been a great time to have started the firm and some work done well over 80 LEED projects, 12 or LEED platinum certified. A lot of my projects are higher education and K through 12 I've, some of the LEED platinum projects include a couple of Northwestern University and some school projects, elementary school, and a high school, and some, a dormitory residence hall, University of Illinois. So one of the things I'm actually quite thrilled about is on some of these LEED platinum projects that the goal wasn't LEED platinum, the goal was silver, and we were able to get them not to just bleed gold, but to platinum at relatively little or no extra costs. Wow.

Charlie ([12:58](#)):

80 projects and counting and I'm sure you've had a lot of other buildings that weren't necessarily pursuing a LEED certification, but still had so many green attributes. So I've got to ask about some other credentials and then

also your business degree and your MBA. Has that helped you also, what made you want to go and get that MBA?

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

Well, I was working at the environmental research lab into the early 1980s. And one of the thing I just want to mention, which was quite fun as I wrote a column for the Arizona Daily Star for two years on solar energy and passive solar and energy efficiency. Anyway, so early 1980s not to get political, but Ronald Reagan was the president. His first act was to take the solar collectors off the roof of the white house and we had grants, big grants from the department of energy, which I was working on those grants and I'm thinking, well, this is not going well. We will lose those grants. The grants will be gone. In fact, they were reduced significantly so I had been thinking about going into real estate development. I looked into getting an MBA and I ended up going to the Wharton School because they had such a great real estate program and that's how I ended up there. But I have to say that I tried out a few business classes at the University of Arizona just to make sure that I felt comfortable doing business classes.

Charlie ([14:31](#)):

Oh, wow. No, thank you for connecting those dots. I just finished Jimmy Carter's more recent book, a Reflection at 90, and he talked about after he moved out that was one of the first things they took the solar panels off the white house. Let's talk a little bit about some fundamentals and also your work with the USGBC of the year. So, I mean, first of all, congratulations, you're a LEED fellow. That's amazing. What has that meant for you?

Helen ([14:59](#)):

Fellow's just a wonderful honor. I was in the inaugural class of LEED Fellows and it just a great honor to have been recognized in that way at work. I think being a fellow of the American Institute of Architects has been really quite amazing and also an amazing, amazing honor.

Charlie ([15:20](#)):

Good, a fellow on both sides and of course, WELL AP and other credentials, and then you stayed involved with your chapters as well.

Helen ([15:29](#)):

I was one of the initial people working on development of the chapter and eventually was on the board for six years and shared slash co-chair the education committee. I couldn't tell you how many years that's been, that was maybe 10 or 12 years. Eventually I retired from that, but that was very rewarding and we really worked hard to have people understand what the opportunities were.

Charlie ([15:58](#)):

No, thanks for sharing and so that's a good segue to my question of if you do look back at Helen, on the highlight reel, what else stands out? What are you really proud of?

Helen ([16:07](#)):

Well, as I had mentioned that article in the biweekly column and just having my own business has been amazing. I could say that there's some projects that I've worked on that were just really wonderful. One of them I might highlight is the first LEED platinum house of worship. The Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation in Evanston, Illinois, was designed by Carol Ross Barning. It was a wonderful project. I loved working with the congregants, in particular the leadership who worked on the project, a very intelligent group of people who really understood those systems. What happened with that is it propelled that congregation into actually bringing in much higher membership. And one of the very unusual things in that building, and this is really thanks to the president of the congregation at the time, is that the energy model, which normally these energy models don't necessarily reality. In this particular case, it was pretty darn close, but over the next few years he was able to get that building more and more energy efficient simply by watching it and watching how it was performing and making tweaks along the way and that was very exciting.

Charlie ([17:33](#)):

Sorry, say that sometimes the energy models, unfortunately are more to document for a LEED project instead of the iterations upfront, the what ifs. So this point is using it for operations in nature and how do we really run a better building, especially for a nonprofit. So that is a great story.

