

## Sustainable Design Director at ESG - Laura Eder | Transcript

Announcer ([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.

Speaker 3 ([00:33](#)):

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

Hi everyone. Welcome to the next episode of The Green Building Matters Podcast. Today I've got Laura Eder coming to us from Minneapolis, Minnesota. She's the senior associate and sustainable design director at ESG Architecture and Design. We've actually known each other through a colleague and worked on some projects together. So Laura, thanks for jumping on the podcast today.

Laura ([01:20](#)):

Yeah, thanks for having me.

Charlie ([01:21](#)):

Well, I can't wait to talk more about what you're doing at ESG and some of these really cool green building projects you're working on, but we've got to go back. I always like to ask my podcast guests, you know, where'd you grow up? Where'd you go to school?

Laura ([01:32](#)):

Yeah, so I grew up in St Louis, Missouri in a small town outside of St Louis called Ferguson, Missouri. It hit the map a few years ago, but I grew up there and all of my family still lives in Missouri. I went to the school at the University of Kansas, so

I'm a JayHawk. I got my master's and five year program there and then I got a job coming out of the downturn of the economy and I moved down to Dallas, Texas.

Charlie ([01:57](#)):

Wow. You moved around and then get back up to Minnesota, we'll have to have you connect those dots in a minute. Did you always know you wanted to get into architecture first? Then I want to follow up with what about sustainability? So how'd you know you wanted to kind of get into design? Did anybody kind of nudge you that way?

Laura ([02:13](#)):

So my father actually went to school for architecture. He graduated also in a year downturn of the economy and ended up going into computers, which for him was a really good choice. I just grew up knowing and loving what architects could do and the love that my father had for it. It was a passion that I had and I just kind of continued that through my career path and sustainability. I can't think of an exact moment when I started to be more sustainable minded. But I do remember being in college and being a junior and wanting to take the LEED exam. I don't know why I wanted to be a LEED AP so early in my career, but I just felt like I needed to. So I actually convinced the engineering school at Kansas, which I had nothing to do with because I was in the architecture school to pay for my exam because I didn't want to pay the couple hundred dollars while I was a student, if I promise to help other students study and take the exam as well. So I did that and that was a good memory that I have of early in my career. Kind of being focused on that sustainable design.

Charlie ([03:22](#)):

Resourceful. That's a good thing. When it comes to sustainability though who have you looked up to, are there any other mentors? It's fantastic, you consider your father a mentor and maybe his architecture, schooling background, you know, who else maybe had some influence on you, whether it's someone that you just read their material or followed or maybe it's someone that was a little more close to you. Any other mentors?

Laura ([03:45](#)):

Yeah, when I moved down to Dallas I started getting involved in the USGBC and the AIA committee on the environment. I had so many people that I crossed paths with within those companies or with those organizations. Norma Lehman is the

director of sustainability at the Beck Group, which is a construction company as well as architecture and design. She has had a major impact on my career and just being kind of a woman leader and a construction company that's not only doing great work, but also pushing sustainable design. And so I've always looked up to her and used her as a resource and a mentor throughout my career. My first job in Dallas, I worked at a company called GFF, Good Fulton and Feral Architects and my boss, Lawrence Cosby was one of my biggest mentors. He was my direct supervisor and he pushed me in many ways. He taught me how to be a good leader, but he didn't really push me in the realm of sustainability, but he always pushed me to kind of follow my dreams. I think that was definitely something that helped me grow in the sustainability aspect by allowing me to have a passion for it.

Charlie ([04:56](#)):

No, that's great to have someone like that you can give a shout out to now in the firm you worked at, but even one just within your network down there. The Beck Group doing a great job. We do some education with Beck group company. Tell us what kind of work you did at GFF versus fast forward to today with ESG, are there similar projects, different projects, but how'd you go from Texas to the greater Minneapolis area?

