

## **GSA's Sustainability Program Manager and LEED Fellow - Lance Davis | Transcript**

Speaker 1 ([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](#)):

Sure. To check out the green building matters community where you can have unlimited exam prep for any of the professional credential exams you're tackling next as well as putting your continued education on autopilot, saving time with GBS reporting your hours on your behalf. Check it out. [Gbes.Com/Join](#). Now enjoy this episode of the green building matters podcast. Hi everyone. Welcome to the next episode of the green building matters podcast. I love it. I get to interview green building professionals all over the world. I've got a LEED Fellow coming in from Washington, DC I've got Lance Davis and he's a program manager for design excellence for architecture and sustainability at the GSA. So Lance, how you doing this morning? I'm doing great. Thank you. Glad to be here. This is about you. I know you've had some big impact with some amazing programs, but I know today we're just going to kind of connect the dots with your green building career.

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

It gives some encouragement and I always like to just ask, Hey, where'd you grow up? Where'd you go to school?

Lance ([01:36](#)):

Sure. So I come from Ocean Springs, Mississippi on the Gulf of Mexico. I grew up fishing and swimming with alligators and started working construction at around the age of 12 and eventually made my way to Mississippi State University. I had a different career path. I was actually heading, I wanted to be a test pilot and was enrolled in aerospace engineering. Had a deal set up with the Air Force and got to a point after

two years in where I went and did my physical and they determined that I was going to need glasses in my late twenties and basically told me I would never fly. So it really, put a rink in my grand scheme.

Lance ([02:23](#)):

Since I had been working construction since age 12, I had a love for buildings and applied to the architecture program at Mississippi state and got in there. Sort of midway through college, did a massive change and got going in architecture.

Charlie ([02:43](#)):

Good for you. Yeah. And starting so young there at age 12. So did you have a family that was in construction or, I mean, what made you want to start that young?

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

An Atari game system? My father, Atari, had just come out with its game system. You remember the pong and all that. I was like, I want this and my dad's like, well, I'm not going to go out and buy you this. So you're going to have to earn half the money somehow. And my next door neighbor across the street, he built houses and he was sort of marching down the block. He would live in a house that was partially finished and start working on the next house, move over to it and then finish up that house and sell it. So I went over there and helped the brick masons and just was a general laborer and sort of fell in love with the work scene. Things happen on a day to day basis and then the stories that you hear from construction workers as a 12 year old were just fascinating.

Charlie ([03:54](#)):

Yeah. You might help you grow up fast there. I'm glad we got that story out already. So, Mississippi State and then tell us kinda the early career, what brought you to DC?

Lance ([04:06](#)):

Sure. So in school, I think one of the things that I love to do was just go in the library and randomly pick off a book. One of the books I picked off was Gentle Architecture by Malcolm Wells. It just really grabbed me and really said to me that I have a bigger role as an architect than just designing

beautiful buildings. I have a responsibility and at that point I worked with my professors to help change all of my projects to be more sustainably focused. And this was back in 90 probably. It wasn't something schools were thinking about, it wasn't USGBC, wasn't around there, wasn't anyone talking about a LEED rating system and it just really captured me. So when I graduated, I wanted to be that.

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

What I wanted to do was be a sustainability architect. And I fortunately graduated at a great time and I interviewed from Atlanta to DC and got my best offer up in DC with the firm that was willing to take a chance on this crazy college kid who wanted to be a sustainability architect and change the way they practiced architecture. And so that's how I wound up in DC and wound up with Cooper Lecky Architects and got to work on some amazing projects with some great clients along the way that were very influential in getting me to where I am today, I guess. So,

Charlie ([05:46](#)):

Wow. Yeah. What an early influence there, and they took a leap of faith on you. As I understand it, of course, the first LEED projects, right, Lance weren't until about the year 2000, but reading your bio around 1998, you were already kind of doing some training programs about LEED, Hey, this program's coming about at the time.

Lance ([06:06](#)):

Sure. So we were fortunate a couple Lecky architects won a job with Arlington County and a gentleman, over there, Dave Albert's was really into this idea of sustainability and wanted to bring that to the County. This was the first project that they put out on the street that they wanted, this new thing called LEED. And they weren't really sure much about it, but they wanted the design team to learn about it and incorporate it into the project. And so we won the project and it was for a community center and it was in a very dense section of Arlington County and they had a beloved little, teeny, tiny place there. And so it became a very interesting project where you had to balance the desires of the community and respect that all these people live in apartments nearby, or most of them do, they love this little place, how do you bring something new and sustainable and bring that all in. To make that happen, someone had to educate the firm. Someone had to go through

and figure out what a green material was, and that all fell upon me at the time.

