

Sustainable Furnishings with Susan Inglis | Transcript

Introduction ([00:02](#)):

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

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

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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. I've got Susan Inglis, with us she's from the Chapel Hill, North Carolina area, and she's the Executive Director of the Sustainable Furnishings Council. Susan, I think you and I met last year up in Nashville at an interior design event and it's just so great to have you on the podcast. How are you doing?

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

Thank you so much. I am doing well and I'm just delighted to be with you again, Charlie. It was good to meet you last year and it's so important to be able to continue the conversation.

Charlie ([01:34](#)):

Well, you've got a lot of energy. You've got an amazing, Southern drawl and I just can't wait to have our chat today. I've got to ask, tell us a little more about where you grew up and where you went to school. I think you've been in that part of North Carolina for a while. So tell us about that.

Susan ([01:50](#)):

Right? I am from North Carolina. Yes. I grew up in the Eastern part of the state in a family that valued stewardship and I grew up out in the countryside. And so with an appreciation for the natural world, I also grew up knowing something about how things are made by hand because of our family's hobbies in making things by hand, ceramics and woodwork and weaving and things. I went to the University of North Carolina and studied anthropology and my children were my after college career and they are now young adults. One lives in Nashville. The other adult lives here in Chapel Hill and is a young mother herself now. So that's a great joy in my life. My work though, as they were growing up was with artisans around the world to get skills and products to new markets. And it is through that work that I got involved with the beginning of the sustainable furnishings council in 2006.

Charlie ([03:05](#)):

Amazing. Now I get it. That origin, using your hands, the craftsmanship, and not everyone listening because we have some international listeners Susan, tell us a little bit about North Carolina and furniture. It's really known for its furniture over the years. Right? Can you speak to that history?

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

Yes. North Carolina is a furniture producing state and a furniture selling state. Furniture production here started well over a hundred years ago, 150 years ago because there was such a natural resource here, we still have a lot of hardwood forest and the hardwoods are used in furniture making. So the manufacturing that still exists here is still tied to local natural resources and wood resources. The largest furniture market in the world is here in North Carolina, High Point Market. As many manufacturers moved off shore when North Carolina, when our country tightened our environmental protection laws a lot of businesses decided to do business elsewhere and pollute elsewhere, but enough manufacturing stayed. Manufacturing is still important to our state and it is good clean manufacturing that is done here. But like I said, marketing furniture is also important to our state's economy and the High Point Market sells furniture from all over the world.

Charlie ([04:45](#)):

That's amazing. Thank you for that history lesson there. Let's talk about sustainability. You mentioned you were resourceful growing up, maybe in a little more rural area, but really when did you want to do this next stage of your career? Something with sustainability, was there an aha moment? How'd you know?

Susan ([05:03](#)):

Well, there was an aha moment. In 2006, I was doing a lot of work in the furnishings industry with artisans in South America and from other places. I got wind of the fact that Jerry Cooklin was going to have a meeting in his showroom to talk about starting something that might be called Sustainable Furnishings Councils. So I showed up knowing that would be interesting to me and could be good for my little business. I learned in that meeting that the Residential Furnishings Industry is \$80 billion at retail. I thought, Oh, that's not so big. That's not unmanageable. It's smaller than construction. It's smaller than tourism. I thought this is an industry we can save, we can transform an industry of this size. And that was my ah, ha moment by thinking this is doable. What I have learned in the 14 years since then, is that the industry though, not so large as a whole, is unwieldy because it is made up of so many different parts. It's a very fragmented industry. There are lots of smaller and medium sized businesses. No one business has a large percentage of the market and it is an industry full of complex supply chains. It is not uncommon for the material to come from one continent to be processed on another, to be manufactured into something on another for use by consumers on yet another. So that is a lot of unwieldy moving parts to work with.

Charlie ([07:08](#)):

The supply chain. You're right. It's one thing for building product manufacturers, but here you have these finished goods. While we're talking about your industry, tell us a little more about where the sustainability push is coming from. Is it the consumer? Is it competitiveness? Is it companies in their own corporate sustainability mandate saying, Hey, we need to do it. So, where's the big push right now in furniture?

