

## From Sustainability in Hospitality in San Diego to now Skyscrapers in New York: James Tosh | Transcript

Intro ([00:00](#)):

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!!

Intro ([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](https://Gbes.Com/Join). Now enjoy this episode of the Green Building Matters Podcast.

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

Hi everyone. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters Podcast. I'm excited to have another green building professional on today for you to get inspired by and learn a little more about his story. I've got James Tosh coming to us from the New York City area. James is an expert in energy commissioning LEED and he's got an interesting background, James, welcome to the podcast.

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

Thanks for having me. It's great to be here talking with you, Charlie.

Charlie ([01:22](#)):

Yeah, I know we've been wanting to do this for a little while you and I were going to meet up in the New York area and then pandemic hit, we are in the middle of it. Again, for those listening right now, just want to send you some encouragement and hopefully this talk about green buildings really gets you inspired. So, James, I always like to say, Hey, where'd you grow up? Where'd you go to school?

James ([01:42](#)):

Yeah, so I grew up in Maryland just North of Baltimore City and a town called Forest Hill. I was born and raised there until I left for college at 19. Went to University of Maryland College Park. I graduated there in 2004 with a degree in history. Definitely not the typical path for a green building consultant. From there I've been traveling ever since bouncing around the country.

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

Yeah, you went from Maryland and I understand you spent a lot of time in San Diego and now you're in New York. Back then history degree and then making that transition to those early careers, those early jobs coming out of school. When did you start to maybe pick up on sustainability? Was it kind of later on in your career?

James ([02:33](#)):

Yeah, so after I left college, I actually moved to Hawaii. I was there for two years and moved out there with a couple of friends and there I did surfing and hiking. I came to the conclusion that I had a real connection with nature and water and I wanted to do something that would make an impact. Fast forward to when I was in San Diego, I actually had taken a job with a hotel. I was working as a bellman, so pushing bell cards and carrying bags around. I really hadn't started my true career path yet. And their surf in San Diego, I had heard that you can't surf after it rained for 72 hours. Of course, the first time it rained, I went out surfing anyway and I got really sick and I just researched that a little bit more and found out it was the stormwater going out into the ocean and causing elevated levels of bacteria.

James ([03:26](#)):

Among other things? And that's really when it kind of dawned on me like, wow, this is a big problem. How would you even start to solve something like that or make an impact on something like that? That's what really drove me to sustainability. So from there I started researching programs and luckily I was living in the LA Jolla area where UCS is, and they had a program for urban planning and also sustainability. So I started taking classes in urban planning and also one in sustainability and that first sustainability class, I took it, it hit me like a ton of bricks

Charlie ([04:02](#)):

I want everyone to hear this to go from bellman there at the grand Mar in San Diego to going out and getting those sustainability classes and ultimately being the sustainability manager there. Right. So just still take us through that, , what were you learning at the time, taking those additional classes and how'd you maybe go to your boss or someone there at the resort and say, Hey, I'll do sustainability.

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

Yeah. So then I was taking urban planning in sustainability. The one thing about urban planning, one of the professors had told me you're looking at 30 years, 50 years, like you may not see some of these projects completed. Then on the sustainability side they were talking about, you can make an immediate impact. When I was taking those classes, it was very much, these are the things that you can do in a business today from building a business plan for a lighting retrofit, to waste diversion, and they were really teaching all the aspects of how to set up a program, how to actually put it in practice. So I was going into those classes and learning a lot. Then I literally just walked down to the director of the engineering office and at the hotel and his name is Vern Bulden and told him I want to be a part of the green team.

James ([05:19](#)):

I want to help out in any way that I can. And luckily for me, Vern, who would later be my boss? A great guy gave me really, my first shot. He was very much like, Hey, let's start out by, you shadowing me in meetings. So one of the first meetings that I shadowed him on was an inspection by the city on the recycling program for the hotel and they failed miserably. I think, something like a 12% diversion rate at the hotel at the time. And at the time the city of San Diego had an ordinance that you had to meet a 40% reduction or a diversion rate. So at the end of the meeting, the representative from the city essentially said, you're not meeting your demands and you can be fined for this. You need to figure that out and he turned immediately to me and he was like, well, that's why I brought James. He's taking classes on sustainability and he's going to figure this out for us. So that is how I got my first shot at sustainability at the end of the meeting Vern told me, he said, give yourself a title, write yourself a job description and we'll get you part time working on that plan.

