Designing Schools That Heal, Inspire, and Perform Better: Human-Centered Sustainable Design with Bob Morris | Transcript

00:02
Speaker 1
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 lead 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 matters.

00:34
Speaker 2
Hey, everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. Again, I got the easy job. Been doing this a long time. I get to interview some great people around the world, especially those focused on green buildings. Maybe we call it sustainability decarbonization. Maybe it's resiliency. You know what, there's a lot of overlap. Today we're going to talk to Bob. He's up in Milwaukee. He was highly recommended from one of our former podcast guests, Teresa. So, Bob, how you doing today? Welcome to the podcast.

01:02
Speaker 3
I'm doing great, Charlie. Thanks so much for having me. I appreciate it.

01:04
Speaker 2
Yeah, this is going to be great. I've been checking out your background. I'm in Atlanta, Georgia. I know you're up north there, so. So, yeah, just tell us a little bit about that origin story. Where'd you grow up and go to school?

01:15
Speaker 3
Yeah, well, I can go pretty deep there, so at some point, you might have to cut me off.

01:22
Speaker 2
Let's go for it.

01:24
Speaker 3
Yeah. I grew up in rural Illinois. Cornfield town in Delavan, Illinois. I am the son of the town doctor, and he had eight boys. And at some point took us all the way to Africa to be a missionary doctor in Africa. And then when we came back to the United States, he kind of built his own doctor's office in our backyard. And that's probably where my interest in construction and design really came from, is watching him build his doctor's office in her backyard.

01:55
Speaker 2
Well, that's the first. I've interviewed about 500 people. That's the first. I love it. So. I love where this is going. So, okay, so grew up rural, spent time in Africa. How long. How long were you there as a family?

02:07
Speaker 3
We were there for four years. I was pretty young then. Four years old. Eight years old when were there. But, yeah, it was a life changing experience for sure.

02:15
Speaker 2
It's still.

02:16
Speaker 3
Still very formative in. In who I am as an individual.

02:20
Speaker 2
Okay. And then come back, finish going up there and see some construction literally in the backyard. And, you know, Obviously you became an architect. So what was it?

02:30
Speaker 3
Yeah.

02:31
Speaker 2
Yeah. How did that come up? How'd you know? I think I want to do that.

02:34
Speaker 3
Yeah. I'm not one of those people who always knew. I started at community college in East Peoria, Illinois and they have an excellent pre architecture program at Illinois Central College. So shout outs to them. And it was really the instructors I had in that pre architecture program, like I got started with a couple classes and it was those classes that immediately hooked me. And then once I took a few of those pre architecture classes at icc, I knew that's what I wanted to do. Transferred into University of Illinois in Champaign, Urbana, and finished my architecture degree there and then actually worked for a few years in central Illinois for a firm in Bloomington. Met my wife down there who's from Wisconsin. And so when I decided to do grad school, we ended up at UW Milwaukee.

03:20
Speaker 3
Fell in love with the city, got a job with eua, which is the firm I work for now right out of grad school and have been in Milwaukee ever since.

03:28
Speaker 2
Okay, you connected the dots, got that master's in architecture, planted your roots there in Milwaukee. And yeah, so let's talk about a little bit of the past, then we'll talk about your firm. But yeah. Any other mentors along the way? Anybody that either challenged you or opened doors or maybe you just admired their work from afar?

03:48
Speaker 3
Yeah, I mean, my dad is always going to be my first mentor and he passed away in 2017. And so his perspective on the world and the way that he was a jack of all trades, he did everything and he looked at everything sort of holistically. So that'd be my starting point professionally. My first mentor at eua, I think, was Eric Duvec, who was a designer planner in the school environment market before me and kind of trained me. And I think one of the things that really impacted me or influenced me about what I learned from him, just the idea that we. To be. To do great architecture, you don't have to be. You can let go of some

of the architectural pretense and just be real and just be open and honest with people.

04:36
Speaker 3
And great architecture really comes from just being curious, being inquisitive and asking great questions. And I think that's kind of who I am or what I at least try to be today is just to be someone who is authentic, honest and inquisitive. And we go from there.

04:53
Speaker 2
What great early mentors there. Okay, you connected the dots. Early career. As you look back, what are some of your proudest Achievements. What's on the highlight reel?

05:03
Speaker 3
Yeah, if I look at specific projects, the first one that comes to mind, Lake Mills Elementary School in Lake Mills, Wisconsin. First LEED version 4 Platinum School, I believe in the US which was really fun to be a part of. Actually worked with Teresa, who you mentioned earlier on that project from the construction side, so that was formative. Just finished a project also with Teresa as a construction partner in Menasha, Wisconsin, which will is projected to be the largest zero net energy school in Wisconsin. So those are a couple highlights. I think more than that, what I'm most proud of in my career, when I started in school design, which is what I primarily focus on, I would say schools hadn't changed much in a long time.

