

Susan Heinking and Sustainability Innovation at Pepper Construction Transcript

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

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

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

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

Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters Podcast. This week I've got a LEED fellow with me, also AIA. We've got Susan Heinking coming to us from the Chicago area. Susan's vice president of high performance and sustainable construction at Pepper Construction. Susan, welcome to the podcast.

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

Thank you for having me. I'm glad to be here.

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

I've been wanting to get you on here and just kind of learn more about what you're doing with your construction company, but really also your journey, your story here. So take us back, you know, where'd you grow up and where'd you go to school?

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

So I'm originally from Springfield, Illinois, so right in the middle of the state, the capitol. So my story is I was never that kid who really knew what she

wanted to do when she grew up. I was really big into high school soccer so that was my focus I guess kind of in that free college situation where you kind of have to make those big life changing decisions. In high school I was really into art, had a great art teacher and so when it came to college I was like, well, I'll just declare art as my major I like to do it. I like creating things. I like solving problems. So two years later I'm in an art school and reality kind of hit and I was like what am I going to do here?

Susan ([02:15](#)):

What kind of career am I going to build for myself with an art degree? I was in a 3D class and then my professor was talking to me and he said I had a really great talent when it came to creating space and he suggested I should look into architecture. So that kind of led me to Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, joined their architectural program. I had a professor there, Jim Wright. He was the founding partner of Metsuikia Wright Architects, at the British Columbia. They did the CKH building at the University of British Columbia. If you have not checked out that building, I suggest taking a look at it. That was my first exposure to green building and that kind of hit me like a ton of bricks and it was kind of like that light turned on and I was like, this is what I want to do.

Susan ([03:04](#)):

I want to design sustainable buildings starting with the Passive, moving into the active strategies to kind of solve that problem can something sustain itself over time and not be dependent on things like a grid. Can they still be beautiful? Can they still be comfortable? And just kind of looking at that idea, that extra layer almost of sustainability to architecture was just like another problem or another challenge that I could solve on top of everything else. That's what really kind of intrigued me with green building lean forward. I really got into that at Southern, but Southern's a four year program. So when you are in architecture school, you need a professional degree, which is a five year program. When you go through a pre-professional degree, if you ever want to be a licensed architect, you have to go get your masters and that actually led me to the university of Oregon and I went to Oregon because of their sustainable architecture program. The whole program is set up just to focus on green building. The professors literally write the books on what green building is and what it can be, what it should be. So you had Brown, Alison Kwok, John Reynolds, I love that man he's brilliant. Virginia Cartwright, Stephen Duff, just like all of these brilliant minds with regards to

sustainable architecture. So it's just kinda like surrounding myself with the experts in knowing how to understand the principles, but then how to apply the principles.

Charlie ([04:39](#)):

Susan, did you know that before you went, Oregon, obviously a very green state and University of Oregon, great program, but did you even know the professors you'd be working with? Walk us through, what was that selection process like?

Susan ([04:52](#)):

So Jim Wright, the professor who got me into green building, he's actually one that was like, this is what you want to do, Oregon where you need to go. So it kind of pointed me in that direction and said walk. So it was his recommendation to go there.

Charlie ([05:10](#)):

Okay, great. Definitely had some influence you called out some really great professors and mentors. Anyone else early in your career maybe have some influence or open the door for you or someone you call a mentor?

Susan ([05:22](#)):

Well, I think I never had like a formal mentor where we met every week for coffee let's say. But I definitely had people that inspired me and that I looked up to. So I think that's super important in the trajectory of your career is if you find something that you love and you find something that you're passionate about, figuring out who the people are that are doing those things and reach out to them or follow them and kind of see what they're doing. But I think it's also important to kind of have that person to help guide you through the day to day of career development. So like for example, like how to negotiate a salary or how to not retell it in an email, right? Like all of these little X, Y and Z things that pop up just when you start out in your career and you're new and you're hungry to have that person to kind of give you that reality check. I have a family member that's helped guide me through a lot of my career development on that side of things.