Laura ([05:21](#)):

Well, I met my husband in college and I moved a Minnesotan to Texas and that was my first mistake. No, we lived in Texas for almost 10 years and we have a wonderful three year old daughter now and we just felt like it was time to be closer to the family. About a year and a half ago we moved to Minnesota. So I actually worked at Good Fulton Farrell for a full nine and a half to 10 years. We were in Texas and I left that position as an associate and the director of sustainability. I moved to Minnesota, kind of not planning to follow the director of sustainability title, but it found me, I guess when I started at ESG I kind of said, you know, I've been doing this in my background, but I'm not necessarily convinced that's where I need to be moving into a role at ESG. After six months it was inevitable that my passion and that position was just going to align perfectly.

Charlie ([06:26](#)):

I love it. Well, let's go there for a minute. So for those listening that may be, or are younger designers and architects, help us understand that role balance between the design work and maybe in that sustainable plead as sustainable design

director. Can you let us know a little bit about the back and forth and what kind of makes up some of your responsibilities?

Laura ([06:46](#)):

Yeah, great. Great idea. So right now in my position at ESG, I am trying to make a culture of sustainable building and less of a top down kind of role. So we actually have over 30 employees that are on six different task forces that focus on various efforts that are their individual passions to make our company work as a whole more sustainable. So we have a materials group, we have a group that's just focused on sustainable messagings. So how do we talk about sustainability within the office and on social media. Then we also have a group that's focused on resource conservation that cares about saving water or energy. So if you like sustainability, but you really don't care about the energy model for some reason, but you really do care about the impact on a material that is impacting your health. You can actually just get involved in a group within the firm on that.

Laura ([07:40](#)):

So there's actually six different leaders and I'm helping manage those six leaders and kind of creating goals and efforts within the firm, getting information to more people and having more people have ownership. So that's part of my role. The other part of my role is as new projects come in or as projects come through and clients have an interest in going after a sustainable certification or just how they can make their own buildings more high-performing, I am more or less an expert that might come into a meeting and talk about what they could do or talk to the team internally about what we can do or give 'em recommendations for firms that we can hire. Somebody wants to go after a certification such as your company to do a LEED certification for a project.

Charlie ([08:29](#)):

Yeah. That's so great. I love how you started with culture and just that mindset and you know, it's leadership, right? That's really cool and you really didn't say LEED, too much. I know you're working on a lot of LEED projects, probably some other rating systems, but it sounds like across the board you're really trying to say, "Hey, where's the sustainability in all of our projects we're doing?"

Laura ([08:49](#)):

I love a certification, but it's not, it's not something that I feel like makes a project sustainable. So for me, if you want to make your project sustainable, I'll give you

all the ways that we could do that and find ways that aligns with the goals that you have for a project as a client. But I'm not going to be the person that stands up in a meeting and says, well, if you don't get it certified, it's not actually real. But I also love USGBC'S LEED process, especially the LEED for homes process with the changes in the high rise. Then for many years I was actually a Green Globes professional as well. And I've done a couple of group projects so

Charlie ([09:27](#)):

Well versed, love it. Well look back on the highlight reel if you would and what are some of your proudest achievements?

Laura ([09:36](#)):

Oh, some of my proudest achievements. So in college I was part of the studio 804 design build program at the University of Kansas as part of my graduate degree. We did what was called the Prescott Passive House. I think there were about 20 students that designed and actually physically built a house and it was LEED platinum as well as a passive house certified house. It was a learning experience, not only from the design and documentation of getting those certifications, but also from having to build what it required to get those certifications. So air ceiling details for passive house and then having to buy special windows because of the air leakage testing and doing the research that was required around that and having to do our own indoor air quality tests for LEED, great learning experience and one of those projects that, you know, changed the trajectory for your career.

Charlie ([10:34](#)):

That's fantastic. And that was early on there. What else, tell us a little about the work you did in Texas, maybe different clientele versus what you're doing in the twin cities and ESG. It was a different kind of project?