Helen ([17:51](#)):

Yeah, it really was. I had a lot of training with energy models. I don't personally do the models, but I understand how they work and always try to get the teams I'm working with to use them as a design tool rather than after the fact documentation of LEED to me, that's almost a waste of time. You might as well, not even worry about doing it that time, but if you use it as a design tool, it just makes, so can make so much difference.

Charlie ([18:23](#)):

Absolutely. Well, thank you for taking us back. There's some highlights now, let's talk about the future. What should we be reading up on right now? What do you think is around the corner in this green building?

Helen ([18:36](#)):

When I read about this net zero energy, I think it's really important. I think that you got to start with energy efficiency, super energy efficiency and then use solar wind or whatever to get that net zero, people are talking about embodied carbon. We were talking about embodied carbon back in the seventies and eighties. So interesting that it's all of a sudden coming back, healthy materials and indoor environmental quality. These are all things that are bubbling up and coming to the fore front and there's a lot going on. Unfortunately, I think that all of these things are not going to be sufficient to deal with the big existential threat, which is climate change. I feel like we, as a society need to become more creative and actually develop the will to do the big things that need to be done. And my personal feeling is that technology while really, really important is not going to solve the issues with climate change. We're going to have to be looking at other things that relate to human and social development. Paul Hawkin writes in his book, Carbon DrawDown is the education of girls in developing countries and to me that's one of the most important things.

Charlie ([20:00](#)):

It's a fantastic book. It's been referenced several times on the podcast. So we'll make sure we put a link in that in the show notes for sure. I totally agree. You're right. We have to connect the dots and show how it really nets out to still open on the carbon front.

Helen ([20:15](#)):

Also if you don't mind, I'd like to mention the idea of regenerative design and development, and I'm sure others have mentioned that too. So I'm actually teaching a class at Northwestern University, which we call systems thinking for sustainable design. I feel like it should be systems thinking for regenerative development with a co-teacher with another LEED Fellow, Michelle Holly Stern. And we really get our students to think in new ways and it's a challenge. And it's really fun when all of a sudden they have this aha moment and they go, Oh wow. And one of our students in particular said it was the most important course that she took during her whole graduate career. If you don't mind, I wanted to say something about what regeneration sustainability is, has become a buzzword and a lot of us don't know exactly what it means. I'm concerned about that same thing with regeneration and regenerative design. When people talk about a sustainable building, I kind of cringe, even though I do it myself on occasion and I cringe doubly, triply. When people talk about a regenerative building,

Charlie ([21:29](#)):

Is there a good dictionary for how we would define it in? Where do we start? Right. If it's something we don't know a lot about, it's intimidating and we might not even want to go towards it, but that's not what we need right now. So, from your experience and in your class with regenerative development, while we may not pursue a plaque, maybe a living building is just part of that conversation. Where do you think someone should start if they really want to get up to speed on true regenerative development?

Helen ([21:56](#)):

Oh, there are a couple places. One of them would be, there's an organization called Regenes in, out of Santa Fe that teaches classes on the regenerative practitioner and I've taken their classes and worked with them for years. And the other is Carol Stanford Institute. She actually works closely with the guys in Santa Fe Regenes and she's written a whole bunch of books on regeneration. And the most recent one is called the Regenerative Life, which is a great book. I continue to work with her and it's about development, your personal development development of communities and ecosystems. And that's why you can't really have a regenerative building because a building itself can't continue, doesn't

continue to develop, but the community can continue to develop. So you have to be looking at the building as part of a system of holes, , like the building inside the community inside that larger ecosystem.

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

The pro tips there, Helen, thank you. We'll put links to those are great resources. Let's talk a little bit more about you and what do you think is your specialty or gifts? What are you really good at?

Helen ([23:11](#)):

Well, that's an interesting question. One of my specialties, I suppose, is curiosity. I'm kind of just curious about everything and I'm very linked to be open and open to new ideas. I always wanted to know what was going on even as a kid and I love to travel. I love to see new cultures experience new things. And I also, I was taught to be on the cutting edge. So I worked with people early on, who I thought were on the cutting edge and I'm committed to education and I love making connections, connections between people and between ideas.

