

Housing and Social Equity with LEED Fellow Jeff Oberdorfer | Transcript

Introduction ([00:02](#)):

Welcome to Green Building Matters. The podcast that matters for green building professionals learn inside 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 hosts and yes, he has every LEED and WELL credential. Here's Charlie Cichetti .

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

Be sure to check out the green building matters community where you can have unlimited exam prep for any of the professional credential exams, you're tackling next as well as putting your continued education on autopilot, saving time with GPS reporting your hours on your behalf. Check it out gbes.com/join. Now enjoy this episode of the green building matters podcast. Hi everyone. Welcome to the next episode of the green building matters podcast. I'm your host Charlie Cichetti. This week we've got Jeff Oberdorfer. He's coming to us from Santa Cruz, California as a LEED fellow, and just an authority on affordable housing, green buildings, and so much more. Jeff, how are you doing today? I'm doing good. Well, I really appreciate you coming on, fascinating background and just really want to first ask, where did you grow up and where'd you go to school?

Jeff ([01:27](#)):

I grew up on Long Island, about a 45 minute train ride out of New York city. I grew up thinking the whole world was like New York City in terms of transportation or.

Charlie ([01:39](#)):

Trains usually. We're recording in the middle of pandemic. I'm usually in New York about once a month, even though I'm based in Atlanta, Georgia, I love to go in and fly into LaGuardia, get over to Manhattan. So I love New York.

Jeff ([01:52](#)):

I took a course in high school in architecture and we had three years to have mechanical drawing and the third year was architecture and I was floundering around until I took that course. So that was it.

Charlie ([02:05](#)):

Unbelievable. I hadn't heard of a lot of high schools doing that. Would you say it was just a teacher?

Jeff ([02:10](#)):

Actually the guy who taught it was an auto shop teacher. He was into mechanical drawing and we did two years of just engineering drawings and then third year was architecture. That just got me.

Charlie ([02:24](#)):

Okay, so that helped you choose where you wanted to go to college, Kent State. What was that next choice for you?

Jeff ([02:35](#)):

Kent state was, I was the oldest of four kids and my father said we got four kids going to college. So you got to go to a state school and Kent State was a really good architecture school. I wanted to get away from New York and wound up in Ohio.

Charlie ([02:53](#)):

Amazing. Two questions about that time as I've reviewed your background, you were at Kent State during the time of the shootings. What was going on at that time and then also in the architecture program, you studied, sustainability or energy efficiency. Was that part of the curriculum? So if you could take us back.

Jeff ([03:13](#)):

Well, Kent State was an extremely conservative school and it was also a suitcase school. So even though there's like 25,000 students, maybe 2000 were on campus. So the first thing that was interesting about being in that area of Ohio, is my first year of architecture school. The Cuyahoga River would catch fire by spontaneous combustion and that was the beginning of people's awareness that things were really screwed up. Nobody called it

sustainability at the time that wasn't a word, people used, people didn't use green or sustainable. We did have an instructor who taught lighting and he wrote the textbook on lighting and was very interested in the psychological impacts of lighting on people and he also taught the energy section. So we had a really good background in energy and also in lighting.

Jeff ([04:09](#)):

That's what got me started in being interested in how the environment impacted people and I joined a group called EDRA, the Environmental Design Research Association, which was a lot of academic architects who were interested in how the environment impacted people and in surveying that too, that's where I'm post occupancy evaluations started. So I became very interested in that and in architecture school, after the shootings on May 4th, 1970, I left to go to New York City to work for an architect, which I had scheduled before the killings. When we came back last year, this was before the killings had happened in high schools around the country, there was no psychological help, nothing like that. We just came back Cold Turkey. The first project we got in senior architecture school was bringing people in Kent together again, but we didn't have the skills to do that. So that got me really interested in community participation and how I look at community.

