

## Sustainability in New Mexico with Noreen Richards | Transcript

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

Hi everyone. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters Podcast. I'm really excited to have another green building expert with us this week and I've got Noreen Richards coming to us from Albuquerque, New Mexico. She's a principal at Verdacity, a LEED Fellow. Noreen, how you doing?

Noreen ([01:17](#)):

I'm doing great, Charlie.

Charlie ([01:18](#)):

Really excited to talk to you more about your journey in this green building movement. Even a little bit about what's coming up in the future, but I always like to ask my guests to take us back. So where did you grow up and where did you go to school?

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

I grew up on the East coast and upstate New York in the finger lakes region, Ithaca, New York, to be precise and I came to architecture later in life. So I've had several other careers. And I've been out here in Albuquerque now for over 30 years. I got both my bachelor's degree and my master's degree in architecture here at the University of New Mexico. So I was a bit of a wanderer both professionally and geographically, but I live in New Mexico and I became a licensed architect in 2010.

Charlie ([02:10](#)):

That's fantastic. I actually have a tie to Ithaca, New York. A fun fact. My dad who did go to Woodstock in 69, actually lived on a commune in Ithaca for a little while and later became a journeyman carpenter and the rest is history. It's beautiful up there and the whole finger lakes region of New York state. Just beautiful.

Noreen ([02:31](#)):

My dad told me this is probably the most beautiful place in the United States, but you won't know that until you move away. That has stayed with me.

Charlie ([02:41](#)):

No, you're right. And so you moved away, you've been in New Mexico for a long time, but that masters in architecture too, going back, I'm just curious, what made you want to go get the masters in architecture at that time?

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

Okay. So this is going to be maybe a little nontraditional, but I had been working as an accountant and a fine artist, professional artist for 15 years and doing both full time and feeling kind of crazy. And I kept thinking, surely there's a way I could combine aesthetics and visual sensibilities with some kind of math or technology. And I just couldn't get to what that might be until I took a career counseling test that had like, I don't know, 400 questions. And I guess I kind of broke the thing because the architecture indicator was so off the charts. And that's really how I came to architecture. It's not something that occurred to me and I thought really? And then I thought, okay, I'll try it. And then starting in the school, I went back to school in my forties and I just got bit, I really got it badly and that's been my world since then.

Charlie ([03:44](#)):

That's fantastic. We never know where a career path could originate and where you end up. And that's part of this podcast is giving encouragement to what made you want to get into say green buildings. But we've had even Michael Dean who retired from Turner Construction, he was a dancer in New York City in the eighties and then later became the sustainability director of a huge construction company. So I just love those origin stories. So what had some influence on you, what made you want to get more specifically into the green building movement?

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

Sure. So growing up in Ithaca, it's a very progressive culture and I just grew up running wild in the woods frankly. And and I look back now and I think that the people that I grew up around were hippie scientists. They were

doing a lot of these investigations along the lines of say the new alchemist. What we would say now is back in the day, so just living really close to the land and then being exposed to some of that thinking. But I went to an alternative high school where we talked a lot about self determination and we weren't using those words like sustainability or resiliency, but I was living that way and I was hanging out with people that thought that way. But a lot of, like you mentioned a lot of intentional communities in that part of the world. And growing up during the 70s energy crisis as well, I just remember driving my mom and my sisters crazy because I would insist we turn all the electricity off at night and tried to just make do with candles.

Noreen ([05:18](#)):

And I don't think I was an easy child to raise, so coming later to know Oh I think maybe I want to be an architect, I knew all along that I would have this sustainability mission because I learned that, Oh, you know, they don't do that naturally. That's called green building. And so I had already pointed myself towards that before I even took the first course in school. Yeah. And then drove my professors a little crazy too, and had some wonderful mentors there that sustainability was an elective and they didn't always offer it because they couldn't get enough folks to sign up for it. So having me kind of barge through there in my forties and saying, Oh no, no, I will be shaping my career this way and you guys are going to help me with that. I had a lot of focus.

