

Discussing Living Buildings, Hawaii, and More With LAS' Jim Nicolow (FAIA, LEED Fellow) | 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 host and yes, he has every LEED and WELL credential. Here's Charlie Cichetti.

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

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Charlie ([01:00](#)):

Hi everyone. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters Podcast, where I get to interview a Green building professional every single week. Today, actually coming to us from Hawaii. Can't wait to talk to Jim Nicolow ,who is the director of sustainability at Katerra and Lord Aeck Sargent, and just learn your story, Jim, how you doing today? Doing great, Charlie. You've already given me an Aloha, as we started and I just can't wait to learn more about doing sustainability in your region, but I've got to ask, where did you grow up and where'd you go to school?

Jim ([01:30](#)):

I grew up in South West Michigan in a small kind of rural farming community, a town called Galesburg. If you drew a line between Chicago and Detroit, Galesburg would be almost exactly equidistant. The first way you could get from a big city in Southwest Michigan.

Charlie ([01:47](#)):

Did you go to school there? University of Michigan? Did you know you wanted to get into architecture? I know those are the degrees you had. What was that like at the town?

Jim ([01:51](#)):

I didn't think about architecture at all growing up, which is, I think, unusual a little bit in the field. A lot of the people I work with and come in contact with kind of knew from childhood that they wanted to be an architect. I hadn't considered it at all. I was actually initially interested in being a vet and I met with a veterinarian, uh, just before starting college and talked to him about his career. He said it's as hard as medical school and less respected. So, go to medical school. I thought, okay, I'll, I'll prep for med school. I was interested in lots of different things.

Jim ([02:30](#)):

So for a while I was thinking maybe computer science. I took a macroeconomics class. I got really interested in economics. So, it was actually all kind of registered to be an econ major. My sophomore year and we were building a loft in the dorm and we had a two bedroom suite and we thought, if we build a loft with all four beds above in one bedroom and the desks below, then we could have a party room open. We were in the process of designing and building this loft and a guy in the hall had great suggestions about how to structure it. And it turned out he was an architecture student and he started talking to me about the program and I thought, wow, that's art and engineering and it just seems pretty cool. I literally didn't come to think about architecture until partway through my

college career and kind of shifted from econ major to architecture student, after a conversation with him and an intro to architecture class.

Charlie ([03:23](#)):

What a great story. Great influence and that's good segue. I always like to ask, who else maybe had some influence or might you consider a mentor? Anyone else stand out?

Jim ([03:32](#)):

Somebody who stands out kind of from a sustainable design and green building standpoint is Bob Berkebile from BNIM. I had kind of a political awakening when I reached college, which I think is not unusual for small farming community kids in Michigan and other places come to college and get exposed to lots of new ideas. I had really kind of a budding interest in sustainability and ecological living, but I thought of it as sort of a personal thing and something you do in your personal life with the food you buy and the way you live and that architecture, as a career, was sort of separate from that. I distinctly remember Bob Bob, Berkebile coming to Ann Arbor and giving a talk to the architecture school. It would have been probably 1989 or 1990 about his epiphany for green building and how he had sort of shifted his career to focus on green building and that was like a real light bulb for me that wow, you could actually merge my personal interest in sustainability with a professional career. So I think a Bob Berkebile is really kind of the spark that kind of where I first kind of realized I could put those two together.

Charlie ([04:38](#)):

I've heard his name several times here on the podcast. I've interviewed over 150 people now, Jim and his name has come up. He is obviously a great mentor, great influence and set you on your ways and that's why I'm curious, when did you really know green buildings and sustainability? I mean, obviously you have a title you've held now for a long time, director of

sustainability, but when did you really know, okay, what I do going forward it's going to be sustainability?

