

AIA 2030 Commitment with OPN Architects' Tate Walker | 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 ([01:00](#)):

Hi everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the green building matters podcast. I'm your host, Charlie Cichetti. We've got another green building professional with us this week. We've got Tate Walker and Tate's actually in the St. Paul area there in the Twin Cities. He's an architect with OPN Architects and he's also AIA 2030 commitment Co-chair. How are you doing today? I can't wait to learn more about your background, your story. I know you do a lot, not just with green buildings and LEED, but some of these other commitments we're going to cover a lot today, so take us back. Where'd you grow up and where'd you go to school?

Tate ([01:35](#)):

I grew up in California in East Bay, like Oakland and Orinda, and I went to school at University of Washington out there in Seattle.

Charlie ([01:44](#)):

Okay. All right. So you're probably unhappy with the Raiders moving and all that stuff. So did you know you wanted to be an architect? Tell us about that

decision making process, choosing a college, choosing a degree. You've got a degree in architecture, tell us about that.

Tate ([02:03](#)):

So my dad's an architect and I used to love going into the city with him and being part of that environment and then just drawing all day long. So I mean, early positive reinforcement and I just really enjoyed it so much.

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

That's amazing. You went to school just outside in Seattle. Tell us about sustainability. Like at what point either in education or career "I really liked the green. I really liked sustainability?"

Tate ([02:32](#)):

I don't know. I'd probably sell into it. Growing up in the Bay area you're in the foothills between the ocean and the mountains there. It's just such an amazing place and having somebody that's a teacher, like your dad kind of walk you through what's really important about buildings and how to make them like

Tate ([03:00](#)):

Other places. So we definitely did lots of pilgrimages when I was young and Robertson Jeffers, he's a poet from Carmel. I think that was my favorite building of all time. Like it's just like this little house perched on the cliffs, built out of stones that he pulled up from the beach and everything is super intimate. It's small, it's got the most amazing craftsmanship there's not anything that he didn't put together with his own two hands. It's just a place that you couldn't build that building anywhere else in the world and have it be so beautiful. So, doing that and then when I was in school, we had Glenn Murcutt come up from Australia and teach for a year and I was seduced. I mean, his work is his practice. Everything was so amazing to me. I had my father who was an architect, but I wanted to bring something to the practice that was unique and special.

Tate ([04:06](#)):

Having this emphasis on the environment, something I care deeply about was something I could bring to the table in that practice that was really key.

Plus, it was the nineties, man that whole movement was just kind of blowing up at that time. Like COTE, got started in 1990, Committee On The Environment for AIA. The COTE awards in 97 and USGBC was right in there around that time, too. It was a blue ocean, like we could get in and we could explore it, discover what was there and really bring something new to the conversation.

Charlie ([04:51](#)):

You're a great storyteller. It's very vivid and I love it. It's inspiring, I have to be really honest. I like how you've talked about those projects, some of that we can link to in the podcast show notes. It's fascinating, let's talk about mentors. You mentioned your dad. Tell us a little more about your dad and what kind of architecture did he do? Was it residential or commercial? Tell us about that early inspiration and then any other mentors.

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

Yeah, I've had a lot of mentors anywhere I've worked and just all over the country. I'm going to probably leave some folks out here, but yeah, I think my father was definitely right there in the beginning. He had owned his own office, small shop and he was also a daycare provider for a little while there. I mean, it was great because I learned everything about his sort of DIY attitude. He didn't have a lot of resources, but he went out and he got it done. He worked all over California. We did small residential, like remodels additions all the way up to some large commercial projects. We did rotaries and offices, everything in between. So he's a real generalist and it was just never the same day twice going in with him.

Charlie ([06:14](#)):

Yeah. Firsthand and then some other mentors though, along the way.

Tate ([06:18](#)):

Oh yeah, for sure. School was chocked-full of great professors there. I would say Rand Ekman was a big influencer for me, like early in my career happened to meet him when he was in town for a conference. And he really sort of changed my perspective of what architecture was and what we could do. I think a lot of people really get into sustainability. It's exciting and then they get it beat out of them pretty quickly in the real world. And that's tough.

To find mentors, to find people that inspire you, that kind of work is just really important.

