

Founder of Living Building Challenge: Jason McLennan | Transcript

Welcome ([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 .

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

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

Hi everyone. Welcome to the next episode of the green building matters podcast. I'm your host Charlie Cichetti today. I'm joined by Jason McLennon coming to us from the Seattle area, and he's pretty famous for being part of the Living Building challenge in those early days. I can't wait to learn more about that, those old stories. How did that come together and learn more Jason about your green building journey and also what you're doing today, but Jason, how are you doing today? Good Charlie. Nice to be here with you. Thank you. I always like to ask the origin story. So where'd you grow up and where'd you go to school?

Jason ([01:34](#)):

Yeah, I grew up in Northern Ontario, Canada, a town called Sudbury and left there to practice architecture. I went to school at the University of Oregon, and then studied overseas for a bit and this is what my path has been from the very beginning.

Charlie ([01:50](#)):

And that's kind of that followup is where did you first kind of lean into sustainability was a part of the upbringing. Was it a college professor that influenced you? Where did you have an aha moment about green buildings?

Jason ([02:03](#)):

Yeah, well, I knew I was going to be an architect when I was growing up and that was inspired by my hometown and my family to care about the planet, care about the environment. Sudbary was infamous as being one of the most polluted places in the world. I saw the effects of devastation in my hometown and, and yet. I was able to also participate in a massive greening and reforestation campaign in the community that eventually won one of the United Nations commendation, and basically we regenerated an entire landscape miles and miles continues to this day. And that really got my, I started thinking about regeneration.

Charlie ([02:47](#)):

That was early because just now we're trying to get back to do a lot more regenerative design. Tell us about, okay. So you went out to Oregon to go to college, get your undergrad. How was your time out there in Oregon?

Jason ([02:59](#)):

Well it was good. I deliberately went to Oregon because it had, at the time, the one of the only programs anywhere that had multiple professors that we're focused on green building before there was much of a movement. I was able to learn from them and sort of chart my own course if you will. And it took me eventually to Europe to study at the Glasgow school of Art. And eventually I also got a masters at the university of Kansas.

Charlie ([03:30](#)):

Oh, those are fantastic. And, and what, what, what kind of architecture were you doing at the time and, and Jason, was it more like energy efficiency focused biophilia, daylighting, like what were the early sustainability kind of influences if maybe LEED came a little later in the, in the programming.

Jason ([03:47](#)):

Yeah. LEED didn't didn't exist when I started. And so we focused on energy conservation as you mentioned, we focused on passive solar and natural ventilation and really first principles of design using climate responsive

principles, great daylighting and connections to the outdoors that we were talking about before people were using the term biophilia. And then that was really the start. And then also materials, really, a lot of the issues we were looking at and that later informed a lot of green building programs.

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

Yeah, no, I can't wait to take a look at maybe that work with Cascadia and LEED and then Living Buildings, but I've got to ask about mentors and early influences. Was there anyone that you looked up to from afar or maybe someone a little closer to you that you could call a mentor there in your career?

Charlie ([04:40](#)):

Yeah. Well, mentorship has been incredibly important to me. I think we reach our potential when we learn from others who have been down the paths further. And I've been very lucky in my career to have had quite a few mentors starting with my parents and extended family where I grew up. I had several really amazing professors in college work as mentors and became friends. My greatest professional mentor was Bob Berkebile Bob and I ended up after I graduated, I worked with Bob for a decade and eventually became his partner BNIM and when Bob and I we're working together, we get to work with a whole bunch of other leaders because this was still before LEED when I got started and the firm actually played a pretty strong role in the creation of LEED.

Jason ([05:29](#)):

And the development is Bob. Bob was the founder of the AIA committee on the environment and was tapped as an advisor, by the USGBC, which meant that I was involved as well in a way. Things like the materials radius point came out of one of our projects, for example, in Montana. I had the opportunity to get mentorship from really the best minds in sustainability and engineering and architecture that practicing in the late nineties at that point. And then through the rest of my career, it's continued

Charlie ([06:04](#)):

Well, thanks for giving a shout out there. I think it's so important to look back on those influences and mentors. And really looked back on that highlight reel, but Jason helped us pull together the timeline. So you were working

there, you said for a decade, but what were those next couple of career moves you had?