Laura ([10:49](#)):

Actually kept that in alignment. So I did mostly high rise apartments in Dallas. I did a little bit of office work as well. That's where I got my Green Globe Certifications in. But when I moved to Minneapolis I figured there was going to be a lot of change in my career and ESG's work aligned with some of the past work that I had done, including similar clients that I'd actually already worked with. So now I'm working on high rise apartments again and it's been a great shift from changing climates and jurisdictions and new zoning and building codes because Minnesota just this month adopted the 2018 codes but had been working on the 2012 so I

had a great learning experience but was able to keep that building type similar and my market change. So that's been fun.

Charlie ([11:47](#)):

Love it. Well, fast forward to today and we've talked a little about your role at ESG, but just you know, what else is keeping you busy, you do any volunteer work, how else are you supporting the industry, but also talking more about your team and if you can, a couple of projects you're working on today.

Laura ([12:01](#)):

I've been super fortunate to work on some fun projects since I've started at ESG. One of the great parts about being the director of sustainable design is I get to touch a little bit of a lot of projects. I am also a full time project architect as well on projects and I'm working on a large multifamily project that sadly went on hold last month, so I can't really talk about it too much. I'm working on a project in Minneapolis right now that's a three building apartment complex or three building apartment complex around an existing high rise apartment tower. So I think the fun part of that is it's creating a lot of urban density and community for this area that doesn't really have a whole lot around it right now, but we're not tearing down that existing building. The client is interested in keeping that existing building and kind of adding the value around it, which has just been really fun to kind of to work with new and old on that as well as keeping the fabric of that area kind of what it already is and keep it what it wants to be. So just adding value to that. So that's been really fun

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

Question with the residential and even high rise residential I haven't been able work on too many of these, but what about affordable housing and, and maybe I'm not sure if it's there on some stuff you work on depending on what you've seen across the country can you speak to that for a minute? Do you have any experience or any thoughts on what it takes to maybe have a good balance with affordable housing that can also be high performance and green building.

Laura ([13:30](#)):

Affordable housing is a big part of these larger mixed use projects. Usually the deal happens early on before we even get involved in the architecture side at least. What percentage of units would be affordable housing with the city. Minneapolis is a great city, kind of pushing owners to do that in their new project

builds. And they also give them area bonuses when they do that as well. So the buildings can actually get bigger if they do the affordable housing requirements from the city. So it is an integral part to pretty much almost all of the main urban density projects that we do for housing. I think Dallas was working towards a plan for that, but they hadn't had anything set when I was doing work there for affordable housing. It was incentivized enough that the owners were biting at it. I think it plays a huge role in sustainability as well for creating those urban dense networks that people can afford to live in. Not just the expensive high rises that show up and push everybody else out of town.

Charlie ([14:34](#)):

Thank you for that and I know that's a requirement for a lot of that. You're right. Just getting your early permitting zoning and to have a certain mix of affordable housing. Thanks for going through that, but anything else today that you're working on or is your team doing any research or something they are looking into? My next question will be about what's coming down the road, but anything else your team's working on now you want to talk about?

Laura ([14:55](#)):

One of the things that I guess I'm working on internally is kind of with the shift and change of the AIA guidelines that we should be talking about climate change with all of our projects, I'm trying to create it so that in all of our proposals that go out for all of our new work that we are adding that level of commitment on our end to at least talk with owners about even if it's not something that comes in as part of the project requirements. So that's been a really fun task is to look at our proposals for office work, hotel work, multifamily work and try to figure out how we can best include that from a front end perspective so that it doesn't get either forgotten or not talked about because the client isn't bringing it to the table.

Charlie ([15:37](#)):

Well, let's talk about what is coming next in the crystal ball for a peek into it, where do you think sustainability and the green building movement are they shifting? What should we be reading up on now?

Laura ([15:49](#)):

Interesting. Well, you know, I always find it interesting to be a part of the middle of the country because I know there's a lot of trends that happen here in the middle that have already trended on the East coast and the West coast. But I

really think this shift towards occupant health and the user experience and the consumer caring about the supply chain of where products are coming from, is really going to be where the focus lies. Especially when it comes to companies that care about social justice. For instance, resilience, integrity, all those things that kind of the generationZ , the younger generation wants to see kind of that all inclusive. We care about the earth mentality. I think that's what's coming if it's not already here.

