

Blima Ehrentreu on Designing with Purpose: Creating Sustainable and Transformative Spaces | Transcript

Welcome to Green Building Matters, the original and most popular podcast focused on the green building movement. Your host is Charlie Cicchetti, one of the most credentialed experts in the green building industry and one of the few to be honored as a LEED Fellow. Each week, Charlie welcomes a green building professional from around the globe to share their war stories, career advice, and unique insight into how sustainability is shaping the built environment. So settle in, grab a fresh cup of coffee, and get ready to find out why. Green building. Green Building Matters.

00:33

Charlie

Hey everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. I'm your host, Charlie Cecchetti. Once a week I interview a green building professional somewhere in the world. And I've got Blima with us today, just excited to unpack her story and just really learn more about the designers group. We'll talk about sustainability, but we'll also talk about empowering women in this industry as well. How are you doing today?

00:55

Blima

Great. Thank you so much for having me.

00:57

Charlie

I know we've discussed a little bit between New York and Miami, up and down the east coast. Looking forward to seeing where else you have your projects. But for our listeners, if you would take us back, where did you grow up and end up going to school?

01:10

Blima

I grew up in Toronto, Canada, and that's where I began my career. When I

was growing up, my parents moved my family across the street from our tribes and folklore and began the process of rebuilding our house. So I was able to see the entire process that we launched, the transformation of our bungalow into an amazing two story column that is about 5,000 square feet. So being able to watch that process really inspired me to eventually pursue a career in interior design because I knew that I wanted to get involved in the construction industry. Absolutely being a creative person, design felt like the natural course of action to take. And it's been incredible, an incredible line so far.

02:09

Charlie

You saw that you were part of it, that early project. I love that. How long were you in Toronto and where have you kind of moved early in your career?

02:20

Blima

I went to school in Toronto and actually pursued a master's in interior architecture and design, while at the same time I started working at an architectural firm to understand the technical part of structures and how a building is built, as well as understanding the codes that go into it. And then another designer approached me about starting to work on a couple of projects together. It started as two women working together, really grew into something that I definitely never expected. And it's just been so amazing to see the trajectory of our firm, as well as the quality of the project we've been able to undertake. I moved to New York probably about nine years ago, opened an office in New York, and then moved to Miami as well and opened an office there. Right now we work on relocation, but we're doing projects throughout the US And Canada.

03:25

Charlie

And as I was reading up on your profile, it's do you do residential and commercial interior design work?

03:31

Blima

Our residential portfolio is multifamily buildings as well, garden style apartment living. But we don't work on a private fold. We'll work on communities and development.

03:47

Charlie

Okay, understood. And I know you've been awarded as some of the fastest growing. Sustainability is a big part of what I do in this podcast too. Can you talk about that journey? Maybe. Where did it first show up for you? And then in a minute we'll talk about the present day and how you're implementing that. But what does sustainability mean in your interior design career?

04:09

Blima

As a designer, I can directly see the impact of the environments around us. And what better way to understand the impact of what we do towards the environment than actually working on creating a better environment? As soon as I got into the industry and I started working on health care and senior living projects, being able to see how thoughtful design really improves well being made me realize that sustainability is not just about materials, but it's also about creating spaces that enhance lives while also minimizing the environmental impact. We always have to understand that our actions have an impact. And when it comes to sustainability, that's so important in our industry.

05:01

Charlie

Couldn't agree with you more. And then there's green buildings, sustainability, environment, and then there's healthy buildings and healthy homes too. We saw that before the pandemic hit and now it's like, wow, is this a healthy space or not? Do you ever pursue any certifications around,

like a healthy space, healthy building, or just have some best practices for healthy spaces?

05:20

Blima

All of our spaces that we design definitely implement sustainability as well as healthy protocols and principles. However, I have not pursued the certifications just because I have not had the time. I do want to. It's on my bucket list because I believe that even with the knowledge, it's so important to have those certifications. It's definitely on my to do list. Check back in 2026, I'll let you know how we're doing. But it's something that we discuss and we definitely are mindful of sustainability, like I said not just in the materials that we're using, but also in how they get produced. Being mindful of the carbon imprint, as well as making sure to use recycled materials whenever we can work on using existing materials and incorporating them in a way that elevates the property. We'll do that as well.

06:22

Charlie

No, it makes sense. A little more. Look back. Did you have any mentors along the way?

06:28

Blima

I definitely would credit the largest influence on my career and my life on my parents. I grew up knowing that work here in this world makes a difference. And that is the motto of our design firm, which is designing with purpose, creating a better world. It was all about our actions that can make the world a better place. And even today, I definitely reach out to my father all the time with business questions. He's not a business advisor, but he's a very smart man that has a lot of experience in many different things. I know that if I ask him something and his answer is always the path that I want to follow.