Charlie ([07:31](#)):

I love it. And just, I guess even today we have to teach a lot of people. What does it take to go for LEED and green buildings and sourcing better materials? I can't imagine 20 years ago. All this is so new, so that was probably a lot of work.

Lance ([07:49](#)):

It was a lot of fun. As it turned out, the firm really saw the benefit with sustainability and actually started hiring many engaged people. And so we brought Sandy Mendler over, we had some amazing young people who were also coming in that had very creative, very strong ideas about sustainability and I think an overall understanding within the firm that this is something we really want to do and so let's all get together and learn about it and make it happen. It was, I'd say a hotbed of some crazy ideas and just really great discussion about what the future should and could be. There's a lot of fun.

Charlie ([08:38](#)):

Sounds like you had a lot of support there. That's just fantastic. So did anyone else have any influence early in your sustainability career plans or maybe a mentor that stands out?

Lance ([08:50](#)):

Yeah, so in truth, I was taking anything that anyone had to offer. Obviously my parents were providing me direction in my career which was super helpful. I got married my fifth year of architecture school to an architect. So my wife was super influential. She's also a sustainability architect. My boss at Cooper Lecky architects, Ken Cooper was huge at sort of continuing to ask questions and push me to do more. And then people like Dave Alberts at Arlington County or Ethel Kennedy when I was doing the earth conservation Corps, just sort of these very big thinkers that continued to challenge my thought process at the time and allowed me to think bigger and be bolder about some of my decisions along the way.

Charlie ([09:53](#)):

Thanks for sharing. So connect the dots a little bit. So how'd you get out of the architecture side and then get into the GSA?

Lance ([10:00](#)):

Sure. So that little job in Arlington County, we're going along, lots of turmoil, lots of budget, lots of community issues. Then we turned a corner and the community seemed to trust me as an architect. Seemed to trust what we were doing as a firm on this project. The County board though, was getting these notifications about this crazy project of waterless urinals and planted roofs and all of this sustainability stuff, and they're freaking out. They asked me to come in and present to the council about what we were doing with all the sustainability stuff. I did a presentation and they got it. They basically said, wow, we should be doing this for all of our buildings in Arlington County.

Charlie ([10:52](#)):

Would you mind helping us write policy for Arlington County to do this? And so I worked with Joan Kelsh and Dave Alberts and others at the County to help write that first green building policy for Arlington and word got out. All of a sudden I'm getting phone calls from DC to help write their first green building policy and the state of Maryland when they were first starting looking to adopt LEED. They called me up to the state of Virginia, Montgomery County. The next thing I know I'm spending a lot of my spare time getting to charge a little bit of it for project development potentially. But most of it was my own time writing policy for a lot of local governments in the DC area. Eventually a friend of mine at GSA called me up and said, Hey, how would you like to come do that on a national level for GSA? And I said, yeah, absolutely. Applied for the job and got in. I went from banging my head on a lot of little walls to one very, very large wall, but at least I stayed focused on it and I got paid for it.

Charlie ([12:03](#)):

What a big impact that I know you've had 15 years, all things sustainability for the US GSA. So can you tell us about a couple programs that you've been really proud of?

Lance ([12:15](#)):

Sure. I think rolling sustainability into GSA has been super pleasurable and it's not that it's been easy, but I've been surprised at how much support there has been through. I've been through three different presidents now during my term at GSA and they seem they get it that doing sustainable buildings makes financial sense. It makes better buildings. And when you're holding on to buildings for as long as the federal government does, it makes even more sense. And so the numbers work out and we're really able to help push the envelope and write some really spectacular performance into the overall aspects of these buildings. And it's been great so far.

Charlie ([13:07](#)):

That's fantastic. Well, looking back on that highlight reel, what else stands out? What are you really proud of?