Charlie ([06:03](#)):

That's fantastic. Well speaking of mentors, is there anyone that maybe had some influence on you? Sometimes it's just someone we follow, we read. I mean some have said Frank Lloyd Wright, believe it or not, some have maybe kind of been able to intern on that side, but others it's this person had a direct influence, opened some doors for me, encouraged me. So talk about mentors and what's that meant to you?

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

I had a professor in school, his name is [inaudible - Cooper slummy and younger] and he still teaches there and he has worked all over the world and had been working in sustainability all his life as an engineer and then as an architectural building science person and then as an educator and when he was the one, I remember exactly where I was. I mean, this is kind of, it's

almost personal. It's kind of intimate for me that I was in one of his electives and he basically said, I want you to write a paper where you describe all the impacts that you're going to have by the end of your career quantitatively and qualitatively. I want you to measure it, how many BTUs will you say, how many tons of carbon, like really do the math based on what you think you can do. And he was the one that told me, you can get out of here and you can just do sustainability.

Noreen ([07:12](#)):

You don't have to "pay dues". You don't have to go off onto some other tangent or practice anything traditional. You can do sustainability from the very first day you practice. And I had kind of an epiphany around that and I knew that I really cared more about existing buildings and our existing fabric and the people who are in those buildings. Maybe then some brand new kind of flagship or just this kind of project. Nothing has wavered for me since then. That was like, there was this moment I was standing at the top of the staircase and he said that to me and it just changed my life. That was it. So, and then he continues to be in my life now. He's kind of like my uncle. So he was the first one. And then of course he turned me on to Ken Yang who was always a big a hero for me because he got into the biology of things and then Glen Moorekit because he's so hyperlocal in the way that he thinks about things.

Noreen ([08:10](#)):

And actually both of those individuals limit where they design to the ecosystem and the biome, but they know the best. And then here locally, we have some, again, these hippie scientists that are still around and you can go find them and they'll show you all these cool inventions they've made that they've got strapped to the roof or the side of their house or you know, New Mexico. There's a lot of stuff going on here and always has been in terms of PDs and trombe walls and ground source heat pumps. And people have got experiments just, in their backyard. So I've had a lot of local, I've just been really lucky that way to be able to access some of those elders, I'll call them.

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

That's amazing. Yeah, we need the hippie scientists making change. Inspiring. And so I like the way you've worded that. Well, your career there,

in a minute we'll talk more about your company, what you do today, but can you fill in some of the gaps there? So navigate us through some of your career architecture then green buildings. How did that go?

Noreen ([09:10](#)):

Sure. So while I was still in school, there was a buzz about a small firm locally, and this is I would say almost a coincidence that I was lucky enough to have a local firm that I could maybe try to get into. Because we're in New Mexico, it's not a given that there would be a big green consultancy practice that was really robust, say in the early two thousands, but there happened to be. And that company was, they were some of the people who were involved early on with USGBC and they were called environmental dynamics. And there was actually a guy that worked there that I was in school with and I was like, dude, how do I get in there? How do I get in there? And he's like, just keep talking to them and eventually they'll hire you, especially if you don't go away.?

Noreen ([09:55](#)):

So I did that and I was lucky enough to get really good experience before I was even out of school. And I actually had done a lot of LEED project management before I actually managed to attain my architectural license and I did go off and do seven years in a more traditional firm and did the internship and all the craziness, the 9, 10 tests all that and was a project architect. And I was very lucky to have those experiences. It really informed me, but ultimately I'm just wired to think about how buildings really, really work and how they really impact the natural systems around them and the people inside of them and all those flows. I just think a lot about the streams in and out. And so I knew I wasn't going to stay ultimately. And I ended up going back to that original firm only now it's got a slightly different configuration and a new name. So as an adult, taking on a new career as an adult, I think you know yourself really well and you kind of know how to leverage your strengths. And so I didn't have that traditional experience of traveling around the world doing a lot of internships. I was able to just kind of get to work.

Charlie ([11:13](#)):

Gotcha. No, that's an interesting journey there. Appreciate you sharing that. To build up to become a LEED Fellow, which is, I'm sure a very big

accomplishment for you. Congrats. Tell us about LEED along the way, and I'm sure you've worked in multiple different programs, rating systems, but how has LEED and the LEED rating system maybe you focus on say new construction or some others? How has that affected you?