Charlie ([07:03](#)):

Absolutely. Yeah. It's great to have those mentors, those that have influenced, those can open some doors or really, to me, encourage you. So let's connect the dots on that career timeline. So you get out of school, you're working for a design firm. You end up working with your dad, I think for a number of years and then it seemed like you also got active with some of the USGBC chapters. Tell us about just that early start to the career.

Tate ([07:25](#)):

Oh yeah. Right. Well, I got out of school, practiced up in Seattle for two, three years and again, it was a small shop, but we did everything and it was exciting because it was not just the same thing over and over again. I go back, I see those buildings still. And I think what I would've done differently now, but they're still there and that's pretty cool. And then I moved down to the Bay area, worked with my dad for many, many years and that was amazing. But then I moved to the Midwest, about 10 years in. Right about the time I got my architectural license and we moved for my wife, she went back to school and we moved to Madison, Wisconsin, and Madison is where all the troublemakers are from. So they have just like a long legacy of environmental design there.

Tate ([08:24](#)):

I was thinking, well, I go out there practice for a few years and then come back to the coast. It didn't happen that way. Surprisingly, I'm still out here in the Midwest, but I did learn quite a bit. Aldo Leopold was really an amazing influence out there with Sand County Almanac in his writing and his naturalist writing. Gaylor Nelson was a Senator from Wisconsin that helped kick off Earth Day in the seventies. So, they got this great legacy out there and I fit right in

Charlie ([09:05](#)):

Tell us about the Wisconsin Green Building Alliance, then you start getting on some tag groups with the US GBC, AIA. I can tell from looking at your resume you spent a lot of time with those green building alliances and

chapters, and then we'll talk about AIA. So just tell us, how'd you first get introduced to the US green building council and some of those initiatives in Wisconsin, and later in Minnesota,

Tate ([09:31](#)):

When you're the new kid on the block. You are looking for opportunities to kind of get out there and meet people and just understand what the culture and the climate is like. The Concept Green building alliance was there, they were reviewing stuff, foolishly, let me kind of run for the board. I spent many years working with them on conferences and on initiatives with the cities, with Madison and Milwaukee, Fox Valley near Appleton, and ended up working closely with like the regional group up there at the time when they had a regional caucus and ended up getting way beyond Wisconsin, getting into Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois, and really just got to practice across the Midwest. And that was instrumental and at the same time, I was also kind of working with the AIA and just like a local chapter leader and really trying to integrate these sustainability things into our practice.

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

I would say that was great too. I got so many resources to help with advocacy that way. Going out to grassroots meetings with senators, congressmen, and really kind of helping advance these issues that I think we're uncomfortable with as architects, at least most of us, we want to take a really objective approach. We don't want to be seen as pushing a client one way or the other, but these are really important concepts. I think just talking to people and finding out where their interests lie and then tailoring that conversation depending on whom you're talking with can really sort of help integrate some of these ideas because no one was coming to me with big budgets or high aspirations for sustainability in the Midwest and I got tired of waiting around. It's kind of like, okay, what can we do right now? What can we do today without having to ask for permission and that's kinda how I built my career.

Charlie ([11:57](#)):

Trailblazing. I love it, man. It's that advocacy I can tell you've been real active. Tell us a little more fast forward to today for a minute, if you would tell

us about your firm and an OPM, some of the work you do, and also tell us about what you're doing with the AIA 2030 challenge

Tate ([12:16](#)):

Right on, it's all a work in progress. I'll just give you a bit about LPN first. We're regional, we're a hundred people in four offices and I'm up here in St. Paul, but certainly Madison and Iowa as well and it's a generalist practice. So we do a bit of everything and it's just been amazing the past couple of years to see some of the work that's been coming out of our studios. We just finished a project with Renzo Piano building a workshop up in Des Moines. I've been doing a lot of work on libraries all over the place from Flint, Michigan to Madison, Wisconsin, but also I've been working a lot on fire stations as well.

Charlie ([13:04](#)):

Are those green buildings? Are they LEED projects? What is that in the SPECS or is it green best practices? Tell us about some of those projects.

