

## Head of LEED in Europe - GBCI's Kay Killman | Transcript

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

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

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

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

Hi everyone. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters Podcast. I'm your host, Charlie Cichetti. Every week I get to interview a green building professional, somewhere in the world. Today I have a special friend. This is Kay Killman, coming to us from GBCI Europe. Kay is actually the head of uGBCI Europe. UI had the honor to go out and speak at Greenbuild Europe a few years ago. It was amazing. I just can't wait to hear more about how Kay got into Green Building. Kay, how are you doing today?

Kay ([01:31](#)):

Hey Charlie, thank you very much for inviting me for this podcast. In fact, this is my first podcast ever, so I'm excited. I'm doing very well. Thank you very much.

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

I can't wait to just learn more about that origin story. Let's just go there first. Where'd you grow up and where'd you go to school?

Kay ([01:48](#)):

I grew up, I believe it or not, in the Eastern part of Germany. That's the commonest part on the other side of Byron Kirkman. Somewhere on the east of

the city of Dresden, many people probably have heard of Dresden and lots of art and went to school there. Did my high school in combination with an integrated apprenticeship as a masonry from there and did the military service in Germany. At that time we had compulsory service, SN medical in the medical battalion. I went to college, the University in Aachen, which is on the other side of Germany. That was when the wall came down and I went to school for architecture, studied architecture there.

Charlie ([02:34](#)):

Wow. I didn't know that about you and in east Germany. We did spend that time together in Berlin and that was just an amazing experience just to really see the two types of architecture and the division and the lines. I'm going to ask how you know you might want to study to be an architect. Did you have anyone that influenced you with that decision?

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

My father is actually a structural engineer by trade, before he's a carpenter and had a practical profession. It was never really the center of discussions, but at home we did a lot of garden house and things at the projects I was interested in, so I was not really sure which direction I would go as far as college. Having this masonry degree as a practical foundation, I still thought to myself, "Maybe structures, engineer architecture," but I also considered actually studying medicine. That's why when I was in the military, I was serving for a year in the medical Corps. There were still all avenues open, but then the structure engineer was a little bit too much mathematics for me. I like this artsy component, so architecture was a good mix. We did have structural calculation classes for almost four semesters. I think that was, I liked this. I enjoyed this the right mix of being creative, but I'm also making sure you can actually build what basically aligns on paper, becomes a wall later on and that's quite impressive if you have this process from your drawing board or then later on the CAD drawing, and then you talk to the general contractor. '

Charlie ([04:16](#)):

Many skills that you had, and then you got to choose your path. Sustainability, how did you first know you really wanted to do more with sustainability or green building?

Kay ([04:27](#)):

Funny thing is when it wasn't college. I remember one professor actually was making a joke. Another student had a project. He was putting on a green roof and the guide said, "Are you kidding me, cows on the roof?" No, that was a joke at that time. When I moved to the US in 2000, 2001, and then all of a sudden you could see this green movement got a little bit more in the US framework. LEED, US GBC got developed. I got more interested in it and started looking into it and studying for the LEED AP basically. I started to train the architecture office coworkers, and all of a sudden we were two guys. We looked into this and we trained in an architectural office. At that time I was working as an architect in California. I think that was my entry level, even on paper, so to speak. In Germany we always had passing powers and did a little movement, but I think that really kind of pushed it at one point was the beginning of a potential shift in career. At that point I didn't notice yet that that might happen.

Charlie ([05:38](#)):

Well, that's what you had to do in the early days. There weren't even the practice tests, the flashcards and 2000 LEED professionals around. I think that was in the early two thousands. If I'm understanding your career resume. You were out in Arizona and then California, tell us about that.

Kay ([05:57](#)):

Growing up in Eastern Germany, the picture of America of the US in particular, that was like, this is the country where milk and honey are flowing and you need to make it. You need to understand, we couldn't really travel in Eastern Germany so we could visit other Eastern of socialist countries, Poland, Czech, Republic, Hungary, but anything else was forbidden for East Germans. Polish p[people had a bit more freedom, really dependent. When the wall came down, that was for me, I wanted to go to America. The first time I got over to the US was through an exchange program through my university with University of North Carolina at Charlotte. When I spent a semester there and could extend it with an internship that really influenced me and that's where coming to the US was a complete new experience.