Noreen ([11:38](#)):

So LEED has been like the bright green thread through my career. And largely I would say, because right when I was starting in this work a bunch of folks that were really dedicated, really intelligent about things, approached at that time our governor, Bill Richardson, and said, we need a state mandate for all state funded buildings, go LEED and to meet certain energy reduction requirements. And he said, okay. So his very first executive order was to require that and that was January, 2006 and that is still in place. So that really has an impact here in New Mexico. And also we have so much federal stuff going on here, which you may or may not know. We have two large national labs in New Mexico. We have three, I think air force bases. The Department of Defense is the largest employer in New Mexico.

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

So the fact that the federal government started to adopt those requirements, the guiding principles and then using LEED as the way to perform a functional equivalency to show demonstration of compliance with those guiding principles is just the short version is most RFPs we see have some kind of LEED in it if it's any kind of a public project. And I actually helped facilitate some of that state mandate stuff. We got to do that and a lot of education and focus groups and socialization of those concepts back then. And then shortly after that a group of us were able to author and push through, I think it might still be the most kind of impactful or progressive state tax credit for achieving LEED Certification. And that's for commercial and residential buildings. And that was super exciting. And because that's still in place, there's a lot of private and housing and commercial projects that are also incentivized to do LEED.

Noreen ([13:34](#)):

So we made that. LEED is our landscape. And lots of people don't even know where New Mexico is, but the USGBC is very aware of us because we have so many LEED Certification here. We have one of the largest school districts in the country, Albuquerque public school. It just never subdivided.

They're huge. And they have voluntarily decided to do LEED for all new schools. And that's been in place for a really long time now, well over a decade. And those are big economic drivers that we're discussing here, right? The federal government, the state, a large school district like that. So culturally LEED is we're all soaking in it here in New Mexico now. And I've had something I've been able to contribute to that not just passively respond to it but drive it. So LEED has been our green thread and having been a proven provider for awhile now we're able to both push back to make sure that newer versions of LEED as much as possible respond to different cultural, economic and climatic setting for new projects as well as to help transform the market here.

Noreen ([14:48](#)):

So I spent a lot of time explaining what it is for a building to be set in a high desert environment. We're one mile up in the air. We have no rain. So I can talk to you about hardscape for a long time, I probably shouldn't get started on that. But we do a lot of back and forth, back and forth. I'm kind of a complexity navigator and kind of a translator or a mitigator if you will, of information and kind of maintaining the intent of what we're trying to do across a wide variety of settings and conditions. So yeah, LEED has been such a great resource for that and we are really branching out now to use another green term pawn I guess. We are branching out a lot now. I would just say that this thing about working in New Mexico, I've also been an educator now.

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

I've been teaching at the School of Architecture and Planning and I kind of bring, I guess if you will, the buck building science or the sustainability flavor to course development. And video projects there and also sometimes resiliency in emergency disaster readiness kind of concept, but being here and being able to have a little bit of distance by being an educator and kind of getting your head up and looking around a little bit to see what's going on to get some better perspective or context, if you will. I've been thinking lately, this might be a bit philosophical, but I've been thinking lately about how really in any place you are, you can look around and if you look for it, you'll see that we are not living in one era. Right. And we can usually look around and see that there's pre-industrial activities, there's industrial

economies and activities going on, there's post-industrial and there's a lot of what we now live in, if you call it techno era or whatever.

Noreen ([16:41](#)):

But all of us as humans, we tend to just limit things to the things we need to know as much as possible in order to just, I guess not go crazy. But if you really reach out and embrace it, there's all these layers happening simultaneously and it's very clear in New Mexico because the contrast is high. So say for example, I'm working on a health clinic out at Laguna Pueblo right now and I'm doing some work out in the Navajo Nation where there may be no infrastructure and nothing much in terms of biosphere, if you will, for say two, three hours' drive, right? But there's a small community there. Doing sustainability there is a very different thing than doing sustainability, say at Los Alamos National Labs where there's a ton of research and infrastructure. So engaging that and having to really fully engage it and bring those ideas of what do we mean by sustainable practice or strategies or thinking in this place for this project with these other kind of folk definitions or mission.

