

Egypt's LEED Fellow & Edge Auditor Karim Farah | Transcript

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

Welcome to Green Building Matters Podcast. The podcast that matters for green building professionals learn insight in green buildings as we interview today's experts in LEED and WELL. We'll learn from their career paths, war stories and all things green because Green Building Matters. Now our host, and yes, he has every LEED and WELL credential. Here's Charlie Cichetti .

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

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

Hi everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters Podcast. I love getting to interview green building professionals all over the world. Today we have a LEED Fellow coming to us from Egypt. I've got Karim Farah. How you doing today? I'm doing fine. Thank you. I know we were just talking about the weather where you're at. You're on your balcony. We're doing this interview and I just can't wait to hear more about your journey. Tell us, where did you grow up and where did you go to school?

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

I grew up in Cairo, went to school in Cairo and went to college in Cairo. What about your degrees and then later sustainability? Was that around you or when did you maybe know and learn a little more about sustainability? I'm an architect and my passion was studying architecture or anything related to natural building and building with mud bricks and Adobe and things like that. I was really passionate about that and did some research while in college about the very famous Egyptian art called (inaudible), domes and bolts you the using Adobe. I was interested in sustainability and green building and natural building when in college.

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

Were there some professors that also tried to teach you that, or you had to go find your own studies when you were going through college? Was it more about energy efficiency or materials? What was the most important thing at that time?

Karim ([02:55](#)):

Sustainability wasn't the main issue we were talking about climate and climate studies and orientation and good ventilation and stuff like that. The most important professor that taught me was [inaudible] may he rest in peace? He was just an amazing architect and artists. I learned a lot from his passion about what he was doing. I went to a Jesuit school where I was taught by a priest and they put the seed about loving nature and loving. We went hiking a lot at school. The seed was put in school actually, and then in college.

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

That was just reinforced. That's great that they had that influence. Did you have any other mentors? Those are two that you've just named. It's amazing. Who else as you built your career would you call a mentor?

Karim ([03:37](#)):

After graduation there is another LEED Fellow, when I came to learn about LEED I learned, he was a mentor to me, Mario (inaudible) he is from Sri Lanka. We worked on some projects together and he was always supportive. I also had an architect whom I worked with on one project and he was British, his name was [inaudible]. I haven't been in contact with him in a long time, but he was someone I learned from.

Charlie ([04:10](#)):

That's amazing. Tell us about early in your career in architecture. You worked for a large firm or more than that. Those early days you got your degree, you're interested in sustainability, but where were you working? What kind of projects were you working on at the time?

Karim ([04:46](#)):

Okay. I worked for some time. I worked as an architect when I started my career, I worked as an architect for different firms. I worked almost for one firm per year, so I changed one firm per year for like four or five times and then I had a longer job for four years and then my most important step was working for Dar

Al-Handasah in 2004, by then I had 10 years of experience. I finished college in 1994, in 2004. I had 10 years of experience and I started working for Dar Al-Handasah and this was the biggest step in my career to that day.

Charlie ([05:10](#)):

Tell those that don't know about the DAR group and there's several organizations that can come together on projects. Tell us about that.

Karim ([05:54](#)):

DAR group was established, I think in 1950 something, 52 or 58 started in Beirut. The aim of the founder was to have a consultancy firm using Arab and international experience that can compete with international firms. He achieved that aim. He hired people from different nationalities, but mostly Arabs that were highly educated and highly qualified to take work mostly in the Arab region where we understand the culture most. DAR grew to be a larger group. They had other companies they acquired, such as Perkins and Will and TYL in, and other companies. I stopped working for them three years ago so I don't remember all the companies that formed our group, but it was a conglomerate of many companies. We work on large scale projects. This is where the larger scale of the group could have an edge over smaller firms. You can undertake large projects like airports and hospitals and large stadiums and cities and things like that. Most of my work with Dar Al-Handasah was with Perkins and Will, the architectural firm from the US and this is how we worked on many LEED projects.

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

That's 14 plus years at Dar, Perkins, a Wilke connection to the states, LEED's been a great tool. Tell us about what LEED may have meant to you along your green building career.

