

President at Recollective Jason Packer | Transcript

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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 credential experts in the Green building industry and one of the few to be honored as a LEED Fellow each week, Charley welcomes a green building professional from around the globe to share their war stories, career advice and unique insight into sustainability and green building. Settle in, grab a fresh cup of coffee and get ready to find out why Green Building Matters.

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Charlie: Welcome to our next episode on the Green Building Matters Broadcast. I have a fun job. Once a week I get an interview, a Green Building professional somewhere in the world. Jason Packer is with us today. He's the president at Recollective up in Vancouver, British Columbia, just outside of it. I can't wait to hear his story, Jason, you're a LEED Fellow, a recently minted LEED Fellow. I know we'll get to that. I know that's meant a lot to you, but I've got to know your origin story. Where did you grow up and where did you go to school?

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Jason: I grew up in a small town called Parry Sound, its own Lake Huron in northern Ontario and Shinobi First Nations territory, and that region is now the United Nations Region of global economic, ecological significance. I read that to make sure I get it right. I spent my childhood surrounded by trees and water and tree hugging. This comes naturally to me right from the start.

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Charlie: Lake Huron, in the US, is one of the great Lakes I don't hear a lot about. Is that like the one that you know? It was a big deal growing up near that lake?

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Jason: It was great. It is one that I think probably has a little more of the territory on the Canadian side and there's a Georgian Bay which is actually about as big as Lake Erie or Lake Ontario, and that's just part of Lake Huron. It's a massive body of water and I was fortunate to play in it all the time. Growing up was like a fun place to major.

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Charlie: I'm sure they had some influence on you later. Talk about your studies, your schooling and even some college days that come together.

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Jason: I went to a university in Peterborough, Ontario called Trent University, a fairly small liberal arts sort of college. The coolest majors there were philosophy, anthropology, and cultural studies, literature and stuff like that. I took a small program called administration and policy. It had a sort of a unique take on business and economics and I really enjoyed it. I enjoyed being in that environment with so many different ways of thinking and rubbing elbows with all those other students that sometimes had some pretty intriguing books. They were reading budgeting and accounting and stuff like that. There was a touch of environmental policy.

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Charlie: When did green come along? What did you like about green and sustainability? Tell us how you started towards this green building direction?

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Jason: I always loved designing and building. My dad was a tinkerer in the shop and he liked to build things, and that certainly influenced me. When I

finished university, a friend of mine and I whisked across Canada and we landed in Vancouver. We didn't have much money and means. We sort of got the first job that we could get. I had a friend who was walking past a construction site and got a job and he had some construction background, so he sort of knew that you could show up and ask if there might be a job for you. Vancouver has definitely sort of been booming through all the years I've been here and so I went by the same job site the next day and just asked if I could get a job and I really enjoyed working in construction because it was pretty easy to get in and out. I was a big traveler, traveled to many countries around the world during that period of time and I could always come back and pick up the construction again really easily. So that had a big appeal for me. I say I would for myself, a lifelong treehugger and working in the construction business often felt frustrated by the waste and toxic materials as part of construction projects. It was easy to predict they weren't going to perform that well from an energy perspective, and I started out my own green renovation business. I hardly knew what that meant and those early days for LEED and I sort of defined it with my clients as we went along. It turns out the focus for them was mostly on indoor environmental qualities, so low VOC paints and adhesives and all that sort of stuff and non-toxic materials for the most part.

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Charlie: I'm going to tell you there's the first on the point, as you're the first to tell me you were a hitchhiker. You're the first to say you did that. A lost art and times changed. If you look back, did you have any mentors or maybe someone that you looked up to that had some influence on you?

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Jason: This is a bit of a tough one because there are so many. If you're not learning from other people around you on a regular basis, then you're not doing something right. I will call out. I guess maybe a couple of people in particular. There was a woman named Helen Goodlin. She's a pretty influential member of the Green Billing community here in Vancouver and

she was the first executive director of a place called the Sustainable Building Centre, which has come and gone. I volunteered there as it was being set up and I even helped build some displays and hung around all the time? Helen gave me great advice about people to reach out to and things to learn more about. To this day I think that has served me well. I also have to mention Brenda Martins, who was one of the guests on your broadcast and who was the person who sponsored me to become a LEED Fellow, and she started the company of which I am president today, Recollective Consulting. The whole team that started Recollective were a bunch of really influential movers and shakers here locally who I learned a lot from. There's so many peers here that I learned from this day all the time.

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Charlie: I can tell you're really grateful for all of those mentors. Tell us about Recollective. What kind of work do you do?