Charlie ([16:36](#)):

I think we maybe use LEED as a reference, right? Pushing on building product manufacturers, EPDs, HPDs cradle to cradle. Making sure we really are the clear label and a lot of good is happening there. I think there was pushback right when LEED was trying to go through updates over the last five or six years. Maybe that's just a start. So any advice for those that are specifiers and architects on a non LEED project where they're not chasing a point or two to really help us go better? Does it come down to the specs? Does it come down to the developers saying, no, this is really important to us. We're going to really make sure everybody, not just the building product manufacturers and contract or figure out what's in a spec, but does an architect and the contractor work more closely to source things?

Laura ([17:23](#)):

That's an interesting question. One of the things I've been trying to get our team to do, especially from an interior side, from a design perspective, sometimes we get multiple palette options where it's like do you like the green or the blue or the black kind of pallet for this, for this lobby area and I'm trying to push forward, do you like the most sustainable, the mid level sustainable. I don't care and the cost difference between them shows that being more sustainable in your product selection for those healthy material products isn't actually costing you a ton of money. So more on the education side. The clients of let us help you understand where the cost lies in those as well as just whether it can look good and still be good for the environment. I think that's been something we've been working through, but I personally think it lies in the specifications. I think there's a lot that is buried in the specifications that if we can, if we can specify good products that the market, the contractors, the subcontractors will follow along.

Charlie ([18:37](#)):

No, that's fantastic. And I know sometimes you have spec writers in house, sometimes they use some different softwares to make sure they're using some of



the latest information. And a lot of it's just what do you want to put into this project? What's working? So maybe more collaboration there internally. Okay, good. Let's take a look at a little more about you or in your career. This is a humbling question, but what, what do you think is your specialty or gift?

Laura ([19:02](#)):

Gift. I would probably say that it's that I'm highly organized. I'm type A personality to a fault. And I think that organization has led me to have kind of a good memory of the client or contractor or a presentation that I went to. Learn something and be able to use that information later on. I am also really positive. I'm kind of a glass half full, don't get discouraged with minor setbacks, kind of a person. So I think that's also a good gift to have, especially when it's, when you're focusing on sustainability in a project, what are the small successes that you can hang your hat on or, or jump for joy with where it's not. We didn't get to net zero, but we are doing our part to make the project better and make the environment not so angry at us.

Charlie ([20:03](#)):

Positivity. You know, Laura, I'll be careful when I say this word, but you know, positivity is contagious but in a good way, right? I know we're going through a lot right now. A lot of people will be listening to this podcast while we're still in the middle of our pandemic crisis and some will be listening to it next year, but just want to make sure everyone knows that you know, when you can, how does someone else want you to show up? You've got to think about that. And if you can be positive, you know, you don't have to sugarcoat everything, but if you can just be positive, I think it really does rub off. So I think that,

Charlie ([20:37](#)):

As we get to know each other more. Laura, you'll learn, I'm a fan of the bucket list and I'm just curious, what are one or two things on your bucket list?

Laura ([20:45](#)):

You know, I am not a huge fan of the bucket lists. I am not, but I would have to say if I had to add something to it, it's to travel, which makes it really hard to say during this time of the pandemic because we can't travel. But I married another architect and we just have this desire to get out and go see cities and buildings and travel together. We've been together for more than a decade and we've

traveled quite a bit. Can't wait to travel more once everybody gets a green light to be able to do that.

Charlie ([21:22](#)):

Well, tell us though, what are one or two destinations, maybe you and your husband are hoping to get to?

Laura ([21:28](#)):

Hoping to get to, I really want to go to Banff and Canada and just see nature. I get very inspired by those kinds of almost breathtaking natural backdrops as well as, you know, good architecture. And then we were actually going to LA for the AIA convention in May and that got postponed. But I've actually never been to LA, so that's been something that I've had on my want to list for awhile. So I guess we will be putting that back on our list of places we have to go if the convention doesn't get rescheduled.

