Crisis Is a Door: New LEED Fellow Boyka Ognyanova on Building a World-Class Green Building Career in a Smaller Market | 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. Green Building Matters.

00:33
Speaker 2
Hey, everybody. Welcome to the next episode of the Green Building Matters podcast. This gives me energy. Every week I get to interview a green building professional somewhere in the world. Sometimes we talk technology and materials, but of course, we got to zoom out and talk about green buildings. That's what I've got with us today. I've got Boyka with us. She's a freshly minted new lead fellow. So, Boyka, how you doing today?

00:56
Speaker 3
Doing great, Charlie style. Thank you for having me. It's a late afternoon here in Sofia, Bulgaria, and I'm really happy to be here. And I have to tell you, as we've been talking just a minute ago, I've been recommending this postcast for years. It was on my course resources that I gave to this UC Berkeley extension students, and we've included it in our USGBC course on extended continuous study together with Kelly Gerhardt. So being on the other side of the microphone here with you is just surreal for me. Thank you for having me.

01:32
Speaker 2
Well, thank you for being a listener and, of course, getting it out to your audience. Well, then you know the format, so this will be easy for you. But take us back. Tell me and our listeners, please, where'd you grow up and where'd you go to school?

01:46
Speaker 3
Sure. I grew up here in Sofia, Bulgaria, on the Balkans, in Europe. Grew up in the city, went to a mathematic high school, and I got a lot for, like, structure and order, but I also always had interest in mathematics, and this combined took me to architecture in my studies. So I graduated architecture with a cultural heritage specialty back in 2009. And where I credited it was just in the middle of the economic crisis back then. It wasn't the best time to, you know, graduate an architectural school because architects were being laid off rather than hired and. But, you know, started doing some editorial work. I ended up working as a journalist for National Construction magazine. Then I was editor of Facilities Facility Management magazine. And then I organized Sophia Architectural Week for a few years, which was fun.

02:56
Speaker 3
And along the way, I Interviewed a young lady that had just came back from the States to start her business in Bulgaria. She was educational director in the Bulgarian Green Building Council. So I visited my first lead course and, you know, that took me to where I am today, like almost 15 years later. It's what I do.

03:21
Speaker 2
Well. That's. I love that. And you've been doing this a long time in your region and Europe. I know with some of your business partners, you get to do some work here in the US Where I'm based, and back and forth. And I've known Kelly and Vasela and others over the years. So you've got an amazing rock star team there over the

years. So sustainability, though, I heard architecture, then you got into it, and you've been doing it as a career. But was it part of your upbringing? I mean, when did you really know? Like, gosh, this is for me,.

03:50
Speaker 3
Honestly, I came to sustainability through crisis, not comfort. I said it was tough times at the moment then. And I was doing research on what's going on with our profession in those times. And I wrote maybe one of the first comparative article on green building systems here in the region. And that really took my interest to sustainability as a way for our profession, but also for the built environment to overcome crisis, really. And that brought me to it. And also the other thing was that I always connect sustainability with the newest and the latest in technology, and that really also draw me to it because everything new and interesting was happening in the realm of sustainability. I believe today is also the case still. So, you know, that's what brought me to it.

04:52
Speaker 2
Amazing. All right, Necessity. You had that building background, architecture necessity. And then, gosh, you've been doing this a long time. So let's talk about mentors. To me, a mentor could be someone you read their material. We were talking about David Gottfried's podcast, for example, and maybe they influence you. But then over here, it could be someone that meets with you, challenges you, open stores. Have you had some mentors along the way?

05:18
Speaker 3
Absolutely. I've been lucky to meet amazing mentors in my early years through my working at the magazines and organizing events and stuff. But when we talk about sustainability, I would of course start with David. Obviously, I listened to his episode with you in this podcast, and for me, he's really the father of what I do. When I wrote the comparison of rating Systems back in 2009, lead existed because of huge GBC he co founded, and the World Green Building Council he founded is the network that eventually brought the Green Building Council to Bulgaria and Me to what I do. So when he said on your show that your GBC built the base camp so the rest of us could climb together, I am one of those climbers, so I would definitely put him first.