Charlie ([05:23](#)):

And the big issue of course, killings at Kent State is that happened at the architecture school. So there's bullet holes in the bathrooms and the old architecture school and the open space Taylor Hall, the architecture school sat on top of the hill and the open space below. It was the commons where students at any time could gather about anything. It was like common space and the national guard basically took that away and that's what started the conflict. So that got me interested in the rights of people in open space in urban or college open space. That kind of started me off. I left Kent and I went to live in Boston, Cambridge, and I wound up teaching at Tufts University on issues that we're talking about. I have students at Harvard and MIT taking my courses because nothing was taught like that at either of those schools. So quickly, I got a reputation for being known for looking at how people participate in the environment? What is community? This was not discussed in the seventies. So this was all new. Everything I did was kind

of an experiment, kind of stumbling forward, taking as many different jobs as I could find learning about interiors, about landscape, about urban design.

Charlie ([06:49](#)):

You really were out there before anyone else had done it. I usually ask what aha moments, but you just told me several and some of those very heavy. So that was a big influence on you. At what point in your career did you know no matter what I'm going to do in a career in sustainability, it's gotta have like you said, the word sustainability might not have been around.

Jeff ([07:12](#)):

I became really interested when I moved to California in 1980 about nontoxic building materials. So I was interested in linoleum, cork, bamboo, and I started getting clients by word of mouth who had neurological problems, chemical allergies coming to consult with me. And many of them were living outside on their deck because the indoor air quality was so bad. So my early career was based on what we call passive solar design and nontoxic building materials, the word sustainability, the word green didn't exist. The word green started around the time that the US Green Building Council Started.

Charlie ([08:02](#)):

Yeah, that was early 93, when the US GBC started that's right. Carter administration and the energy crisis got through the eighties and then green buildings, early nineties, best case, it sounds like.

Jeff ([08:15](#)):

That's right. When I took over at First Community Housing in 2000, I was talking to the chairman of the board of directors and he offered me the job. I said, on one condition, we're going to do all green buildings. And he said, what is a green building? I started at first community housing and the first thing we started doing was to incorporate energy efficiency and nontoxic building materials. We became involved with US GBC. This was before LEED Mid-rise. So to do residential buildings with LEED you had to use LEED commercial course, which was not designed for multifamily. So when LEED Mid-rise came around and LEED for homes, we just celebrated because all

of a sudden we had a LEED category that worked for multifamily housing, much more accommodating.

Charlie ([09:12](#)):

Being an architect for a long period of time, and I've got to ask because there might be some aspiring architects or engineers or LEED consultants listening to the podcast right now. Jeff, did you have to go out of your way to put green best practices into your projects or were some clients asking for it? How was that conversation?

Jeff ([09:30](#)):

As executive director at First Community Housing, I was the client so we included green features as what we called them like linoleum or PV panels. But what we found is that when we applied for funding, if we had listed and itemized the green building materials, the city or county that was funding us would delete them from our budget. So we became very good at integrating green into the building in a way that couldn't be taken away by funders or lenders. So after four or five years of doing this, we became known for doing green building. At that point we didn't have to disguise the green building features any longer. They were integrated as they should be.

Charlie ([10:21](#)):

Wow. Sometimes it gets value engineered out, but in your case, they were stripping it out. Tell us about that time. So 2000 to 2014 First Community Housing, what do we need to know about that organization?

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

Well, the organization was flattering when I took it over and it's interesting because when I was in private practice and I worked for nonprofit developers, I used to talk to my senior architects and we used to say we could probably do a better job of building affordable housing. I never thought that I'd be running an affordable housing company, but when I was offered to me, the possibility of being a developer and creating my own rules, interested me a great deal because I knew that was the only way that I can incorporate these materials and be in charge of how it was going to happen. Our first efforts were in nontoxic building materials. So we attracted a lot of special needs tenants because they were hyper aware of toxins in

the environment. I had a young fellow, probably 30 by now who was severely autistic.