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

Well, I like to describe that I've had three careers after graduating. I worked as an architect and planner at BNIM doing a lot of leading green demonstration projects, again, starting before there was LEED. And then in the early days of LEED I was the project manager in two of the first LEED pilot projects that existed under 1.0. I used to joke that I managed 20% of the entire world's portfolio of LEED, when I started, there were 10 projects that started. Then from there after 10 years of working with BNIM, I realized that the industry wasn't moving fast enough, wasn't going far enough. I recognized that I needed to really help describe the end game, the destination, where we need to head with green building, which is what I wrote with the Living Building Challenge.

Charlie ([07:19](#)):

And I created that in 2005 and then brought it out West, left my job at BNIM. Started with the Cascadia Green Building Council. You mentioned Marney was part of that journey. Then at that point, when I brought the challenge to the organization and then for 10 years ran the nonprofit created the Living Future Institute and a ton of programs. The first programs in the world on zero carbon and net zero energy first program to introduce equity issues and to green building directly the red list, which is transforming the materials industry. Declare and just so the materials transparency programs, those were all things that our team launched into the industry and many of which I think influenced in turn LEED and in the same way that LEED influenced us,

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

That kept you plenty busy there. And Jason's humble here for those that are listening that are just now getting into this green building movement. I don't throw around the word pioneer lightly, and you really shook things up there and it's very exciting what you led and what you did. Marnie Evans worked with issues on another podcast. I'll make sure I link to her podcast here in the show notes. So you're gonna tell us the story, Jason. So here LEED came out in 2000, right? The first LEED project certified in the year 2000, we've got 20 years with LEED projects now, but to some at the time, people thought LEED was crazy. Here you go, a short five years later and say, no,

we have to be net positive energy and net positive water and regenerate it. You really raised the bar about 10 times as high, so did people think you were crazy at the time. And where did this really come from?

Jason ([09:02](#)):

Yeah. People did think I was crazy. It's interesting that as an idea, Living Buildings, heatedly, you really picked of the history. Bob and I were talking about this idea of Living Buildings on projects. In the late nineties, we published articles in 1998, 1999, then the idea of Living Buildings. And we had a project in Montana called the Epicenter where we were eventually, it became one of the LEED pilot projects. And David Gottfried was a consultant on that project. And he was just getting this idea off the ground of creating a US Green Building Council. It's interesting that LEED, the Living Building as a philosophy was really an idea in the late nineties but it didn't become a program til 2006. And the market really wasn't really ready for it, Living Buildings in the nineties, they needed LEED to come first.

Jason ([09:56](#)):

And that was the brilliant thing that LEED did for the market, it created a common language, a common way of looking at building performance in many different categories holistically around not just energy, but materials and indoor air quality and site impacts and so on. And so LEED basically created a space and built a market if you will, for this idea of building certifications and did a lot of amazing things. We were very early supporters and developers of LEED, as I mentioned, cause we saw the good that it was going to do in the world and knew that it was going to do and introduced it to all our clients and, and all that kind of thing. But ultimately realizing that at some point really soon, we needed to go much further than what that LEED was asking and that you need different tools for different types of change and LEED.

Jason ([10:52](#)):

In my opinion, it was really good at taking the market where it was and moving it forward. And the Living Building world is basically saying, where do we need to head? What's the destination? And moving backwards from that point and they kind of meet in the middle. And those were two different theories of change. That was the idea of when we launched the Living Building challenge eventually in 2006 was not to compete with LEED, but to

supplement it and provide a different framing for those that were really ready to go beyond looking at points and looking at levels of certification as LEED has it and look towards regeneration. And so that was really the intention when we, when we put it out there.