Noreen ([17:54](#)):

It just makes me realize that it's important to be sensitive to this idea that technology is not always the sustainable move, right? So like for example, if you've got Mesa that's never been developed, it doesn't really make sense to put down a bunch of concrete in order to say, Oh yeah, we're doing a good job for sea Island there, right? I mean, I guess another way to say it is that when I approach a project, I don't make assumptions about what's there. I don't make assumptions that there's even power or water, right? And I don't make assumptions about what our clients already know in terms of how to be resilient, how to work within a space of their city or austerity. We work with very low budgets or under-resourced populations a lot. Often we end up learning more than we teach about what it means to be sustainable.

Noreen ([18:52](#)):

So there's a big exchange here that happens. And and when I lift my head up and I look around and I travel around and I talk to people about what we're doing, I often find that others want to know how we're managing to get certain things done. And out here in little old New Mexico, which makes me realize that engaging ideas of sustainability at these various levels of



what we now call kind of economic economy or industry or kind of the social landscape in terms of how we embrace technology. The more we're open minded about that, the faster we're going to be able and the better we're going to be able to solve a problem.

Charlie ([19:34](#)):

That's good stuff. Noreen, let's talk about some achievements. What stands out when you look back on the highlight reel? You've mentioned several and really what you've done to influence green buildings in your region. That's amazing. What else stands out as some achievements you're very proud of.

Noreen ([19:51](#)):

There are some exciting things. In addition to doing a ton of LEED projects and over time if you stick around long enough, you gain some wisdom around some of that. We just are in the process of completing a LEED for city certification for the city of Albuquerque. And I love the idea of scaling up the concepts and trying to wrap your arms around a whole G located and the idea of taking something from a project where pretty much everything is good in your agency, like a building this site, all that to something where we're talking about huge social systems and expanding our definitions of what it means for a community, be healthy or sustainable to things like civic trust, equity, access to clean water, how safe people are in traffic, all these concepts and then layering that on top of well what is our community's greenhouse gas emissions or how are we doing with treating and capturing and mitigating our storm water, that kind of thing.

Noreen ([20:58](#)):

It's been really an honor for me to be engaged in that process and to have the trust of our community to look at a lot of their data and come up with reasonable and meaningful ways to interpret that data. And I'm proud of that effort we did and I would love to do more about work along those lines. Over the past four or five years we've been in a relationship with Sandia National Labs, which is I think it may be the largest lab depending on what metrics we're using per size, but it's a very large place. They have 14,000 people working, well no, maybe now it's closer to 16, 17,000 people. If you look at both campuses in both States, over 150 buildings, maybe almost 2000 acres of land. And so we did, I believe it's still the largest LEED for

campus application, large meaning just number of buildings that would be prequalified and showing compliance because before but also large in the sense of just how many credits we were able to preapprove.

Noreen ([22:04](#)):

And that is to the credit of the DOE and the national lab there. And just in terms of how they do business. And again that was really an honor to be invited in to their culture and their protocols and their policies. And their interpretations of things and be able to capture that and filter it through another lens, which in this case is the LEED campus thing. We're also doing a lot of guiding principles work now and I would encourage anyone that has a lot of familiarity with LEED who doesn't have familiarity with the guiding principles to just kind of sample that crosswalk because it's exciting and because the federal government does have so many of our buildings in this country, our nation's largest landlord, right, the GSA, it's really good to know what they're up to and to do all we can to support that.

Noreen ([22:55](#)):

So I'm proud of that. That I think is an achievement. And then also some other things we could talk about this a little bit in terms of what's keeping me busy, which I know we want to talk about. There's some things that I'm starting to work on now. I wouldn't claim expertise that are very exciting and exhilarating for me. And again, I just feel lucky to be engaged in that as someone who's maybe at the height of my career or I'm aware that I don't have unlimited number of years left to go to an office every day, starting to pay attention to that a little bit. So I just feel so lucky that I'm working on things that are innovative or exciting, like thinking about resiliency primarily and also in the past couple of years have just done so much work on health and wellness.