Kay ([06:54](#)):

I had experienced the communist east and life was good and nobody was suffering. Then the wall came down and you experienced this European social

market system, that's how we call it here. It was structured. You come over to the US where it's completely open. I think it's an experience that not many people have. Looking back, you can actually then compare this is good there. You try to pick the best or choose the best experience for your own life eventually.

Charlie ([07:29](#)):

You want those choices, like you had that too, especially.

Kay ([07:34](#)):

To your questions though, and then through this first internship on the exchange program kicked it off. I thought there must be another way to get move over. Of course, it goes always with the visa, with the work permits. At the time I had a friend and visited her in Arizona, I basically went from door to door and applied for jobs. She gave me the car and I drove around and looked it up in the phone book. Within a week I had two offers and they were aware that I needed a visa. I took one job, went back and took awhile to get the paperwork done, but then there was not even half a year. With two suitcases I flew back, visited and far related on uncle that I had dug out from my mom, he's told me, "You can have the TV, the pickup truck, you pay me \$500 a month over the next six months. I drove down to Arizona and that's how I started in the US. And that was the first three years, Arizona because that's how long the visa lasted the first round. You could extend one more time and I thought of this saying, "Go west, young man." California is always where I wanted to be and then I applied again, you need to do the same thing for companies. I found a company that sponsored me and at that time it was a bit simpler I just needed to leave the country. I flew to Canada's German Embassy to get my visa extended and edit the re-entry into the US Embassy. I moved to California and that was my little American dream.

Charlie ([09:15](#)):

Good to hear that. Thanks for connecting those dots in that early career. Anyone else kinda, you might call a mentor or was there anyone that you were following at the time?

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

I thought about this question, if I'm really honest, I think my father is the one that gave me the most and set the frame. He was really a very honest and simple man. He always knew this is possible, especially in Eastern Germany, when we use all

the resources or the framework we have, this is what we can do. Such an honest person. He's 76 and things might go faster than you think eventually. But that would be from the main picture. For anything else in life I think you have certain stages where certain people, a person you interact with, provides you the knowledge and gives you the next step. Looking back, I always think between 30 and 35 to learn project management, then I learned to manage other people.

Kay ([10:25](#)):

I had to go into finance. There are always these stages, but you don't really notice when you're at the stage, you just know this later, when you look back. I must sound like an old person now looking back, not everything fits in. My father was one. I remember in Arizona, the first office I've been working in was a small, private architecture office. They just opened this office as a satellite office from a Milwaukee office. Paul Nickelburg, was very direct. He needed to oversee many things and for me, it was a big challenge, language Imperial system coming from, u,e university and school. All of a sudden, looking back, that was the best experience I had for my architecture career and life in the US. It was really hard when you are so exhausted by the end of the day because language wise you need to process everything and then get into it.

Kay ([11:24](#)):

In the US that was a good starting point. Once I moved out to California and showed this bigger office, I thought, "Oh my God, this is loosey goosey here somehow." I think one thing that really also shaped me was sport. There was a key part, I think I dropped this at the intro, I left home a little earlier,13 and went during east German times to one of these sports schools. I was at a boarding school basically Sunday evening until Saturday noon. I would take the train and then come back. In East Germany, these sports schools were one of the reasons why this country was so good in the old days in sport if you remember. There were the Olympics and the first three countries were always the US, USSR ,and Eastern Germany. Sports was easy for me. I liked sports but it's just structure. Looking back the main reason why I did it was I wanted at one point to leave the country, that's how I already thought.

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

You probably had to grow up fast taking the train 13 and that maturity.

Kay ([12:37](#)):

It was a rough 12 hour day. We had school, sports, school and sometimes two sports a day and mixed it all together, but it worked.