Jeff ([11:29](#)):

He lived with two providers in a three bedroom apartment. After three months in his apartment, his childhood asthma was gone and he's off his anti-anxiety meds. So these kinds of things just built our reputation and also we're winning architectural awards. So not only were we doing architectural work that was getting national recognition, but we're also at the time getting LEED Gold. One of our projects actually got a coat award and it was LEED Gold. There's a big debate amongst the LEED Coat team about whether they should give a code award to a project that wasn't flat. Many people argue that this is an affordable housing project. We also did the first vegetative green roof in San Jose and I used to get invited to green roof conferences a lot by Paul Kephart at Brenner who does a lot of green roofs around the world, very famous for that. He would have me give a presentation and he would say, listen, the First Community Housing to build affordable housing with the green roof, you guys can do it. So it became a model beyond affordable housing just to multifamily

Charlie ([12:52](#)):

What a cool story and congrats on that LEED Goal and the code award. What do we need to know about affordable housing for people listening in, but haven't been on projects that seem to be in DC or Portland or maybe the Bay Area or where you are. There's probably a lot more of them, but is it a multifamily development that only a certain percentage has to be affordable housing? Should it be the whole entire community? What do we need to know about affordable housing?

Jeff ([13:22](#)):

Well, generally in California, affordable housing is for people who are low income, who earn between 30 to 60% of the area median income, but you can now do affordable housing that goes up to a hundred percent, as long as the average of all the incomes is 40%. A couple interesting things, One is that the leadership in the United States in multifamily housing that's green or LEED is coming from the nonprofit sector, not from the private sector, not if there aren't some really good private sector, people doing projects, but all

the early green building came from the nonprofit affordable housing sector. I think the affordable housing projects need to be a hundred percent affordable because within the 30 to 60% range, there's such a wide range of people. And we used to include at least 20 to 25% of people with developmental disabilities and they don't drive. So that brought our parking requirement down and increased our density. And also they thrived on our nontoxic building materials. So we got this formula together and actually got called to do affordable projects by castle members because they knew that we knew how to work with the community and build really exciting architecture.

Charlie ([14:47](#)):

It sounds like you had an A-Team there doing all that work too.

Jeff ([14:51](#)):

I had a great, great team and they still had the same grade team at First Community Housing. They're still pumping it out.

Charlie ([15:00](#)):

Well, you set that up and turned it around. Let's look back in the highlight reel. It's a humbling question, but what are some of your other proudest achievements? Maybe one of them is a LEED Fellow. It just shows that you really, really deserve this high honor. What else is on this highlight reel?

Jeff ([15:15](#)):

I think one of the things that happened quite by accident is that I became a Fellow in the AIA as well, only about 200 of us, I believe in the United States that have both AIA and LEED Fellows. So that's, that's pretty amazing. I was excited about that. I think winning the Northern California chapter of USGBC Heroes Award for First Community Housing was probably one of the most outstanding achievements, but some of the achievements are not things you can put on a resume, like having the mayor walk through a building, we just finished saying, I don't smell anything. There's no toxins. It's like getting into a new car, you smell all the toxins from the plastics. Non Toxic building you don't smell any of that. So small things like that, or also having an elected official come to an opening of one of our properties and going to a market rate project across the street, which wasn't as nice looking because he

assumed that the affordable projects would be less good looking than the market rate. So those kinds of things, those kinds of stories, but basically it's my tenants, the tenants and their stories, I think probably more than anything is what I found satisfactory.

Charlie ([16:44](#)):

So you've already given a few examples and you've changed their life. That's amazing. Well, thank you for taking us there. Fast forward a little bit more to today and what's keeping you busy.