Noreen ([23:47](#)):

And I know a lot of the folks you've had on are really experts about this. The place where I've been able to help is by working with public health professionals and experts and research, like spending time with folks that at Harvard teach gen public school public health or spending time with Dr. Matthew Trowbridge at the Robert Wood Johnson Funded Green Health Partnership or the ULI Health Partners. I've been involved with those folks or the Center for Active Design, kind of trying to help build momentum and bring a lot of that research driven information to lay people in a way they

can use. So we've just had a blast bringing public health professionals together with owner groups together with designers and trying to develop shared language. And it's really cool to think that you can take a look at a population that's going to be in a building, look at their specific health risks, their risks, their health disparities.

Noreen ([24:50](#)):

They're real rubs in terms of just do they sleep well? What are their sources for stress? Are they able to really move around much? You know, are they hydrated? All this stuff just based on the nature of their work, where they live, stuff like that. And almost come up with a prescription that you could write or how the building can provide what public health professionals call design intervention. So you can almost have, if you will, a deeper program for a building that's almost a prescription for how this building is going to specifically address people. So look, which is a really different way of thinking about it because we've just been struggling to make it to that building spec, right? Like let's not have that indoor air quality. That's just not cool all the way over to, you know, regardless of why people are having a hard time sleeping, let's say they're shift workers or the nature of what they do is really there's a lot of privacy around it and they can't go home and talk about it at night. Things like that. But we can do things in the building that will help people sleep better and that helps their overall health and stuff like that. I just think it's really rewarding to have those conversations.

Charlie ([25:57](#)):

Oh it is. And the whole health and wellness movement, I know you've got experience in our Fitwel Ambassadors as well. It's happening. It's coming up. Very rewarding. So, well tell us a little bit more about Verdacity and a little more about your company and what's keeping you busy today.

Noreen ([26:13](#)):

Oh sure. Yeah. So we're in a growth mode. We intentionally stayed small for several years and now we really observe that by growing more and in an intentional way, we can maybe operate at a slightly higher level. We can really go more to our highest uses. Oh, sorry, I'm not being clear about that. But what it means is that again, looking around, we've been thinking, one of the things that we can do to be sustainable isn't directly about buildings. It's about our economy. So we can create green jobs here in New Mexico and

that's a really good thing to do. So I do a lot of training and mentoring now and sharing what I know and that might be the best use of me, frankly now. So that's one thing that's happening with us. And the other thing is we say that we're a firm that's rooted in New Mexico, but operating on a national level and that it's happening more and more now where we do sort of, I would call them niche or targeted services for groups that are anywhere in the country.

Noreen ([27:18](#)):

Like we do a lot of daylight modeling and a lot of LCIA analysis just for anybody that would like that. And the other thing that we're doing that I think is cool is that we're moving more into building operation spaces, like doing more work with the organizations themselves in terms of how can I track whether or not what we purchase is green. It seems to me like that would be so simple, right? Like Oh sure, let me just go grab you a tool for that. Well it's really hard apparently. There isn't like one handy dandy tool out there so when we become aware of a gap like that, we just get to work to close that, right? So now we're building that tool and we're offering that tool. Or like we were observing a lot with clients that they really want to do flush outs and they really want people to move into a building with really nice fresh air.

Noreen ([28:12](#)):

But the schedule budget thing, everyone knows budget schedule to just accelerate it. I don't even use the word fast-track anymore. Every project's fast-track, right? People are moving in and they haven't finished painting yet. So how do you do that? So we just on behalf of the clients, we were thinking, you know what you could do, you could do the IQ testing and you know, maybe in other parts of the country, and I'd like to learn more about those. This is something that's just done all the time. But for smaller projects it's a little tougher to economically make that value proposition. But by bringing in ideas about lift and insurance and occupant health, it becomes a no brainer. And because that service wasn't available here, we're like, well I guess we could provide that. So we start from a place of discovering something that's missing and then we try to figure out how to close that gap, whether it's us or some colleague firm of ours or friends or strategic partnerships. We just try to make it happen. So that's how we've grown is just by filling needs and meeting needs in meeting people where they are, meeting our clients where they are. And we're also geographically starting

to do more work in California and El Paso. El Paso is kind of a sister city for us, very similar history to our city. And we love going down there and we've got a bunch of friends down there so we're doing more work down there as well.