05:49
Speaker 3
And myself and some of my colleagues here at eua, I think have had the opportunity to see a real transformation in what the public's expectation and what a school is here in Wisconsin and sort of changing the perceptions of what a school can do, what a school can be, changing the focus from sort of lecture driven education to more authentic hands on learning and the environments that we need to make that happen.

06:13
Speaker 2
I love that. Yeah. And you took it so much further than green schools. Even just how you learn, we got to get hands on, you know, not just theory. Let's, let's get to work. That's awesome, man. Okay, so yeah, now let's transition to kind of

what you've been doing over these last almost 20 years, it looks like at this firm. So tell us some different roles you had and then tell us what's keeping you busy today.

06:36
Speaker 3
Yeah, I think like most architects, you kind of start from the bottom. Right. So as an architectural intern, I got involved right away in learning environments and I've kind of found a home and a niche there. So as I work my way up, I've done almost all the roles, I think in an architectural firm, from lead production role to design. And now my focus is really more on planning and design, but with a sort of emphasis on the early kind of big picture planning of how does a school function, how do we want it to work, what are the educational goals that school is attempting to accomplish and how do we ensure that those goals are realized in the final design, which is kind of my niche, I guess at this point. Got it.

07:25
Speaker 2
Okay. And you know, sustainability, green buildings, an uber lead platinum school there, sometimes it's just save energy, it's local mandates, it's renewals. But hey, how have you seen some of this green building movement evolve and then every project you look at, does your firm just try to bake in some green best practices? And then maybe we go for a certification, like, what's the issue?

07:50
Speaker 3
Yeah, yeah, I think kind of all of the above. And our firm encompasses a lot of different markets, so based on who our clients are and what our clients are attempting to accomplish can kind of change what our goals are for that specific project. So for myself personally, I would say when I began my career, I don't know that being green, quote, unquote, was the highest thing on my priority list. I don't think I had a lot of knowledge in that area at the beginning. And so I really have to credit my clients and my firm with sort of helping me to grow my understanding of what that really means.

08:30
Speaker 3
I think my initial passion as a designer was more around how do the built environment and the human element interact with each other, and how does the built environment affect who we are as humans? Now, I've always cared about the environment. I've always loved nature. My dad used to take the whole family of 10 out on road trips to see national parks every summer. And that sort

of love of nature and the bigger processes of the world have always been there. But it's as I've sort of grown as an architect that I've kind of realized that human side of how the building affects us as people, as living organisms, and the sustainability side really kind of come together and are really, in the end, kind of the same thing. I don't know if that answered the question or not.

09:19
Speaker 2
No, I did. I mean, yeah, it was good to get back to just your philosophy, you know, how. How you tackle these different projects.

09:24
Speaker 3
And so.

09:25
Speaker 2
So, yeah, maybe zoom out a little bit. Tell us more about the firm and. Yeah, Big Yar and what regions and what.

09:30
Speaker 3
Yeah.

09:31
Speaker 2
What kind of projects?

09:32
Speaker 3
For sure. Eway is a national firm now. We have five offices. The original or the first office was Milwaukee, Wisconsin, starting in. I want to say it was 1907, so over 100 years old. And we've branched out over time into Madison, Green Bay, Denver and Atlanta as well. And in our firm, we kind of COVID pretty much every sector of design, except for probably single family residences. But our firm is structured kind of in a studio format. And so for me specifically, I work with our learning environment studio focused specifically on K12. I think one of the things that has been really fun for us as I've grown up at EUA and I've watched us mature, is our firm kind of understanding the value of Sustainability and investing in that. And so for us, that means we've signed on to the AIA 2030 commitment.

10:33

Speaker 3
It means we've invested in personnel who have expertise to help us with that. We're committed to metrics to measure how our buildings are doing and work. Our firm has always been phenomenal about making sure we have the resources we need to be able to explore and dig deeper. And so it's really that commitment from a firm level, I think that has allowed us to take that a little further beyond just talk and try and be more real about what we're accomplishing through our sustainability goals.

11:05
Speaker 2
I really believe it. And you get that passion there for the schools too. So a good friend of mine, he. He runs a mastermind group for school superintendents and teachers. It's called Better Leaders, Better Schools. And he's been trying to influence more on the. On the overall just, hey, green school side of it too. So we've got green, we've got sustainability, we've got carbon. But then we got like healthy buildings too, right?