06:14
Speaker 3
And of course, as mentioned, the person who opened the door for me was Vasela here in Bulgaria, because, you know, I visited her course and then started working with her. And of course she's now the business development director for GPCI Europe. And my longest mentor really is Kelly, which you've also mentioned. I've been lucky enough to be in a company with two lead fellows. I think this is, you know, a rare thing globally, not just in a small country like Bulgaria. It's really something. So we worked with Kelly for more than, I don't know, close to 15 years maybe on projects from like five bedroom house in California to like 900,000 office building, you know, dancer, design, office. So we've been through everything. And she brought me to teaching in UC Berkeley and we've co authored courses and she was at my wedding.

07:18
Speaker 3
You know, we are now close friends. What sustainability does, you know, builds a community. And so if I had to give like one shout out, I would definitely give it for Kelly. She, she's an example of my work.

07:36
Speaker 2
So I owe Kelly something. You don't know this. The first lead prep class I ever took was here in Atlanta, Georgia when she was at South Face. And this was like 2007, 2008, she taught the first lead class and that helped me go study for and pass my lead exam. So there you go. Okay. What great mentors. And you're right about that basecamp. And to our listeners, right? We've accomplished a lot. Sure, there's more work to do, but. And maybe things are taking new names, Decarbonization, resiliency, you know, regenerative buildings. We have these certification programs, they're great and now they kind of fit under those new umbrellas. But there's just a great head start, a great base camp, and let's keep climbing together like David said. So. So what are some of your proudest achievements so far?

08:29
Speaker 3

A few things really. I just wanted to comment on what you just mentioned. That before it was, you know, when we started on sustainability, only enough it was sustainability in green buildings. Now we touch talk more, much more about decarbonization. And here in Europe, you know, EU taxonomy and the directives and this and that, but it's still the core of what we would do is to make the built environment better. Right. So my proudest achievements are related to this really. I have worked on some of the, you know, first lead projects and sustainability projects here in Bulgaria when nobody actually knew what it was and were setting precedents and were, and I'll develop in the market and educating people. And then what I'm also proud with is that we managed to achieve unusual high standards for the region.

09:23
Speaker 3
It was not usual to have, you know, the highest platinum starter on most of our work. And here in Bulgaria, I think projects are now and investors are now used to, you know, strive for the best standards, to be the best. And that's something that we managed to develop. And of course, the third thing which is very important for me, coming from a small market and small region, it is teaching and the access to education and information for young professionals. The way I needed this access when I was beginning my career. We've got more than 6,000 listeners to our UHGBC courses. That's, that's a lot of people. We do lead teaching as a UHGBC faculty. I do my courses and of course I visit Kelly's courses at UC Berkeley Extension and several sustainability classes.

10:28
Speaker 3
So this is something I'm proud of and maybe in the last few years I'm most proud with the teaching part really. And that's what I see as, you know, my legacy.

10:43
Speaker 2
I love.

10:43
Speaker 3
That to the full extent.

10:45
Speaker 2
So tell us more about that. You've been doing that for several years now. So you know, Guest Lecturer, UC Berkeley what are some of the topics you teach?

10:54
Speaker 3
Well, I joined some of the courses that deal with the principles of sustainability, also with Lydga, of course, and the effects of climate change. And what I like best about joining those classes is that there you have students from around the world really who are professionals. Those are, you know, grown up people that have joined, decided to join the sustainability Extension program with some, you know, they have a concrete idea how to use this knowledge and they know what they want to take from those course. And it's really about having a conversation about sustainability around the world, different aspects of it questions that are from all the different spheres of work of those students. Some of them are architects, interior designers, but some of them come from like the chemistry industry, the textile industry, all spheres of work.

11:55
Speaker 3
And it's really, for me, it's also a learning process to see how sustainability participate in the decision making in all those different spheres.

12:06
Speaker 2
Got it. Okay, so let's connect the dots on the career and then we'll talk about your business and what you're doing today. So a lot of Great projects, interiors, new construction, all the lead programs. I know well over 12 years at triple Green Group there, so. So any fun projects you want to highlight, and then we're going to talk about your business, Urbanista's and what you're doing today. So any fun projects to highlight?

