

Strategic Sustainability Planning With Sandy Mendler, LEED Fellow | Transcript

Welcome Announcer ([00:02](#)):

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

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

Hi everyone. Welcome to the next episode of the green building matters podcast. I'm your host Charlie Cichetti. Today we've got another LEED fellow with us. We've got Sandy Mendler coming to us from the San Francisco area. Sandy, how you doing today? All things considered great. It's a beautiful day. The sun is out. Well, nice to be with you, Charlie. Yeah, we're going to talk green buildings. We want to talk about your journey and that's what the feedback we get from our listeners of the green building matters podcast is this, man, I appreciate the peek into someone else's kind of career path. You know, we will talk about some other things, what's around the corner, but Sandy take us back, where'd you grow up and where'd you go to school?

Sandy ([01:46](#)):

I was one of those kids who wanted to do something creative, but I also wanted to do something that had social meaning to it that had sort of some larger purpose. Growing up in New Jersey and making trips to New York City and you know, passing through kind of the industrial land and then arriving in the city. It was really interesting because I loved it. I was so excited by the architecture in the city, but I was also so aware of the contrast

between, you know, what I had just passed through to get there and so yeah. Grew up in New Jersey just outside of New York City bedroom community and went to school at Washington University in St Louis and also pride Institute in New York was where I got my national degree and a third of my career in New York city. Working with firms there. I'd say in terms of getting focused on the sustainability issues. Earth Day 1990 was really impactful to me. I was a young architect in New York city in the late eighties.

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

I was trying to figure out what that meant to do architecture that was really great design, but also had some sort of socially beneficial kind of aspect to it. And when the idea of sustainability and sustainable design emerged, I was really excited. It was like, that's it. That's what I've been searching for. There's a name for it. This is so exciting, you know? So it kind of started there for me in my early career. Yeah. Long time ago. And yeah. And I think that that was really impactful to me, that idea of wanting to be an architect, doing creative work, but wanting it to have a kind of a larger purpose.

Charlie ([03:23](#)):

Sure. Let's talk about, you know, 1990 I mean Earth Day. Wow. What a great aha moment. You know, by the time this podcast comes out we'll have just done our virtual earth day and everything right now. And so was it about energy efficiency then? I mean 10 years later, right? Maybe in the year 2000 that's when the first LEED projects were certified, but early nineties. Can you give us a picture of not just architecture then, what kind of projects you're working on, but sustainability, what were you trying to get into your design?

Sandy ([03:52](#)):

Yeah, sure. That's a good question. You know, we're just going to rewind for a second . Earth Day started in 1970 did you realize, I was just thinking of this the other day, because the 50th anniversary is coming up, 20 million people across the US participated in earth day 1970. That was 10% of the population of the US that's dissipated in that it was the largest ever effort in our country. So it was really interesting. In 1990, 20 years later it was still this, there was a lot of focus on pollution, right? Rivers were on fire, the air was really heavily polluted and there were a lot of health effects being discovered from that. So it's interesting to think and realize, but now we're talking about health effects. We're talking about global health effects. Like

not only do we still have a lot of things, people with their lives shortened because of air pollution.

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

Well, we also have this pandemic threat. So it is interesting that like it started with this idea of like this isn't a healthy way to live and that's kind of where we are today. Stills. So there was a question about the kind of economics, but I say, Earth Day 1990 was still looking at the issues around pollution and health as well as the idea that, ____, it's also very inefficient and we could reduce emissions, reduce the cost of energy. And provide these like win-win solutions where by being smart about design, we're solving this problem and providing these other benefits at the same time. That was the part that was exciting to me. It underscores why being a good designer makes a difference because we can actually create something that solves these problems proactively.

Charlie ([05:39](#)):

That's inspiring and I hope we get more and more. I hope we beat that number with Earth Day. We see pollution numbers going down right now with shelter in place and just the fact that we've got the pandemic. So it is a silver lining. Now let's talk more about early career. Did you have any mentors, anyone open any doors maybe who even encouraged you to participate?