Susan ([07:33](#)):

It is coming from all of those places. I think the loudest and what matters most is that consumers do care about sustainability and or considering principles of sustainability when they make their purchases of furnishings and other things. I'll answer your question in a sort of different way as well, having said how unwieldy the industry is. Part of our success as an organization is that we do involve companies from all segments of the industry. And so we, as an organization, have a great opportunity to apply pressure within the industry and that is making a difference. We do see that making a difference. We also see that governments have a huge opportunity to make a difference and we're a relatively small organization, in a relatively small industry, but we partner with the American Sustainable Business Practice, the American Sustainable Business Council to lobby for best practices for sustainability and that includes procurement practices. So that is one of the things that we do work on. And so my answer to your question is all of those things are important and it's the combination that is creating the push.

Charlie ([09:03](#)):

Thanks Susan, it seems like all industries are seeing the sustainability movement pickup. Tell us more about the council, what are you about and how are you helping the industry?

Susan ([09:15](#)):

Yeah, happy to. So the council is, as I said, a membership organization, but we do not work only with members, members support us and we do give them all the support we can. Each of our 400 member companies has their own public and verifiable commitment to sustainability and to transparency and to continuous improvement and so we support them in realizing their commitment. We do that with providing them with a lot of resources and guidance and education and all of our education is available for all the industry and for consumers on our website, we have a quick buying guide and we have lots of resources with deeper information that consumers can enjoy using when they're making choices for their homes. We have a finder, I should mention this, please, Charlie, we have a finder on our website where consumers can actually look for something specific for dining room furniture or for interior design services or whatever they need at the moment.

Charlie ([10:25](#)):

We'll link to that in the podcast show notes for everyone. I know you put out great education. I think that's where we were speaking together at the interior designers last year. You've been in this career for a little bit, who's been a mentor? Who's had influence. Who would you really say you looked up to, or maybe someone opened the door for you along the way?

Susan ([10:45](#)):

Well, I will mention first Jerry Cooklin who founded Sustainable Furnishings Council and who is a very dynamic person and had started lots of conversations before he moved on to other areas of interest. So when I got involved, there was a conversation that had already started. I will also mention an organization in the furniture industry that is the best networking organization in the industry. It is called WithIt, which stands for women in the home industries today. And I really feel like WithIt introduced me to the whole industry and this started long before Sustainable Furnishings Council. When I was doing my work with artisans I could meet anybody in the industry, through colleagues at, WithIT So those women especially have all served as great mentors for me and did, especially at the beginning simply by giving me introductions to people I was interested in talking with.

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

Oh, I bet. I'm sure you've been a mentor to others along the way. It's so important. Susan, take us back. Look on the highlight reel. What are some of your proudest accomplishments?

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

Well, I'm proud that so many companies, hundreds of companies have gotten involved with us here at Sustainable Furnishings Council. I'm also proud of our ability to address specific bits of this large area of sustainability. Our wood furniture scorecard is a highlight. We have been very concerned about forest preservation and responsible wood sourcing since our beginning and three years ago in partnership with world wildlife fund and the national wildlife Federation, we began a wood furniture scorecard, scoring retailers on their woods sourcing policies and providing them with a lot of support and guidance in developing policies and making their policies more robust. Another area where I'm very proud of our work is in this area of

indoor air quality and avoidance of pollutants in our homes. So we have a data initiative that is to encourage transparency in supply chains and to stimulate innovation towards the elimination of those harmful chemicals that are actually commonly found in furnishings. None of which is going to make us keel over immediately, but all of which cause harm to our health and are known to accumulate in our bodies and stay in the environment a long time. So we're very proud to be working on that very complex issue,

Charlie ([14:05](#)):

So important, right? The healthy building, the healthy home movement, even before the pandemic. But especially now we're looking at everything so amazing scorecards and let's just help the audience here for a minute. Trust the labels, right? I think sometimes if we see this is organic or this is that maybe the lay consumer doesn't trust the labels, but it's a big part of what you do. Can you help build some confidence that there are certifications, third-party validations and labels that yes, trust the labels. Can you speak to that?