Charlie ([12:50](#)):

A lot of sports. On the career side, you get done in California, architecture, getting exposed to LEED in the US GBC is really ramping up, but then you come back kind of mid to later in the 2000s back to Europe. You come back to London and then back to Germany. Tell us about a couple more of those. What kind of projects were you working on? We'll talk about your current role when you come back to London.

Kay ([13:15](#)):

The LEED part is the glue. I became LEED AP in 2006. As you can manage, that was the early day. There was no specialty there, just the LEED AP. No GBS was already in place there.

Charlie ([13:33](#)):

Before we started our practice.

Kay ([13:38](#)):

Working as an architect, that was fun, but that was all of a sudden at the time when the Lehman Brothers bubble happened. In the US I have never experienced that. They were closing shops left and right. I was lucky. I was still on a project in Vegas. It was a hospitality project and parallel, a London consultancy had reached out to me by a recruiter. I have the LEED credentials and they needed a LEED consultant and asked if I wouldn't be interested in moving to London. For me, that was my God. I've worked so long to get to the US. I think I was six months away from being able to take the citizen test, but then Parallel, the office laid people off left and right.

Kay ([14:30](#)):

You got called in and about a two weeks severance package. It's American way. My project still let me go on because they said, "You close the project or we have the grand opening?" I shifted and moved this along to Southern California, where we were living at that time in NewPort Beach, Orange County. I was where our first child was born. I had the pickup truck and went surfing before eight o'clock and

then still was at work the first time. Eventually, we saw that I would be eventually the next one to visit the HR office. The day I wanted to give in my notice they called me. I kept my mouth shut, took the severance check, packed my suitcase, and moved over to London, to find a place to live. Nicole was at that time already pregnant with the second and in this case, I can say bench because it turned out they were twins. And that's how I went over to London and that was the change of career. That's when I entered sustainability and started supporting the LEED projects, not just in London, but also in Milano, Italy and in Abu Dhabi and UAE where they had offices.

Charlie ([15:42](#)):

Wow. I didn't know that part of your story. I know you and your wife, and I know you have three boys and what a leap of faith to come back when you could have stayed in the states, but you took LEED with you, so to speak. I've seen that and I know if we fast forward a little bit, that's why the US GBC probably tapped you to say, "Hey, you're the guy, you're the couple, make this happen." Tell us how that conversation went. How did you get to be the head of GBCI Europe and really grow, not just one, but really advocate for all the great programs there that you're using.

Kay ([16:17](#)):

When we moved, London was the first place and after a while we moved to Germany. The UK is not a good place to live. I thought, "Hey, how can we kind of grow this because there was no real point of contact. Definitely, the UK is not the right place because you're BREEAM. At that time, there wasn't even a UK Green Building Council and then in Germany it was the same. The DGB was already had existed and I reached out to the US GBC and said, "Hey, what can we do?" On one hand, Germany is the strongest European LEED market, but there's nobody that can answer questions and US GBC, at a time they're the lead international round table. They're straight forward and said, "You found a non-profit or kind of an organization and you move on to the LEED international roundtable, as a member." I didn't know much about the round table so that's what I did. 2012. Uh started a nonprofit called the GGB to German Green Building Association because they associated us with LEEDs. There was already a German Green Building Council in place so we needed to be careful with the naming and the USGBC said, "that's enough for us." Since then, GBA moves on the table. Through this relationship over the years, and the US GBC realizing that they need partners,

GGBA became a strategic green building partner and from there it evolved to an even farther engagement. Strategic thinking on the US side, "Oh, we probably need to have a regional office somehow." They started the GBCI India in 2014, I believe and we were pretty much the next one, the second international green building council. They asked me, "Hey, don't you want to start this in Europe?" GBCI Europe, I was asked to build it up and it's what we did from day one. It was a lucky coincidence that it ended up in Germany. It could have been any other place, but, luck is to a certain extent, part of life.