11:28
Speaker 3
Yeah, exactly.

11:29
Speaker 2
This pandemic's kind of pretty far in the rear view, I think. So I don't know. What are you seeing on the healthy building front?

11:36
Speaker 3
Yeah, I mean, there's a lot of aspects to that. One of the buzzwords we're hearing right now is biophilia. And I'll say that to me, biophilia is just understanding that nature matters and being connected to nature matters. And I think we as human beings have a sort of inherent, built in understanding of natural processes that evolve from us being living organisms that use natural processes to survive. Right. But as we think at schools, I think it's part of that healthy environment is really just allowing our kids to be exposed to the elements we all know they need anyway to be healthy. And part of that is sunshine. It's views, it's nature, it's cutting down on the number of VOCs in the air and all of those things, it's increasing.

12:28
Speaker 3
Covid taught us that filtration systems matter in our H Vac, So it's all of those

things. But what we're really trying to do, I think, is create the kind of environments that we want to live in as kids. When I look back to my growing up years on the edge of a cornfield in Delavan, Illinois, what I wanted to do was to go down to the creek and plan water and to explore nature and to experience the sunshine and the air and everything else. And I think that's what we want for our Kids, too. And so if we have buildings that enable them to be closer to all of that, I think that leads to healthier kids and it also leads to more inquisitive kids and kids who are more ready to learn.

13:10
Speaker 2
Yeah, I've got three teenage boys, Bob, so I'm right there with you. Okay. That's fantastic. So I know, looking at your resume, you've also done some instruction at some colleges there. And over the years, you know, when you do teach, I'm sure you do that some inside your firm, some you might speak at a conference. And this was at some colleges, like, what topics do you like to teach about?

13:33
Speaker 3
Yeah, for me, this sounds maybe a little silly, but I like to teach about what I know because then I'm not teaching. I'm just sharing how to do something with someone else. It's. Right. It becomes more authentic. I've never been good, honestly, at things like this, where I feel like I'm supposed to be someone. What I'm good at is talking about the things that I care about and the things that I know about. Right. And so most of my teaching experience has really been, okay, how do we leverage the tools to do a better job with what we're doing? From architecture, I taught a couple courses in actually utilizing revit and three dimensional modeling in construction. And when I teach at the firm, it's really teaching our younger staff, like, what are the right questions to ask?

14:18
Speaker 3
How do we make sure we're accomplishing goals and objectives? It's how to interact with our clients, how to dive deeper, and how to make sure that the work we're doing is impactful and meaningful.

14:29
Speaker 2
Love that. All right, man, I tell you, got good energy here. All right, let's talk about what's next. If we had a crystal ball, what's next in this? Sustainability, green building, carbon movement, what do you kind of get excited about?

14:42

Speaker 3
Yeah, that's a really good question. I wish I knew what was next. If I did know what was next, I would be a wealthy man. But that's. That's beside the point for me. When we think about green buildings, I think I have to come at it from my unique perspective in the mostly public school market. And in the public school market, it's a challenging time in some ways for grain building because of the politic. The politicization. I don't think I said that right. That word. Right. Because of the political. The political aspects involved with anything that has to do with green. And within Wisconsin especially, we're. We're a purple state. We're trying to be green in a purple state. So what does that mean in terms of how do we understand and talk about green?

15:26
Speaker 3
And so the unfortunate part of that is all the baggage that sometimes comes along with those terms. And so people feel at, or at least some people feel like there's an agenda when you talk about being green or being sustainable. And if we could get beyond that agenda and talk about what it means to be healthy, what it means to do the right thing for our kids, I think that's my hope. That's my hope for what the future is that we can move beyond some of the political elements of the discussion and move into a greater understanding of how do we do what is best for humans instead of worrying about what political party is scoring points and what we're doing.

16:07
Speaker 2
Yeah, no. Well said. And you know, I remind our listeners I spent a lot of time on lead projects, green building projects. You know, the federal government may ebb and flow with mandates, but there's still state and city mandates and you know what, corporate mandates. So at the end of the day, there's still a lot of people are saying, I don't know what's going on up there, but we're going to do this. And so just lean into the mandates. Sure. A lot of it's about energy efficiency. There's still some money out there for decarbonization, but, you know, that gets you halfway to lead or sometimes add on well or fit well or. Yeah, just do the right thing. So that's kind of my view there too. I'd agree with you. Hey, quick question.