Sandy ([05:58](#)):

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, well, you know, right after 1990 my husband and I, we got married, we moved to Washington DC, Washington DC in 1991. It was kind of a downturn in the economy and the one firm that was hiring was HOK because they were doing a lot of government work and it turned out to be such a great thing for me to join HOK and have that opportunity to work on larger projects and that cycle of government investment was really interesting because there was a focus within government to create demonstration projects looking at sustainability, president's council on sustainable development. It was really interesting and I'd say those early HOK days where I had the opportunity to work on the EPA headquarters in North Carolina, I was agitating on sustainability and that project opportunity came up.

Charlie ([06:57](#)):

And so it was an amazing experience to work for four years as the project moved slowly through the process because we had to get reauthorized at each step. It created this opportunity to research. Doing the research, exploring, I'd say, there were a number of folks at HOK at the same time, Chris Hammer was here in the Bay area, still pitched this idea to HOK that we should have a green team. That became an opportunity for me to meet colleagues in other offices. So, you know, Bill O'Dell and Marion Lazarus were my collaborators in those early days and you know, learn so much from them. And we were able to, okay, put an initiative together to do research and projects and share what we were learning. So it ultimately turned into the HOK guidebook to sustainable design that became one of the major publications

Sandy ([07:54](#)):

Who influenced me? Like those folks that I worked with in those early days at HOK so inspiring and because none of this is done by one person. Right. So having people to team up with is huge. And people that share that passion. I found a lot of people with a lot of passion in my local office as well, but I'd say that the leadership there understood the value of kind of letting us explore and, and push these issues forward. Bill Hellmuth was running the office at the time he and George Helmuth, they're cousins. They were very supportive and led to a whole series of projects after the EPA headquarters. So it's like the Nature Conservancy, headquarters, world resources, headquarters, things led one to the next and created a great opportunity to learn.

Charlie ([08:51](#)):

But in terms of people that were inspiring, I just want to throw in there early. I was involved in the AIA committee on the environment and it was Gail Lindsey for anybody listening that might remember Gail. Like what a wonderful, beautiful person. She passed away way too young; she was like the heart and soul of the AIA committee on the environment in the beginning. I met her through the EPA project because she was out in North Carolina and she was very encouraging for me to sort of speak publicly about what I was exploring and this is a good takeaway. She said, "You know, Sandy, everybody has something to offer and to share. Just remember, only share five things, right? That's as much as a person can ever

absorb." We have a lot to talk about. There's a lot on this issue that is so large and complex in any conversation you're having.

Sandy ([09:43](#)):

Like don't try to share more than five things. Anyway, I was just remembering this morning about her, but then through her I got involved in the committee on the environment, Bob Berko bile also like what an important person in this movement and just so deeply inspired by him. And he, one of his big themes is he talks about this idea of beautiful pedagogy. Okay. You know, our buildings hopefully like pedagogy, they're teaching, right? Or buildings teach people and they need to be beautiful. They need to inspire and uplift people. And he was great. It kind of makes that case that this is all about design and you know, in terms of the work we do as architects, right? We're creating buildings that are performing on multiple levels. The most impactful ones are the ones that, you know, really catch people's attention. It's about the idea that a building can be beautiful and meaningful at the same time and there's not a conflict there.

Charlie ([10:41](#)):

What fantastic, you know, influences mentors. And I think it's so important that we do give them a shout out. We wouldn't be where we were if they weren't there. You were on some really cool early pioneering project. So, Tell me how you got from EastCoast to the West Coast and how'd you end up in the Bay area?

Sandy ([10:59](#)):

Yeah, so actually it's HOK. Again, I left briefly to join another firm and after a year when things were challenging for that firm financially, I kind of, well look again, I realized that, you know, I think sometimes when you're with a firm it's hard to sort of see it completely. And so I think stepping away I was like, wow, that was a lot, that was really positive there. And they did offer me the opportunity to come back and to relocate me to the West Coast to San Francisco, which was super exciting because that was a goal to get to the West Coast. I came out to the West coast with HOK and led to a whole series of super exciting projects. My focus was really on like how do we get