Lance ([13:14](#)):

I've got some great projects under my belt. I worked on the Korean War Veterans Memorial on one end of The Mall. Then I did the US Capitol Visitor's Center on the other end of the Mall. GSA has one nine AIA Code, top 10 awards, which as the sustainability architect for GSA that's a huge feather in my cap. I think the biggest, proudest achievements I have are some of the humanity within some of the projects I've done. So back to this Arlington County project, with all of these apartments, I was trying to get to understand the neighborhood. And so I would drive around and see what was going on.

Charlie ([14:02](#)):

And there were just apartments and parking lots everywhere. And I was like, man this is nuts. The community called the existing community center where they're green Oasis. I was like, how do they grow a vegetable? How do they grow a tomato? They don't have any land, they don't have any. So one of the things I did was incorporate a little vegetable garden that you can check out, it's incorporated into the landscape and people in the neighborhood can go and check out a plot and grow their own vegetables. That little bit of humanity to understanding the neighborhood was super important and one of those things that I sort of look back on. Then more recently, before COVID happened everybody was really on what was happening on the Southern border.

Lance ([14:54](#)):

We have a project going on down there that we put in a bio membrane reactor. So it treats the black water coming from all the toilets and everything in the facility and then it takes that water and cleans it up. We irrigate this super lush garden on the US side. So people coming across the border are standing in line for hours trying to get across because there's a lot of people crossing. They get through security, they're allowed to enter the US and we could have just thought about it from a design perspective, just opening the doors and saying, okay, Hey, you're in America, go on. But what the design team did and what we were able to incorporate was taking the waste, turning it into something beautiful, having all of these lush plants, as you open the doors into America, you get the cooling effect from all the plants, because it's in a super hot environment. You get this lush color, you get this very welcoming sort of open arms attitude. And that sense of humanity, of inviting people in after they'd been allowed into the United States, I think is a pretty spectacular moment of humanity and how architecture and sustainability works to bring everybody together

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

Inspiring. I didn't know all that. I appreciate you taking us there. That's definitely a highlight on that highlight reel. What else is going on today? Can you fast forward to today? What's keeping you busy.

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

Every few years we update our facility standards, it's the P 100 design standards. I'm currently in charge of that and we're getting ready to do a new update so that brings in a whole host of possibilities of what our buildings could be in the next few years. Starting to look at what's out there, what are the things that we should be considering how as our current building environment being affected by COVID, by sustainability, by carbon, by fossil fuel, by whatever, and thinking about ways of how do we incorporate this, be very mindful of the taxpayer dollar, but also try to do the absolute best that we can with these projects, recognizing it could be a border station on the Southern border or a brand new courthouse in, Washington state or something. So trying to find that balance, but continue to push the envelope and raise the bar and make sure that we're being respectful of what we're doing.

Charlie ([17:44](#)):

It's great to hear too, but that's what the government's focused on with all of its real estate and a big reach, big impact. I've got to ask a little bit about Fitwell, as Fitwell is really growing on the wellness front, the healthy building front, as I understand its origin four and a half, five plus years ago, there were 300 GSA buildings, Hey, let's get occupants up to more active wellness programs. Could you speak from a high level about wellness?

Lance ([18:13](#)):

Sure. Before Fitwell came along, we actually had a program in place to use the stairs. We were designing buildings where stairs and the office were sort of laid out to help promote the idea of getting out of your chair and moving more within our central office. We actually incorporated several we have three or four walking stations with desks on top of them. So you can sit there and actually walk on a treadmill and be able to work. So that's always pretty cool. I think that was that overall bigger recognition that employees are happier and more productive when they're not just sitting there at their computer for eight, nine hours a day. I know we've seen a big push for desks that raise and so we have a lot of people using the up and down desks.

Lance ([19:12](#)):

In a lot of cases, we brought in yoga balls where the people could sit on them. That way they always have to engage their core to be able to stand up or to sit up straight. I have a thing. I think all of that has really helped to open it up. We've always been a big believer in daylight. Haven't always been very successful with it. We still have a huge challenge with design teams, understanding the difference between good daylight and sunlight but we've got some great projects that have done really well with that. The aspect of biophilia bringing that into many of our projects, we've got a great project where we capture the water from the roof, filter it. Some, it becomes an interior stream that waters the plants and this interior area and everyone gets to look upon that from their desks, which is pretty cool, looks like an amazing place to work. Things like that, sort of getting out of this concept of, I think what we saw in the sixties and seventies as a traditional government concrete box building where the big design. Challenge was how many people could fit in this box sort of attitude and that's changed a lot now.