12:31
Speaker 3
Fun projects. So if we're talking about fun, maybe one of the fun ones. And also a very motivating project was the Children's Museum here in Sofia. It's the first of its kind in our country. Specifically, it was specifically designed to educate kids about different technology and science topics. It was an assessment by USAID here in our country. And that's one of the reasons why they decided to go with lead certification. And it was really fulfilling to work on this project. And we also did several rounds of education tours on that building to showcase what has been done on it. You know, from weather station to green roof to photovoltaics, to, you know, all the different aspects of a green building, water use, all of that.

13:24
Speaker 3
And today also some of the projects that are more most inspiring for me and motivate me the most are connected with education as well. My company, Urbanistas, as you mentioned, deals with certification with most of the big schemes and rating systems on the European market and globally. And for example, we have a project that's the new building of the Technical University of Gabriel here in Bulgaria. It's an energy efficient center. But again, what makes me excited about this project is that it educates students in sustainability and helps pass the baton to those young professionals that come next. So this is one project that excites me. Another one is actually a huge project where it's very interesting that the investor is very technologically advanced and they implement AI in their operations and project management. And it's a neighborhood development project.

14:31
Speaker 3
And they recognized in us also technically advanced company because we also implement software as a service in what we do. And it seems like we're speaking the same language here and we work in this newest and most exciting side of our profession.

14:53
Speaker 2
I love your energy, all these projects, you're making a difference. But you know, it's not just the buildings, it's the teaching. You know, that's actually the motto of our podcast, Teach everything. You know, it's important, right? We learn so much, but you have to pass it on and you're doing that. Okay, so let's talk about your business. Tell us about Urbanistas. What do we need to know?

15:16
Speaker 3
Urbanistas is a very young company. We've established it just this year together. With my partners. What differentiates us on the market together with our obviously year long expertise in sustainability is also as the implementation of the newest technology and what we do, AI analyzers and using software to help us deal with this huge piles of documentation that we typically have on our sustainability project, especially when we deal with materials and products on a project. And what is different than services and software as opposed to software as a service, is that, you know, rather than the software giving us tasks to deal with and like tables to fill in and all the things that we're used to when using a certain software as a service actually provides you with the result.

16:15
Speaker 3
And we as experts verify this result, you know, adjust it, modify it, review it so that it's proof ready for our clients. And we're very proud with, you know, having the opportunity to implement that in our projects from all kinds of scale, like from interiors to buildings to asset neighborhood developments. And the other thing I'm really proud with, as said before, is working on public projects because you know, on the Balkans, small countries here, we are not used with high quality public environments. And for me it's really motivating to contribute to having more bills, you know, for our country and for the region.

17:02
Speaker 2
Well, you're doing it. It's exciting and I know you're right, it's probably a little more challenging there, but you can have some big impact. Okay, so that's what you're working on now and you're still teaching, you've got

projects, you've got all this going on with business. What do you think's next? What are you kind of reading up on? What are you excited about, Boyka? What, what's next in this green building movement?

17:26
Speaker 3
Well, I was thinking about again what David has said here on this podcast. If we're doing everything right with buildings, but we're still not hitting on our targets, then what should we do more? Like why is the catch why working with sustainable buildings isn't enough to get to net zero, keeping the Paris agreement targets and all that. I think that some of the answers we are working on getting the answers, but some of those answers are working on as a systems thinking on not just buildings, but buildings as a built environment, as systems and the spaces between buildings and the neighborhood and you know, taking it on a larger scale, I guess. And also to that I'm a firm believer of bright green, so technology helping the goal of sustainability.

18:26
Speaker 3
And I'm very excited, you know, about these last few years of, you know, tremendous improvement and you know, Everything that's going on with technology and AI. And that's why we started this new business, because we wanted to be part of that newest development, you know, get the most of the benefits that technology give us and implement it in what we do on everyday basis. And that excites me. That makes me think. And we know we are constant learners. You know, we should all run very fast to catch up with what's going on and being on the front of it. So that's what we try to do.

19:12
Speaker 2
Now. It's exciting times. You're right. There's a lot of the same work we need to do, but we can do it a little differently now. And it sounds like you're leaning into AI and technology, you're leaning into opportunities, and that's so important.