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

These ideas into the work and to those leadership projects. Anyway, there were a lot of people always involved in these. It's not a, not an individual thing, but being part of creating those opportunities to do the NOAA headquarters in Hawaii and laboratory projects I was focusing on. It was really exciting. It was great to be on the West coast and yeah, that was a period of my career through 2008 until I transitioned to Mithun which was also great. I don't want to ramble on too long, but you know, it was really, I think it was having a long career with one firm was very satisfying. But I also think for folks listening like change can be good. You know, it's not, yeah, I don't think it's anything negative about the places I've been, that I've made changes. I think it's just enriching to experience different design cultures and contribute and work with different teams of folks. So it was, it's been interesting to make some of those transitions because you know, there's another type of environment to experience. So, okay. I guess it was 2008 and transition to Mithun and that's when I realized that as I was thinking about these different chapters in my career, it's really interesting that each transition happened at a downturn in the economy, but I didn't necessarily know it at the time. Like joining the phone right before. Yes. Incredible recession, great recession we went through was really interesting.

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

Yeah. Tell us you know, for those who don't know, and fortunately I get to provide education for companies like HOK and Gensler and, and unfortunately work with, you know, these are so amazing firms and Mithun. So just if you don't mind, highlight a little more of the work there when you're with Mithun for over 12 years. So like what kind of projects are you putting out there?

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

Yeah, sure. So I was attracted to Mithun because of this idea of a firm, it wasn't quite as large that had a really consistent and strong design culture around everyone participating in the sustainability initiative as opposed to it being sort of a part of the practice. It was sort of embedded at the core. And also I think being a multidisciplinary firm as HOK was, but having a really strong landscape architecture practice together with architecture and interiors in planning was yeah, there's really a distinctive approach to doing work looking outside inside at landscapes. And so that was inspiring for me. Some of the key projects while I was there, that's the Chatham University

new campus and just that part of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania was an opportunity to create a whole new campus from the ground up to be a school, a living learning environment for sustainability.

Sandy ([14:28](#)):

They were housing their new school of sustainability and the environment there. And the idea was, you know, if we were designing a campus from the ground up, like what would we do, how could it be net positive in terms of energy, water and waste and provide a place for experiential learning and a place to really attract people to host conferences and events and create this really unique environment. So that was super exciting. I know ___ sort of integrated design process on that. There were a lot of really creative designers involved in the specific buildings and that went on for quite a long time. The first phases of construction are done and we've done a lot of post occupancy study, a really fascinating project if people want to look it up online and a great and wonderful educational environment.

Sandy ([15:14](#)):

Also, we were one of the Mithunn, one of the teams with the Resilient by Design challenge and that was an effort in the Bay area to ask a big question, you know, so the Rockefeller foundation funded rebuild by design, which was after hurricane Sandy, there was a response for the design community. Like how do we respond? How are we going to respond to all the damage and build back in a way that's more resilient. So was it a design exercise where the winning schemes were funded and they were built? That work is in progress now, but in the Bay area, the Rockefeller Foundation asked this and other partners asked this other question, which was, how would we prepare in advance? Rather than waiting for the crisis and then enormous amount of damage, how would we redesign our communities now so that we're more resilient or prepared?

Sandy ([16:10](#)):

And this pandemic adds a whole other aspect to that, but they're very aligned. And so it was super exciting. There were 10 teams that were selected to be part of this, and Nathan was leading one of the teams and we spent a year researching and working with a community in North Richmond to develop our solution. And the team is continuing and advancing some of that at work. Now, those who are very, very inspiring, the rich conversation

where each of them, the teams would meet periodically and share our work with each other. I think it's a lot of good because our community has learned through this experience both in terms of the work that was done and the process that was super inspiring. It led me to change the direction of a dissertation I was working on at USC at the time focused on how to address the larger drivers behind the sustainability challenge to focus the resilient by design case studies as part of that investigation. I also finished up that professional doctorate recently that was really exciting to work on both buildings and these larger planning ideas. However, I think the next chapter you might get to is the fact that I recently joined Gensler.