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

Yeah. So the higher ed, the civic stuff is a little more explicitly green. They have minimum requirements and it's really kind of easier to integrate sustainability at a deep level. I'll give you an example. The COTE that I mentioned before, I've been involved with that for many, many years. When I was in one advisory group, we built this thing called the COTE toolkit and the COTE tool kit is there as kind of the operational guide or the path to achieve the COTE top 10, criteria. It is sort of like the manual you get for USGBC, it's how to do that and it was great. It was a lot of fun. We wrote that and it ended up getting picked up, put online, and then just took off from there.

Tate ([14:11](#)):

There was a resolution in 2018, I believe to take that and have it become the framework for design excellence. So it's no longer just a sustainability thing. It's like a framework for the entire Institute. And it has all these fundamental measures where there is a ton of overlap between rating systems. It's not a rating system per se, but, it's all about design and equitable communities, energy, water, wellbeing. It's pretty new, but it's incredibly up to date. I've

been across the country in the past couple of years, talking about it and getting people to dive in and apply it to their projects. So we've been super successful doing that, not only at the AIA, because now it's become part of their awards criteria, so that we're honoring our values. We're not just talking about pretty pictures, but, but thinking about both the form of the building and the function you have to have both, it has to be form and performance.

Tate ([15:25](#)):

So, that's been super exciting. It's been taken up into the awards, but then I've had a lot of luck with clients as well. We wound up writing sustainability guidelines for the state of Wisconsin that came out in August. Every project in the state that gets money from the state to get built has to meet these minimum standards and they're based on the criteria for design excellence. What that does is it sets up the vision for the state, but then the state sets the minimum requirements, the thresholds that are unique to that culture, that climate and the types of projects that they do. So that was super fun. I'm excited to see those rolled out and it's sort of getting taken up at the University of Wisconsin and the city of Madison where we just completed that fire station and like 2018, 2019 we're really kind of the years of the rating system. There are just so many out there, and there're so many good things that you can pick up. WELL is huge in the market right now. They're focused on human health in buildings. But what we did is we took those concepts and we looked at them through the lens of what health hazards firefighters are currently facing. So PTSD, it's a high stress job from answering emergency calls, shift, wake, sleep disorder, having to work 24 hour shifts and then certainly cancer from burning stuff in buildings and the need to decontaminate before they sort of returned to the station. Taking those concepts and then weaving them into the architecture. I think the approach that I like to take for any project. Sustainability provides the guidelines, but how do we tailor that to the unique circumstances that we're working on,

Charlie ([17:45](#)):

You do it the right way. With all the different advocacy. I'm curious if you consider yourself more of a lobbyist or a politician or an evangelist in some of this grassroots work that you've mentioned, but you're doing it, man. Well,

let's look back though. What are some of your proudest achievements? If you look back on the highlight reel, what stands out?

Tate ([18:09](#)):

That's so difficult. I think my whole career sort of, I looked forward to the potential of working for someone like Renzo Piano. Mr. Piano, to be able to do that on this project into Des Moines was transformational. It was so great. I learned so much as a part of that. To have the small buyer station, 20,000 square feet, now we had two architects on it for like six months. You try and compare those two projects together and they're just so different, it's like picking your favorite kid. It's just not a good idea. I'll just say my favorite project is my next, I love that process of discovery and that's what keeps me going.

Charlie ([19:06](#)):

I'll take it. Let's look to the future now. If you had a crystal ball, where is this green building movement shifting? What should we be reading up on now? You've mentioned some other programs, obviously the healthy building movement, but what else do you see that you're tracking right now?

Tate ([19:23](#)):

Yeah, I love that and a big part of what I try and think about is innovation, but running all these programs and processes of my firm and for 2030 and for USGBC, like we're tripping over ourselves, we're still not getting the basics, right. We're still not doing it consistently. What I think is we pick a subject and go deep on that. No one person can span the breadth of all these subject areas for sustainability. So I mean, figure out what you're passionate about. If it's energy, if it's materials, if it's resilience, these are all super important and the crossover is huge. I've been deep into energy for my entire career and we still are not building net zero buildings. The speed, the scale that we need to mitigate climate change just isn't there yet. So how can we mainstream that? We need someone like Ray Kroc, right? That sort of figured out for hamburgers, what we need to figure out for sustainability.