Charlie ([06:19](#)):

That is a great story. That's what I love on the podcast here. Those origin stories. James, thank you. Who else might've had some influence there. What a great mentor and boss you had at the time, but who else stands out? Who else maybe helped along the way?

James ([06:40](#)):

After I started working as a sustainability coordinator part time I started going to US GBC meetings there in San Diego. I met Jeff Marshall who works with healthy buildings, which was recently bought by UL. He was a co chair for the EBOM committee for us in San Diego. I met him and we started talking and he was like you should start coming to Ebon meetings. Eventually, he recommended me as the co chair and he and I ran that committee for about a year. I have to say, I learned a lot from Jeff and he actually would get me my next job when I jumped from the owner's side at the hotel into consulting, he was the guy who got me that job and taught me a ton of the consulting side and a little bit of wisdom around sales and building relationships and those types of things.

Charlie ([07:34](#)):

That's great. Talk a little bit about the US GBC time in that chapter. Of course, USGBC National or companies can be members, but there's so many active chapters. It sounds like that was a very active chapter in San Diego. Can you speak a little more and how that helped you early in your career?

James ([07:54](#)):

Absolutely. That is a fantastic chapter there in San Diego. I've been all around the country. I've visited lots of chapters, but San Diego, they have a great community there. That is when I got my first perspective on what other people are doing in sustainability and the different types of jobs and career paths. When I talk to people who are just getting into sustainability and trying to figure out what they want their path to be, I always tell them to go to USGBC meetings and find other professional affiliations to get involved with. But that time when the EMOM committee, like I said, ended up landing me my next job, but I met a lot of people and made a lot of connections that I still have today. At the time they were doing what they called the gap

program and I believe they're still running it. Essentially, you got to volunteer to help with LEED projects for nonprofits and we were working on some of the projects in Balbo park, which is a beautiful park there in San Diego, some of the historic buildings. That was my first case of LEED and the first time I could say, Oh, I have sustainability experience because I got to work on these nonprofit LEED projects. Oddly enough, it actually ended up being the first experience I had with the water credit and going around and finding water saving.

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

Thank you. To everyone listening we're not just a fan of credentials and education and really understand what's going on with this movement, but absolutely get involved with your local chapters. USGBC is great, but also BOMA and ASHRAE and just so many others. Now, James you're in New York City and of course the urban green council, another fantastic chapter there. I know you're really staying involved as you look back on the career and we're going to talk in a minute about what you do today, but as you look back a little further what's really standing out is what's on the highlight reel.

James ([09:44](#)):

When I think back after a year of doing the energy project, the hotel, and after being a sustainability facility manager for about a year, we really started to see some progress doing a lot of lighting retrofits and other energy upgrades. I remember getting called up to the accounting office, which is very much, you have to go see the principal type thing. Like you're in trouble when they call you up to accounting and sitting down with the director of finance. She was like, no, James, we love what you're doing here but we have some issues with our utility bills. We noticed that we were thinking that you haven't been paying them correctly for the last couple of months because they're down and we're not up to budget. I was looking through them and I was like, no, these are all the correct amounts. She's like, well, there's obviously something wrong here. I was like, no we did this big lighting retrofit and we changed out the exhaust fans and the clubhouse. So our energy is actually down that amount and she didn't believe me at first and I kind of took her through everything. She was like, okay, well I just called you up here to tell you you're doing a great job.

Charlie ([10:53](#)):

I love it. That's really good to continue the career. And then you can highlight a few projects you've worked on, but tell us a little time with healthy buildings in California, but then what brought you to New York? And tell us a little bit about the firm you're with now and if you could highlight a few more of these green building projects you've been on.

James ([11:12](#)):

Absolutely. So the primary work now is element engineering, which is part of the integral group, which is a firm nationwide. Our focus is deep green engineering and we have a sustainability division in the building performance division, which I kind of bounced back and forth between. My opportunity to join Integral Group came probably about five years ago. They have a startup or had a startup Austin office and they were hiring a sustainability consultant for that office. I applied to that job. Austin was kind of on my list of places that I wanted to go and would be interested in. I got to fly out there and interview with a guy \_\_\_\_\_, who is the managing principal out there, still is, and just had a great conversation. He ended up bringing me in a couple of months later when they got the work, they could have hired somebody. That first project I ended up working on was a living building challenge project in Gulf Shores, Alabama.

Charlie ([12:10](#)):

That's awesome.