Karim ([07:44](#)):

Let me tell you that this is how it started. I did a project management diploma in 2000 and in it, the last chapter I wrote about LEED, this was in 2000 and LEED just started. I did some research and somehow I managed to insert this project in my diploma, something about LEED and efficiency and energy efficiency and water efficiency. In 2006, I was working with my direct superior on a project in Beirut. He told me we have a project in Dubai, and they're telling us that they want the project to be LEED Gold. I tried to find out what they mean? What is LEED and

what is gold? I knew a little bit about it. I dug a little bit deeper and I did a presentation to the board Dar Al-Handasah that LEED is very important. It's what's coming next. I had the green light to start pursuing it. I contacted the US GBC on the phone, and I told them, we want to learn about LEED. They sent two LEED faculties to Cairo to teach us now, Dr. Mullin and Eric, 'm very sorry. I don't remember his name, Eric. I met him after that and they came to Cairo and we had 11 people come from Beirut in addition to 11 people from Cairo. We attended five consecutive days of LEED workshops in our headquarters in Cairo. This was in 2007. Directly afterwards, we had to go to the US to take the LEED exam because the LEED exam wasn't available in Cairo. I traveled to New York and took the exam in August, 2007. I was the first LEED AP in Asia.

Charlie ([08:32](#)):

That is a good story. You're right. There was so much advocacy and teaching and learning. We know green building best practices, but here's this program called LEED. Any of us that are LEED Fellows can say, "thank you." It's been a great tool for over 20 years. Did the project get to LEED gold, hopefully that it comes close?

Karim ([09:08](#)):

Actually, I had a string of projects coming out of Dubai. Many of them started and then stopped in 2008. We had 10 projects that started or more and then stopped, but some continued in Dubai and then I was the LEED guy. I started explaining LEED to people in every project. I explained to the team, I explained to the contractors, I explained. I thought I was teaching all the time. Why don't I become the faculty? I applied to become the faculty. In 2009, I became LEED faculty and I continued to teach LEED. At that time, we started working on large projects in Saudi Arabia with Perkins and Will. We shifted a little bit from the Emirates to Saudi Arabia because we had large projects there that were targeting LEED. We had like 18 projects in Saudi Arabia that achieved LEED, uwe started this Perkins and Will, but these were large projects and they took many years for execution. I followed up on them from the first phases of design with Perkins and Will, of course they were the leaders at this stage.

Karim ([10:24](#)):

I continued through the final stages of design and construction until we achieved the LEED certifications for all the projects. We achieved more than we targeted. We were targeting one Gold on a project and 11 achieved four gold and six silver.

Something where we achieve much more than we were aiming for when we started. This was LEED to 2.2 lean version 2.2.

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

LEED version three and now we're on to four, 4.1. Tell us about your region and projects. What's difficult and what may be we take for granted when it comes to a green building in Egypt, the energy efficiency, the weather, materials, is it recycling? Where do you still find it a challenge?

Karim ([11:27](#)):

The main issue is number one, our building code or our building techniques are very different from the building techniques of the buildings that apply. The technology is very different. For a project in the US or Europe, you're doing a good building, and then you take a step forward to achieve LEED in Egypt, we are building completely different. You have to have a project that fits a certain standard, and then it is decided to achieve LEED. This is a very small, small, small margin of the projects in each Dubai and Saudi Arabia. It's a little bit different because many of the projects have a high standard of building quality. LEED is a small step further, but in Cairo, one issue and cost is very, very important. The other thing is that in most of the projects they worked with in Egypt or in the Gulf, almost all the team was new to LEED.

Karim ([12:14](#)):

Very few projects that I work with a team that had done any project before. It's always new. The knowledge is not at the level it should be. It's changing a little bit because most of the people graduating from college these days are very fluent with sustainability and LEED and WELL and everything. I'm hoping that there will be a positive change in the future.

Charlie ([12:44](#)):

Thanks for painting a picture. I'm glad to hear we've come a long way in your region as well. Let's talk more about your career. A lot of time at Dar group, you've obviously been involved with the Egypt GBC faculty. Tell us what else you've been doing to build your career.

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

Well, because I was the LEED person. We had a project in Dubai sometime, and it told me that there is something called (inaudible) which is another rating system. I studied this and we applied it for one project. We started working in Qatar. So they told me there is a rating system called QSAS, which later became GSAS. I learned GSAS and I spent some time in Qatar and we applied to QSAS for like 40 projects in Qatar. I thought, why not start an Egypt green building council? In 2012, we started working on Egypt's Green Building Council. It's been a little bit of a bumpy road because it's not easy to GBCs. There is always some kind of internal politics involved, and it doesn't always go the way you wish. We started developing a rating system that was built basically on EDGE, the rating system developed by the IFC. I played an important role in the development of (inaudible) rating system that we were developing for the Egypt green building council, but then it didn't go very well.