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

You're right because at the time we were recording this podcast, it's the Greenbuild Conference, middle of November. They're talking about LEED

zero and LEED positive. You hear Mahesh Ramanujam, the CEO of the US GBC and regenerative design and that's where we want to be. We will get there, but how do we speed this up and make it automatic, make it really consistent. Right. Those best practices are just a given. There's some other programs though that we work in besides LEED. Go, it's been around for 20 years now and hopefully a lot of our projects can use that framework, but you've got the AIA, commitment 2030, but what else, what other mechanisms or tools would you recommend projects consider? Give us a peak in, Tate. When you're working with a client and maybe they're like, take, what should we do? How do you answer that question? That's where you're probably like, okay, living, building and regenerative is now. I mean, how do you kind of walk a client through some options and some frameworks,

Tate ([21:55](#)):

I ask the questions, I ask a lot of questions. I ask really good questions. I think that's my superpower. You start out with what keeps you up at night. Certainly a good question. What's your biggest environmental footprint. I mean, if we're just talking about sustainability, I guarantee they know what their biggest environmental footprint is. And if we can solve for that, we can tell a story that's going to outstrip any other sort of accolades or awards, right. Because it's going to be meaningful for them. It's going to be tailored to their business and their perspective of what's important and reinforce the very nature of their projects. The sort of bones about questions are really useful for us to get to the bottom of that. Sometimes I get half an hour, sometimes I get a couple of days for a workshop and I think there's always something that you can do no matter what you get dealt. You just, you can't let lack of access stop you.

Charlie ([23:13](#)):

A great segue to my next question, which is, what are you best at? You've kind of mentioned asking great questions. Literally this year I've been studying, just asking better questions, peeling back the onion and thinking there's so many different parts of life and business. If you can have the right question or follow ups, it's just important. You're not being negative and you're not doubting them. You're just really trying to peel back and get to

the root cause. If you're saying that is one of your superpowers how can one practice this? How can you get really good at asking the questions?

Tate ([23:48](#)):

It's just kind of the way my brain works. If you're thinking about divergent or convergent thinking. Some of us are really strong at divergent thinking, which is casting a wide net and figuring out what's out there and then integrating it into a hole that is super tight. It is integrated design. The way our industry works is more convergent thinking. Hey what's wrong with that? Why is it not going to work? We need to get to an answer quickly. Not spending that time with an open mind. And that's how I approached my career and has worked for that. It's how I like to start a project. You need to give time and space to move laterally and how things fit together and that is what is missing.

Charlie ([23:52](#)):

Well, thanks for taking us there. Let's talk a little bit more about you. Do you have any good routines, rituals, good habits that help you stay successful?

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

Got a lot of bad ones. I drink a lot of coffee.

Charlie ([25:01](#)):

A good Habit or a bad habit we are not judging.

Tate ([25:04](#)):

I think it's good.

Charlie ([25:07](#)):

I mean, is that part of rituals like, Hey, in the morning I get this it's habitual, right?

Tate ([25:13](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. I like to get up early. I like to hand grind it. I like to do a pour-over

Charlie ([25:19](#)):

Now we're getting into it. That's a good habit. Seriously, You want some good coffee there. Okay. Anything else? Exercise, meditation, note taking any other hacks pro tips for it?

Tate ([25:32](#)):

Yes. If I could get like a second of free time I'm on my bike, I'm out the door and I look forward to riding my bike anytime I get the chance. I don't know this summer, I got out there and rode across Minnesota in 21 hours in a race. So yeah, the short part, the skinny part, not the long part. It's like 240 miles. It was a big deal. I discovered some things along the way, right. About training, you can't get up off the couch and do it just like you can't do sustainability off the bench either. It takes a long time to kind of figure these things out, work them into your sort of a way of practice and to be successful.

Tate ([26:30](#)):

I go out on rides all the time and I'm just getting dropped by guys that are faster than me. I thought better than me, but , when it comes to liking riding for that long, no problem. I think that's it, if you focus on the long game, instead of just getting this project done, getting those specs out the door, getting that. I think you'll forever be frustrated, but you need a vision. You need to focus on the long game and train hard to get there.