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Jason: Recollective was formed in 2007 and I joined when it was about a year-old, a green building consulting firm. Lots of firms do what we do, but we only do green buildings. We had a big role to play in the development of every Vancouver's Olympic Village for the 2010 games. A big project that sustained us through the early years and really raised the bar locally on green buildings. I want to be careful with what I say. We were the oldest green building consulting firm in Western Canada and I have a friend who corrected me that she had her one person shop set up slightly before ours. I don't want to make any grandiose claims, but we've been at it for a while since Green building in the modern sense and we see ourselves as leaders. We have great relationships with the Canada Green Building Council and the City of Vancouver and we work on projects ranging from all the different flavors of LEED to build green, Passive House, Living Building Challenge, zero carbon standard and so on and so forth. With regards to wellness and some master, a sort of work. We get our hands in lots of pies as long as it's green and we're interesting.

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Charlie: I love it. I've been around for a long time, 14 years, and it helps the city. It helps to have this conversation around green and green buildings. Is it both residential and commercial? Help us understand that.

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Jason: Both, I would say more commercial institutional work in the beginning. As the city raised a bar on what was expected from private developers, we got more residential work as well. Today I would say we probably have about a 50/50 split.

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Charlie: Are consultants and colleagues cross trained or kind of two sides of the house within the company?

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Jason: Yeah, there's a lot of cross-pollination we have or have had on our staff: interior designers, engineers, architects, people with a construction background. We've even got a linguist and quite a variety and we tend to try to share the work around. Some of the projects, by their nature, are a little bit more exciting or a little bit more groundbreaking, and so we want to make sure everybody has a chance to work on the greenest of the green projects. We spread it around like the management style.

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Charlie: That's good. Let's look back just a little more. What are some things you're really proud of? If you look back, what stands out?

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Jason: Good question. The first thing that came to mind when you said that is a particular project we worked on in Penticton, British Columbia, Okanagan College. It's called the Pattison Center for Excellence in sustainable building trades and renewable energy conservation and that project pursued the living building challenge. It came up a little bit short

but it's a pretty big building. It's, I guess, about 70000 square feet. It's got classrooms and workshops, trades, training, gym offices and so forth. It generates, last I'd heard, about 85% of the energy demand, just with the solar on the roof. It's got a lot of technologies that at the time were quite groundbreaking strategies that we've been using more and more and our projects ever since, and that project that the school is very proud of it everybody worked on is very proud of it. Quick story. There was a student group there when we began the project, there was a conversation about having a little bit wider set points on the internal temperature. We might accept if it gets a little bit colder, a little bit warmer than you might in a typical schoolroom and that people would have to bring a sweater. It turns out that after the fact everybody says it's the most comfortable building on-campus. I think that really speaks to the mentality of the team we put together and the pride that the students take in the school. I think that really reflects back on all of us.

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Charlie: That's one heck of a project. That's really cool. You got a chance to work on that project. I'm sure. It's a LEED platinum certified plan, close to the Living Building. It's an evolution. A heck of a project. Sometimes we take it for granted. I've been doing LEED for a long time. Green Buildings is not everybody even gets to work on a LEED project, let alone Living Building. It's a really cool achievement. Anything else stand out?

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Jason: I take a lot of pride in our firm and the leadership position that we've taken. We've done a lot of things over the years to try to grow our influence. One example would be a work placement program or an internship program. We've had a lot of people come through and I'm always happy at the end of it they we have an interview and they tell us what a great experience it's been and and to me I think we're planting seeds in the industry through that program because a lot of people we see out there then on on projects, working in other firms and we know that we've put some

ideas in their heads as they move through their careers. Everybody at the firm has a lot of time for people who are starting out and learning. A lot of us have been involved in formal mentorship programs or are certainly open to having someone give us a call and ask if we might have coffee and pick our brains and that sort of thing. I always have a lot of time for that sort of stuff. I think that we need a lot of people pulling on this rope together to get to where we need to be. We think of when we make decisions at Recollective, we think about being a force for good, we think about sharing what we know and we think about sustainability as our top priority.

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Charlie: Sounds like it's a big part of your culture. That's amazing. Those young team members have a kind of farm system to get them going into their careers within your company. I love that. That's very important. Glad you make the time for that. Let me follow-up a little bit about that culture. I'm really kind of inspired here by Recollective.