Charlie ([06:20](#)):

That's fantastic. We'll connect some of the dots. Get inspired, get into green buildings, go out and get the master's, and then you did some design work for several years. Right? Then I really started to focus even more, on sustainability and kind of leading. So walk us through some of the firms and some of the types of projects you'd worked on early in their career.

Susan ([06:40](#)):

Sure. So my very first job out of school was in Asheville, North Carolina, a firm called Sample Architects and they were working on Wilson College campus. There was a building there that was called the Eco Dorm. So very similar to the CK chow building. The Eco Dorm was completely Passive off the grid with energy and with water, so all compostable toilets. Looking at the Eco Dorm, that gave me the opportunity to start to apply the LEED green building standard for existing buildings. So that dorm was actually awarded LEED Platinum certification and was the first one in the country. So that kind of was that moment in time, for me, where I was applying the principles to the building and then looking at a building, looking at a project, working with the people that are actually occupying this space to prove out the concepts in reality and on paper we can say, here's kind of how this building is performing and what is the projection of that efficiency over time.

Charlie ([07:47](#)):

Gotcha. No, I love EBOM. First of all, congrats on that early EBOM win and that platinum and for everyone listening, if you've never been to Asheville, North Carolina, I'm based Susan and Atlanta and we love to get up to Asheville. It's such a cool part of the country there but you went to Chicago, right? And worked for a large firm.

Susan ([08:08](#)):

That's what happens when you get married and your spouse gets a job in another town. I landed back in Illinois, in Chicago. I was very fortunate to get a job at HOK. And from HOK I was working as an architect trying to get my license and there was, they had a sustainability group there. Marianne Lazaruth ran the firm's sustainability group out of St Louis, but each office had their own little sustainability group. I raised my hand and I said, well, I'd be really interested in being part of that and they said, yeah, sure we've got a lot of work come on board and so that's what I did with HOK for the next five years. There was an opportunity at a local firm called VOA, which is now

Stantec, to develop and lead their sustainability program. That really allowed me to kind of spread my wings and create a program in a firm from scratch and really understand kind of what goes in that process and really be involved in kind of how are we selling sustainability to our clients, how are we incorporating it on projects and things like that. And getting really involved in the community. So at VOA, I really was able to work on some incredible projects like the biophilic Walgreens in Northwestern hospital, Google Chicago headquarters project, just like really phenomenal deep green building projects.

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

That's really cool. Great experience and really a director of sustainability there. Fast forward, tell us a little more about Pepper Construction and the stuff you're doing today and then we'll look back on the highlight reel to connect the dots from the VOA side to Pepper Construction over the last five or six years.

Susan ([09:56](#)):

Yeah. So one thing, I guess if you're in sustainability, you're going to be able to relate to that. One thing that we struggle with is, you know, getting people to understand the value of sustainability from a dollar perspective. There were so many times I would be in budget meetings or VE meetings on projects where the contractor would have a line item that was just called LEED or they would just have like the line art and line item that called sustainability. And if you're kind of going down the list to try to figure out where to save dollars, those two things when they're on an Excel spreadsheet like that, they don't have any tangible benefits. People don't understand what that's representing. So it's very easy just to say, well let's just cut that out of the project. There's a lot of times where I expose that same conversation over and over and over again and I had just had it and so I said, enough is enough Peppers, director of high performance and sustainability was retiring and so it kind of like opened up that door that there was a spot that needed to be filled and I wanted to close the gap between the conversation we are having with the owner and understanding what sustainability is for a particular project and how that was getting lost in translation on the contractor side of things in the budget meeting.

Susan ([11:18](#)):

And so I came to Pepper to educate myself on how the contractor goes about building a project and putting the numbers together so I can better defend and fight for green building.

Charlie ([11:30](#)):

That makes a lot of sense. There's that disconnect and we don't want it to be just a line item. We want to have more folks that are in the loop and the latest with the green building movement and LEED and having a better conversation. So I think that's so great Susan. Well take us back. What's on the highlight reel? What are you really proud of?