Jim ([05:03](#)):

After Bob's talk. I kind of tried to focus my coursework to the extent possible on green building. There really wasn't in the late eighties, early nineties at the University of Michigan, College of architecture, and urban planning. There weren't a lot of courses around that. There were some professors who had interests in it to the extent I could focus a little bit in my studies, but the real opportunities came when we moved to Atlanta. My wife is an epidemiologist and had a postdoc at the CDC and that moved us to Atlanta. We thought for two years, and we ended up staying there for eight years. When we got down to Atlanta, I saw some of the work published by Lord Aeck Sargent, in particular, this new arc building, which is kind of a Hobbit house of structure and just got very interested in the firm and ultimately went to work for Lord Aeck Sargent (LAS), a firm that had an interest in ecological design already and I was able to really start to blossom and find my way kind of through, through LAS, I've been there since 1997.

Charlie ([06:02](#)):

That's where you spent most of all your career and just, I'm sure there's some amazing highlights, but heck of a place to work for those listening that aren't in Atlanta like me, or then the region or really know of your firm. Tell us a little more about Lord Aeck Sargent and then, and then Kattera what do we need to know about?

Jim ([06:21](#)):

Sure. LAS was in many ways a conventional architecture firm in the Southeast to have non-integrated AEs. So, not just architecture, but we are an architecture and planning firm basically without an internal engineering focused a lot on higher education institutional projects. And that was really where LEED kind of initially took off. So just a nice bit of serendipity that the

project types we were working on were also early adopters for LEED. I was the first LEED AP in the office and in 2001. I ended up getting on those LEED projects and that sort of led to the ultimately the formal role as director of sustainability. It was informal to begin with and then about, I guess about two years ago, maybe three years ago now, Katterra approached us. They are a Silicon Valley based technology company extensively that is looking to disrupt the design and construction industry.

Jim ([07:18](#)):

We were on their design consortium kind of helping to influence some of their early work and they actually made overtures about becoming part of Katterra and we ultimately decided to do that. So, that's been a really interesting ride and kind of expanded my view of architecture from just sustainability in architectural design to now what's really a vertically integrated company with supply chain and construction and manufacturing and trying to get my head around all of that. I mean, it's been a great, great learning opportunity after 20 years of sort of starting to feel like I knew what I was doing now, I'm in a whole new industry learning all over again.

Charlie ([07:55](#)):

As they say, what got us here, won't get us there. 2001 you're LEED AP that's right when the exam first came out. So you were right there.

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

It's funny you mentioned, I know you do a green building exam training and at that point there were three or four practice questions that when I took the actual first LEED AP exam, they were right there in the exam verbatim. So I felt like I had prepared just by reading the practice.

Charlie ([08:25](#)):

You may be one of the oldest, original LEED APS I've interviewed, so well done. I know credentials, we'll talk about some volunteering you've done with different committees, but let's talk about buildings for a minute. On your LinkedIn profile is a building that's close to my heart, my alma mater Georgia Tech, The Kendeda Building, a living building. Can you tell us a little more about why that one is on your LinkedIn and you gotta be proud of it, but what are some other highlights that really stand out here, Jim?

Jim ([08:52](#)):

One of my favorites, I mean, still, I think one of my proudest accomplishments is right there in Atlanta as well, the SouthFace Eco Office. When I first moved to Atlanta in 97, I started looking for a green building community locally and the SouthFace Energy Institute was really kind of the go-to organization, supporting green building training and just sort of publicizing learning opportunities. I started getting involved with South Face events and their GreenBuild Conference or Green Prints. I think they're inaugural Green Prints Conference was in 97 or 98. I moved to Atlanta and started participating in that and ultimately presenting in that conference and when the opportunity came about to design a new demonstration green office, as an addition to their green residential demonstration project, we pursued that. I was the project architect and sustainability LEED on that. Dennis Creech, the executive director at the time described it as he wanted it to be a Noah's Ark of green building features that there was two of everything. It wasn't just one example of a way to solve a problem. It was the first project that I really got to work on that was completely focused on sustainability and creating a teaching building to tell the story of sustainability. It's still one of my proudest achievements. It was the highest scoring LEED project in the Southeast at the time.

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

Real cool story. Two of each. I love that. For those listings, we'll put a link to South face.org. You can learn more and check out the center there. What else stands out when you look back on the highlight reel?