Charlie ([29:34](#)):

That's great. My next question, it's one of my favorites. What's around the corner? If you had a crystal ball, Noreen, what should we be reading up on now.? What's coming next in this green building movement?

Noreen ([29:45](#)):

Charlie, I would say something that's again like start with the obvious. I would think that a lot of us were anticipating that we would all be paying, like what it really costs at this point to have electricity and gas delivered to our building and that those increasing prices would help drive some of the things that would in turn slow or kind of dampen this climate crisis effect we're all experiencing now. I don't think it's really turned out that way, right? And for us to not recognize that means that we may be like even trying to solve the wrong problem. So I'm kind of observing. I think a lot of us are experiencing this right now, that to use like a track and field metaphor, we're kind of lapping ourselves now, right?

Noreen ([30:32](#)):

Where we're still trying to work on climate crisis, but we're also experiencing climate crisis and we're still trying to come up with ways to do sustainable design, but now we're thinking, wait, maybe this building should also be a little bit more ready for some extreme event, right? And even as we're thinking about that, maybe for the first time in some of our design charrettes, we've got projects where the places already experienced some kind of event. And so they're very cognitive of the fact that they need to do it differently next time. And it's almost like it's happening as we're realizing it. I just went to a disaster resiliency conference in Florida sponsored by FEMA and some other really amazing local and statewide agencies there. And it was mind blowing and so educational for me. But it was also a little shocking for me that I think I talked to everyone at that conference.

Noreen ([31:30](#)):

It wasn't a large conference, but I was the only green building consultant there. I was the only architect there. And so people were just coming up to me and just blasting me with like why does and couldn't this like they had these amazing ideas and I thought, right as we're even starting to talk about this, we're observing new things like the funding mechanisms better in place right now for post-disaster are quickly becoming a pre-disaster condition because places that have extreme, extreme events are more likely to experience another one, right, like soon. So it's like everything is accelerating in that field. And so what's happening next? It's what's happening now and we're just trying to wrap our brains around it. I don't know if we'll say sustainability in five years or we'll all just be talking about resiliency, very interested in this concept of passive survivability and maybe it's just because our firms use that.

Noreen ([32:28](#)):

Maybe that's a place where we could insert in a meaningful way because we do computational fluid, dynamic analysis now when we do daylight analysis now and so if a building could be made to operate well or well enough with no power and be a place of shelter for folks, that would be a real asset in a community. And if it was identified as such and designed to such, right, it could be one of those critical operations locations that doesn't go down. If you've got a community that's having an extreme event and the fire stations go down and health clinics go down and the shelters go down because they don't have that passive survivability capacity, things just got like too hard, way too hard. Right? So I'm very fascinated by that and I think we're all going to be talking about it a lot more.

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

And because maybe it's because my boss Chris Calori, she's also a LEED Fellow, has a bachelor's degree in biomimicry, we push ourselves a lot to think about how, what types of bio functional or biogenetic solutions are available to us that we are just not accessing. And I predict this is a little a little out there, but not for me anyway that this idea of biomimetic or biofunctional design will converge with this idea of resiliency and disaster mitigation. And if we have to learn about how to be successfully nomadic, right, or to have people retreat from coasts and go back and retreat from coasts, we're going to have to learn from nature about how nature does that. Because it would take us too long to invent some new way to do it. And so I

love this word vernacular because we talk about vernacular as being free fossil fuel ways of designing and mitigating environmental climate extremes and things like that.

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

But I think vernacular also means language. And I think we're going to be developing a new language, a new vernacular around this idea of ways of designing better, just less fossil fuel dependent, maybe even less technology dependent. And I mean we work for clients better located in places where there is no reliable internet and yet we're very aware that there's all this innovative stuff you can do. So if you can't put a DDC in your building with controls that are wireless dependent, what can you do? Right? And so it may be that some of these places haven't quite been able to fully realize the techno era dream, may be positioned to arrive at some of those solutions a little sooner. And I really hope I'm in some of those rooms and part of those conversations. It would be an honor to be there and I hope that I would be able to make a contribution.