Charlie ([17:29](#)):

So fast forward to today, but I don't want to skip past a couple. One of my questions of course, is just a highlight reel and just your proudest achievements. In a minute I want you to tell us what you're doing at Gensler and higher ed and sustainability. But you know, you're a LEED fellow. Congratulations to you, you just quickly went through that professional doctorate you earned. So there's been some pretty cool stuff there too. So what else Sandy stands out. If you look back on the highlight reel, what are some of your other proudest achievements?

Sandy ([17:50](#)):

You know, I think one of the things I love about the work that our team did a for Chatham University and it wasn't just Mithun, we had really great engineers and other consultants involved. Bio habitats and interface engineering and others that were part of that team. I think what was the proudest moment for me was we got this great letter from the president of the university and she wrote this glowing letter for us. Oh my gosh, Esther Barazzone What a wonderful person. She wrote this great letter for us about how she's spoken about this a number of times. She said what was so amazing about the design of her was that the whole team was strong. Like every individual was contributing and they could really see and understand the.

Sandy ([18:42](#)):

Contribution of all the folks on the team. So think, for me, that idea that it's not about being brilliant as an individual, it's about pulling a team together and having everyone on that team contribute to a high level and having us

all share in this experience. So pushing the boundaries of what's possible to me, that makes me feel so great. And that's a really great recognition of what we accomplished as a team. And I think that's where I try to go with my professional work, like, how do we pull out what folks can do together.?

Charlie ([19:37](#)):

It's so exciting. Thanks for sharing that. You know, part of the podcast is telling stories and looking back and it's okay to look back on that highlight reel. We don't do it enough. So now take us to today. This is something earlier. Tell us what's keeping you busy today?

Sandy ([19:40](#)):

So I've only been at Gensler for a little over a month. It's been very recent and it was a choice to say, you know, I guess I feel like now that my kids are kind of launched, my kids are on their own now and doing really interesting things and then there's such a need to address these issues of, you know, as I dug in on that professional doctorate, I feel like things are so much more challenging than even I, as somebody who's been in this field my whole career realizes. Kind of digging in on the issues of sustainability and no systemic inequality and the fact that we're not going to solve the sustainability challenge without addressing the inequality challenge. And so I guess I feel like these issues are really large and difficult.

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

The potential for change is, it's really needed. This is a really important time we're all in right now. I feel like this is an incredibly important time and a very rich and creative time. And as much as I love Mithun, it's amazing practice. It felt like I wanted more colleagues and a larger kind of firm to work for to be able to just dig in and do the work and that led me to Gensler, I was attracted to, Diane Hoskins speaking at the cob, the climate conference and talking about the commitment to be net zero carbon across the platform by 2030 and all of the work that Gensler does over a billion square feet a year and going deeper in that as well as the fact that the firm does such interesting and diverse work. They wanted somebody to help them lead their education practice.

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

So I think I was really attracted to that and just wanting to do the work. And you know, we're kicking off a project right now for City College of San Francisco, a new student success center. It's just like such a wonderful project type. It's a design build working with that self instruction but it's like this idea when I was just saying earlier about yeah, the inequality challenge and the sustainability challenge. Like this is a building. The community colleges are so important to provide pathways of opportunity for people in communities and provide economic development to the community largely and so, and the student success center is all about how to help students be successful. It's a project with this mission about strengthening communities and it's also going to be a net zero ready project. It's going to be a smart pipe building is going to be inspiring. It'll be the gateway, the edge of the campus. Everyone coming to the campus will come past here. It's an opportunity. Make a big statement to act as support resilience in the community. It's one of these projects that, I mean these projects are everywhere, right. But it's exciting to focus on the larger purpose as well as the performance as well as the aesthetics with a really strong team.

Charlie ([22:46](#)):

What a great set of projects to work on. I know in California of course you have a lot more net zero already as you say, you know, 2030 and just pushing us as hard as we can on our new construction and it's fantastic. I love to ask this question to all my green building podcast guests, Sandy. If you had a crystal ball. Where's this sustainability movement shifting next and what do you think we should be reading up on now?