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Jason: We've been B Corps certified for about six or seven years now, to be honest with someone else at the firm who initiated that, and it wasn't a top priority for me. The more I learned about it, the more I actually thought it reflects what we're doing with LEED . It provides a recipe for how to do things better and to account for those things. It's an independently verified third party rating system, like LEED. We've learned from even the questions that we get asked as you go through the certification process, but things that we could do to change. We're not necessarily changing our policies to chase points within the rating system, but to pick up on what we've learned as we go through the process and to bring that back into the way that we manage the company. It is a great tool just in the same way that LEED provides a good recipe for green building. It provides a good recipe for business, government, governance and policy. We're connecting that.

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Charlie: That's very important. You'd been doing it while it's not recent. You've been doing it a while with the B Corp. Sometimes. Lead Fellow and what credentials did you have before your LEED Fellow? What has LEED Fellow meant to you?

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Jason: It was originally a lap before we specialized the credentials. I haven't managed to achieve any of the others. I know you have them all, but it's tough. I have a certified Passive House consultant. Those are the main green building ones. From university I have a diploma called bachelor of administrative studies and before I came to Recollective, I went back to school for building technology programs, have a diploma.

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Charlie: It's amazing that education, training, the credentials and then got honored with LEED Fellow . From reading your company's bio, 7500 are already done. There's 75 LEED ongoing projects, that's a lot of square footage or square meters. How do you spend your time though? You've been there almost 14 years. What's next? How are you spending your time?

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Jason: I think our next project might be our 100 LEED certification, the next one coming down the pipe. We'll have to make a little noise about that when they have. So for me I am still pretty closely involved in the project, LEED or Passive House or any other, I always have one of our project managers on the project as they increase their experience and their time with us, their seniority. They manage more and more of the projects and I take a step back. I'm tending to be involved in most of our projects. I have one partner who manages the firm with me and he has the same approach and we sort of divide the management tasks. I'm fortunate to get to spend more of the time on interacting with our clients and with the public and our project teams. My partner does those things, but he's well adept at handling

proposals and contracts and some of the things that I don't enjoy as much. We have a great-great team in that respect. I'm always learning all the time and we have, again speaking of the company culture, we have a weekly meeting in which there are agenda items to discuss the new things that we're learning and tend to be the one that goes to a lot of team meetings. I'm interacting with architects and engineers and owners and builders and I'm in touch with all of our stops on a daily basis.

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Charlie: It sounds organized and sharing your subject-matter expertise to projects, also that upcoming team to make sure they can take on some things and lead on these projects. That's kind of what I'm hearing from you in this role.

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Jason: Absolutely, we put a lot into building people up around her.

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Charlie: Let's talk about the future. One of my favorite questions to ask an expert at green building like yourself, Jason. What's next? What are you reading up on? What should we be reading up on the lists of this broadcast? Where is this green building movement shifting next?

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Jason: I always like to hear. When you ask in the podcast to hear what other people have to say. I'm sure you'll notice, there is a fair bit of overlap. It's validating. While I take notes, that's a good business idea. I need to go read up on that when you hear it over. It's validating. If enough of these global green building experts, I use that word with true sincerity. This is their passion. This is what they do. They say it. I can trust it.

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Charlie: Happy to hear first that you listen to the podcast. What are you thinkin? It's okay if it's something you've heard before, but you're like, "We're going keep an eye on this thing?"

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Jason: Over the years I'm always trying to find ways to relate to people. In our society we have such a sound bite culture. How can you say something with impact quickly? And for me I've distilled it down to four simple words: happiness up, carbon down and and you can unpack those things. Happiness means human interaction, social connection. We design our spaces so that people feel comfortable talking to their neighbors, that happiness means a connection to nature. How are we incorporating biophilia into our buildings, into our built environment? How are we allowing people that have that critical connection to the natural environment, where they're built, and there's so many ways that this can be reflected? I should maybe point people towards the work of a group that is based here in Vancouver called Happy Cities and they have, if you check out their website, a Happy Homes toolkit, which really lands some of these ideas right on the project site in concrete fashion. We're talking about things like having a dog washing station so that people can live with their pets, or happiness might also mean a connection across generations? Are people able to age and place in their buildings? We're thinking about future proofing and all that stuff. On the carbon downside. That's embodied carbon, that's operational carbon. We're talking about thinking long term, and to me that really is what sustainability is just thinking long term. There's something to me about this: this idea that we talk about sustainability as if it is the end goal and really sustainability should be the starting point. That should be the minimum. If I asked you, how's your relationship with your romantic partner going? How's your family? and you said "Things are sustainable." That's hardly a ringing endorsement. It should be far more than sustainable, it should be fun, it should be regenerative, it should be forward thinking and we have a long, long way to go here. We have to set the bar high. We have to really not just talk about

living within our means, but thriving within our needs. I really believe that all is provided here on earth if we can just make sure that we're living in a manner that sustains us without impairing the ability of future generations to sustain themselves. There's a revolution underway that leads to, has the potential to lead to a place that has a healthy, happy society. As the young goal you took us, not technology or program.