Karim ([14:11](#)):

I studied EDGE and I became an EDGE expert and then EDGE auditor. Now in Egypt, we are building a larger city with more complex buildings. LEED is becoming more of the trend of applying LEED in more projects these days. After there was a big lull with the start of LEED version four, but now it's picking up again. We're building a new capital so LEED is taking off again, but still, it still applies to a small percentage of projects. Even if there are more LEED projects to have a lot of green buildings that cover the whole market, we need something that is easier and simpler.

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

That could be EDGE. Educate our podcast, listeners, Karim, when you have a project coming up in Egypt, it sounds like there's options. There's EDGE, there's QSAS, there's LEED, or there's just best practices. Is the client driving that, or you as the advisor consultant are showing options, like how does the conversation go in two projects?

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

I initiated the conversation. I was in a talk with a consultant and they told me I was doing the project. I told them why they didn't achieve LEED and this worked. In a project that I'm doing in Saudi Arabia and another project that I'm doing in Cairo. They're almost at the final stage of the final submission, but the hard part about these two projects is that we started very late. The projects were almost in

construction, so it was a struggle. We are doing well. I think we are going to achieve certification. The other case we might even achieve LEED gold certification, but it is very hard for me because we started at a very late stage.

Karim ([15:59](#)):

There are many, many difficulties with that. Some large projects are initiated by the client and the main consultant. When you submit a proposal for a LEED project. And this is usually an issue for large projects. It is initiated by the main consultant of a product, which is usually larger. I applied for it as a LEED consultant, some projects they want to achieve LEEDs, but they are, it's completely inapplicable. It's very hard and they are at a very late stage. Sometimes I give them the idea that if you cannot achieve LEED, you can still achieve EDGE. We have some potential for. EDGE project, but no concrete projects yet.

Charlie ([16:40](#)):

No, thank you. I know it's good to have options, but sometimes you have to.

Karim ([16:53](#)):

We don't have any other, we have a rating system that was developed by an entity, a government entity called green pyramid, but it didn't really pick up. We have a thought sheet developed by the Egypt GBC, but it didn't really pick up. I think the options for the future would be mostly LEED and WELL.

Charlie([17:04](#)):

Oh, got it. That's good to know. When you look back on your career or even your personal life, what are some achievements that you're really proud of?

Karim ([17:19](#)):

I think I played the role in that many people became LEED GAs and LEED AP is whom I work at Dar Al-Handasah. I give a lot of workshops in Cairo Beirut and in India. With my work with the contractors, many people from the contractor team became LEED GAs and APS, and many of them are now LEED consultants. This is one of the things that helped me be acknowledged as a LEED Fellow. Probably around 500 people became LEED GA and AP through things that I initiated. Be it workshops at Dar or at the American University in Egypt or in different countries.

With working with a contractor, many of them also became contractors teams in Saudi Arabia. Some of them became LEED professionals as well.

Charlie ([18:06](#)):

That's very rewarding because to pass an exam you help them get their careers going and now they're off. I'm sure they call you a mentor. That's really nice that you've done that. Obviously, you've got a lot of credentials, so you've passed a lot of exams too. We mentioned, WELL, for example, how is the healthy building movement in Egypt? Is it WELL Fit? Is it WELL, health, safety returned to work pandemic response. What's going on with healthy builds?

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

I studied WELL many times and I attended your workshops that were many, many hours, but I did not become a WELL AP. I think that there is a lot of talk about, WELL in Egypt nowadays, but I don't think we're there yet. I find it hard to sell a LEED building. I think selling WELL will be, for some of my clients, not ethical to bring to the subject. It will come or maybe parts of it will come.

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

For now. It's how do you be WELL ready? Maybe change the conversation from spending the money on the big plaque. How do we be WELL ready? How do we help? Is this a healthy building or not as people return to work from the pandemic. Definitely those best practices, but when you're ready, Karim from Indio, I'll give you the secret tips to pass your WELL AP when you're ready. So you look me up. Tell us about today. What's keeping you busy today at REEDS consulting, and I know you're still involved with the Egypt GBC. What's keeping you busy?

Karim ([20:02](#)):

Right now I have around 88 projects that I'm working on. They are at different stages of design. One of them is the contractor. I'm working on the construction credits. The others, I'm working with a whole project design and construction credits. I have some potential for EDGE projects. I have some proposals around. To get one project, usually submit 10 proposals. Out of every 10 proposals, you get one project. What I'm working on now is enlarging LEEDs, consults, acquiring more people to work with me, especially energy modeling and commissioning daylight modeling. One of my clients actually wants the product to have EPD and

HPD certification. I'm working with them to do LCAs, life cycle analysis, to get EPD certificates for the projects that are manufactured in Egypt and HPD.