Charlie ([35:23](#)):

Well, you are, and you're bringing it up in conversation. I'm sure you're a part of it anywhere you can be. So no, thank you for taking us there. It's really important to be thinking like that and talking about it. So it's good stuff. Well let's talk about what are you best at? What do you think is your specialty or gift? We'll get into some rapid fire questions.

Noreen ([35:38](#)):

Oh, sure. Let's see. I think that the books that work with me, you think of me as being somebody who's kind of fearless and I do have kind of the motto proceed until apprehended. I mean once you know where you need to point yourself, you kinda just need to go with everybody to just keep going until something really, really slows you down. So I do do that. And then also I think I have communication skills, I have social skills and I really enjoy that place where you're straddling discipline. I know a lot about mechanical engineering now just because I was really motivated to be able to speak that language with engineers and translate on behalf of clients. I like to straddle worlds and I like to make the fact that the ideas haven't been exchanged, not a barrier. I like to be the one that is in the room where people are learning each other's languages and making contributions in that

kind of integrative design process that, we sort of consider a lot of us to be kind of our religion at this point. So I operate well in that space. I genuinely like to make new friends in our industry to work collaboratively, to be really open source and to have long-term relationships. And so I've been able to hold that for my firm and for my community as well.

Charlie ([37:01](#)):

That's so great. Well, what keeps you successful on point? Do you have any good habits or routines you could share with us?

Noreen ([37:09](#)):

Well, I have another, I have other lives and I think it's really important to have other lives. So I'm still an artist. I have a very active creative practice. I find ways to practice my creativity every day and I need that balance. You know, it gets pretty crazy in the office and be able to go home and be alone and it's just grounded. I do that every day. I stand out in the backyard and say hello to the sun as it's going down every day to just sort of say, yeah, you know, whatever I did today, it was not life and death. The sun is going to come up tomorrow. I try to just have good daily habits. We have four dogs. I spend time with them every day because they don't know any of this stuff and I don't think it's particularly important and that's good perspective for me also. That helps keep me on an even keel, I would say.

Charlie ([38:01](#)):

Absolutely. Now a lot of sunshine where you're at for sure.

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

Oh, it's so beautiful here. Yeah.

Charlie ([38:07](#)):

You're making me want to come visit. I didn't realize I've been all over the United States, but I've not spent a lot of time in New Mexico. I need to come see you and I'll put it on my bucket list because that's my next question is tell us about your bucket list. So there are one or two things you could share with us that might be on your bucket list.

Noreen ([38:25](#)):



You know, I would just say that because I live here in the high desert with a very extreme climate and because I grew up running in the woods, I'm always trying to get to a state park or another forest that I haven't been in some time and it really recharges me and to go back to other woods that I used to run around in because I run around in them in my mind, but to be able to go back, it's I don't know, when I go back and I look at photos and somebody took a picture of me standing in a creek or something, I always look so wildly happy and I just think, yeah, I should probably make sure I do that as much as I can. And there's a couple of coastal long walks and just long walks I'd like to take. It's really just about that. I just want to visit beautiful places and benefit from them as much as I can.

Charlie ([39:15](#)):

Well, let's talk about books. I'm not sure if you'd like to pick up a good hard copy or maybe listen to books or have even some trade publications. But is there a book or two you'd recommend?

Noreen ([39:25](#)):

Yeah, I'll tell you the book that maybe everybody already knows about this one, but there's a little book, it's called *The Little Book of Hygge: Danish Secrets to Happy Living*. And I guess maybe this is trending or something, but I just fell upon it, stumbled upon it. I just listen to books on tape from the library and it's really beautiful and it's really simple. It's like really old practice. And I guess just because it's winter, you notice cold and dark and very, very dark too in the wintertime because we don't have lights on in our state because we have a night sky ordinance so that the stars can be observed because we do so much observation here. Scientifically we have a lot of telescopes and stuff, so it's just super dark here. And when there's no water in the air, there's no reflectivity at all.