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

I love that you connected that the two really needed each other and may still be a rewrite. It's Jason, it's not just, what do we have to do? What can we do? What should we do? And I think that's what you've built with Living Buildings. Just a personal question I have. Are you satisfied with those getting pedal or do you really need that full Living Building status? What brings you excitement when you see the numbers grow today?

Jason ([12:01](#)):

Well, I'm a big, big believer in supporting leadership wherever it can occur. We're delighted when people get LEED platinum and we're delighted when they get petal certification, but ultimately we're trying to get people to go to living buildings wherever we can, but it's through support and encouragement rather than guilt and shame in terms of how we motivate people.

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

So let's take a look at this kind of career highlight reel and in some of it could be also personal accomplishments, but when you look back, what are some of your other proudest achievements?

Jason ([12:47](#)):

Well, I think that the red list has been a lot of good in the world. It started out when I was working at BNIM, I became frustrated with the lack of transparency and information about products. I was inspired by the Monterey Bay Aquarium, Seaford red list and wondered why we didn't have such a list for our industry. So I worked with the healthy building network and some others too, developed a red list and put that into the market as sort of identification of major transformation needed and to push materials, transparency to the foreground in our industry and that's really a strategy that's really worked. It's changed the course of conversation for manufacturers all over the world. People talk about red list chemicals all the time. Now and I made it up and that's kind of fun to see that kind of change

and growth. To see manufacturers reformulate, removing carcinogens and doing what a lot of people told me they would never do, which was to reveal the ingredients in their products and declare, and HPDs, Pharos all that it came out of this push, okay.

Jason ([14:09](#)):

Several of us like Bill Walsh and others were making to really have transparency and transformation in the marketplace. When a lot of architects and suppliers and companies got on board, it shifted the market. So that's what I'm proud of because it's not just for Living Building challenge projects, people are using these better materials, correct for every type of project and that's great. It's been lots of other things, but I'm quite proud of that one.

Charlie ([14:39](#)):

No, that's really shaking it up. If you look back on LEED, going from version three to version four, I mean, really, it had to get punted a little bit just because of the materials and they see What you've done with the declare and red list. So if you were to say, give us like a percentage of our progress towards really being where we need to be with materials, where do you think we're at today, middle of 2020, when it comes to our projects. So we, 10% of the way to where we need to be with specifying and even manufacturers getting it. Are we 50% of the way there? Where do you see our progress with the materials?

Jason ([14:52](#)):

It depends on how long view 1 takes, because we're way off where we need to be in every category of impact. We're in real terms we're still losing all the battles. That's tough. I mean, I think if you look at it in the timeframe of what we've achieved within a decade, it is pretty transformational and exciting. It's just, it's still inadequate and we don't have the luxury of time to be making change at the rate that we've been making it. It really needs to be about much bigger scaling and bigger leaps going forward.

Charlie ([15:41](#)):

No, you're right. Well, take us back to the present day. What's keeping you busy, Jason at McLennon Design and your work at Cascadia and the chapter there.

Jason ([16:08](#)):

Well, the chapter it's really the International Living Future Institute that I volunteer on. I'm on the board, still the chapter network isn't what it was as you probably know. I'm just continuing to support the Living Future Institute, doing this all over the globe but through my firm McLennon Design, we were designing this stuff. After 10 years of running IFI and the Cascadia, I knew it was time to get back into practice and help in a very direct way to design buildings that meet these requirements and design. We design products, we design buildings, we do our planning work.

Jason ([16:48](#)):

Then what we try to do is help people go much, further, much faster. That's really the mission. We're having some great success, your listeners might want to look at the new climate pledge arena that we just announced. We were the sort of chief sustainability strategists around the ship becoming a zero carbon arena. Pretty cool project just in the news a lot right now.