Jeff ([16:57](#)):

Well, I'm doing a lot of consulting and housing and sustainability and I teach housing studio, a USF School of Architecture. I'm also involved with a firm. That's looking into bringing Hemp production to the United States to do non toxic non-flammable building materials. So that's just starting, but basically I'm keeping up mostly on webinars because so much new information is coming out consistently on carbon, on zero electric. And these issues I find are not really being paid attention to outside of the circle that we belong to. So when you are a member of USGBC, and you go to these conferences with 30,000 people and you're in a network of people doing great projects, you assume that this amount of remarkable amount of these projects happen, but when you get away from that, like I've been that for five years, I start seeing that people don't understand global warming or carbon reduction. When I meet with people, I tell them that really what we need to be looking at now is stop thinking about sustainability and start thinking about carbon reduction. And sustainability is a component of that, but not the other way around. And I think that's the challenge of our times. And there's so much new research coming out that you really have to do. If you're not involved with it on a day to day basis, you need to really keep up with the research. So that's what I'm doing quite a bit of.

Charlie ([18:30](#)):

That's fascinating. Yeah. Several of my podcast guests said, it's about that shift from operational carbon and efficiency to embodied carbon, but I like where you took us. Sometimes it's difficult to talk about global warming, but maybe it's easier to talk about something more personal, like your carbon

footprint and where we need to be and a little more on the ground level, but as fast

Jeff ([18:53](#)):

Yeah. I mean, when I left First Community Housing five years ago, all our buildings were LEED platinum and we're starting to investigate getting a Living Building Future. That is even further than LEED. Now I realize that's passe right now, because we really need to be looking at all electric buildings, zero electric, new materials, maybe photo glass that are going to change things. Just being sustainable is not enough anymore.

Charlie ([19:25](#)):

We can pull the masses, wow. Yeah. The living building and even beyond that regenerative design. So it's just fascinating. It's a good segue to one of my favorite questions to ask a professional like you that has made a career out of green buildings. What else should we be reading up on now? What do you think is around the corner in this green building?

Jeff ([19:48](#)):

Well, I think that we need to become more aware of agriculture and soil and talk about regenerative planning. Soil is really important. Reducing carbon is really important and buildings knowing where products come from and making those compromises in a building, especially affordable housing. We use a lot of vinyl windows because they operate easier for our tenants. Basically we're using PVC. So a lot of the buildings that you see that are now going to zero carbon or a Living Building Challenge or wood windows, and you can't do that in affordable housing. So when we first started working with the enterprise foundation, Enterprise Community Foundations and the Living Building folks, we tried to make a segway of how affordable housing developers could meet some of these challenges, knowing that they didn't have the budget to go full on. And I think that was a big move. And actually it was the Enterprise Community that really helped us do that.

Charlie ([20:56](#)):

I don't know about enterprise green communities, I've seen some of their work in New Orleans. It sounds like a lot of your projects have done it, but is it important to get that certification and partner with what'd you say some

projects do Enterprise Communities and LEED, or where does that fit into the mix?

Jeff ([21:13](#)):

Well, I think it depends on each firm and the size of the firm. We didn't use Enterprise Communities, even though we were quite close with them because we wanted to have all our projects LEED that way. We could say that we've evolved from legal to LEED platinum. And we had a standard that all our projects met, whereas I thought we only had a 12 person firm, so to go then get enterprise green or get wellness or get something else. It was just too much, whereas large firms should, especially if they have clients who want to get a WELLness certificate to get a LEED certificate, could get net zero. We weren't there at that time. As a small firm of probably 15 people, that's a lot to ask because we had a client paying for that. It came out of what little profit we made. So that's why we stayed with LEED because we wanted to have a trademark that was identifiable.

Charlie ([22:15](#)):

It's a very identifiable, identifiable brand, for sure. Any other projects you want to mention that you've had the privilege to work on? Anything comes to mind? I'm sure there's been a lot but what made them unique or what was the challenge you could share?