16:49
Speaker 2
You spent months, maybe years, earning LEED certification, so why are you still hanging a generic plaque on the wall? With buildingplaques.com you can showcase what actually made your project achieve lead. Highlight your scorecard, your design strategy, your team, architects, engineers, contractors,

owners, all in one clean, modern display. Their plaques are fully customizable in minutes, built with durable architectural grade materials, and arrive ready to install. This isn't just a plaque. It's a storytelling tool for your building. If you're proud of the work, show the work, go to buildingplaques.com and design yours today. Any cool materials or technologies or anything you're kind of seeing. You want to put on some projects if you have a chance?

17:38
Speaker 3
Yeah. Well, I mean, the things we're seeing really take off right now are geothermal and photovoltaic. We've talked about those forever and I know those aren't new, but it seems like we've reached a tipping point where geothermal now just sort of makes sense financially. And so it's like one of those things where it isn't always so controversial anymore. It just sort of makes sense. And so that's allowing us to move beyond, and I mentioned before, the Menasha School, Maplewood Intermediate Middle School in Menasha that just got built, the photovoltaic array that went on there is large enough to make that a net zero energy school. And so again, some of that is because there was IRA funding available that helped offset that cost. Some of that funding is available still, some of that funding isn't.

18:26
Speaker 3
But the idea that a publicly funded school district can invest that kind of money because it reduces operational costs and it allows more investment to go towards kids, to me is kind of a tipping point or a change in how we view these technologies. And so that's really exciting.

18:46
Speaker 2
I love that, man. Well said. Well, let's get to know you a little bit more here. I like to ask my podcast guests kind of some rapid fire questions, get to know you more and what would you say Bob's your specialty or gift?

18:57
Speaker 3
Yeah, I don't know how well this translates or maybe it's a little niche, but I think what I'm good at is actually talking to teachers and staff about what they do on a day to day basis and making the translation for them into how the physical environment impacts that, what they're actually doing day to day. And so it's over time developing the language and the lexicon to be able to talk directly with teachers about what they do on a day to day basis and then being able to demonstrate how changing something that maybe they've never

considered changing before in their lives, like the configuration of a classroom, might actually impact the way that they relate to their students or the way that they teach.

19:43
Speaker 3
So if I had to say, I think that's what I'm hoping is my superpower is my ability to help people understand how they built environmental impact.

19:54
Speaker 2
That's an important one. You want to get their stakeholders, you want to get their, not just buy in, but their support along the way and then they'll be proud of it and retell that story that you taught them. So, so thanks for sharing that. Do you have any good habits or routines that help you stay on point?

20:11
Speaker 3
Yeah, I think the habit or the routine that I appreciate the most in my life, which is really, in the last few years I've been able to take some time on Fridays and every Friday my wife and I Get together, we try to get out into nature in some way and experience the great outdoors, do something active. And we have a lunch date every Friday. And that is the, honestly, the most grounding thing in the world for me is to be able to spend time with my best friend, to be able to download all the crap from the week and to know that I have someone there who supports me as we kind of refresh, recharge and move ahead for the week ahead.

20:51
Speaker 2
Man, that's fantastic. What a great, you know, life pro tip and slash, hack and just, I can tell you're really proud of keeping that consistent, man. Thank you. That's really. Thanks for sharing that. As we get to know each other more. I asked my podcast guests about a bucket list. You know, not everybody has a bucket list. Some do. Some it's travel or some it's adventure. Some it's. I want to write a book. No, no. What's on the bucket list?

21:18
Speaker 3
Yeah, travel is a big one for me and my wife. We were just talking, we just celebrated our 25 year wedding anniversary.

21:24

Speaker 2
Congrats. Nice.

21:25
Speaker 3
And we are for the first time going to see, going to a Caribbean island to celebrate that. And we're going to St. Martin's and were just saying, I think our bucket list should be that every winter we go to a different Caribbean island until we've visited them all. So that's a bucket list item. And there's a lot of other things of course I want to see as well, and architecture throughout the world that I have not got to visit and witness and experience firsthand. So all those things are on it. But because St. Martin's experience, that's the one that comes to mind.

21:58
Speaker 2
Oh, man. Have a blast. And I, I'm in Atlanta, so I'm a little closer to it. But yeah, man, the Caribbean is me and my wife and my boy is one of our favorite places. Well, it sounds like you want to do the islands. I do appreciate this. One of my career highlights, the country and the island of St Lucia and British West Indies. They had zero lead professionals and they got a grant from the UN and the SDGs and they brought me in when I was doing a lot of training and I had gbes.com our elearning company and we did in person trainings and then Prometric. Normally we go to a computer center. They didn't have one there. They flew in people with Scantrons. And I'm happy to report now there's 37 league professionals on that island.