Charlie ([17:14](#)):

Yeah, no, it's making a splash and it's going to be something that I think even the lay is going to be like, Hey, what does that mean? And, Oh, wow. Okay. I get it. And you get a hockey team, so it's going to be great. It's my favorite question to ask someone like you and all my green building expert podcast guests, Jason, if you had a crystal ball what's around the corner in this green building movement, what should we be reading up on now?

Jason ([17:41](#)):

We need to make much more significant changes that we've been making and just to quote Bob Burkebile, who I mentioned before he always used to say back in the nineties, that 2020 was going to be the year of perfect vision. I think it's proven to be very prescient of him to call it that 2020 is proving to be a year of incredible disruption and incredible self reflection around a whole bunch of issues from social justice, social equity issues to climate and other things. When we come up through the other side, I think everyone's trying to figure out what it would mean, but we aren't going to be the same in terms of how we think about a lot of these issues. And it is about time that we make a much more significant change around climate and healing the planet.

Jason ([18:32](#)):

There's some big things we need to completely decarbonize and eliminate fossil fuels from our society. This decade, man, we can do that. It's not craziness. We need to ban single use plastics and petrochemicals and redless chemicals from the supply chain. Another sort of massive thing we need to do an unprecedented amount of work to save what's left of the natural world and the species and biodiversity that's in it. Transforming and inviting nature back within our communities and the places that we've disrupted around the world at the same time. In order to do that, I call this the sort of five great things that humanity needs to take on or humanity's next assignment are these five things. The fifth is we need to transform our politics of hate to politics of love in order to embrace each other and embrace others life on this planet to make the world the kind of place that deserves to have us on it. And that can in fact, sustain us over the next many, many centuries, hopefully rather than just a few more decades.

Charlie ([19:44](#)):

Wow. I can tell you had already established that thought of that well before the events of 2020. How do I get back to defaulting to love, defaulting to, I bet that's a good person, a great person, so defaulting to judgment and prejudice. Thank you for taking us there. Let's talk more about you. What do you think your specialty or gift is?

Jason ([20:10](#)):

I don't know. I'm stubborn. Okay. I don't take myself very seriously, but I think issues very seriously. I think I'm just probably more willing to put myself out there and risk rejection and failure than most people. And that permission one can give themselves to try shifts, to put ideas out in the world and to push for the right thing based upon values that's probably what it is. I mean, there's, there's people that are better than everything that I do than what I do. But too many of them, either ideas or give up too easily or don't approach it in the right spirit of generosity or whatever in that diminishes their potential.

Charlie ([20:59](#)):

Where do you think you get that from? I'm an entrepreneur in this green building movement. I've been in business for about 12 years now and love

what I'm doing and now we're embracing the healthy building movement. I think sometimes entrepreneurs have that resiliency too, but where do you get that confidence or that disruptor kind of mentality? Can you pinpoint where you got that from?

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

Yeah, that stuff's definitely from my family, my parents and siblings and my grandparents and some aunts and uncles I had. I was very lucky with the family.

Charlie ([21:30](#)):

That's fantastic. A few rapid fire questions here at Jason. I really enjoyed our conversation. Do you have any best practices, any good habits productivity hacks that help you stay on point?

Jason ([21:43](#)):

I focus on the essence of things rather than getting lost in the weeds, wherever I can. I try to find and to focus on the end game. What is the result? Where do I want it to end up with? And so finding that clarity, that's what architects consider the party of a design or the essence of something is really where the magic is. If you can make that as strong as possible, the details work themselves out and strengthen it.

Charlie ([22:10](#)):

That's really good. I'm a fan of the bucket list. Are one or two things you could share that might be on your bucket list.

Jason ([22:17](#)):

I have a bit of a different view on that. I mean, there's certainly lots of things that I would love to do and I'm going to try to do, but I tend not to think that way because I'm not so interested in having regrets in life if I can. I think we all have a bucket list as being in the now and being present and enjoying what you have in front of you, as opposed to just what you may one day do. That's kind of the way I look at it, but of course there's things that I would love to do.