Susan ([14:37](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. And I do want to start by pointing out that the sustainable furnishings council is not a certifying body. We are a membership organization and our member's seal is trustworthy because we are counting on what is in the public domain and that transparency. So though we do not certify ourselves. We are proud to point to the certifications that are pertinent for our industry. And that includes forest stewardship, council certification for wood products and wood materials. So look for that FSC certification. It is a robust certification because it covers a triple bottom line of sustainability and it has very good checks and balances. So it is as corruption proof as anything can be in textiles. The GOTS, Global Organic Textile Standard is a very important one as are the OEKO-TEX certification. So that's what we recommend you look for in textiles. Cradle to cradle certification is important, not only for textiles, but for other materials, because it includes the entire life cycle of the product and for indoor air quality GreenGuard is the longest standing certification and remains a very robust one. So those are a few that our listeners can look for and yes, trust the certification when it is third party,

Charlie ([16:25](#)):

Right? Yeah. That's a good point. And LEED of course, validates a lot of those and really looked for those labels. Let's pretend you had a crystal ball. What's next? What should we be reading up on now in this sustainability movement, maybe even within your industry?

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

I think that circularity is gaining in importance and certainly in our own work it is coming to the fore. We see that in circularity many sustainability segments intersect. There is no way we are going to meet our targets in reducing CO2 emissions and less, we stop extracting so much and burning so many new fossil fuels. There is no way that we're going to reach our goals in waste production unless we start or accelerate using waste streams as feedstock. So, and there is no way we are going to successfully use waste as feedstock. And lastly we get some of these harmful chemicals out of our production processes because that does impeded recyclability, a perfectly recyclable polyester that could be made into more and more, more fabric. If it has, PFS chemicals added for stain resilience are not going to be recyclable. If you can hear that in circularity, lots of different things intersect. And I think that's where we're going to see ourselves paying a lot more attention,

Charlie ([18:10](#)):

A hundred percent agree. You're right. It's a good point there about what really started that first material before it can even be re-used, but just that circular economy is circularity. I love it. Well, let's talk a little more about you, Susan. What do you think is your specialty or gift? What are you really good at?

Susan ([18:28](#)):

Okay. I get excited about what about the ideas we're talking about? I get excited about talking with people, knowing that we can discuss ideas and in discussing them, implement more ideas that are going to make a difference in sustaining a healthy future in creating new ways for future generations to enjoy the prosperity we enjoy now, which is actually our prosperity is actually very threatened. Not only by the extraordinary events of this year, the coronavirus pandemic, the hurricanes, the extraordinary numbers of hurricanes. We're talking to you, Charlie, from an area Atlanta that's been hit

pretty hard, that's expensive. It threatens businesses, it threatens economies. These threats can be mitigated and they can be mitigated with implementation of best practices that we know well, but we all have to be brave enough to actually take the steps, to do things and talking with each other discussing is a very important way of learning better, how to.

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

You're an excellent storyteller and speaker. I love the energy you've got. Do you have any good habits, any best practices? Any rituals?

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

For me personally, starting the day with quiet is a very important practice. And for me it really is. It improves the quality of every single day for me, just to start quietly by myself, I do a little bit of yoga stretching. I stare out the window at how beautiful the day is today. See what I see and that quiet does ground me and center me and always something occurs to me during that quiet period, which I really, really appreciate and try to take into the day with me

Charlie ([20:41](#)):

Quiet in a very loud world we have, especially right now. I'm a fan of a bucket list. I'm curious, what are one or two things maybe on your bucket list?

Susan ([20:52](#)):

Okay. I am privileged to have visited many, many places in the world and especially in this new era of less travel, if I do not have many new places to visit on my bucket list, but I do have on my list wanting to further process what I have seen so far in the places where I have been. My mother used to say a trip really happens three times when you take a trip to a new place first in planning, it's a good experience. Second in taking the trip and being there. And third in thinking about it and talking about it afterwards. Well, I have been so busy in recent decades that there is a lot of thinking about it and talking about it yet to do so. That is on my bucket list.