Charlie ([18:25](#)):

I agree. You gotta put yourself out there. Put yourself in a position to get lucky, some say. I know you've been reading system updates and what we used to call LEED dynamic plaque, and now ARC, LEED version 2.1 and conferences, and just really advocating here. When you look back on your career, what are some of your highlights?

Kay ([18:51](#)):

I think there are two things: the professional career and then also the personal. Professional of course founding a nonprofit and kind of leading an international, LEED, the most applied internationally rating system that are big steps and not everybody does it. Currently the whole market is keen on ECC. All of a sudden we've been preaching this for years already even LEED. On a professional level, I think this is something I am really proud of. On the personal level, because professionals do not work without personnel. Of course, I have a family and what I just described is moving around that needs support. I am proud that I managed to move through countries and get this experience. I am proud that everybody is still in good shape and healthier, the three boys. Early in my career when I was still the youth age, I was very good in sports or at one point I managed to come in second in the East German championship. The personnel and professionals, so I would leave it basically, it's up to other people to judge, "where is he good."

Charlie ([20:18](#)):

Humble guy. I just wanted to ask about the highlight reel. We'll talk about today. Here we are coming out of a pandemic as we record this podcast. What's keeping you and your team at GBCI Europe busy today?

Kay ([20:33](#)):



You touched on one, the LEED dynamic plug. I still have a scarf as in commercial advertisements here for the dynamic. ARC, the performance platform, is something where we really, especially in Europe where you have this highly competitive market. Elite is just one BREEAM and DGB and other ones. ARC, the performance approach to digitalization is, portfolio and reporting components that anybody could use. That is one thing that I am using because I see actually, not just the certifications, if an asset becomes at one point, if not, for some clients already a best practice tool. But there's reoccurring reporting and more than just, this is one. The other thing is the urban tools. If I'm wearing my GBCI head, we have introduced, uLEED for cities and communities and a couple of years ago, and we are seeing this taking off at the beginning.

Kay ([21:35](#)):

We always thought about how we need to talk to communities and cities and mayors. The honest perspective as they all cash and resources strap and you get a little bit farther with commercial investors and entities. Of course it goes ahead with the development of the system we have now planet design for new developments. We have an existing one. With the overall market situation where this ESG reporting falls into place and financing, green bonds come in; everybody actually needs something. We have now in Europe, just by an email today to more LEED facilities, registration in Italy from a very famous international organization. So that's where I think we can have much more impact. A single building is one thing, but having an entire framework overlaid across an urban development, that'll be a new one or an existing one. So I think those are the two things that currently really start growing and they're fun.

Charlie ([22:38](#)):

I agree. We're seeing cities and communities go here. One of my favorite categories is the quality of life section within that program. For those listening, make sure you check out a LEED for cities and communities scorecard on the USBC website. I want to ask if you had a crystal ball and you could predict the future. What are you reading up on now? What are you excited about? What's what's coming around the corner in this green and healthy building movement?

Kay ([23:07](#)):

Many people probably still struggle with what is sustainability? You have a sustainable lifestyle, you eat sustainably and your investments are sustainable. I

think that will eventually dawn on people what that means. I think it will be a mix of this health and everything. Some people it's health things and everything in my environment, my environment can be, my family can be a billing. From the real estate industry and sustainability, I think this kind of ESG will be the main answer. It's probably not clear that everybody in the stands needs to have building certification reporting CO2, but that will be deeply embedded from the kickoff financing all the way to the operation throughout the entire life cycle. That's what I believe about this healthy component.

Kay ([24:05](#)):

That's still not really thought through. What you just mentioned is this quality of life. This social, that's why LEED for cities, I think is taking off. Nobody really is able to measure social things and LEED for cities has for the first time found a framework. Two weeks ago, I did a webinar. Hour and a half with European Investment Bank. They were curious about, yes, they think everybody thinks that we haven't kind of figured out, but I think this is the next thing, this health and social, how do we tie this in and make the markets understand it? I think that's the next step.