Jim ([10:33](#)):

Our first LEED project came about through the South Face relationship. Actually, there was a presentation where Dennis Creech, I think, gave a shout out to LAS for our work there. In the audience was a national park service project manager who was about to start up a new project in the Smoky Mountain National Park and that actually jumped ahead of South Face because of the fundraising timeline of working with a nonprofit and became our first LEED certified project. We did a science and education building in Smoky Mountain National Park, and have done several green buildings since with the park service. I'd say that's another area I guess of pride and just appreciation for the opportunity to have a client that sustainability is kind of a key driver for their built environment projects.

Charlie ([11:21](#)):

Those clients, I mean, a lot of times we have to prove it still makes good business sense of course, but it's you want the clients to know, Hey, what else should we be doing? Piece together, the career journey within LAS. You were a project architect and then you worked your way into sustainability. When did you really get tapped to be the sustainability guy?

Jim ([11:41](#)):

Yeah, so it was probably about 10 years into my career before we had an official director of sustainability. I mean, that wasn't commonly a role when I started, it really came about organically through my interest. I think getting the AP frankly pushed me up on the list of possible choices for project architects, for some of those early LEED projects. I worked my way through the ranks and was managing projects ultimately. I think we recognized a need in the market to have sort of a dedicated sustainability expert in the

firm, and to be able to sort of leverage that expertise across the firm. LAS was 45 people when I started and we're up close to 200 now in six offices, we were in one office when I started. So initially it was much more sort of informal and flat. We tended to have an informal green buildings studio or group that tended to work on green building projects from various practice areas. But over time as the firm grew and as interest in LEED grew, there was a need to sort of take that subject matter expertise and spread it across the firm. I think, I want to say maybe about 10 years in 2007, we created a formal kind of sustainability director of sustainability and I've been in that role since that time.

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

Tell us about geography because you're coming to us from Hawaii. When did you relocate there?

Jim ([13:10](#)):

Yeah, so like, like many good architects who have a spouse in a different field. I've followed my wife's job from location to location. We were both from Michigan originally and we had two small kids in Atlanta and had kind of the pull to be back closer to family. She took a teaching position at Western Michigan University, which moved us back up after eight years in Atlanta, we moved up to Michigan. I ultimately ended up directing our Michigan office in Ann Arbor for a few years when Terry Sargent, one of the founding partners of Lord Sergeant passed away too early and unexpectedly, it was a huge loss. He had been directing that Michigan office. I actually helped to direct that office for a few years and then, like many Midwesterners, I think my wife had a midlife crisis. Couldn't take another winter and she applied to a position in Honolulu on kind of a whim and six weeks later she moved with my son and I stayed behind and got the house emptied and sold and followed them in October, 2017. We've been here now just over three years.

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

Maybe you had a headstart on what we're all experiencing this year as we're recording this at the very end of 2020 and getting this episode out in early 2021, so now we really can work from anywhere. Right. So it's just interesting.

Jim ([14:32](#)):

Yeah. I've been working remotely since 2005, really when we moved to Kalamazoo, because that was still 100 miles from our Ann Arbor office. I'd go back and forth a few times a week, but primarily remotely and then with multiple offices. I feel like it wasn't that big of a transition with COVID, it's more the sort of existential crisis of a global pandemic with it, but yeah, from a functional day-to-day standpoint, it didn't have as big an impact on me as business as usual.

Charlie ([15:00](#)): For sure. Jim, what's keeping you busy?

Jim ([15:02](#)):

Today you mentioned the Kendeda building, which is our first living building challenge project. We just finished the performance period on that and it was interesting because of COVID. I mean, typically you have a year of performance data while you can imagine during COVID we wouldn't. Georgia Tech wasn't using facilities in the way that they might typically use facilities so it involved a fair amount of kind of extra calculations to look at what the performance would have looked at but it looks like even under the worst cases, it's producing about 130% of the energy that it needs. So performing well above the needed target so that's pretty exciting. With the relocation to Hawaii and the addition of Katerra, I've been focusing on some projects in Hawaii recently. In this region, we've got a Corps of Engineers project in Kwajalein Atoll at the military base where we're serving as sustainability consultants and a medical clinic in Hilo on the big islands. So,

that's been interesting from a time zone standpoint, I feel like my days start Eastern and finished Hawaiian.