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Charlie: You took us back to just that kind of relationship and a big part of what we're going to need to do to connect us dots in the chief or sustainability. Well said, I feel inspired and Jason, thanks for sharing that man. Some rapid fire questions here about what would you say is your specialty or gift?

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Jason: I don't know about some covet beard. I think I'm good at developing a report with people. I really do take a genuine interest in people. I think that's critical. Perhaps, like you, Charlie, I'm more used to asking the questions rather than answering them, but I think I try to understand what motivates people, what makes them tick and how to relate the message to them. I feel that we really do have the technology that we need. Greenhouse gas emissions aren't going up because we haven't perfected the LEED rating system right now. I think the gulf is leadership and initiative and action accountability, and so I spend a lot of my time. I'm watching YouTube videos about how new technology works and trying to make sure that I understand when I'm in a project team meeting, that I'm bringing value to the project. I'm always trying to do it through this lens of the big picture and so trying to try to do that. Relate between that 10000 foot view and what's happening day-to-day with the details. I find that's a challenge, but it's something that I'm always challenging myself to try to connect those dots with, working with a coach, all look up to. I brought the whole company into Atlanta and he teaches something he calls the Inquiry

Method, asking the right questions the best question. How do you become a really good question asker?

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Charlie: Stay curious, and I heard all that. There is your gift. Thanks for sharing that with us like that. Do you have any good habits, routines, rituals, share with us, go for a walk-in the woods every day?

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Jason: Having a dog helps with that and I think that is critical to my health and well being. I mentioned several times the connection to nature. Growing up in nature it comes naturally to me and I would urge everybody. Sometimes if I was to watch my favorite TV show or do something around the house, that normally brings me joy. Maybe that doesn't work 100% of the time. I have never come out of the woods without being in a better state of mind, a better disposition than when I went in and I can't say enough about that. I'm a tree hugger.

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Charlie: What a great protip and thanks were sure. What works for you, hope others are really going to do that and can really try that casing as we get to know each other more. I'm a fan of the bucket list. One or one or two things. Maybe on your bucket list, maybe some adventure or travel. Write what's on the bucket list?

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Jason: I mentioned that I had traveled a fair bit and obviously not so much the last couple of years, but I love to travel, I love to go and and and and meet people in different parts of the world and learn about different cultures and different places. I would challenge everybody to do it. I think it broadens your perspective. How did I say it once? If you want to keep your views narrow, then make sure you don't travel. I think we tend to take for granted what we know in our surroundings as the natural order of things, that our culture is human nature. When you go out and you see other

cultures, you learn that maybe something you thought was human nature is really a cultural matter learned in nature, and so travel is great. I would love to do more. My partner and I both love to travel and we have ambition to do more. The last few years, even before the pandemic, we've made the conscious decision to travel more locally because we're concerned about our carbon footprint. I'm lucky. In British Columbia there's a postcard view around every corner. We've got stunning mountains and giant trees and all this great stuff to see. It's not really much of a sacrifice to spend our time traveling around British Columbia. There's lots more that we'd like to do. I have the three-month trip through western Australia planned in my head that I hope we get to execute some day regionally. That's overlooked. Sometimes we think we have the jets, but what else was going to mention? If there's one thing, my bucket list, it is to build my own house. We have a dream of a fairly modest house built to high-performance standards, of course like passive, those metric, and we'd even be interested in having some renewables so that we may be off great, fully self sustainable. But at least Nederland captures rainwater and all that sort of stuff. I would love to have my own opportunity to implement those things and put both the design side and the construction side experience to work.

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Charlie: If you want to travel outside of Barcelona, a good friend of mine, that Fellow green building enthusiast, has really renovated one of the greenest homes in all Europe. It's actually a Living Building, but for a home and study and come back when you're ready to build. Books. Is there a book you'd recommend to the audience here?