Charlie ([23:54](#)):

No, you gotta stay curious. Do you give yourself time to think? I know that's something in the busy world that we live in that sometimes there's not as much margin. Would you mind sharing what you actually schedule time to think? Because some certain place you'd do that or where do you go to scratch that curiosity itch.

Helen ([24:16](#)):

Oh, wow. Well, that's an interesting question. So I love to be out in nature. What are the advantages right now being in Tucson, Arizona, just for the summer. It's so hot here, but I am so thrilled with watching the desert bloom. We had a big rainfall and things that are coming out that I've never seen before. And so I do some writing. I do, I like to go hiking and walking and I keep trying to keep up with what's going on in the world, but you're right. I could benefit, I think from spending more time thinking and connecting for myself,

Charlie ([25:00](#)):

You and me both and all of our guests. Yes. I just always like to assemble these best practices because it's important. A good segue to, do you have any other good habits routines? It sounds like you love to get outside with nature, anything else you could share? Any good habits?

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

Well, I was thinking about that and one of the other things I do and I, as I keep on up on the news every day and I know it's really depressing. And at the same time, it allows me to see connections and how things are related. Like how the pandemic related to the climate change question. I keep asking myself and plan to do some deeper thinking on that and actually be part of a panel discussion and lead a panel discussion on that very topic.

Charlie ([25:48](#)):

It sounds like you need to be aware of what's going on out there and then how much of that are we going to let it influence us? It's good to know how it is all connected and like that as we get to know each other more, Helen, I'm a fan of the bucket list. In other words, what are one or two things that you could share that maybe would be on a bucket list? Any adventure they travel? A book. I don't know what's on the bucket list?

Helen ([26:13](#)):

Alright, well, my bucket list is pretty long. One of the items on my bucket list is to write a book on regenerative development to make it more accessible and we've barely started, but it is in the works, the bigger bucket list. Well, I don't know if it's bigger, it's just more tangible because I have been doing it related to travel and I love to travel. I've been to about 50 countries, 48 States, and I want to travel some. One of the things that the coronavirus has done is put a big damper on those travel plans. So what have I done? I've created zoom calls with family all over the world. I have family from Australia to Europe to Ecuador, so that's been really fun. One of the things that I think is important for people to understand about bucket lists, one of the places that I traveled to last year was definitely not on my bucket list and that was Ethiopia and I have to say it was one of my favorite trips ever. I just love that country so beautiful.

Charlie ([27:22](#)):

Yeah. Maybe it can be a stay open to some other adventures. So where's the first place though? Post pandemics Helen you're going?

Helen ([27:31](#)):

I might be going to Portugal. I have that on the calendar. I'm very involved with the American Institute of Architects, Europe chapter, and go to conferences with them every couple of times a year. The other thing I'm really excited about and hope to make something happen with is I support a couple of organizations in a big way. One is called the Hunger Project and the other's called the Pachamama Alliance. And I really want to go with the hunger project to India. I've been with them to Donna and they work with rural communities to help them overcome their hopelessness and despair and become self-sufficient. And one of the key elements of their work is the education of women and girls.

Charlie ([28:21](#)):

That's an important one. And what you've connected here on this podcast interview is for those that haven't seen Drawdown though, that's one of the top 10, I believe it's around number six ways that we can reverse climate change. So that's fantastic. Yeah. In Spain, I want to say hello to my friend Emmanuel in Barcelona, but Portugal sounds let's see. Well, let's talk about books, you've mentioned a couple, I'll put links to those, but is there another book or two you'd recommend

Helen ([28:52](#)):

I want to get kind of on the not so serious side, although it is serious. I just finished reading a book by Isabel Allende She's one of my favorite authors. The first book she ever wrote was called House of Spirits. It's my all time favorite. I just finished reading A long Pedal of the Scene and that book starts with the horrible and bloody civil war in Spain, in the 1930s when the fascists and Franco eventually took over. And then the protagonist managed to escape from Spain to Chile, where they created their home in livelihoods. And it kind of spoke to me in the midst of this pandemic because there was such horribleness and bloodshed and they got out of it and made a really great life for themselves and also escaped the civil unrest and it related in a way to link current fear of fascism.