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

In Honolulu, one time I taught a LEED green associate class to 96 locals. This was back when there was some green job training from the last recession about 2011, 2012. We had a great time there and it was a big class and they told me to hurry up because they needed to go fishing. I was like, okay, let me get through the material.

Jim ([16:27](#)): Sounds like we're due to get you back.

Charlie ([16:28](#)):

Yeah, I'd love to. I really would. This next question is what's around the corner. What do you think we should be tracking now?

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

I mean, I don't know that I would say it's coming up in some respects. It's here already, but I think from a broader industry standpoint, there's going to be much greater focus on embodied carbon and sort of the impact of the building materials. I feel like as an industry, we've had a good 20 years of really paying a lot of attention to operational energy and driving that down. I think in the meantime, the codes have really caught up. LEED was an optional kind of aspirational target and the codes were far behind it and I think over time they've really got closer and closer to LEED. We've seen ASHRAE 90.1 kind of approach LEED. I think those strides mean that by comparison now the embodied carbon impact of the building products take on an ever greater importance.

Jim ([17:24](#)):

And with the time value of carbon, those decisions are upfront. I think we're going to see a lot of attention to that as part of the appeal of Katerra, frankly, they built the largest CLT plant in North America and they're making a big push for mass timber. We think that's part of the future of the building industry. So that was one of the appeals to us of joining Katerra. I think health and wellness was already sort of, kind of a rising interest. And I think in response to a global pandemic, it's going to be even more important. One other area that I just, I feel like we, as architects want to solve everything at the building scale, we tend to think of the building as kind of the system boundary. With the Living Building Challenge, as an example, you've got to power it with the light that falls on the site and provide water with what falls on the site. I often wonder if these demonstration projects are great as a thought exercise, but some of these solutions need to be municipal scale solutions where the building operator doesn't have to run an energy plant and run a water treatment plant. It'd be much better to me if we still had distributed systems, but maybe solve some of these things at a greater scale. I'm hoping maybe we'll start to do that to look more comprehensively at communities rather than building by building.

Charlie ([18:40](#)):

Everything you just said, I agree with it all from the wellness of the communities. LEED for communities is a good tool for that now, too, but definitely embodied carbon, timber frame construction. I've been fortunate to work on a new project here, Atlantic Station T3 (inaudible) . We did the LEED consulting on that and it's just a great project. Let's go back to materials in Hawaii for a minute. What makes sustainability more challenging there? The codes, for example, I think you have to, on the residential side have solar hot water, right? I mean, solar water heating, excuse me, but ours are pretty expensive there. So you're pretty incentivized to be efficient. Tell us a little bit about some projects there. What's easier and what's harder to do sustainability wise?

Jim ([19:28](#)):

Costs are higher because a lot of materials are shipped in. Just costs in general are surprisingly higher, coming from a mainland perspective. What's in many respects, easier is it's such a benign climate. I mean the first house I've ever lived in that doesn't have a thermostat. There's no heating or cooling system. The most we do is close the windows if it gets a little cool at night, but we've got a net zero energy system in our house, but it took eight panels to get there. So that's a different cost dynamic. The cost of electricity is extremely high, but if you're not air conditioning. You're basically looking at fans and refrigerators.

Charlie ([20:12](#)):

Yeah. It's slightly different there. I think everyone is a little more sustainably minded, but you're right when that power cost is 25 to 30 cents a kilowatt hour compared to here in Georgia where it's 8 to 11 cents, it's a different driver.