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

I also have acquired the help of some other consultants, international consultants to help me with such tasks. My aim is to form a consultancy that can cover all the requirements of a sustainable building from energy modeling, daylight modeling, material commissioning, and under different certificates I can offer to my clients. Now, I'm building the website for a consultant and I'm working on the different services that we are providing.

Charlie ([21:51](#)):

I love entrepreneurship. I love green entrepreneurship. A few weeks ago, we released a podcast where me and Drew Shula, who built up his company in LA, I'm in Atlanta, Georgia, talked about these early days of the consultancy. You've got the experience, you've got your network, your relationships. Good luck as you're picking and choosing. It's hard to do at all, but you do want to be flexible. You have all these different programs they could offer. If you had a crystal ball and you could see the future career what's next? What are you maybe reading up on? What are you excited about coming up in this Green building movement?

Karim ([22:12](#)):

I'm actually one of the judges of the jury for a competition for designing a zero building in Cairo. The competition is about a typical office building in a typical business district in new Cairo. The competition is to design a net zero building. One of the things that we underlined while preparing for the competition is that the idea should be feasible. I don't want something that is over the moon, this is not net zero.

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

We want something that can be applicable. The project has been submitted. We are going through them now for review. I think the level of awareness is becoming much higher. We are doing a lot. Egypt is on a development stage where we are building a lot. We're building a completely new capital, which is a very big mega city in Cairo. Some bad experiences with that LEED consultancy led to some projects stopping because they didn't give very good advice that made the project very expensive. They stopped the need for projects completely because you

should know how to do it. You should do it in a way that is feasible and you should discard the credits that are going to be difficult. Discard the things that the contractor is going to ask for a lot of money for and achieve the goal.

Karim ([23:59](#)):

You don't have to go for platinum and they target a certain way. It's very difficult and very expensive though. So instead of achieving gold, the whole project was dropped. No LEED for this project. I see a lot of movement, a lot of talk about sustainability, a lot of talk about green, a lot of knowledge in the younger generation about sustainability and there is movement. I think maybe within, I don't know how many, maybe as soon as next year, there will be a boom in green construction in Egypt, but we have to have the right people to do it with the right experience.

Charlie ([24:40](#)):

You're onto it. Thank you for giving us that glimpse to the future. Let's talk a little more about you. What would you say you're best at, what's your specialty or gift?

Karim ([24:53](#)):

I am passionate about what I do. I do not do things just for the sake of business. I do things that I like. That's why I like to talk about these things to other people and they get excited when I speak to them about sustainability. When I explain the different credit or issues in a meeting, I do it with a deep understanding of the issue and with passion about that. So this gets people. They understand when I explain. They understand it because it's explained simple, clear, and with good understanding from me so things get moving in the right direction.

Charlie ([25:45](#)):

A mentor of mine on the podcast episode three, he said, "You can't fake passion." So yeah, you gotta, you gotta use that. So that's great. Let's talk about any kind of best practices. Do you have any good habits or any routines that help keep you on point?

Karim ([25:55](#)):

I don't have very healthy habits in general. I don't have very healthy eating habits or smoking habits or drinking habits.

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

I'm glad you're honest. What about planning ahead or are you organized or do you go on a walk or a bike or just you meditate?

Karim ([26:29](#)):

Yeah, I meditate. That's one thing I do. I meditate and I go on a walk. Recently I moved to a nice place that has a park. On a walk from time to time. I sit on the balcony and I read and meditate. I am also very, very organized. I'm learning about business. I wasn't born as an entrepreneur, but I'm learning. It seems that I'm doing some things well, and other things I'm still improving on.

Charlie ([27:14](#)):

They say entrepreneurship is the school of hard knocks. It's just trial and error and a great job. Tell me about if you have a bucket list. Are there one or two things you'd share that are on your bucket list, meaning is there a venture, some travel, or do you want to write a book? What do you still want to accomplish?

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

Two things. One thing is I have a small house that I need to finish and move to. It's taking a lot of time and money. This is on the short bucket list. We have very nice deserts here, and I've always been fascinated about the desert. I have a friend who goes on desert trips a lot. My next move, hopefully by the end of this year, is to get a desert car that can go through the desert so I can join him in camping. I love camping. I love simple life. I'd rather sleep in a camp than sleep in a FiveStars hotel. Traveling is one of the things I want to do, but also the problem with traveling, it's very easy to spend a lot of time finding places that are not very touristic, where you can hike and see farmers and not like the typical travel.