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

That's great, man. That's a lot, I can relate to that. So let's talk a little bit about bucket lists. Are there one or two things on your bucket list you could share?

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

Along those lines, I'd love to ride across the US. When I left California, I rode the coast from San Francisco to LA. When I moved out to the Midwest, I rode around the UPP, the upper peninsula in Michigan, Wisconsin, and then, yeah, just done stuff all over the country, but I've never strung it together. Maybe across the US maybe the great divide that would be a killer ride from Canada, Mexico, all off-road.

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

One of my business partners did part of that way. You start in Canada and come down and do a little bit in Colorado, too. I mean, the elements can get to you and a lot of it can be solo. Right. So a lot of it's mental if you're not with a small pack, so that's amazing. I love it. That's a hell of a bucket list.

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

Yeah. Well, we'll see. I don't know. Maybe I should just stick to visiting Japan or something that might be right.

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

Oh, I can't wait to see ya at the ride. Let's talk about learning. Do you like to pick up a book and hold your hands, maybe listen to audio books? How do you consume some of that?

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

So I don't know if you knew this, but like, I also have an English lit degree.

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

It's not in the LinkedIn bio, so you buried that.

Tate ([28:42](#)):

No, I don't tell many people that. It was funny my structure to the professor who was also like my counselor in architecture school was just like, Tate, you cannot add two numbers together, but I've noticed you're furrowing all your English courses. Maybe you want to double major. You should really check that out. Yeah. So I love to read, voracious consumers of all sorts of fiction, but right now I'm reading Drawdown. So that's super important from a broad technical perspective because let's face it.

Charlie ([29:23](#)):

Yeah. It's right there on my bookshelf. But yeah. Tell us more about that.

Tate ([29:30](#)):

Yeah. So it's, it's like a technical reference guide, right. It goes so deep on every one of these measures and you just don't realize how sort of levers you have at your disposal until you go through a book like that. The opportunities specifically where you live, I think are really cool. But then the

other one I'm reading right now is called tools for grassroots activists. And that's sort of the bookend, right? So you have Drawdown, which is the technical guide, but then the Tools for Grassroots Activists, which is more a behavioral side, how to move hearts and minds. I think the technical stuff is easy. It's the behavioral stuff. That's where I need the most work. Just figuring out what makes people tick, what are the barriers and how to remove them so we can achieve the deepest possible impact we can.

Charlie ([30:39](#)):

This is a powerful conversation. We'll link to those books in the podcast show notes. Tate as we started to come to a close two questions. One is there anything you wish you'd known earlier in your career?

Tate ([30:51](#)):

Oh, man. I don't know. I took a lot of risks. I actually left architecture for a number of years and worked for a nonprofit. I kept them wide lens about what was important for me and that was definitely different from the path that a lot of my colleagues took. It ended up. Okay, because I'm still challenged every day and I'm still, I'm happy with what I'm doing. I feel like don't let other people define what a career is, define it for yourself. I think that's key to long term happiness. I'm not sure if that's something I would have done differently. Didn't quite answer your question.

Charlie ([31:34](#)):

What I've learned from just in this conversation is you're on a mission that's not completed yet. And that's what I can kind of hear in your voice. It's like, okay, there's still some work to do, even you personally on this. I think that's a little what you're talking about there too. Just it's now the long haul, but, but yeah, I guess that wouldn't be the final question. Let's say there's someone listening right now and they're just now jumping in to the green building movement. What words of encouragement do you have for them?

Tate ([32:03](#)):

Yeah. Focus on your internal drive, ask yourself why you're doing this. And I think if you can answer those questions, you can make it past any barriers you find to like doing these things in the professional room. You'll find it's

kind of like the stream. You have to either go through the rocks or go around them and yeah, just leave you with that sort of mental image.

Charlie ([32:31](#)):

You started us with a couple of good stories, illustrating early inspirations to houses. You'll leave us with one. This has been a Tate Walker, just a lifelong architect in green building evangelist is the word I'll use today. But man, I've really enjoyed our chat and thanks for your time today.

Charlie ([32:52](#)):

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 to 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 ([33:18](#)):

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