Jeff ([22:32](#)):

One of the great projects that I worked on was our Forest Street Studios. That was a hundred units of family housing. And the reason why it was really amazing is that we had been working with developmentally disabled people for a long time. The man who got us started on that Santi Rogers was in charge of the local headquarters of the Lanham Act in California, which provides funding for nonprofit groups to do housing for disabled. He came to one of our openings and he had always told us that he didn't want more than 25% of the population to be disabled. The reason was he wanted disabled people to integrate with the general population. He thought that 25% was enough that they weren't overwhelming the population, but could fit in and people could see them as human. So he came to our opening and here we have a high rise and people very rarely had lived in a high rise before.

Jeff ([23:38](#)):

Matter of fact, the first three months of this building being an operation, we didn't see any kids on the playground because they were running up and down the elevators playing on the elevators. So we had an opening and there was Mexican food. Lot of Latinos in our buildings, blacks, developmentally disabled, white folks and Sensei were sitting next to me and he was saying, this is what I've always dreamed of is having development, disabled people in a community where they didn't stand out, but they fit in and were accepted. And to me that has nothing to do with architecture that has to do with where your heart's at and having nontoxic buildings or energy efficiency. We work with people doing many fruit trees on their deck, so they can have food. The amount of services that are being provided now by nonprofit housing developers are really substantial.

Charlie ([24:31](#)):

Well, and it goes back to that word community that you mentioned even back at Kent State and those common areas and it just kind of full circle there. So I can see how that's a proud accomplishment and different layers of diversity there too. Jeff, let's talk a little more about you, a few rapid fire questions. What would you say is your specialty or gifts? What are you best at?

Jeff ([24:51](#)):

I would say teaching a housing studio and also putting together integrated design teams that could thrive and do a creative project.

Charlie ([25:02](#)):

I bet you're the cool professor everybody wants in class, right? You got a lot of good stories there too. Well, do you have any good habits? Any routine rituals that help you stay on point?

Jeff ([25:14](#)):

Well, actually going to farmer's market is what keeps me alive right now during this quarantine is that, , supporting local farmers who come out in this weather and also it links right to what we was talking about with regenerative architecture is that local organic farmers and farmer's markets and changing the way we produce food and the way we treat soil, I feel

really connected to that. So for instance, the building, which is a co-housing building, we compost all our food and we're in an urban environment. So that's really important.

Charlie ([25:51](#)):

It's an unusual blessing in disguise how all the farmers have really been able to support during this time. You're right. We need to keep it up. That's amazing. I'm a fan of the bucket list. What are one or two things maybe on your bucket list?

Jeff ([26:09](#)):

Let me think.

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

Travel, write a book who knows.

Jeff ([26:16](#)):

Well, I have no desire to write a book, even though people have asked me, I'm not a writer. I like doing PowerPoints and things like that. I think continuously promoting nontoxic, building materials, promoting, local organic agriculture. Especially if this new venture happens that will interests me and it all kind of links together for me.

Charlie ([26:44](#)):

Where would that be imported from? Is there a place in the world that you think really is nailing it with materials and healthy materials that maybe you want to go visit and learn from when it's okay to travel again?

Jeff ([26:55](#)):

Not necessarily there's places, like Parsons in New York City is one of the major places teaching healthy materials. I talk about it in my classes all the time, but it still hasn't caught on a lot in the profession. It is, we do get LEED points for it. I think it's been overshadowed recently by the net zero carbon and electricity, but use of natural materials obviously is a component of that. So that we do have a lot of buildings now made out of wood and bamboo other kinds of materials that are nontoxic, that just the breathing environment and the importance of ventilation, especially with what's

happening in California right now. And also COVID, we have to improve our air circulation systems.

Charlie ([27:48](#)):

You're right. If we lean on a program like LEED, that's helped us so much, it's still weighted towards carbon emission reduction, which of course is important, but how do we get a little more credit for the healthy materials and for better air quality? How about books? Is there a book or two you recommend to the audience that doesn't even have to be about green buildings?