Charlie ([24:45](#)):

No, I agree. A lot of people are trying to get it right. It's the right thing to do and it's maybe sometimes a little harder to measure. It's a leading indicator. "Hey, We do upfront, here's our campaigns. Here's how we invest in our community". And then maybe it's a little harder to measure, but gotta look to do it. Thank you for that. One more humbling question for you. What would you say you're best at? Kay, what's your specialty or gifts?

Kay ([25:09](#)):

I think I'm a very structural person, so it does help me. I am creative and probably that's why I went in dark and texture. I can motivate myself. I see it, Especially during COVID times. Many people get depressed. I'm completely independable from the weather. Regardless of whether it's not the other way around, if it rains it's good, I get my office work done because I don't really have ADD, but I'm very active. If the weather is nice and that was in California, I wanted to go out and to play all the time. I think I have a lot of energy and can motivate myself. I think this is my strength.

Charlie ([25:59](#)):

Again, those are your superpowers. There's an exercise I do in a mastermind group I'm in, and then we have to tell each other what we think our super powers are, our blind spots and even our kryptonite. I think you just listed off some really cool super powers. As I've known you, I think that's fantastic. Do you have any good habits? Do you have any routines or rituals that help you stay on point?

Kay ([26:25](#)):

Yeah. I just briefly mentioned the structured thing. I'm a morning person. My wife would say that's a German thing, breakfast. I like breakfast. If I stay in my rhythm, don't go to bed too late and I get up early, then I feel well rested. When you're younger, people say, "it was boring." When you get older and have family and kids you have to meet so many schedules anyway, but personally, I feel good getting up. If I can do a little bit of physical exercise outside, and that can be anything just doing yard work and I'm currently installing an outside the shower and we have no California weather here or Arizona. As far as this is really going, I have a water barrier where the overflow from the roof goes in.

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

But that's how I start my day. This is a routine. Another thing I'm a fan of is power naps. I do not enjoy using coffee to push me. I like drinking coffee. That's not in the morning, but if I can close my eyes for 10 minutes in the early afternoon that brings me over the hump. I don't necessarily need coffee to go then I just have a little coffee as an adult more or less, but that's, I think, one of the things I use, what's, what's my routine. I do need sports. If I don't do any sport within three days, I get grumpy.

Charlie ([27:52](#)):

The three boys get out there and play sports and enjoy the weather. I love that structure embraces being that morning person you are, and that outdoor shower that's going to be, those can be fun. I'm a fan of a bucket list. Not everybody has a bucket list, but if you had one guy, what are one or two things on your bucket list? Is there some travel or adventure, or do you want to write a book? What are one or two things on the bucket list?

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

I do have a bucket list. One bucket, since you mentioned traveling, and I tried to kind of get people to join. One bucket would be, I have hitchhiked through Alaska once when I was living in the US. I think for two or three weeks I hitchhiked through Alaska. I've seen a couple of documentaries and always wanted to go paddle down the Yukon river. I think that as a starting point, the white horse in Canada and Yukon apparently must not be the most challenging river, different from some movies. I would probably need some bodies, but , if you have families and everybody's a different time in life, and then you need to coordinate, that would be one bucket list.

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

I have never been to New Zealand. That would be one or Namibia. I'm interested in, or then the other extreme Greenland. So that's the travel part. Buckets, things that I'm enjoying on a daily basis that's not too. I am currently redoing my garden and a little bit of the house. I enjoy this every day of every year, again, as the season of gardening being a bit more, yeah, you can call it local. I'm into sourdough bread baking, I mean all through Corona and all. I enjoy this. The bakers, or are you looking for me? I haven't shown up there for weeks now. I also want to communicate with my boys. They see it with the bread baking, but also the gardening and home doing some improvements, do it yourself, because everything is going so fast. If you have three boys growing up, you see them constantly on, on iPads and computers. To try to counterbalance these things and make them aware that there's this candy fund and again, maybe I sounded like an old person.

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

We've had the virtual learning through the pandemic and it's just even more forced screen time and you want them to be able to experience that. We want to make sure we're putting good kids into the world that can contribute and not take away. You want to teach them certain life skills so they can take care of themselves. It's as simple as that. Right? Let's talk about books. Is there a book you'd recommend to the audience and it doesn't even have to be industry specific?