Sandy ([23:12](#)):

I think people are experimenting with what word to use, right? Is sustainability? I don't think sustainability is the goal, right? Sustainability is sustaining what we have. Some people would say sustainability if we're not careful, sustains inequities. So I think health and wellbeing is the larger goal and we can't, and we even have a healing exercise to go through in terms of the damage that's been done. So I think focusing on how we're more resilient, but also how we transform going forward. Like, how do we take what we have and we want to reduce all the negative impacts. That's not really enough to just reduce negative impacts. We actually really have to build the much more positive, healthy, vibrant set of systems and

infrastructure for the future. And so that to me is the really inspiring part because you know what we have today, it's not that great.

Sandy ([24:12](#)):

I mean I think we have beautiful places for people to live, but across the board we have a lot of places that are auto dominated and impacted by pollution and not very inspiring and uplifting. I think that's what we have to do as a profession is really focused on what that positive image is, that vision is that we're going towards and look forward and put forward. This is going to be such an important time in our profession to sort of put that positive vision forward about a healthy, vibrant, and place for communities. I think we need to look beyond individual buildings into like the patterns of development in the way neighborhoods are built and we have to find the way as architects to not just work where the most resources are, but to also work where there aren't enough resources but we can unlock a lot of opportunity and a lot of great things through designs. So there are some firms that are putting their attention on that very intentionally and I think Genzler was looking at it as well or how do we bring our design talents more broadly to the problems that are out there instead of, you know, take more of a leadership role in terms of envisioning the future we'd like to see.

Charlie ([25:35](#)):

Sure. Wow, that's so great. Thank you. I agree and especially, you know, let me know if you agree with this. Let's say we're improving recycling at a building, right? We can try to hit a higher percentage diversion or we could talk about what would it take to go to zero waste. And sometimes we're focused just on to your point, I think maintaining, sustaining, being resilient, which are all super important. So hopefully everyone listening to realizes great programs out there, great price practices. If you're not doing it, get there first. But you know, sometimes we don't focus on the bigger prize, which is Hey, how could we do zero waste instead of just 40, 50, 60% diversion. So I'm not sure if you agree with that.,

Sandy ([26:17](#)):

Exactly. Compostable and looking at waste as a resource. Bill McDonougha said that waste early on, you know, waste people's food. So yeah, those are exciting transformations and you're right, I mean all of this is layering on top

of the knowledge that people have been building in the areas of sustainability and resilience and it's all an evolution of that thinking.

Charlie ([26:39](#)):

Yeah, no, that's great. Just a few more questions here. This is just fantastic. Let's talk a little about you Sandy. What would you say are your gifts? What do you like best at?

Sandy ([26:48](#)):

Ooh, I like to ask the big questions and I listen very carefully to the answers. I do a lot of facilitation work with teams and clients in the early stages of projects and also kind of checking back to make sure we're doing all of those things we decided would guide a project forward. So it's a matter of bringing people together. That's the big question and really elevates a conversation about what's possible.

Charlie ([27:19](#)):

That's good. You know, as we get to know each other a little more, I'm curious, do you have any other best practices there? One of your early mentors said, make sure you only tell people five things. It's all the process, love it. Other processes? What other routines or rituals do you do that help you stay on point that you could share about?

Sandy ([27:39](#)):

No, the risk of getting beyond five things now. Yeah, I think I've been getting more into a regular morning meditation practice to make time to settle down and feel centered and focus on what's most important. We all have to look out for our wellness. I love it that David Godfrey who was one of the founders of US Green Building Council. He got onto this whole thing about how are we even personally sustainable? Like how can we talk about sustainability if we're not sustainable in our lives? Right? I think that, I think we do have to do that. I think a little bit of self care so that we're bringing our best selves forward in our work.

Charlie ([28:22](#)):

That's self care. So important, right? It's the old anecdote of make sure you put on your mask first so that you can help others on the airplane. So let's talk about a bucket list Sandy. As we get to know each other more. I know

we ran into each other at some conferences, like the design futures council. Amazing. Let's talk about a bucket list. If you wouldn't mind. Tell us one or two things on your bucket list.