Charlie ([21:54](#)):

That's amazing. I love how you spell that out. That's a great anecdote there and yeah. Look back, give yourself permission to look back on that. The highlights, I love it. Couple more questions here. Let's talk about books. Is there a book or two you'd recommend it doesn't even have to be industry specific

Susan ([22:11](#)):

Hope Jahren, has written a wonderful couple of books. Her first book was Lab Girl. Her more recent book is I think called the Story of More. It is so important for the easy way in which it explains how our being a consumer based society and a consumer based global economy has led to the climate crisis. One of the things she talks about is thinking about it. How far back in your heritage do you have to go until you meet somebody in your aunt, among your ancestors who actually lived off the land was a farmer or otherwise had direct contact with the land. And I think that's a very provocative question because that person back there was feeding himself and his family. And now we are dependent upon a global and very carbon intensive system to feed our families. So, yeah, Hope Jared's is what I recommend. First and foremost, there is another book I want to mention because it is such a good story is Over Story and it is about trees. And far as we learned, it's an exciting, lovely read. And we learned so much about trees and how the role they play in each of our locally ecosystems, as well as global

Charlie ([24:03](#)):

Fantastic book recommendations. And I'll put the links in the show notes. Thank you for that. Two final questions. One is, is there anything you wish you had known a little earlier in your career?

Susan ([24:15](#)):

Well probably the most important thing is I wish I'd known that you really should ask for the compensation. That it matches what you're providing that for me. I have been so interested that didn't occur to me right off the bat. I know it does to many people, mostly though my answer to your question, Charlie, is that life and my career have been all the more interesting for simply following the way it opens. Following what presents itself, being interested in what's in front of me. I don't quite know what's going to happen

next. That really is. So I can't say even financially, I don't live with any wish for something else, but I do appreciate that we can, we can live with the mystery.

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

Absolutely. Wow. That's really good. And you're right. You need to know what you're bringing to the organization and definitely be willing to pay for performance and put on yourself. Let's say there's someone listening right now and they're thinking of getting into this green building movement, I'll take the question more specifically. Even the green furniture, building on interior design, what would you say to them? Do you have any encouragement for them right now?

Susan ([25:53](#)):

I say a couple of things about the furniture industry and the sustainability movement. Now this is our moment and of course it's broader than just our industry, but this is our moment. This is the time when our country and the world are in a place where we need to figure out how we're going to rebuild. We have not yet, in my opinion, probably gotten to the depths of the coronavirus recession. We do know something about rebuilding already. We do know that green building back greener is building back better. There is lots of evidence of that and specifically in the furniture industry, our being at home now, I'm talking to you from my home where most of us are working out of our homes. These days, we're privileged to be able to do that where it's a privilege to have a home in which we can have a desk, but that does mean that many people have needed new furniture.

Susan ([27:05](#)):

They needed a new desk when their office moved home. I think we're going to see our homes serving that multi-purpose going forward. So this is an excellent moment to bring a conscientiousness about sustainability to the furniture industry, which is doing alright since we're buying furniture. These days, those of us who have homes and those of us who have jobs, which again, this might shrink, we might see fewer and fewer of us with homes, with jobs, but as the economy recovers and more people again have homes and jobs and are paying for furniture, they're going to want that furniture to be eco-friendly. There is that awareness of our interconnectedness now.

Charlie ([27:50](#)):

Oh, absolutely, this too shall pass, but those are some realities we still need to face as we get into 2021. It's challenging times, but it's created a lot of opportunities if you'll just look at what did all those things, so a wonderful conversation today. I just want to say thank you, Susan, just to everyone be sure to connect with Susan on LinkedIn. Make sure you check out some of the resources on their website and some of the scorecard, just the other tools that they've developed. But this has been Susan Inglis, Executive Director of the Sustainable Furnishings Council coming to us from Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Thank you, Susan.

Susan ([28:31](#)):

Thank you so much, Charlie. It's been great to talk with you. Thank you.

Charlie ([28:38](#)):

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 were 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 ([29:04](#)):

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