Jim ([20:28](#)):

In some respects, it should be more expensive like that. I mean, the reality is that the cost of per KW in Georgia has some externalized costs of pollution from the grid that's providing it. You're paying for it in other ways, but it makes it really hard to do those trade offs and justify sustainability measures. We're working on a project for the national park service in St. Croix and I think their electric rates were 50 cents a kilowatt hour. Solar wasn't a ten-year payback. I think it was an under three year payback and when you have those more expensive utility costs it really changes the ROI on some alternative technologies.

Charlie ([21:08](#)):

Like you said earlier, the price on carbon, even if it's just us projects, putting a price on carbon. Let's talk a little more about you. What do you think you're really good at? What's your specialty or gift?

Jim ([21:21](#)):

I think that I don't like buildings. I mean, I say that somewhat in truth. It's funny when I think of most of my colleagues, when they plan vacations, they'll go to see buildings and it was like, it would never dawn on me to vacation around seeing a building. I usually limit the building's impact on the natural environment. So I really appreciate green buildings and I appreciate well designed buildings, but in some respects, not being passionate about the object of a building as an architect puts me in kind of a funny place, but maybe a helpful place when you're talking about sustainable design.

Charlie ([21:59](#)):

No, that is an interesting perspective. It sounds like you'd like to problem solve. You like to improve and of course the industry, but building by building, it's a building. It's really just a figured out a better way to do what we're doing. So, that's what I'm kind of hearing here. Do you have any good habits, Jim, any routines or rituals?

Jim ([22:19](#)):

Not that I can think of. I mean, I feel like I'm pretty traditional in the way that I work. I've got a handwritten to do list that I keep updated with dates of deliverables on my left. My email is my surrogate memory. I tend to rely on that to know what I'm doing. I guess one thing I would say is that maybe it is important for people, particularly in the time of COVID , I've had to learn to be deliberate about informal conversation and communication with colleagues from a remote work setting. You don't have those sort of inadvertent water cooler discussions and you can't have them when you're in different locations. So making a point sometimes of reaching out to team members, just to check in and talk when there's not a set agenda item I think is something that I've done. I've learned to do over time, working remotely and something that may be applicable to more folks now in this new sort of COVID world.

Charlie ([23:15](#)):

The new world, thanks for that. Let's talk about a bucket list. Some people like to travel to Hawaii, but you live there. So where else would you like to adventure to one day or travel or is there still something even professionally you want to achieve? So what are one or two things maybe on the bucket list?

Jim ([23:34](#)):

The bucket list from a travel standpoint, I'd love to see Iceland. We had a trip planned to Iceland in June of this year. Of course, that didn't happen. So I have an entire itinerary and agenda mapped out for a two-week trip to Iceland that I hope to actually be able to implement at some point professionally. I feel like in many respects it's a dream. I have a dream job. I mean, I've been able to focus my career on sustainable design for a firm that values sustainability. In many respects, I feel like that's a bucket list item achieved. I feel like it, some of it's just dumb luck being in the right place at the right time with the right interests. I really appreciate that. I'd like to learn to surf. I've been in Hawaii for three years yet and what I do on the water would not be mistaken by anyone for surfing. So that is on my bucket list. I'd love to love to actually know how to surf seems like a nice low carbon entertainment activity here.

Charlie ([24:35](#)):

Bucket list. That's fun, man. Let's talk books and learn. I don't know. Do you like to pick up a book in your hands or listen to audible, or if you do some industry publications, but is there a book or two you'd recommend?

Jim ([24:47](#)):

Yeah, I tend to prefer books in hand just because so much of work is on a screen. I don't read things electronically. Typically I have a subscription to the local paper and I read the hard copy daily. I was thinking about books and I'm one that I've been working my way through. I think with my short attention span, maybe because of COVID, it's taking me longer to finish

books than it used to, but I've been reading Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow: Harari, Yuval Noah. The description is a brief history of tomorrow. It's kind of looking at the future of humanity, really interesting, kind of looking at our species transitioning to a more technological age and what does that mean? I was looking back at the beginning of the book that I read before COVID and he had this whole section called the last days of death.