Charlie ([22:49](#)):

Sure. Yeah. For a while, well, first of all, it reminds me of Simon Sinex's new book, *The Infinite Game*. I don't know if you've read that, but that's stuff I want to check out. What about travel? When hopefully it's safer to travel. Is there a destination you want to go to or maybe go back to,

Jason ([23:06](#)):

Well, I miss Europe and I don't think they want us over there right now.

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

That's true. Well, this too shall pass. This is a tough one. Actually. I got a follow up question later when the pandemic started, I told my team, we have to keep asking ourselves the question and to my clients, too. What does all this make possible? What does all this make possible? So have you seen any pretty cool innovation over the last 90-100 days and anyone you've been around?

Jason ([23:37](#)):

Well, I think that will emerge after the dust settles because we're still caught in this dust storm. That's scary. But I think clearly everybody is rethinking travel and rethinking what it means to work remote then telecommuting and that kind of thing. So there's going to be all sorts of new thinking around that as we actually emerged through this.

Charlie ([24:03](#)):

You're absolutely right. Let's talk about books. I don't know if you'd like to pick up a good book in your hands or maybe listen to books on audio, but is there a book or two you'd recommend?

Jason ([24:13](#)):

Yeah, I like real real books. I'm a book guy and I'm between books right now. I just finished a couple of books. I'm really looking forward to Paul Hawkins' next book that he's writing and certainly enjoyed *Drawdown*, but again, probably your audience knows all about his writing.

Jason ([24:36](#)):

I just came out with a book myself, a kid's book. It just landed a month ago called *Love and Green Building*. It's available through the living future Institute or of course through Amazon. People can check it out. It explains

why we are in this war work that we do. It explains to our kids or to our loved ones why we give a shit.

Charlie ([25:03](#)):

Man, we're going to put links to those books in the podcast show notes. I will make sure I get my boys, h who all have summer birthdays. They're eleven, eight and six. So I'll make sure I pick up a copy. Jason, that sounds fantastic. As we start to wrap up here two final questions and thoughts, one is, is there anything you wish you had known earlier in your career?

Jason ([25:28](#)):

Lots of things, but the good thing is to your, the question about mentorship early on, that it really pays to listen to the elders and to learn from those that have walked the path before you, I think too many people now, for whatever reason, discount our elders and that's great peril and they focus too much on themselves and that's what the technology and the social communication and everything that we have at our disposal is allowing for sort of a level of narcissism that's unhealthy. It's sort of a focus on, people call them trolls, and those that feel like they are justified in being critics of things and publicly shaming and diminishing others and diminishing opportunities and ideas with no apparent stake in the game using their anonymous platform, or send me anonymous to poke their nose where it isn't helpful.

Jason ([26:39](#)):

And so, , I think if I were growing up today to reframe your question for those that are growing up today is to really be aware of how unhealthy certain things have become and to take the time to slow down and listen and learn from those that have come before.

Charlie ([26:56](#)):

Thank you. It brings to mind the question, why don't people listen to wisdom? And so the last thing I'll ask is let's say there's someone listening to the podcast right now, Jason you've clearly been a pioneer in this movement. What words of encouragement do you have for them as they just get going with the green building movement?

Jason ([27:15](#)):

Well, I would tell them that this too shall pass. That this moment we're in will change, we know that and they need to be fearless and become agents of regeneration of agents in hope of the world in what they do in the world and we need them to rise to the occasion.

Charlie ([27:37](#)):

Love it. Now we need you. We need all the listeners here. Thank you for listening. And this has been Jason McLennon, CEO of McLennon Design, and of course, all of his great work at the Living Futures Institute. Jason, thanks for your time today. Thank you. Take care.

Charlie ([27:53](#)):

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 a green building professional here in this industry, or just some pro tips that we want to make sure that you are getting straight from us straight to you. Thank you for listening to this episode of the green building matters projects@gbes.com. Our mission is to advance the green building movement through best in class education and encouragement. Remember, you can go to gbes.com/podcast 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.