07:15

Charlie

That's great to have on speed now. I love that. If you look back a little bit, what are some of your proudest accomplishments? What's on the highlight reel?

07:23

Blima

I'm incredibly proud of every project that we do. We approach every one of the spaces that we're working on with the desire to make it better for the people within the space, for the people using the space, and for our clients who are looking to make their environments better. But what I will say is something that I am even prouder of are the charitable initiatives that we have started and continued to run through the firm. Because like I just said, we're here to make the world a better place. And I know that with every project we're doing now, but as well with making the world better and using our firm as a platform to be able to do that has been incredibly rewarding. I feel really lucky to have those opportunities to be able to give back.

08:15

Charlie

It's fantastic. Let's go Present day Now tell us a little bit more about your firm, your team, and then a day in the life of you, what keeps you busy.

08:25

Blima

We're always looking at the latest trends, the latest technology, and how we can leverage that to ensure that our work is at the highest level possible. We just introduced the TDG smart building concept, where we integrate technology to create spaces that enhance well being, improve energy efficiency, and promote sustainability long after we're out of the project. And we're working on several projects now to bring this vision to life. And it's really exciting to see how technology can elevate design in meaningful ways. That's something that we're super excited about. We've also been leveraging technology in our design processes and having our clients and vendors and any consultants that we're working on be able to visualize

what our business has been. A game changer. We have the TDG tech hub where we are leveraging 3D software to create VR force as well as everything in 3D.

09:31

Blima

Not everyone on the project can be on the same page. And that has been really powerful to be able to communicate our vision and get our board with that.

09:44

Charlie

It's one thing if they say a picture is worth a thousand words, but like a walkthrough, a video, a simulation. It's even so much better now. Are there certain software tools you're using or you want to use? I'm trying to picture that? Does it ultimately one day go to virtual reality and your client can walk through the space before you've even built it out? I don't know. Where do you think that's going to go?

10:06

Blima

So there are several AI platforms that have different apps that can help us with our renderings and our software. Obviously, we work in AutoCAD, Revit, any of the mainstream crafting software. But as well, we have been experimenting with the different AI softwares out there to be able to generate anything quickly, anything from material board to creating deeps of a spade to material option taking a sketch and transforming it in parentery within a matter of a few minutes. However, all of those software that we use are not at the level that they need to be for it to completely transform the way we've been doing it in the past. But it has been really helpful and it has allowed us to produce even more 3D imagery and color palettes for everyone involved.

11:10

Blima

And it helps us a lot in the inspiration piece when we're developing concepts.

11:16

Charlie

It's exciting, no? It's such an important part of the future AI tools, but you're right, maybe they need to be baked a little bit more. What are some of your favorite projects to work on today? I know you said you love all of them, but is there a certain type of project that just, I don't know, you just get really excited about?

11:33

Blima

There are two types of projects that excite me. Number one is one we are retaining for a new timeframe project. Something that's different, something that's interesting and innovative, where our clients are thinking outside of the box. Because we love to be challenged. And we are here to come up with solutions that are innovative and change the way people have been looking at design. That's one reason that we're in so many different industries. When I started getting into more of the commercial sector, I was sworn with the idea of just sticking with multi factories because that was what I started with. But then I realized that I could bring in different philosophies and approaches from a multifamily space into an office project as well as in a healthcare project. We can bring in all of our family vibe, which we have done.

12:34

Blima

And it's been so transformative for the patients of resident experience where they're able to feel like they're in a hotel or a resort rather than in a nursing home. So we have the front dog, we have the reception area. Let's make it feel more like a hospitality experience. And for our clients, it's patients. For residents of patients, the level of care and how innovative their companies are. So that's one type of project that gets me very excited and another is a project with impact. We're working on a lot of community

centers. We've been working on daycares in poor communities that don't have access to services that most other communities do have. We are working on a special needs center in which there is an emerging care component as well as dental and an assisted unit and a daycare and day ad. And just being involved in these segment projects that really make a difference and that we can directly see the impact that has been very gratifying. I say with all our senior living projects, these communities being able to come in and see seniors' lives transformed or people's lives being rehabilitated in a positive happy environment that encourages us to do better is so important. And it's something that I really feel very grateful to be a part of. And it's a project that I can do.

14:10

Charlie

Tell you lit up there and you're right, that impact, that community impact. I've made a career around LEED and even the new version of LEED's going to focus more on quality of life, community and impact, not just the impact on the environment. It's exciting to see you're already doing a lot of that work. Let's talk about the future. Where do you think interior design is shifting? Let's start there. What's next for interior designers?