Charlie ([22:02](#)):

Well maybe maybe Greenbuild in November in San Diego and take a train up to LA. Let's talk about books? I'm not sure if you'd like to pick up a hard copy or listen to books. I like audible for example, but I'm just curious, is there a book?

Laura ([22:18](#)):

I love books. I am a book junkie and I'm a self help book junkie. I have a three year old, so I don't pick up books anymore, but I do listen to audiobooks on audible. I love audible as well. Some of the ones that I've been reading lately that are kind of about your company and how to make your company better. Right now I'm listening to the *Hard Thing about Hard Things*, by Ben Horowitz, and then there's a really short book called a *Company of Owners* by Darren Martin. It's graphically really cool, but it's also just kind of small tidbits about why your company should be a company of owners instead of the company of employees with one or two owners. And then there's one that is pretty inspiring. It's called *The Energy Bus* by John Gordon and it's along the lines of the company of owners. It's just as how do you get all the right people on the bus to do what you want to do at your company? And those have been some inspiring books. The *hard thing about hard things* is because we're all going through some hard things right now and I just thought it would be the right time to read that. Right.

Charlie ([23:27](#)):

Those are all great. I've only read the first one so the other two I've got to check out. And you know what, we're going to put the links to these books, Laura's mission down in the podcast show notes. Well yeah. What's a, as we said, ramp up here. A two part question. You know, you've made this career and design career in sustainability and green buildings. Is there anything you wish you'd known a little earlier in your career?

Laura ([23:46](#)):

I wish I had known earlier in my career that taking risks is not as scary as you might think it is. So whether that's taking a new job or asking for something in that, in a meeting with your boss that you want or just speaking up on a project team of saying, this is what I want to do. Just those small kinds of ask or Taking risks. What it's all about and you shouldn't have to be scared to do them. And I'm hoping that I'm learning that every day that I can still continue to do that.

Charlie ([24:29](#)):

That's good. Great attitude. Then my last question, some listening right now are just now jumping into the green building movement and and others maybe have been doing this a long time and they love listening to the podcast to validate some things they've been thinking or get to know industry peer a little better, but any words of encouragement for someone listening is jumping into the green building movement right now.

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

Somebody that's jumping into the green building movement right now. I would say find something that interests you within the green building movement and focus on that because the green building movement has so many parts and pieces to sustainability, resiliency. It's so broad, it's hard to kind of find a topic within that. I think if you can pick what is your passion within that sustainability umbrella, then you can really narrow in on something that makes you happy and also can kind of do it. Big difference like if LEED and green building in USGBC is your passion or if healthy materials is your passion. There's all kinds of different ways to get involved and to get more knowledge about that.

Charlie ([25:37](#)):

A quick follow up before we wrap up. I love teaching a LEED green associate class or sometimes they'll leave a specialty or, WELL AP we do a lot of training but you know, it's a nice cover all. So where do you think you should get more detailed

and become a subject matter expert on a certain part versus where to kind of keep it higher level, maybe not go as deep any advice on if you find a passion, do you become that expert on it or do you still try to stay pretty well rounded? Like at what point do you kind of niche down I guess is my question.

Laura ([26:10](#)):

That's a good question. I think it depends on what your end goal is if your end goal is to be a director of sustainability, at an architecture firm, then I think you need to be a little bit more broad and what you're learning. If your desire is to be a spec writer, you're probably also going to want to be more broad. If your desire is to be a project architect, you might only pay attention to the things that have to do with the building envelope. If you're an interior designer, you might only pay attention to the things that are about materials. I think it just kinda depends on where you are. Your passion lies in what you want to do with your career and there's always time to learn more so you can focus on something, learn a lot about it two or three years or however long it takes you to learn a lot about that.

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

Great, great advice and I've really enjoyed our conversation. So you know from, from Missouri to Texas to Minnesota. Laura, thanks for being on the podcast. It's been great. Thank you. Thanks for having me. This has been fun. I just want to say thank you to our loyal listeners. We actually are celebrating over one year here on the green building matters podcast. Me and the entire team we're stoked and are so glad you 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 6 ([27:47](#)):

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