Susan ([11:49](#)):

I have had a really great career so far and my career is nowhere near to be done. But like I said before, the Biophilic Walgreens, just really getting into kind of what biophilia is and how that actually gets applied in a real space. I was very special to me. And then Google Chicago headquarters where we chased LEED V four WELL building standard and living building challenge for the same project. That was probably the hardest project I've ever had in my life. But my most recent proudest achievements have been as a contractor. So part of my struggle with getting people to kind of see the value of green building is understanding dollars and the dollars behind it and understanding return on investments and being able to kind of just let the data make the argument for you. And so at Pepper I was able to develop the building performance tool.

Susan ([12:41](#)):

And so what this tool does is kind of like a, think about it as a mini energy model engine where we can quickly look at different strategies that relate to energy use or your wall types, your mechanical types, what's going on, roof, anything like lighting. And so we can make very quick decisions with a client without having to have a model. And what this offer does is that it turns out the projected energy use and gives the client a utility a dollar amount that this building is going to be sending over a year. And then it ties into our estimating database. So now you have all your energy cost gonna be coupled with your construction costs and then you can kind of see what strategies are going to give you the best return on your investment. So in that it really just helps us set up that conversation with the client and it allows us to kind of challenge assumptions and figure out what strategies

should we maybe leave on the table to like or further study versus what are the ones that are just not going to work and we can just not talk about them again.

Charlie ([13:49](#)):

That's super proactive. I think that's great that you're doing that. That's really cool.

Susan ([13:53](#)):

Yeah, and then I'm at Greenbuild a couple of years ago we unveiled our net zero job site trailer. And so this was just doing a proof of concept, right? If you've ever been on a job site, you know it's not the most glamorous setting of workspaces in the world. We're exposed to a lot of elements as contractors and just to build a space for ourselves and for our employees that's comfortable but also off the grid. That net zero job site trailer has been a very huge success for Pepper Construction and just kind of proving out the concept and, and looking at the job site trailer as a class, a workspace, not just some temporary block that moves job to job.

Charlie ([14:35](#)):

I toured that at Greenbuild. It was so cool. I really think that's great you guys are doing that and sharing, hey, here's what works, here's what doesn't, it seems like a very sharing as a firm. So that's good.

Susan ([14:46](#)):

We want to show people it's possible and we want to share kind of the and the strategies that went behind it because every job site workspace should be that way, right? We should all have comfort and a nice space to do our jobs. And then finally, something that we just recently rolled out on that Pepper is we're dubbing it Draw Down at Pepper. And so kind of piggybacking on Paul Hawkins drawdown book, looking at, you know, if we are going to build high performing buildings, if green building is going to just be the traditional building way of the future, how are we setting ourselves up for success today and our clients for success today? And looking at what are the things that go into a building or we should be introducing into our building that actually benefit the environment. And if we're, if this building is benefiting the environment, then that building is going to be benefiting the people inside. So we've developed a program around that as well.

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

That's really cool. What a great highlight real. You've named some really neat projects. Any other project stand out and then we're going to talk about the future next.

Susan ([15:51](#)):

Sure. I mean all of my projects have a little bit of a special place in my heart because I think when you are so passionate about something you do. Especially with architects, our buildings, our designs are art. I started out as an art major, but I really look at architecture and building as just another form of art in the community. The fact that buildings impact so many people, people that you're never probably ever going to meet I think that you have a personal tie into everything that you touch, that you designed, that you build, that you can, you know, drive down the highway and like just point out like even to your kids like, Oh mom, you know, mom built that or mom was part of that project. You know, like there's that pride factor.

Charlie ([16:39](#)):

Absolutely. Actually before we go to the future question, Susan, tell us more about Pepper Construction. So what markets you're in, what kind of buildings and clients do you usually work?

Susan ([16:48](#)):

Pepper is a pretty diverse contractor, but I like to tell people is we're in every market except for single family residential. Being that diverse, high performance or sustainability, we get to look at all of those markets. We're not just tied to a single market place. With that we are able to kind of be chameleons, which is exciting because we can kind of see what maybe healthcare is doing and we can kind of take those strategies and apply them to a school, right or even a warehouse and then be able to talk about the benefits of those strategies and just have that cross sharing of knowledge and ideas.