22:42
Speaker 2
And it's a beautiful place if you get a chance to go. I learned the hard way, oh, it's the British West Indies. They drive on the other side of the road. And I wanted to.

22:50
Speaker 3
Yeah, right.

22:52
Speaker 2
And I'd highly recommend Belize, while not an island. Unbelievable place in your money. Yeah, absolutely, man. Have a blast.

22:59

Speaker 4
All right.

22:59
Speaker 2
There you go. There's bucket list, you know, like, go ahead, let's build on that.

23:03
Speaker 3
I was just going to say, I think some of those island nations and places like that, the environment is sudden becoming very real there. Right. And some of the things that maybe in Wisconsin still feel somewhat theoretical to some of the people around us, they're experiencing global warming and rising ocean levels and all that in a really firsthand level. And so maybe it hits a little different down there, you know.

23:28
Speaker 2
That's a great point. Yeah, we're. We're used to where we're at and sometimes it's easier or harder to do some of the sustainability work there. And they have real severe things. I think water is a good example. I think we take it for granted how easy it is to have fresh water here in the United States. So. Good, good points there. All right, so I like to ask my podcast guests, is there a book you'd recommend? It doesn't have to be about buildings. If not a book, it could be a podcast or documentary. Just something you like to share.

23:55
Speaker 3
Sure, yeah. I should have looked up the name so I remember to get it right. I think it's called the Hidden Life of Trees that I read recently. That that was phenomenal, really eye opening in terms of how our natural world works and the intelligence that works below the surface of the ground and in organisms that we. That I've taken for granted probably most of my life. So that was an eye opening one for me, really like that one. Also read through Aldo Leopold's Sand County Almanac recently, which was a great read as well. And just really fascinating to hear that perspective from 70 or so years ago and how that, how some of those things ring true today and what has changed since then.

24:42
Speaker 2
So two great recommendations. Yeah, I've got it here. I'll put links for our listeners in the podcast show notes. So thanks for those recommendations. You know, as we start to wind down here, just a couple more things. Why don't. As

you look back on your career, is there anything you wish you'd have learned earlier or any career advice you wish someone would have told you earlier?

25:02
Speaker 3
That's a really good question. I Don't know that I have anything super profound off the top of my head. Maybe what I would say is just sometimes it's okay to not know everything and it's okay to admit when you don't know. And I think maybe that's what I'd focus on. If I'm thinking about it right now, the things I've learned from my clients. When I say, hold up a minute, can you explain that? I know you think that I know that I really have no idea what you're talking about. So can you walk me through what you mean when you say that? And being. Being able to let go of needing to be intelligent and to be able to say, talk me through that is probably. I shouldn't say I've learned it. It's something I'm still continuing to try to learn every day. Right.

25:51
Speaker 3
But.

25:51
Speaker 2
Well, it didn't have to be profound, but it was. So thank you for that nugget. That's what the podcast is about is, you know, someone to hopefully relate to a little bit of what you've gone through, inspire them what's. What's possible. And if you had some lessons learned along the way. Let's share. And that gets us to our last question, actually, let's say there's someone listening right now. They want to get into architecture. Maybe they want to do something with sustainability. Any words of encouragement to someone that's just now jumping in?

26:19
Speaker 3
Yeah, I mean, it's a world that's changing really rapidly. And so we need people desperately, number one, who care and number two, who can move beyond the buzzword and into how do we implement and make it reality. So if you are someone who is really hands on and who really cares about the details of how something works, then I think this is an area that you can make a difference because. Well, I don't know. It still sometimes amazes me that the work we do, we draw things on paper and then someone builds them. And the ideas we had and that we illustrated on paper or on a computer in a 3D model become the built world that the next generation is stuck with. Right.

27:08
Speaker 3
So my kids will have to grow up with buildings that I envisioned in a computer model somewhere, and they're stuck with them. And so the ramifications for that are kind of awesome and kind of scary at the same time. And if that's attractive to you, people who take that responsibility seriously, I think are what the world needs.

27:31
Speaker 2
All right. Find that good balance between awesome and scary. I would agree, but it's amazing. Just construction and it all starts. I think people don't realize I spend a lot of time with our software company. How much is done during pre construction to how much locked in? Sure. Then let's build it and hope we got it right. So to our listeners, make sure you connect on LinkedIn with Bob. Check out what EUA is doing. If you're ever up that way in Milwaukee, you know, look them up. And Bob, just thanks for sharing your story on the podcast today. This was awesome. Thank you.

28:02
Speaker 3
Thank you Charlie. Appreciate what you do and your perspective.

28:06
Speaker 4
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