14:34

Blima

With the advent of AI and everyone being able to see how quickly things are changing, it's impossible to predict where the future will go. But like you just said with LEED changing their protocols in a sense, or just expanding that and for more wellness, more health and the environment, when it comes to impact is really where I see design going. There are so many wellness retreats now and a focus on health and balancing and there is just so much opportunity there. Good. And we definitely want to be a part of that. We've been working on a Ketamine center, for example. In the health and wellness space, the sky is the limit. And I know because of our experience both in healthcare and rehabilitative communities, there is so much opportunity. We want to stay in front of it and be a part of that.

15:36

Charlie

That's exciting. And it sounds like you're growing the team and your reach. Are your projects all over the country, up and down the East coast, like what geographies do you focus in? New York, Miami?

15:48

Blima

I would say that our main projects and our largest project right now are. Our locations are, but we are, like I said, working throughout the US and Canada and we've explored the west coast, opening another location there. And we're always. Our eyes are always open, our ears are always open, but it really depends. We get retained to work. And that's been our trajectory so far. Starting in Toronto, where I grew up. Then we had clients who were developing in the States, came here and opened an office. And then a lot of our clients were expanding into the Florida market, which has seen incredible growth recently, especially for Covid. That's really Bernard's trajectory so far. We're always here to add value, create really amazing experiences for people within spaces. Wherever the optics stop, we're here for it.

16:52

Charlie

Amazing. Well, congratulations on the success, the growth, and just that continued energy. I love entrepreneurship and in the AEC space. Let's get to know you a little more. Kind of a rapid fire part of our interview. This is great. What would you say is your specialty or gift?

17:07

Blima

Someone once told me that designers have to be therapists and content and it's not just a career in design. And I always found that interesting because I realized that to be a good designer, you have to understand what your clients want. And sometimes they're not even able to communicate

that. What I found is that I am able to understand that. And I love getting to know people, understanding them and looking at a space and being able to envision how it can support the people that need to be using it and utilizing it. That's something that I definitely feel lucky that I'm able to grasp. And as well, I am just so grateful to be surrounded by an incredible team and have them help me with everything that I do and support me and our work.

18:12

Charlie

Good for you. All of those, I love. As you think about your day to day, your week to week, do you have any really good habits, routines, rituals that help you stay on point?

18:22

Blima

I plan to start every day with purpose, like either setting some goals for that day or making sure to be active. I want to keep things positive. And really I find that those two things, like either being active or setting intentions, are what make my day that much more amazing. If I wake up in the morning and I rush down without spending a few minutes really reflecting on what I'm doing and how to make the work that we do and my personal work better than my days, just not the same. And when I'm in Florida, I love to swim, I bike. I actually just did a week trip in Africa where we did. I shouldn't say we. I went for a 100 mile bike ride but I had not trained and I hadn't been on a bike in almost a year, so I couldn't do the full 100 miles. But just being around nature and as well as being active and I work with an incredible group of people, that was really inspiring. I think that just surrounding yourself with positivity and people who are trying to make a difference and do good is something that keeps me going. And I know that anytime that I help someone out or feel like I'm making a difference, that just makes my day back.

19:48

Charlie

That sounds like an amazing trip. Great people. That's a good segue to the

bucket list. Not everybody has a bucket list, but you know, maybe what are one or two things you put on your bucket list? Maybe adventure, travel, write a book. I don't know what's on the bucket list.

20:02

Blima

I love to travel. I find that I always get inspired when I travel. Seeing the way different cultures live, different climates, different religions. I always find that there's something that I learn from everyone. I definitely want to make sure to get a few new countries on my traveling list this year. I am not going to be writing a book this year just yet. I have to put a few more things on my bucket list that I can accomplish before I can do that. But first I want to expand our charitable initiatives and I want to spend the work that we're doing to more countries. Really that's what I would say is on my bucket list. Just more countries, traveling to them, making an impact there, getting to know people from there. I love it.

20:52

Charlie

That's a fantastic start to the bucket list. And they say everybody has a book in them, so maybe later. I've not written one yet either.

20:59

Blima

A couple of people reach out to me that they're book writers and if I want to gap me on a gut selling list. But I just don't think that I have enough to offer yet. And that would take all those chapters. I want to feel like I've accomplished more at that point.

21:15

Charlie

A few more chapters, then you'll be ready. I love it. I like to ask my podcast guests, is there a book you'd recommend? It doesn't have to be about buildings or spaces. It could be about anything. Or it could be a

documentary or a podcast. Just something that's inspiring to you and you wanted to share.