Charlie ([17:27](#)):

No thanks for that overview. Alright, so you know you're a LEED Fellow. We forgot to mention that yet again. Congratulations. What a high mark clearly

you've made a career of sustainability. What do you think is around the corner? What should we be reading up on now?

Susan ([17:43](#)):

So I think that we're seeing a shift where, you know, before we were all green building professionals were kind of all in their little hub and we, you know, we would joke like, Oh, we're just speaking to the choir. I think we're in a shift. We're getting more attention to the benefits of green building since I've been at Pepper. We've shifted the conversation from sustainability to high performance and building performance and how that's directly relating to human performance and health and wellness. So there's been I think a huge shift in vocabulary and you know, just looking at carbon, I mean everyone's talking about carbon, whether it's carbon from operations or embodied carbon, looking at you know, the market and the investors on continuing that pressure on businesses to keep and act on their climate commitments. Looking at just the different communities around this country, upping their renewable technology commitments as well.

Susan ([18:40](#)):

And so at Pepper I mentioned Draw Down, we're using that program to introduce four solutions to every single project to have that conversation with the client with regards to refrigerants, installation, water savings and rooftop solar to talk about how those four things when they're applying to a building, they impact carbon, they impact building operation and then they further impact people inside the building and how comfortable they are in their performance levels as well. And that alone is a huge shift because people are excited about it. They want to talk about it. They even say, Oh my gosh, we're so glad that you brought that up. Right. So they're just more where everyone's just more aware of what's going on and I think it's gonna make our job a little bit easier. Right. Day to day because people are grasping the concepts.

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

Sure. It sounds like this is kind of part of your DNA. I mean it's even, okay. Set LEED aside, set some of the rating systems aside. It's like Hey, and that is a great program, great book and the top 100 ways there like Drawdown. So it just sounds like it was part of your DNA. It's not like that's extra. It's like,

Hey, if you're going to work with us, this is how we do it and thanks for bringing this up. Is that true? It seems like it's part of the DNA there.

Susan ([19:57](#)):

It is. And you know that that Drawdown commitment came from the CEO, which is huge. Right. Anything coming from the CEO with regards to a huge program like that is super important. We've developed training for the entire company with regards to what does that mean, how to talk to clients about it, how that affects operations day to day and then finally, how that's getting incorporated into the field is really getting embraced by all of our locations throughout the company. We've just hired somebody in our Indiana office to be a full time high performance person and we have a full time high-performance person in the Ohio office as well. So just that alone, having those full time people there and it like, like showing, like it shows that commitment to what we're trying to achieve and how we're trying improve building performance.

Charlie ([20:48](#)):

That's great. Thank you. Alright, let's go more about you and some rapid fire questions. Susan, what do you think you're best at? What's your specialty or gift?

Susan ([20:57](#)):

I think my gift is communication. I don't know if you would say gift, but communication. I work really, really hard on educating myself and finding different ways to talk to different types of audiences. You know, once you kind of figure out what is important to the person that you're talking to and you can take a message that you're wanting to get across and show them where they could see value in it, that opens up so many doors. I feel like in the green building industry and our little tribe, we can get pretty complex with vocabulary and we can nerd out a little bit and so with that, but it's hard, you know, sometimes it's hard to kind of take that and you need to translate it to different audiences that you know, might not be too privy to kind of the green building ways of life. So taking those complex ideas, I'm really good at translating and simplifying them to, you know, another person that relate and see value in them.

Charlie ([21:58](#)):

I think that definitely is a specialty of yours and that's pretty fun. Thank you. As we're learning a little more about you and your successful Greenbuild and career here. Are there any pro tips, any good habits that you have that you could share?

Susan ([22:13](#)):

So one of my things is I think you never stop learning. There's never an end, right? You know, we have, we have goals that we set but we could achieve those rules. But then you just set new goals, right? So I love learning. I love reading. It's to the point where my husband says I get obsessed with whatever topic is at hand that I'm into at that moment. I just want to be a mini expert in everything. So with that thirst of knowledge, I think it served me really well in my career because I'm just, I'm never done learning. And then you know, also just to be present and in the moment with whatever you were doing has also served me well. Just being present at work, being present for my kids, with my family, whatever it is. Just kind of like take a moment to kind of celebrate where you are and recognize where you are is super important.