James ([12:11](#)):

Yeah. I went from doing a LEED Ebom project and got thrown directly into a design project that was going for a living building challenge. Bongani, really gave me a chance to follow my passions because the water requirements were one of the first things he had me look at. He said, we have to get this building to net zero water, and you're in charge of figuring that out. So that was one of my first projects and down the line, they're actually in the performance period now we're hoping that they hit that certification sometime here soon. Getting thrown straight into that, that's one of my proudest achievements. Actually the water calculator that I ended up building, to meet net zero became something that we wrote out firm wide and actually won an internal award from Integral Group for creating that calculator. All of our offices use that calculator now.

Charlie ([13:04](#)):

I love it when you're building those tools, they carry on and you're right, living building sometimes we forget that there's a postdoc occupancy and there's a little time before we get that official certification. I'm glad you got that experience. Any other kind of projects or kind of career highlights, anything else stand out? You've gone from Maryland to Hawaii, to San Diego and now to New York city and what's different, I guess would be my next question. As you talk about projects on the West coast and maybe in a big city like New York,

James ([13:36](#)):

I can say that net zero is a lot easier on the West coast than it was in New York. The weather is a lot friendlier. The climate zones are a lot friendlier out there, but there's still, I think that the conversations change regionally and the priorities change regionally. That's something that really stuck out to me in Texas, water is a big conversation and they are doing a lot of forward thinking of things. We have a lot of projects actually that wanted to go after net zero water when we, began talking about it a little bit more, and then you get here to New York City with local law, 97 coming out, but there's a renewed focus on carbon reduction, energy management and doing the best we can with the buildings that are already here. There's a lot of opportunity for that. So it's kind of been a shift in conversation a lot of the methods and a lot of the ideas are the same. It's just the conversations change regionally and my experience having been here in New York has been fantastic. There's a lot of great people in the sustainability community here, having big conversations, people who really want to make an impact. It's just been exciting to be here and be a part of that. Really

Charlie ([14:48](#)):

Talk a little bit about, you mentioned local I 97. I'm in New York, quite a bit. It's definitely a groundbreaking big push on our existing buildings. James, you've got a CEM and you've got some commissioning credentials. So, I mean, have you shifted a little bit to the existing building side? Like what's your balance between some new build-outs, new construction or existing buildings and let me guess a peak onto the energy savings side of things in New York.

James ([15:14](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. So I say I straddled new and existing buildings. I go back and forth with. One of my projects right now is a central terminal B, LaGuardia redevelopment. So that's a big, obviously new building project where I'm doing commissioning for all the tenants and helping them with the LEED process as well, which is a port authority requirement. Luckily here in New York City, we also have a building analytics group that is very much focused on local law, 97, and working alongside them, kind of teaming with that analytics team. When you go out to site we do the surveys, we find the opportunities, and we work with the analytics team so we can pull that together and present owners with ideas about what are actual ways that you can meet local law, 97, and what are the most cost effective steps to do that. With buildings out here you can.

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

Run into a lot of older buildings and they have maybe envelope issues or dated systems and things just kind of stepping them along the way to understanding what are the actual steps that you have to take to get there, to meet the performance you need to meet local on the 97. The immediate goals in 2004 are very much achievable, but when you start looking at a longer timeline, 20 to 30 and beyond, they get a lot more aggressive and that's definitely going to take some planning and some capital costs for a lot of these owners.

Charlie ([16:38](#)):

Yeah, you're absolutely right. We're looking in 5 and 10 year capital planning. Some of these buildings major, major, and pretty deep retrofits, so , thanks for taking us there. Anything else you want to highlight about some of the sustainability work you've done? I want to look into the future, but anything else to mention so far?

James ([16:58](#)):

Yeah. So one of our clients right now is a little more on the policy side, which I've had the opportunity to jump in on as well. So we've been working with Fannie Mae and they have their green financing program for multifamily. This is just one of those projects that kind of a dream for me because they have us do an annual green building review. So every certification that has a focus on multifamily and they're looking into health and wellness too, obviously all things that I'm interested in and



understanding more and helping them understand more. So this is a team when you talk about impact and having the impact of a green financing program, they have a huge impact and their team consists of people who really want to make a difference, who want to create the best mechanism possible to really advance the green building movement in multifamily. This is separate, but they have their affordable housing piece as well. That alone is creating better health outcomes for people in communities. When you stack on top of that, looking at all these health and wellness certifications like WELL and FITWEL, and others that are really improving the quality of life for the people, it would be in those units. You're making a real impact and it's something that I love working on, people I love working with, and just a fantastic program.