Sandy ([28:44](#)):

I think I do want to write another book. So I have been collecting materials and thinking about that and that it should be a guide book, the sustainable design, which was a collaborative effort. Yeah, it was, it was an amazing way to sort of writing helps with clarifying ideas and it also creates an opportunity to meet people you'd never otherwise meet. So a ton of work. But I do want to do another book and do you want it to travel to provide a broader set of inputs and case studies and inspiring projects into that book. I don't want to do that right away, but they do think taking the time to clarify ideas and put inspiring projects forward is something I love to do. And so I'm kind of looking forward to that a little further down the road.

Charlie ([29:38](#)):

Okay. Well there's always a lot of travel, but that book, they say we all have a book in us and it sounds like you've got some more to share and that's a good segue. Only a couple of questions left here. Is there a book or two you'd recommend that I can link to for the listeners?

Sandy ([29:54](#)):

Oh sure. There's a lot, the book I've read most recently that I'm talking about with folks that I find incredibly inspiring and relevant the moment Mariana Mazzucato, *The Value of Everything*, and she's an economist and I think it's great for designers and people in our field to read a book like this because she walks you through the history. When she talks about the value of everything she says, What is it? How do we define what we value? And how does that and does that align with the way we make decisions in our economy? And so yeah, there's been a whole train of thought around ecological economics and the fact that, you know, we don't value natural resources, they're not counted as something of value there taken and abused. That's why we don't track very well and it's so hard to first sustain sustainability strategies pencil out because there's so many things of value that are not included in the equation.

Sandy ([31:00](#)):

You know, Herman Daly and others, Brittany, all bunch of folks who have written about ecological economics, but he's steps like a further step back and puts it into a larger frame in terms of theories of values that have existed throughout history and then you know, and then she's looking at us now. And really pointing out the challenges and gets to why our economy is so fragile right now and why we are seeing how brittle and non resilient we are . Because the economically driven choices have led us to a situation where we don't have strong local economies and we don't have resources that we can easily draw on. I love her book. It's really clear for anybody who wants to sort of walk through that history and then be able to have a larger conversation about what needs to shift in our economy, in our way we talk about the economy and the way we make economic decisions.

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

So let me just say one thing about this cause I'm kind of rambling in our discussion about sustainability. You know, oftentimes people will say, well, we achieved reductions in energy use and we achieved these things, and we increased our GDP. I just think that if you read this book, you'll stop talking about increases in GDP as a good metric on wellbeing. Because I think we need to be more disciplined in our industry and not use those kinds of metrics. Don't represent what we're trying to achieve as a society.

Charlie ([32:29](#)):

It's like just running up the score of the football game. I hear you. What a good book to check out. I'm going to put the link in the show notes and Sandy as we come to a close, just give us some encouragement. If someone's listening, jumping into the green building right now, the green building movement, what kind of encouragement do you have for them?

Sandy ([32:48](#)):

When we started the HOK green team ages ago, we kind of looked around for some really smart consultants that can help us and help us identify what we needed to do. And we talked to some smart people. It was really good. Well, we also sort of realized that that the smart people might have to be us and we might have to just kind of dig in and get creative and build up a knowledge base. And I think we're in a similar point in time now where there's going to be, there are a lot of shifts and changes and buildings are going to be thought of very differently in the future than they are now

because of the pandemic and the need to think about how frequently we gather and how we gather and it's going to be a really rich and creative time. We don't wish this upon ourselves and it's a shame it happened but I'd encourage folks to, rather than deferring to the experts to put their common sense and logic and talk with their colleagues and put their ideas together and be part of a conversation. You don't have to do it by yourself, but I think people should know step forward and add their voice and artists and not just wait for somebody else to figure it out.

Charlie ([34:05](#)):

No, it's on us. And those listening. I hope you're encouraged because Sandy's had an incredible green building career here and so this has been a Sandy Mendler, AIA LEED fellow. Doctor Sandy, thanks so much for being on the podcast today. Really, really appreciate it.

Sandy ([34:21](#)):

You got it.

Speaker 6 ([34:22](#)):

Thanks.

Charlie ([34:24](#)):

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.

Speaker 7 ([34:50](#)):

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