Charlie ([23:04](#)):

Absolutely. I mean where are you in it? Where are your feet on the ground? Make sure your Headspace is there. Excuse me, and be present. I love it. Well, Susan, tell us a little bit about maybe if you had a bucket list, what are one or two things you'd put on your bucket list?

Susan ([23:18](#)):

Sure. So you know, I'm not one to actually do a bucket list. I don't know if I just maybe don't think that far in the future or something. But one thing I would love to do is a Ted Talk. Just like having that platform to share ideas is very inspiring to me with the amount of people you can reach your message with with that platform is even better. Right? I think the more we can share our passions with other people, we can really get others excited about what we're doing. I've never done a Ted talk, so looking at that as a possibility gets me very excited. But then I'm a mom, I've got triplets at home, they're in second grade, looking at them. Right? Like, I think once you become a parent you kind of shift a little bit looking at my kids and kind of seeing what is their world going to be like when they grow up? I just want to look back and see that I have made a difference for them and their lives and

I did my best in creating the healthiest buildings I could and just being the best advocate I can be for the earth. I think that they kind of carry me on just to kind of push myself to do better myself, to do more

Charlie ([24:40](#)):

Great perspective. I have three boys, they're 11, eight and six and I thought I have my hands full, but I think you win with triplets. That's amazing. So let's talk about books. I'm not sure if you like to listen to books or pick up a hard copy in your hands, but is there a book or two you'd recommend?

Susan ([24:57](#)):

So definitely an audible learner, but then I also loved to read because I liked to put notes in the books. I'm one of those. So first of all, Drawdown by Paul Hawkin, not a Sunday read, but really good information like I nerd out at the methodology and understanding the numbers and how they took all that data and broke it down. I just love that book. I always go back to that book because communication is so important, how you present information is so important. Slide:Ology and Resonate. They're both by Nancy Duarte. She is a great marketer and communicator and so these two books really tell you how to tell a story in a very compelling way and understand how your visuals don't tell your story for you but support your story and whatever you're presenting. Those two books are really how I use them all the time when I'm creating presentations on how to engage an audience,

Charlie ([26:00](#)):

I'm going to check them out and actually we'll put links to the books that Susan's recommended in the podcast show notes. Well as we started to come to a close, I've got two questions. One is anything you wish you'd known earlier in your career?

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

Oh yeah. So many things like, Oh, if I could go back. So one thing if I could tell my younger self to have patience. This career is not for the weak at heart. Like nothing worth doing is ever, and so with every challenge you gotta look at it as an opportunity. When you overcome any of those challenges, you just grow and you get better with each fun. Like I just, if I can do this once, I can do it again. That's literally my mantra of my career when it comes to kind of getting silent and kind of turned away even like it

doesn't, you know, the door is never shut. It just means you kind of have to pivot and find another way around it.

Charlie ([26:57](#)):

That's great advice. Just let's say you're having coffee with someone that's listened to this podcast and they're just now getting into this sustainability movement, this green building or even healthy building movement now. Any encouragement for them?

Susan ([27:12](#)):

Yeah, I think they've entered in at a wonderful time. I think the pioneers of the green building movement have really paved the way for us and they kind of did all the heavy lifting. I think there's a lot more lifting to do, but if you can get creative and if you can figure out how to market yourself and figure out what exactly about the green building movement you're passionate about, whether it's carbon or greenhouse gases or healthy materials or water feel. Yeah, you don't have to be an expert in all of the things green building. Just pick one or two and really dive in and be an expert in that topic.

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

That's great. Wow. Wow. Such Sage advice. You have a ton of energy and just want to say keep up the great work and thank you for being on the podcast. This has been great.

Susan ([28:02](#)):

Thank you so much for having me. I loved it.

Charlie ([28:06](#)):

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 6 ([28:32](#)):

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