Charlie ([18:20](#)):

Thanks for sharing that. That's great and it's necessary. Let's go think about the future James, if you had a crystal ball what's around the corner in this green building movement, what should the listeners and I, on the green building matters podcast, what should we be reading up on now?

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

I think this health and wellness movement, especially with the current situation with COVID-19, it's going to be front of mind as people start coming back to work. Things that really are a good design practice in terms of ventilation, air filtration, even going in as far as biophilic design and things like that. I think they're going to be more and more front of mind for people as we're getting back into offices, creating places that you actually want to spend your entire day because we're working eight hours in a place 9, 10, maybe. You really want to be in a place that you feel safe, you feel healthy, you feel comfortable so I don't think this is a passing fad. I think this is going to just build and build and I really see a long future of us getting farther and farther along and creating these healthy occupant spaces.

James ([19:29](#)):

To build on that increased automation, increased sensors in the space as sensors get cheaper. I think it's going to be easier and easier for us to monitor things like the air quality, because right now you have ventilation standards and things that you work out in design, but when it comes to practice and performance, especially from a commissioning point of view, I

love that sensors are getting cheaper and that we're able to monitor things actively and really ensure that the spaces that we're in are providing air quality that we're looking for. So, that kind of integrated environment with sensors and constant feedback, I think we're just getting closer and closer to that becoming reality in a lot of places. Now, I think there's definitely some, maybe privacy concerns around that, but I think we're really, we're moving in that direction and I'm excited about it.

Charlie ([20:18](#)):

Yeah, me too. WELL, FITWEL going, but like you said, just some of this real time monitoring, IEQ what's important is how does it affect health wellness productivity, if someone in the space coming out of the pandemics here, it's very important. So let's take that just a little further. When it comes to some of that real time data you as a sustainability consultant as an engineer, how does that make your life easier? What kind of information would you be looking for but is sometimes not at hand, you'd have to go login. You'd have to go find it. Like how would that help you in a certain space?

James ([20:57](#)):

Well, I think of when you walk in to, let's say to an energy audit, or even just a building assessment, if they have that information ready for you and at hand, there's a lot of things that you can look at ahead of time and you can kind of scope out your, your discussion when you get to the building a little better with that information. You can really hone in on things that don't look right, or it seemed like opportunities. So you can't manage what you don't measure. I mean, that's always what I had said back in my days as the sustainability manager at the hotel, when I would argue for sub meters and things like that. I can't tell you where all the energy we're spending all of our money goes, if I don't have insight into it where it's actually going, I can make educated guesses, but I can't definitively tell you without that actual real time data.

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

I feel the same way about air quality. It's hard to say within any given space, how good the air quality is at any given time without actually, knowing what that data looks like. I think the certifications have made good stretches in saying we should have a testing maybe on an annual basis, but that's just a spot in time who says, like, when you move more furniture or different

people in and different items in that it isn't going to go downhill. What does that say? The afternoon versus the evening time in which it varies here in New York City. I can tell you by the time of day.

Charlie ([22:34](#)):

That's a good peek into if you had that data. We can measure more, you could plan more, you could find more energy savings, and just have more to work with. We don't want to get data and let it sit on the shelf. It's like using it. Don't be afraid of it. Earlier, I think you hinted at liability and stuff, but it's like, the liability is going to be on if you don't have some of this monitoring in the near future you're behind and someone could maybe get sick. You don't have proof you're at industry standard. It's better to be monitoring it if something got a little out of whack, then you addressed it right then and it's back to normal. James, let's go through a few rapid fire questions here, what do you think you're best at, what's your specialty or gifts?

James ([23:20](#)):

I would say resilience. I've put myself in the position several times in my career where I have said yes to an opportunity that I was not sure I was totally prepared for and then just figured it out along the way. That has a lot to do with, I think the fact that I found something that I really believe is my calling. So that kind of fuels my passion to make an impact and that creates a resilience within me. I hit a lot of roadblocks. I hit a lot of things like, Oh, I don't know how I'm going to figure this out. That kind of ability to be resilient and to keep pushing forward has really been one of the things that have gotten me this far in my career. That also comes with it's okay to be wrong. It's okay to fail here and there because I feel like there's the parts that I learned the most. So yeah, I would say, or maybe just a hard head, maybe perhaps a stubbornness, maybe that is one of my best qualities, how I've been able to push forward.

Charlie ([24:27](#)):

I think that kind of goes along the lines of resiliency. Right? You don't take no for an answer. You push through, you find a way. Do you have any routines or rituals, just any good habits that help you to stay successful?