Charlie ([29:58](#)):

Thanks for those books. Those I'll put links in and it's always good to just hear about a book that someone really influenced them. They really enjoy it. So I'll add that to our list. Helen, as we start to wind down two more questions. Looking back on your career, is there anything we should have known earlier in your career?

Helen ([30:19](#)):

I would say somebody has said to me, don't be afraid to talk to anyone. I wish I had been less fearful, a little bit more willing to say, I can talk to anyone about anything. And the other thing that was really important in my life was the advice that I give to young people, if somebody comes to me and says, I want to study sustainability, I would say to them, study something that's fundamental and tangible. Something like architecture or engineering. My father would say chemical engineering, and you can use that as a base for which to create a career in sustainability. And the other thing is there are many people, including myself at an early age who have a hard time choosing. And my advice to them is to just choose something

Charlie ([31:12](#)):

That's really good. That's good advice for a young professional listening. As we wrap up here, if someone's listening and they're just now thinking of maybe a career change or maybe getting out of college, going for Green building like sustainability, any words of encouragement for them?

Helen ([31:30](#)):

Well, I think green building is only going to become more and more important. We talked about climate change and hundreds of millions of people are gonna end up having to be moved away from the rising seas. And we're going to have to be really thinking about green building and smart, urban development and all of that. And so there's a huge, huge opportunity in the next 25 to 50 years to do it right. I was believed to do it right the first time. I think that part of our culture is not to look at the cheapest way. And I'd like to say, let's look at the best way and the most effective way,

Charlie ([32:09](#)):

Helen, let's talk about not just books, but even current events. We had a conversation earlier about this. So what else have you been focusing some of your energy on?

Helen ([32:20](#)):

I've also been educating myself about racism and especially the racist history of our country. I am more convinced than ever that we won't create a sustainable world until we create a sustainable society that gives everyone an equal opportunity. And I've been reading a lot about it, and I want to say that there are many excellent books and articles. I would recommend reading anything by Ta-Nehisi Coates and also by Tony Morrison. And there's so many others.

Charlie ([32:55](#)):

We'll link to those. And just in general, I would echo that you're right. We have to get to where we're looking at someone else that we default, but they're just an amazing person. And something to worry about and you're right. Equal opportunity. We just have to raise kids that are putting good into this world. A combination of those things, any other thoughts on that front?

Helen ([33:19](#)):

Well, one of the things that I've been doing, and I'm a member of a number of organizations, one of which is called CREW, which stands for Commercial Real Estate, Executive Women of Chicago, and created an initiative on racial equity and social justice. And the enthusiasm for making change is just so palpable right now. And I'm very, very excited to be part of that. And it's just time. I mean, it's been a time frame for generations, but now it's time.

Charlie ([33:57](#)):

Absolutely. I enjoyed getting to know you here. Congratulations on all your successes. I hope you enjoy the rest of the summer there. Hopefully not too much humidity, but definitely some heat and I love the rain and what's blooming in that desert and maybe that's kind of a symbolism for what we're going through right now. What does all this make possible? Where are there some opportunities? So I appreciate that encouragement, but everyone, this has been Helen Kessler, LEED Fellow, just a green building expert. Helen, thanks for being on the podcast.

Helen ([34:30](#)):

Thank you, Charlie. This was a lot of fun and I really appreciate your questions and the opportunity to talk to you.

Charlie ([34:38](#)):

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. We're stoked. And we're 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.

Charlie ([35:03](#)):

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