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

Absolutely. So it sounds like there's a lot of wellness and healthy buildings already baked in. And now we see some new rating systems out there, which I think help everyone have some guidelines. So I love to ask this question, , if you had a crystal ball, Lance, what's around the corner, what should we be reading up on now what's coming in the green building.

Lance ([20:53](#)):

Sure. So I, I think COVID has been super helpful for many organizations to realize that people can be super productive if you give them the right tools. And they can work from virtually anywhere for many, many types of jobs, not all jobs, obviously, but many types of jobs. One of the things I've been touting for a very long time is this concept of teleworking or stacking of employees. If we're going to pay to have this building and we're going to pay to condition it, and we're going to pay for the lights, and we're only going to use it Monday through Friday eight to five, that's a lot of waste for that investment overall. Is there a way, should we be looking at stacking that where the people are working shifts, where that we're bringing potential other people in to utilize the building, let's get full value of that embodied energy that we have in that building out there for us.

Lance ([22:01](#)):

And I think COVID has really brought in this idea that, Oh, well guess what people can work from home. People can work from other places. I'm really questioning, do we need all of these buildings? Does the downtown city center change to something else? I think we absolutely still need to get together. I know for me personally, my best relationships are built on physical interaction, getting together, being able to share stories. That's how my brain personally works. I need those little things to remember relationships and doing it over a zoom call doesn't really get it for me, but so I think we still need ways to interact in person. I don't think that goes away, but I really question do we need all of these buildings and therefore all of the embodied energy that went into it and all of the current energy still being dumped into them to heat and cool them to put the lights on and all the various things that go on in a building.

Lance ([23:09](#)):

And so I think we're going to be looking very hard at our own inventory to, I think, determine what do we really, really need out there is this new building necessary? Is there another way of actually doing this? So I think that's going to be the first thing happening. And then the next thing I see happening is what I like to call the micro neighborhood that instead of these enormous centralized utilities happening, our waste goes away to some big facility. Somewhere. Our electricity comes in from some enormous plant, somewhere. Our water gets done this way. One of the things I was sitting down recently with my wife, we watched the biggest little farm and how all of these little relationships happen. And if you allow them to happen and it's hard, sometimes it's hard to let those slugs climb up your tree and destroy all your fruit as one of the issues they have in this particular movie, until you realize, Oh, well, all those snails are food for the chickens and that's where I'm getting my eggs from and meet. And so those relationships in these smaller sort of micro grids, I think allow our communities housing and our offices and our entertainment places to be much better intertwined as an actual community and hopefully brings all of us better together as human beings to interact with one another through where we live

Charlie ([24:54](#)):

Micro neighborhoods and another good documentary there, we're going to put some links to some of that, just so nobody can go read up on it a little more, but I think you're absolutely right. COVID is making us reevaluate a lot of things on what's essential, but how do we still collaborate? So thanks for taking us there. Let's go through some rapid fire questions, get to know you a little more Lance, a humbling question here, but what do you think is your specialty or gifts?

Lance ([25:20](#)):

So I think I like to understand the parameters or the rules. Okay. I've always been pretty good at and I have that ability to step back and sort of look at the bigger picture and understand that. And that's important to me because I like to understand the rules for that, so I can then break them or disrupt them. That's what's been really great with something like P 100 is okay, Hey, here's the way we've always done it. Here's the rules. Here's what we put out there. Now that I get to be the program manager for it. I can look at it step in and go, Oh, why have we been doing it this way? This whole thing needs to be changed, to be more efficient, to be more streamlined, to give

our design teams more creativity, but make sure that we're there delivering on the performance that we ultimately need in this process. And so I find myself continually doing that in almost every aspect of my life is okay, what's the rule here and how can I break it a little bit?

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

I love that, man. That's really, really good. I liked that a lot. I resonate with that. So what helps you stay on point and productive? Do you have any good habits or routines or rituals?

Lance ([26:40](#)):

Yeah, so I'm, I'm a heat person. I grew up in South Mississippi. I like hot humid weather. And so I've always found everywhere I go that I look for those opportunities. So, steam rooms, saunas getting in the sun, that aspect of sort of heat allows me to essentially sweat away all of the concerns and issues that are currently on my shoulders and allows me to sort of come out of it all nice and clean and sort of fresh and allows my brain to sort of really open back up and think of new possibilities along the way. So it's a, that's something I've done my whole entire life. Continue to do today.