James ([24:41](#)):

Honestly, I'm waking up in the morning and taking the dog out. Right now I live close to Central Park and getting some time outside has been, it used to be surfing, a little bit about hobbies, but it's very much that time of day when I kind of break away from work or break away from other things that are stressing me and making time in every day to take yourself out of whatever you're doing is incredibly important to me because I always find that when I come back from that, I'm always thinking clearer and things that I was banging my head against the wall about like a problem or something that came up. I'm able to think more clearly about it and come with a new solution. So I think that taking a little bit of time, taking myself out of whatever I'm doing every day has been incredibly important.

Charlie ([25:35](#)):

Oh man, I can picture that right now. Central park. It's extra quiet right now. I bet. Let's go bucket it us next. As we get to know each other James, a little bit more, you'll learn, I'm a fan of the bucket list. So what are one or two things on your bucket list?

James ([25:54](#)):

I want to surf in every ocean. I'm not making great progress. I've done Atlantic Pacific, but that is one of my, one of my goals. When it comes down to it, being able to travel more. I love seeing new places. I love meeting new people, different cultures. I love food, trying new restaurants. So it's very much a travel thing. That's almost like the thing that'll get me moving around is to find new places to surf in new places and check out. Definitely. That's definitely one of my things on my bucket list.

Charlie ([26:33](#)):

Oh man. I love it. That's great. All right. Let's talk about books and learning. I'm not sure if you like to listen to like audio books or may pick up a book in your hands, but just in general, is there a book or two you'd recommend

James ([26:45](#)):

The happiness advantage? I can't recommend that enough. I've actually, I was told about it maybe about six months ago and I've read it almost three times since I've been told about it. It's essentially steps to take advantage of having a positive attitude and ways to put it in practice. There's a lot of things that seem like common sense within it and then when you think about

what you're doing today they put that into practice. It's incredibly helpful and I find it very inspiring. Also a book called Grit by Angela Duckworth. When I read that book, I saw it very much of myself because she makes the argument that it's not necessarily about innate talent to be successful. It's about working hard and being the person who shows up every day and she gets obviously much more in depth about it. But again, that's incredible

Charlie ([27:42](#)):

Two great books. We're going to put the links in the show notes, here to the podcast, the happiness advantage. I think that's Shawn Achor. He did a Ted talk, right? So maybe that's a guy to get inspired and then go get the book as well.

James ([27:55](#)):

Yes. He tells some of the better stories in his book and a Ted talk. Angela Duckworth also has a Ted talk that's worth checking out.

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

Fantastic. Well man, fun conversation. As we start to come to a close here, a two part question, the first one is James, anything you wish you'd known earlier in your career?

James ([28:14](#)):

I think I've already said this, but don't be afraid to say yes to an opportunity. I very much take that to heart now, but I think of a lot of times when I was younger that I didn't take chances on things because I didn't think I was prepared and I was maybe afraid of failure. I look back now and I see how much that held me back because anytime I've taken on a big challenge, it's really just taught me how much I'm capable of and you have to be your own champion. You have to believe in yourself. Sounds really cheesy. But honestly, I think that's the one thing that I would tell a younger version of myself, stop saying, no.

Charlie ([28:59](#)):

That's good, man. That's kind of the last part here is just, you've ended up making a career out of green buildings, worked on some fantastic LEED projects, living, building, and now really trying to help big buildings in New

York city meet this carbon mandate. If someone were jumping in right now, that was the last of it here, James, just any other words of encouragement?

James ([29:22](#)):

Yeah, it's fine. What you're really passionate about is finding that and following your effort. That's really, what has guided me through my career is when I first got into sustainability there at the hotel, I was running a recycling program and then I became interested in energy. So then I kind of followed that and led me towards energy audits and retro commissioning building commissioning and then I became interested in water. That it's really to sustain a career. It's finding what you're passionate about following that passion. That's really, that's the advice I would give because there's a million ways you can go in sustainability. There's a million ways you can make an impact, what's really important and what's going to stand a long career of making that impact. It's really finding that thing that you're willing to get up every day and go after.

Charlie ([30:15](#)):

That's great, man. No, thanks. You've really got some great mindset and I love resiliency. So everyone, this has been James Tosh coming to us from Elements Engineering in the New York area. Lots of great credentials there, James. Thanks for being on the podcast. Thank you, Charlie. I had a great time. 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 are stoked and just so glad to continue to listen every Wednesday morning to a new interview with the 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 6 ([30:59](#)):

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 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.