Jeff ([28:08](#)):

The one I recommend to my students is the New Carbon Architecture by Bruce King. Even if we're not dealing with sustainability and of course I still make this something that students need to look at, I think it's really important. It has a lot of really good information and it finished two or three years ago. So it's already out of date. Taking webinars that you find out more until the next book comes out, but the known things are happening so fast that it's hard to keep up with books.

Charlie ([28:41](#)):

Yeah. You're a continuous learner. I'll put the link to that book in the podcast show notes so everyone can check it out. It sounds like you do spend a lot of time on webinars, learning, reading, any other kind of best practices on, do you give yourself permission to go somewhere and think, go somewhere and learn? Is there a certain kind of setting there? I think with our busy world, we live in Jeff. It's sometimes they almost need to schedule some time to think and plan or, or learn? How does that work for you?

Jeff ([29:09](#)):

I try to spend a lot of time alone quietly and just let my mind go where it tends to always wind up about architecture for some reason that high school class, it always goes right back to that. It is interesting because when I was in high school I was not a great student. I had a high SATs and they called me an underachiever. So the high school guidance counselor was not kind to me on my college applications. So we were getting frustrated and my high school teacher, an architecture teacher, I came home one day and I

found them talking to my mother in our living room. And he said, you were talking about mentors. So he told my mother do not give up on Jeff because he is going to be a really good architect. So the story ends with my mother when I became a Fellow and the AIA called me and said, do you mind if I contact Harry Canaan, your teacher from high school and tell him that you just became an AIA Fellow. She called him up and she goes, this is not only overdraw for, and he goes, Jeff's mom? And that was 40 years after high school. So just to bring around people who have been my mentor much more than a mentor hearing of that success.

Charlie ([30:40](#)):

Unbelievable. What a story? I literally goosebumps. I neglected to go there. So why don't we go there? Anyone else that maybe opened a door had influence on you along the way? I'm sure you've become a mentor to several others, but who else?

Jeff ([30:58](#)):

My somewhat guidance counselor, but my advisor in architecture school, John Flint, when I started going off in different directions and all the architectural faculty was saying, you have to decide if you want to be an architect or a sociologist. And I would say, why can't I just be a good architect? He supported me, got me into the honors college and took me to Neela Park in Cleveland to show me their lighting labs. And that's when I wrote my thesis on lighting. So he also got me into EDRIC, the environmental side research association. So he was definitely a mentor in college that he allowed me to do things that most of the other students couldn't even imagine doing because I was on the fringe about some of these things, which are now considered normal.

Charlie ([31:52](#)):

Well you're right. I mean, the programs aren't there yet, but you heard it here mentors are very important. Some you have access to some, just have influence and you follow their work. Well, Jeff, as we started to come to a little bit of a close here, two questions, one is, is there anything you wish you had known earlier in your career?

Jeff ([32:12](#)):

I wish I took more landscape architecture courses, landscape and ecology. I did take one course at Kent State, but I think that as an urban designer, when I was principal architect for the redevelopment agency, I realized that I really needed to have more knowledge of urban ecology and landscape. And that's one thing I would have done looking back that would have given me a lot wider skillset.

Charlie ([32:40](#)):

Well, really good advice there. Alright. My last question, let's say there's someone listening right now, thinking of jumping into this green building movement. What words of encouragement do you have for them?

Jeff ([32:52](#)):

Go for it. Become passionate about your research work wherever you can, that they let you experiment or learn from them. No matter whether that's a contractor, an architect, whoever it is, that's doing green building to learn from them.

Charlie ([33:08](#)):

Wow. You're a great storyteller, Jeff. This has been Jeff Oberdorfer, LEED Fellow out in Santa Cruz. Jeff, thank you for your time today on the podcast. Thank you. A good meeting. I just want to say thank you to our loyal listeners. We actually are celebrating over one year here on the green building matters podcast, me and the entire team. We're stoked and 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.

Charlie ([33:47](#)):

Thank you for listening to this episode of the green building matters podcast@gbs.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 an amazing guest. 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.