Charlie ([28:45](#)):

Sure. The community just to get immersed. Stay long enough that you kind of understand the people and that's exciting and the camping. I'm so glad you told me that. A couple more questions here. One is books, is there a book maybe you'd recommend? It doesn't even have to be about green buildings, but is there a book you'd recommend to the audience here or a podcast, or just where do you go to learn or read?

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

Well, most of the time when I read, I read novels. I'm reading a book about the founder of Dar Al-Handasah. I found that this book was given to us when we worked at Dar Al-Handasah and I read it and there's a lot of history about the Arab region and I find it fascinating.

Charlie ([29:33](#)):

I don't know if it's something you can buy online, but I'll put a link in the podcast, show notes for that book. That's exciting.

Karim

I write a lot. I write about what happened in my life. What are the trials that I have problems with, that I'm facing. And they are usually writing and sometimes praying at the same time. I write my thoughts and my prayers.

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

They say, everyone has a bucket so maybe you could write a book with all your essays.

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

Yes. But it will be very, very personal and I don't know if it can be, it has some, some difficult, it has some good life experiences, but I'm not sure it needs to be edited for other people to read it.

Charlie ([30:25](#)):

That's fine. No, thank you for sharing. Two things with your career. Is there any advice you wish you would have known earlier in your career?

Karim ([30:38](#)):

Well, working in a large firm is difficult. I'm proud of my career. I'm proud of the steps that I took. I think I have a unique career where I moved from one place to the other. It's good to move from four different places so you can acquire some knowledge before settling down in one place. And then you need to settle down. Working on your own is something completely different and much, much more exciting. You get to use all your talents. When you work in a firm, you are confined to a task that is given to you and you have to do it and sometimes it kills the things

that you want to do. It kills your dreams because you don't get to do everything that you are.

Karim ([31:22](#)):

It depends also on the atmosphere where you work and your boss because they have a lot of influence over your life and your happiness and your mental state. When you work on your own, it's much more challenging, but it is much more rewarding. You feel that you are using all your talents and you can expand in architecture. You can expand anywhere you want. There are no barriers to what you can do, but it is not easy. It's not good to acquire knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Everything that I learned was because there was a project. I learned LEED because we had the LEED project and I learned, I needed AP operational management, because we had a LEED operation management project. I became the faculty because I was teaching so many people that I thought who became LEED AP.

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

But then there weren't any projects after a time they forgot. So not to acquire knowledge for the sake of knowledge, but to acquire a lot of knowledge for implementation.

Charlie ([32:24](#)):

And then share it. It's important. Thank you for being a guest on my podcast. I'm going to send you a t-shirt that says, "teach everything." That's kind of our motto here at the podcast. Last question, Karim, there's someone they're getting really inspired by your story. Maybe they're even in the Middle East Region. What words of encouragement do you have for them? If they're just now getting into green buildings?

Karim ([32:50](#)):

Well, it's a difficult one. There is a dilemma because I want to tell them, you need to acquire knowledge. I just said that you cannot acquire knowledge without experience. There are many people that pretend to be knowledgeable, and there are many people that pretend that they are good at things, which they aren't really good at.

Karim ([33:12](#)):

I would tell people it is true. If you want to be good at something, really know it, don't pretend that about it, but get to know it so that when you are tested deeply, you can show your methods. Don't pretend, don't move the trends because the trends change. Follow your passion, really follow your passion and get a lot of knowledge about it more than anybody else, and become the person to go to and then you will not be afraid to give your knowledge to other people because you will be moving forward. You can give every knowledge that you have to other people, because you will be moving to new knowledge and be at the forefront of the thing that you are passionate about.

Karim ([34:09](#)):

Don't do it just because you're competitive. You do it because you like this. It will turn into business. It can turn into profit, but you cannot do it for the sake of business. You have to do it for the sake of real passion and interests and then you will Excel at it and then it will become business. It will make money.

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

New knowledge, the passion and don't just learn to be learning. If you're just jumping into this green building career, what I heard is to get enough knowledge. You're confident and you really do know how to do it. So that's just really great advice. To everyone listening, please connect with Karim on LinkedIn. He's a LEED Fellow coming to us from Egypt. Karim, thank you so much for your time today. You are most welcome, Charlie.

Charlie ([35:05](#)):

I just want to say thank you to our loyal listeners. We actually are celebrating over near 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.

Speaker 4 ([35:30](#)):

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