Kay ([30:56](#)):

I have to be honest, it's hard for them to sit still. I typically joke around the only time I like reading books is when I'm at a doctor's office. I'm not often there or

when I'm traveling. I do like history and I've recently read a set with friends that was before Corona, a book about German history that interests me. It's probably a very selected audience that would be just in history and German history, which can have very dark or different opinions. What I'm currently reading. We've got a big new Atlas as in substitutional, online, Google maps where the kids saw going doing school projects. I have fun with these things. That's as of right now, besides some industry documents or papers that I read, but that's not really what I would consider books. We do a lot about green financing things more from the professional point of view.

Charlie ([31:56](#)):

We've got to stay up to speed on that too. All right. Two final questions. As we start to wrap up our lively discussion here. I've really enjoyed getting to know you more career advice. Is there something you wish you would've known earlier in your life?

Kay ([32:09](#)):

At the very beginning, that has probably less to do with sustainability, but I always thought because of my sport, I wish that wouldn't have been a wall because I always thought in the US college system, I probably could have more opportunities, but that was just my personal thing. Restriction from where you're born, typically advice for everybody is open-minded. Somewhere I read that you probably change up to seven times your career path. I think Nicole pushed me a little bit and looking back, I was happy that she did. I was happy with architecture and construction shifting to sustainability, but that time wasn't really clear. Looking back that opened everything that basically made me or brought me to where I am right now. If you're a young person on one hand now, young people are much faster, but be prepared.

Kay ([33:01](#)):

You will change and never stop learning. Different countries have seen that the US is very open. You still go and do an additional educational degree with 40 or 50. In other countries it's not Germany is one of them it slowly changes, but also try to keep up with this whole digitalization. Everything is going so fast now. That's why I think many old people are scared. In some countries you see how people, all of a sudden, vote for established old things, because they are afraid of new things. I'm glad to see that my parents are doing online banking. They live in the rural

countryside, but they say, "Oh, we don't need to do banking, go to a bank." Not everybody in this age does it, but this is just an extreme where we have young people, we need to be more open-minded and then keep up with these things.

Charlie ([33:56](#)):

No, this is exciting. That's great advice to never stop learning. The final question is, let's say someone's listening right now to this podcast. They've decided to jump into this green building movement. It's not too late. What words of encouragement do you have, Kay?

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

This is such a young industry. If you want to start with green, you are not tied to one. We're talking about real estate. They had this embedded throughout. I gave lectures to marketing offices that needed to know about LEED because of their clients. They are doing LEED as an example, but let it be fashion where Addy does this looking into completely recycled material for the next sneaker selection, all the way to the finance industry or the organic products in the grocery store. Years back when we were just laughed at now, all of a sudden this has become a normal and more and more people move away. In Australia, the government is a coalition and the green party is part of it. In Germany, we have the next election in this fall, 2021 and current polls show that the green party might become the strongest party. Things are changing for any young person. I would encourage, even if you don't want to dive in, you cannot neglect that this will become part of your life to whatever measurement is up to you. Also the environment we live in. It's a different thing. If you're living on the outside and Alabama and the countryside, or you live in New York city or Berlin in all the different limits, but you will not get around anymore.

Charlie ([35:37](#)):

It's here, it's in front of us, but I love how you said it's still a young movement and it's not just for young people. What a wonderful conversation today, everyone, this has been Kay Killman, the head of GBCI Europe. Kai. Thank you, sir. Keep up the great work.

Kay ([35:53](#)):

Charlie. That was a pleasure.

Charlie ([35:58](#)):

I want to say thank you to our loyal listeners. We actually are celebrating over one year here on the Green Building Matters Podcast. Me and the entire team are stoked and just so glad to continue to listen every Wednesday morning to a new interview with a green building professional here in this industry, or just some pro tips that we want to make sure that you are getting straight from us straight to you.

Speaker 5 ([36:23](#)):

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