Charlie ([27:30](#)):

That's great, man. That's a good segue to one of my next questions, which is what's on the bucket list. What are one or two things on the bucket list? And by chance, is there a steam room somewhere in the world that you got to go to?

Lance ([27:44](#)):

I really want to work on a project that sort of completely incorporates the idea of waste to energy. My thesis project in college was the center for the study of urban agriculture. I had worked with a NASA scientist who had been charged with figuring out if we sent astronauts to Mars, how would we keep them alive? And I love the ideas and I've always wanted to sort of better incorporate them into a building and to take that sort of overall living system idea, taking the waste of the building, turning it into usable nutrients and turning it into usable energy within that building. And so that is something that is still on my bucket list as an architect to be involved with. The next is I really want to take a seriously long trip on a boat. I think recognizing that there is no way that I can't just take my trash and dump it

overboard and sort of relying on my ability to work with nature, to move around, to get where I want to go to be respectful of it, to be a part of it, to help potentially capture some of my own food along the way that sort of really sort of grabs me. There's something that I want to do out there.

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

Fantastic. Great bucket list item. Let's talk about books. I'm not sure if you'd like to pick up a book in your hands or maybe listen to audible, but is there a book or two you'd recommend?

Lance ([29:22](#)):

Sure. Yeah, right now on my I'm rereading probably for the third or fourth time Daniel Quinn's the story of B, which is,usort of a companion book to his first book My Ishmael . This is about a gorilla who can actually communicate with humans and sort of asks us to really think about our place on the earth. And so it's a great sustainability book. It's a great thinking book, and really challenges our preconceptions about day to day life and who we are. I liked the challenge that he brings in these books. And so I've got his series and just occasionally just pull them back off and reread them again, just to continue to challenge myself.

Charlie ([30:16](#)):

Wow. Thanks for sharing. I'll put a link in the podcast show notes to a set of books there. Thank you. Well, as we start to come to a close to two things, one is, is there anything you wish you had known earlier in your career?

Lance ([30:30](#)):

I think I did learn this pretty well, but opportunity is everywhere. I had no idea as a kid working construction that I would ever get to work doing construction at a NASA facility in Mississippi. And at that same facility was Dr. Bill Wolverton, who was the NASA scientist, was figuring out how to send astronauts to Mars and learn about what he was doing and how I could eventually apply that into buildings. Working on the earth conservation Corps in Washington, DC, which has the first planted roof on a commercial building, which I helped design and sitting there. At the time, I didn't know who she was arguing with an older lady who was on the board, who was very forceful, who wanted her way and realizing, okay, I need to find a way to connect with her and work to a common solution for both of us, that

person wound up being Ethel Kennedy and having those interactions and opportunities, being able to point back to that project and how we changed buzzard point in the Southeast area of DC and what it's become now with two stadiums down there and this amazing location for people to go to. Think all started a long time ago with this little tiny. It was a volunteer project actually for the earth conservation Corps. So opportunity is everywhere and you can make enormous changes from there.

Charlie ([32:06](#)):

Thank you. Wow. Big influence there too. Let's come to a close with words of encouragement. Say someone's listening to this podcast right now, jumping into the green building movement. Any words of encouragement for them?

Lance ([32:19](#)):

Sure. Get out there and build relationships. One of the great things I've really enjoyed and, Oh, I was watching Hamilton again recently and that part in the play where they're all at the bar and they're all spouting different ideas and challenging each other. Well, when the US GBC moved from where they were in California to DC, that's exactly what happened. So there was a group of us in DC, and we would all just meet together at bars and start challenging ourselves about what the future should be for green buildings. What should this LEED rating system actually be? How are we going to do this just from a centralized organization? Should we have chapters? All of that was sort of born out of having drinks together as a sort of common group and challenging ourselves about the future. And that's, I think, being super important continuing to build those relationships and continuing to challenge our thinking, swear that we come up with that next big idea and find the right people to help us implement it relationships. Wow. Great words of encouragement and everyone. This has been a fantastic conversation with Lance Davis and just remember it all started for the parenting lesson to buy that Atari.

Charlie ([33:51](#)):

Love it, man. Now thank you so much. Congrats on, on your successes. And I really appreciate your time today. Absolutely. Thank you. 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 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.

Charlie ([34:26](#)):

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