19:28
Speaker 4
All right, real talk, you just delivered a LEED certified building. Saved energy, reduced carbon, optimize daylighting, and then you slap a tiny generic plaque on the wall like it's a participation trophy. Come on. With buildingplaques.com you can actually show off the brains behind the building. Your scorecard, your strategies, your team, the stuff that made the project great. Architects, engineers, contractors. This is your mic drop moment in plaque form. They're fully customizable. Look sharp enough for your lobby and take like a few minutes to design. If you did the hard work, don't hide it behind a boring plaque. Go to buildingplaques.com and build a plaque that actually earns lead and inspires twice.

20:18
Speaker 2
Okay, well, let's get to know you a little more since you've listened to a lot of podcasts. You know, this is kind of the rapid fire part of the interview. What would you say is your specialty or gift?

20:29
Speaker 3
I think I was thinking about it also listening to your previous guests, and I liked what the other guests have said about being translators in what we do. This was also shared by another one of the newest lead fell class this year. And I feel that this might be, you know, the. I don't know, just for the profession, but person in the room who can, you know, current interests of all the stakeholders on a project. And it's typically what we do, right? As consultants, you're in a room with like the investor and the design team and lead want some result or I think that the project work and we as professionals are the ones that balance between all of those. And like, for the sustainability,.

21:24
Speaker 2
It's kind of cutting out a little bit. Why don't we just for this question. Well, it's better now if it does it again. We'll turn off the video. So no problem. We'll edit that. Let me ask that one more time, if you don't mind. Everything was perfect, but it just cut out a little bit the Internet. So I think it's better if it does it again. We'll turn off the video. So I'll just ask it again. So, Boyka, you know what? You know what? What's your specialty or gift?

21:48
Speaker 3
I was thinking about this question when listening to some of the other guests on your podcast, and I really liked what many of them have said about being a translator. So being the calm communicator in a room where you have the different stakeholders with their goals and you know, having the investors and the design team and us as consultants are the people to, you know, balance those interests and make sure to get the best of every stakeholder so that the project reaches its sustainability goals. So if I have a super gift, I hope that it's to be the translator in the room. That's something that I've learned from Kelly. You said you know her and she told you lead. So you know what I'm talking about. Just to be the calm person that keeps it real and like takes everything to the ground.

22:45
Speaker 3
And, you know, I think that's important for us, for our procession,.

22:50
Speaker 2
That translator. You're right, because in our world buildings, there's a lot of technical people and then there's the business case over here, and then you've got the passionate green building side and. And you're right, you've got to be a good translator. I'm going to guess, but do you speak a few different languages too?

23:08
Speaker 3
Only a few, I'm afraid. My native language, Bulgarian. And in English A bit. A little bit of English. But I also speak investors language. Like to get today, I was in a room with the investors and our energy efficiency engineer and were doing exactly that. The investor said, I appreciate your advice on, you know, the H Vac system that you're proposing. But then I, I will have the client coming to me. He, they want to buy the residential unit and they will ask about being able to have a separate system as opposed to centralized system. You know, I have to sell this or I turn them away. And you know, there needs to be a balance between the interests of the different stakeholders.

23:56
Speaker 2
I love that. No, your English is great. This is a fun interview. So thank you. Okay, next. Do you have any good habits or routines?

24:06
Speaker 3
You know, the saying is, tell me you're an architect without telling Me and coffees. Morning coffee is a must in this profession. We are notorious for, you know, staying late and sleeping just a little bit. And that's something to improve here. But the coffee comes with a pen and a schedule. I like to have a plan and my priorities in order because when you have things figured out, your mind is calm and you know, you can take things under control better, you can rationalize better. And even when there are surprises you're still working in, you know, and predefined lines have. Have this like stable things to hold you in difficult situations. So this is something that helps me a lot.

25:00
Speaker 2
Well, I hear you know, systems in there, how you're organized, how you think. Do you, do you get out to nature? Do you exercise? Do you meditate? How about some just other productivity habits? Do you have any of those?

25:13
Speaker 3
Art for me. Art. I'm an architect, so art and architecture is what saves me. I try to find time and visit art galleries and of course looking at some art online, reading about it, that's my pleasure. And that's my meditation. I'm also a runner and that also helps. So those are habits just.