Noreen ([40:11](#)):

So it's got this special dry darkness. I wouldn't know how to describe it but it's really important for us here in the winter to light candles and to do things like that so I'm enjoying that book a lot. And then I guess the other thing is I'm just getting ready to return to a favorite writer because it's been long enough. I think I can read those books again. And those are the books by Stewart Brand. My favorite architecture book is *How Buildings Learn*. I just love that book and going on to think about time a lot and how if, I don't

know if you're familiar with him, but you know a bunch of his buddies that thought if we can train ourselves to think about time in longer arc it would change our behavior. And so he wrote a book called *The Clock of the Long Now* and now he and his buddies have *The Long Now Foundation*, a podcast and if you really want to take a deep dive into something that'll do something to your head, I recommend just dropping in on a couple of those. They always have guests but it always starts with the idea that if we had the ability to stay in a longer time arc in terms of our perception, which our brain doesn't quite seem to be able to do, what does that do? And it does a lot really fascinating. It's kind of, it's a place of optimism. It's hopeful.

Charlie ([41:31](#)):

Okay. Well we need hope and encouragement and if you would share that link with me to the podcast. So we'll, we'll link in the podcast show notes to this other podcast as well as the book that you referenced, Noreen, thank you. As we come to a close, kind of a two part question. One is, is there anything you wish you had known earlier in your career?

Noreen ([41:49](#)):

I think I always felt apologetic about the fact that I was jumping around and that I have so many passions and interests and this whole thing of being kind of scientific minded and artist minded and having to always feel almost apologetic or secretive about that to one group or another. I would now just wish someone had said, don't even spend a minute on the change, you know, your nature and to fit into some existing social understanding of things because it's just such a waste of time and energy and to out the gate kind of dampen your ability to be powerful in terms of who you are, it's just a real disadvantage. I don't think it's possible to access and to celebrate the best we have if we're already handicapping ourselves with other people's expectations. So that's just a lesson learned for me.

Charlie ([42:41](#)):

Yeah. No, it's good for sharing because we have a lot of people listening that are maybe jumping into this green building movement now or need that spark that, just to hear you say that I'm sure really impacted some of the listeners here, Noreen. Thank you. So in closing, any final words of encouragement if someone listening is jumping into this green building movement, now you're a LEED Fellow. You've been doing this a long time.

You've had a lot of influence in your region. Someone needs to hear from you. Hey, any words of encouragement.

Noreen ([43:08](#)):

I've stood in front of big factions of undergrad and I always find myself saying the same thing, which is just try to observe yourself and when something lights you up and puts a fire in your belly, really pay attention because our field is expanding so much. We can't know all this, we can't have expertise in all those. We trust our peers to have expertise in the things that just don't light us up. But if we can observe that early and often about ourselves and then make commitments, make a commitment to a problem that's hard, that might take a couple of decades to really unravel or put a dent in and then just hold yourself accountable and get to it. And I think a lot of times we're operating in the darkness or against some great big challenges. And so if you can build some momentum and a little bit of, I would call it fast or something, then just don't let anybody get in your way. Light yourself on fire and then just keep burning. That's what I would say and give me a call if our interests overlap.

Charlie ([44:14](#)):

Yeah. Now we want people to connect with you We'll put your LinkedIn link and do reach out to Noreen. Clearly a green building expert. Noreen, thank you so much for being on the Green Building Matters Podcast today. Really appreciate it.

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

Thanks so much for having this platform. Charlie.

Charlie ([44:31](#)):

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 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.

Charlie ([44:53](#)):

Thank you for listening to this episode of the Green Building Matters Podcast. At [gbes.com](http://gbes.com) our mission is to advance the green building movement through best-in-class education and encouragement. Remember, you can go to [gbes.com/podcast](http://gbes.com/podcast) for any notes and links that we mentioned in today's episode, and you can actually see the other episodes that have already been recorded with our amazing guests. Please tell your friends about this podcast, tell your colleagues, and if you really enjoyed it, leave a positive review on iTunes. Thank you so much, and we'll see you on next week's episode.