Jim ([25:34](#)):

It was about this idea that maybe we were moving towards a point of immortality, which is certainly ironic having now having a global pandemic spring up after reading that section, but it's a really kind of thought provoking book that I'm still working my way through. It reminded me a bit of something my wife has always said about this sort of focus on sustainability and trying to deliberately steer the built environment towards a more benign or ultimately beneficial place in the environment. Her take as an epidemiologist from a public health perspective as well. If these things get too far out of balance, they're self-correcting, there'll be a pandemic. And I mean, she had said this years ago and I just think, wow.

Charlie ([26:18](#)):

No, that thought provoking that book. We're going to put links in the show notes here. I always love just to hear these recommendations and you have a great point about all our screen time and how we can change that up and get up and move around more. It's just so important. Anything else before we talk career advice, Jim?, Any passion projects, anything that you've been spending more time on that someone listening here might be interested in.

Jim ([26:49](#)):

Gosh, that's a great question. I feel like that it's a perennial challenge and I'm still trying to figure out how to solve it with our organization, especially as we're now a bigger organization than before, but it's always that, that line between the small percentage of projects that sustainability is a key driver

and it's what the project is about. And you can do great things like the eco office or the Kendeda Building or the projects for the park service and the other, maybe 80% of projects, which sustainability isn't even a stated goal necessarily. How can you get a baseline attention to sustainability in a consistent and comprehensive way across an organization where people feel like it's their job and part of what they do. There's a weird mix or a weird effect to me with creating a sustainability director. It's great that you have the subject matter expertise, but there's also a risk of people thinking, , it's not my job. It's the sustainability director's job. Don't worry about that stuff. So I think that's just a, it's a perennial challenge, figuring out how to get this stuff to sort of percolate and just be part of what we do.

Charlie ([27:58](#)):

That's great. Thank you. If you look back on that career or any other advice that was great, and anything else that you wish you had just known earlier In your career?

Jim ([28:07](#)):

I think you hear it when you're starting out and even before you choose a career, but people always tell you it's important that you do what you like. I think that's really true. I mean, I think people perform at their highest when they're doing something that they're invested in and that they care about. I feel like I've been very fortunate that I've been able to align my professional career with where my personal interest and passion is. I mean, being an architect, that's not crazy about buildings sort of set me up for failure. I've been fortunate enough to find a way through it that I could get meaning out of the work and enjoy the work. I think it's really critical. It's almost cliché, but it's really critical to sort of know what your passions are and understand yourself and try to be true to and honor those because that's where you'll do your best work and great things will happen.

Charlie ([29:00](#)):

It sounds like this new challenge with Kattera and just what the future of buildings and construction looks like. It's really got you on your toes thinking and problem solving. It must be a lot of fun. Let's say there's someone listening right now as we come to a close here, Jim, I've enjoyed your enthusiasm, getting to know you and just to get this Atlanta, Kendeda connection, but if someone's listening, but they're just now jumping into the green building movement, it's been good to you. Any words of encouragement for them?

Jim ([29:29](#)):

Yeah. I mean, get involved in professional organizations like the local US GBC, the local AIA. Whatever your profession there are organizations like that. I've had Kalamazoo, there was a sustainable business forum that I joined and worked on the board of that. Finding those opportunities because from a professional opportunities standpoint, that's where you network and build your professional network. It brings you new skills. I feel like you get more, you get so much more out than what you put into it. I didn't really get involved in organizations like that until a little bit later in my career. I think I had some early work with the AIA Cote chapter, in Atlanta. What really sort of opened my world to sustainability opportunities in Atlanta. So take advantage of those professional service organizations. It seems like you're giving them something, but in reality, you get way more out of it than what you put into that.

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

Oh, great career advice there and get involved, surround yourself with like-minded people and just put yourself out there. Everyone, this has been Jim Nicoloe. He's the director of sustainability at Kattera and Lord Aeck Sargent . He is in Hawaii, a LEED Fellow, Jim, thanks for your time today. I really enjoyed it. Thanks Charlie. It was really fun.

Charlie ([30:42](#)):

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 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 ([31:07](#)):

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