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Jason: I would have called myself a voracious reader once upon a time. It seems everything I read now is technical. I've heard some of the guests say that too, but some of my favorite books remain classics of literature, fun stuff too. I love Tom Robbins. I mean it's been a few years since I read some of those things. But if people want to have fun, read Tom Robbins or all the

work of Douglas Adams, *Hitchhiker's Guide To the Galaxy*. If I had to pick one, I guess I'd highly recommend King's, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* and I'll just share this too. I've just picked up a book I'm really excited about. I haven't started reading it yet. It's called, *A good War* and it describes what it would actually look like to have more time, effort, and a tight mentality when it comes to fighting climate change. It reviews the experience of Canada and its response to World War II, and imagines how a similar response could be mounted to address climate change. It Was by a gentleman named South Clan, who was involved here with an organization called Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and examined things like: what did Canada do with respect to federal provincial relations or its relationship to first nations or to its allies, to industrial capacity and so on and so forth? He says, if applied that lens and looked at the climate crisis and things that we could be doing right now, and I believe that it's exactly the sort of approach that we need to take, I think that we can tackle this. It requires aggressive action, it requires accountability and I don't see it from our governments at this point in time. I think there's more to do and this book I'm looking forward to reading and I shouldn't say too much until I do so, but I think it's going to show us the way.

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Charlie: I'm sure someone you like and trust has said: hey, you need this, you're transferring that to us. Let us know how it goes, but we're going to put links to all those that Jason mentioned in our podcast show notes. Two final questions. One: is there any career advice you wish you'd have known earlier?

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Jason: The number one thing for me is to seek out mentorship. Show your potential mentors that you have promised to come to them with good questions, do your homework, have some research and volunteer. Make connections with folks. For me was the sustainable Energy Association. I had a roommate who mentioned that he heard something on the radio

about some sustainable living session this evening downtown. I rode my bike down there and participated and joined the organization that night. I've been a member ever since tonight and I got quite involved with the local steering committee. I didn't do it as a career move. I was thinking about what's important to me. I say to folks: all the time: join Habitat for Humanity, get your hands dirty, learn about construction from the construction side and join a committee, joint board. You're going to make yourself more interesting, you're going to make good connections and you're going along the way. I really wish that I had been given the advice to find people who do what it looks like might be the thing you want to do and ask them a bunch of questions. I do a lot of those sort of informational interviews and some of the folks who come to me with who've clearly put in the effort to to learn about you, know what I do, the business and have good questions. They impress and they are often the ones that I might say to appear. I've found this crackerjack person who's asking really great questions. Maybe there's space for you in your firm.

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Charlie: Thank you for sharing that because some listened to the contest. I've been doing this a while like you and I, but others maybe they're newer and they're early in it and that's my final question to you. Let's say there's someone listening to this broadcast. They've gotten really inspired by your story, do have any closing words of encouragement for them.

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Jason: You know a lot of people are concerned about climate change and the degradation of the environment, but they don't always feel they have the resources to make a difference. I do feel a lot of people are sort of left powerless. They don't even know how our society is giving off all this carbon. Buildings emit 40% of global CO₂ emissions between the embodied and operational carbon and those of us who play a role in the design and construction of the built environment have this opportunity to do better. We can make dramatically better buildings that are more durable, more

comfortable. I'm more affordable to operate, all while significantly reducing energy consumption, greenhouse gas emissions and all for a relatively small upfront premium. And I'll just say: change can happen quickly. People tend to overestimate what we can do in a year, but I think underestimate what we can do in a decade. It took about ten years for the automobile to wipe out the horse and buggy. Think about ten years in the development of cellphones. I think back to the nineties. We banned smoking in restaurants and bars here in Vancouver and there was this consternation. The industry is going to close there, anywhere to go and listen to a band anymore. But none of that happened. Things can change very quickly and I would say: If capitalism is so great at meeting our needs, we should put it to work to make our world greener. Please be an advocate, stand-up for what's right. You have to pick your battles, but do pick them. That means doing your part at home. It means urging the businesses and the regulatory agency and men, officials to do their part and in your career. If you're in this career, you're not always going to get your way on your project, but there's an opportunity. There's always a greener way to do all the things that we do and you can be the voice on your project teams to say: "Hey, should we really be putting a known carcinogen in our buildings? Should we really be making a choice to use a fuel source that we know we're not expecting to use in ten years or that is going to contribute to the problem." Think long term and like I say, pick your battles.

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Charlie: That's good advice for someone that's jumping into this movement, a movement that's been good for us, still work to do what I heard, there is a lot of encouragement. That's what I asked for: some accountability, and speak up, ask the right question. Everybody make sure you connect her with Jason. We'll put a link to his LinkedIn. Jason, thanks for everything you're doing today. I've enjoyed our conversation and I just want to say thank you.

00:38:56

Jason: Keep up the great work. Thank you, Charley, and thanks for all that you're doing. It's great.

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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 Green Building Matters. Our mission is to Advance the Green Building movement through education and encouragement.

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Charlie: Please tell your friends about this podcast, tell your colleagues and, if you've really enjoyed it, leave a positive review on tickets. Thank you so much and we'll see you in next week's episode.

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