25:38

Speaker 2
To.

25:38
Speaker 3
Take your mind off sometimes.

25:42
Speaker 2
Art and running. That's fantastic. Thank you for sharing. Okay, so as we get to know each other more, I'm a fan of the bucket list. For some people it's travel or adventure. Write a book. What's on the bucket list.

25:55
Speaker 3
Right now? It might come as a surprise, but because of my kids, I surprisingly became an NBA fan. So on my bucket list currently it's a Knicks game, maybe a Lakers game, Maybe a Knicks vs Lakers game at the Garden.

26:15
Speaker 2
Wow, look at that. That's fun. All right. I love.

26:18
Speaker 3
That. My personal bucket list. And professionally, as said before, I really like to see more sustainable public buildings in Bulgaria, in the region, especially green schools. As a mother of young children, that one's really personal. Want to see more green sports centers, swimming pools, theaters, all kinds of buildings which are green. That's what I want to see.

26:43
Speaker 2
Okay, some NBA, those are great teams. Of course, the next one and the last one. And I guess there's a lot of good basketball in Europe, right? But it's fun to come over here and see an NBA game or two. That's great.

26:55
Speaker 3
Just I can jump in. Bulgarian 1. Alexander Vazenkov is a double time MVP of Europe. So that's something fun to know about Bulgaria.

27:05
Speaker 2
There you go. All right. I love it. Is there a book you'd recommend to our listeners? It doesn't have to be about buildings. If not a book, documentary or podcast, just something you'd recommend.

27:17
Speaker 3
Professionally. Of course. I should mention Green to Green by David, the story of how he founded ugbc, and also Yangel's book Cities for People. Yangel actually joined this Dutch urban planner visited Sofia to support our municipality with advising on public spaces. So this one is great as well. If we want to continue promoting Bulgarian authors, though, I want to mention Georgi Guspudinov, who won the Booker International Booker Prize a few years ago with Time Shelter. Definitely recommend it. And right now I'm reading recruitment is the creative act, a way of being. It's not new, but it's very recommended for anybody who does not only creative work, but any kind of work that would benefit from, you know, thinking outside of the box. It's great. One.

28:15
Speaker 2
Okay, those are great recommendations. And David keeps coming up too. So last two things. I'm really enjoying this. As you look back on your career, is there anything you wish you'd have known earlier?

28:27
Speaker 3

Again, coming from a small market, I want to speak to people who are maybe in a similar position as I have been. So I want to mention two things that I wish somebody had told me earlier. First is that crisis is a door. My whole career came out of the worst year to graduate as an architect and turns out that it was for the best, I think. And second is that you don't need to be on a big market to do world class work. I hope that there are more professionals that showcase this. You know, this. I come from a region where talented people many times don't believe they belong on the international stage. And I wish that somebody had told me that's not the case. And I hope that I help other people hear that on a timely manner.

29:18
Speaker 3
And you know, just for young professionals, I would encourage them to ask for a conversation to go talk to those people to sign up for this course to ask the question. The sustainability community is incredibly generous. I've also learned this through my lead file application process. It certainly takes a village, but it also creates a village. And I'm really excited and grateful that I'm part of this community, really.

29:52
Speaker 2
Okay, good, you're doing it. Last question. Do you have any words of encouragement to someone, Boyka, that's just now getting started in this green building movement?

30:02
Speaker 3
Keep going. We're all climbing the mountain, you know, but we're in this together, which is the best part of it. So keep going.

30:11
Speaker 2
You're here. The base campus set. Let's go. Everybody listening. Make sure you connect with Boyka on LinkedIn. Congratulations on your new lead fellow, your new business. You've got all this experience, all this passion and I know you love teaching too. So thank you for being on the podcast today. I know I'll see you soon on a lead fellow call. Thank you Boyka.

30:33
Speaker 3
Thank you so much. Charlie. It was a pleasure.

30:35
Speaker 2
You're welcome.

30:38
Speaker 5
Thank you for listening to this episode of the Green Building matters podcast@gbs.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 comment. Positive review on itunes. Thank you so much and we'll see you on next week's episode.

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