21:31

Blima

Speaking of books and the reason why I don't feel ready to write mine, it's because I was just reading a family book about my great grandfather, and I was in England at the beginning of the month, at the beginning of last month, at the beginning of February, I went to visit my grandmother, and I went to the cemetery of my great grandmother, who I was named after. And just reading about her and just getting to know what an incredible person that she was. And I have her namesake, and she was all about helping people. And literally on her tombstone it said how she didn't sleep at night because she was trying to help people who didn't have clothes. She would buy clothes for them and help them, and her whole life was about helping others and doing God's work.

22:23

Blima

And I just felt so inspired by that. And I think that's a lab spread. And I said, and it's so important for people to really learn more about their families and who they came from, because there's so much good in all of us, and we get that from our ancestors. So we're better to learn about how amazing we are and that from the people whose DNA we carry. That's been something that I'd been into recently. I mean, it's just been up, but I'm really learning more about my family and where I've come from and who they are and the different accomplishments that they have, even though they're really different from the life I lead. Because they lived in Europe, this was 100 years ago, and my big family passed away probably about 50 or 70 years ago. Definitely a different lifetime.

23:14

Blima

But just understanding who they were and knowing what they've done is

something that has been transformative for me and how I can continue to become a better person.

23:25

Charlie

Wow, that's clearly inspired you. Is that book available? Can I put a link to it? Is it some others could get access to or it's just an internal family.

23:34

Blima

Documentary wheelie on people's lives. I mean there's so many of them. But what I found that really spoke to me is that this is my DNA, this was my family. These were people that I should continue to carry on the amazing things that they're. That they are done.

23:55

Charlie

Absolutely. Well you've inspired us to focus on more of those types of books too. As we start to wind down here. Just two more things as you look back on, is there anything you wish you'd have learned earlier?

24:07

Blima

I'm not the type of person that goes back and has regrets. I try to take every moment and make the best of it and sometimes we fail at that and not the right thing. But it's really all about learning from our mistakes and taking those lessons into the future. Just a quick example of that. My first home that I ever designed when I was working on the living room. It was really exciting and the first project and a day came, they were delivering the sofa. We measured everything worked perfectly. But they could gnaw the active sofa through the front door. We had completely forgotten to think of those assets. So obviously we took care of the restocking fee. We ordered a new sofa that was able to be broken down. He says, but that lesson has stabilized me forever now.

24:55

Blima

We were working on an 18,000 square foot event space which was in the south dollar of the building. And we have these 18ft high partitions. And I remember saying how are we getting these partitions into the building? Because the elevator cannot accommodate it. It's just about making those mistakes but learning from that. Never be afraid to take risks. Anytime I went out of my comfort zone, it was challenged. I always saw the biggest rewards. It's just about continuing on that path and never giving up because there's always that cycle. They go up and down and just remember to think of the good times and how good things can be when they are good to just work towards that.

25:40

Charlie

What a great simple lesson learned. That stuck with you probably on every single project. I'm sure you teach your team that too. And it's just something we have to reflect on and I love that. Thank you for sharing that wisdom. Last question. I really enjoyed getting to know you more here. You know, as you kind of maybe were to give a piece of advice to someone that's just jumping into this movement. Maybe it's interior design, maybe it's green buildings. If someone's just jumping in now, do you have any words of encouragement for them as we come to a close?

26:10

Blima

So kind of similar to what I just said, there will be mistakes. Do not let that discourage you. Never be afraid to ask questions. That is the way to learn and find a mentor or someone who you can lean on when you have questions or when you're unsure about something. I know. I mean this last night I was on the phone with two designers who are looking at getting into commercial design. Right now they're working on residential and they needed help with pricing and how to figure out seat structure. I'm always happy to mentor anyone who has questions or needs anything. I know that

my work is the only one I've gone to so people I give it over to. So you know I love to do that. I know that our team, although we have the TV Insider, if people are looking to get into a career in design, they're unsure of what it entails. They can come to our office for a day in our Brooklyn office and there's a structure there. They could learn the different aspects that we work on, see if it's a good fit for that, and also be mentored by one of our experiences.

27:17

Charlie

Great opportunity here to reach out to everybody. Maybe connect with me on LinkedIn and we're going to make sure we put some links to the show notes. We'll link over to your LinkedIn, to your website and don't be a stranger. I kind of heard that too. There's an instant community here, right? People that really want to maybe encourage you or have you thought of this? I really enjoyed getting to know you on the podcast today. I know we talked about your career here, some shifts in interior design architecture. It includes technology and AI and definitely sustainability and healthy space along the way. So thanks for being on the podcast today. This is great.

27:52

Blima

Thank you. Let's get started.

27:55

Charlie

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