

Green Building & Design: A chat with Rachel Gutter

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When we began planning the **Back to School Issue**, we wanted a guest editor who was an expert in both education and sustainability, who had experience in the classroom as well as in design, who was an ideas person but also working at the ground level. **Rachel Gutter** was the perfect fit. As the executive director of the USGBC's **Center for Green Schools** in Washington, DC, Rachel oversees multiple initiatives across all levels of education in the United States and abroad and is a go-to resource on the topic of green schools.

Rachel and I had the chance to discuss just some of what the Center for Green Schools and gb&d have in mind as we explore how we might build greener schools. Alongside our conversation, we share a few of our favorite things, from a modular classroom prototype to the best website for design inspiration. Interview by [Timothy Schuler](#)

PART I. ENVIRONMENTAL DILEMMAS

Timothy Schuler: Do you remember your first memory of nature becoming something more than just, “I like climbing trees,” where you realized that you, as a person, were in relationship with nature?

Rachel Gutter: Yeah. Every summer, my family has spent time on Cape Cod, and I was an extremely early talker. By the time I was one-and-a-half, I was speaking in full sentences and talking my parents' ears off, and I think I was driving them crazy. So my father introduced me to sea glass and beach combing. I have memories of it from a young age, but it's exactly the same today—the second I get to a beach I will take my shoes off, walk straight to the ocean, and keep my head down while I walk several miles hunting for sea glass. Sea glass is so fascinating to me because it sits at this intersection of that which man creates and that which the sea delivers to us.

I had a great conversation with my father's best friend, who's also an avid beach comber, and anyone who does a lot of beach combing, especially in the United States, will tell you that blue glass is one of the biggest treasures the sea offers—it's a lot more rare than other colors. He and I were having this environmentalist's dilemma; he wanted to make a gift to the sea in the form of a blue glass bottle, a gift to the sea and also a gift to other beach combers, and yet we've been conditioned never to throw anything like that into the ocean! We were really scratching our heads about it. It was a very funny conversation.

Schuler: Did you throw it in?

Gutter: We did not. But I will admit to the fact that we didn't largely because there were other people around, and we were afraid of how it would look to them. I think otherwise we probably would've done it because in our minds it could only be a gift. The beauty of it is that glass is made of sand in the first place, so one could argue, I suppose, that it's not a pollutant in and of itself.

Schuler: My environmental dilemma is always around the use of real paper, paper made from trees. I'm sure you read Cradle to Cradle at some point—

Gutter: In the bathtub.

Schuler: —they talk about how that book was made. It's actually synthetic paper that can be easily upcycled and made into something else. And in one part of my brain, I completely agree with their argument, yet the idea of nature gifting something back to you and actually being usable is so incredible. A tree can be so many things; it can be turned into furniture; it can be turned into a book. And just the smell, the physicality, the materiality of it is so wonderful that I have a hard time imagining a world where trees are just trees. Even though maybe that is the greener thing. It seems like a loss and a gain at the same time.

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Gutter: I can totally relate to that, particularly as a bibliophile and a former English major. I love paper and books. [They have] something I can't get from my computer.

This is another environmentalist's dilemma. We're plagued by our own sense of guilt. We know too much. One of the things people need to come back to is that it's not about the materials themselves; it's our relationship to the materials and our larger relationship with the Earth. We have to get back to a much more healthy and balanced relationship.

Schuler: It's tough. It's helpful to look back—that's probably one of the most helpful things we can do to see a more sustainable time—but I'm sure you run into situations all the time where people say, "That's not helpful anymore. How can we make real change in this world, where things are where they are?" That's a little bit what the USGBC is all about, right? Practical, pragmatic change.

Gutter: Definitely. That has been our secret sauce. As a movement, with the early adopters of LEED, we've been able to demonstrate that you don't have to [go green] to the detriment of your lifestyle. In fact, it can have tremendous implications for an improved lifestyle, improved educational experience, improved health and well-being.

This is really where the USGBC differentiated itself earlier on and was able to be so successful as a different kind of nonprofit. We connected it to the business case, and we touched on a set of priorities that much of the rest of the environmental community had not been particularly focused on or tuned in to. They were talking about saving the planet, which only a subset of people can connect to emotionally. Or they were talking about saving the polar bears, and only a subset of people can relate to that. I personally have been to Alaska, where they have to have these massive fences built around some of their schools because polar bears eat kids! So I also do not connect as emotionally with polar bears as an icon for global warming or climate change as I do with this idea about it being about our children.

PART II. FITNESS & FIGURE SKATING

Schuler: Do you have a morning routine? I know you do yoga.

Gutter: Lately, on one morning a week I actually head to a local ice rink that is one of DC's best-kept secrets. Typically I'm the only person on the ice, which as a former competitive figure skater was unheard of growing up, and I plug in my iPod and just... dance. That has become one of my favorite morning rituals.

Schuler: How did you get into figure skating?

Gutter: When I was five, I went with my mom and her friend and daughter, and it was just love at first glide. It's one of my earlier and more vivid memories. My father likes to say that when you sign your kid up for group lessons at the rink and you see the ice-skating coach walking up to you afterwards and saying, "Your daughter has a lot of talent; you should consider private lessons," that you should run in the other direction. (Laughs) Because in more ways than one, skating really took over not just my life but the lives of my sister and my parents. But I credit it with being one of the most influential factors in shaping the person I am. From the perspective of discipline, of balance, staying cool under pressure, pushing body and mind to the limit together.

Schuler: I'm sure just learning the capabilities of your own body was really important.

Gutter: I think it absolutely was. I also think that's why yoga has become such a lifeline for me now that skating is not a daily thing because, as Americans in particular, we have a very low intelligence for the connection, or awareness even of the connection between mind and body. And more broadly than that, it connects to this environmental theme, this idea that all these things are separate and siloed. That mind and body are separate, that I am different from you, and I am not one and the same as the Earth. And this much more Eastern perspective of thinking about all these things as operating as part of a whole, for me that began with skating, at least from an individual perspective, and then yoga expanded that practice to a much more holistic and global one.

Particularly for those of us who work in the sustainability movement, when we are confronted with information that suggests a rather grim outlook on our future, it's all the more important to have a three-dimensional life, to have other places to find hope and joy.

Schuler: I've been fascinated by models abroad where classrooms are designed in such a way to really enhance movement. Is there a way for the Center for Green Schools to get involved in that dialogue?

Gutter: In fact, we are working on that and have been collaborating with the National Collaborative on Childhood Obesity Research (NCCOR), which is a foursome of the largest funders of childhood obesity and wellness initiatives in the United States—it's USDA, NIH (National Institutes of Health), CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. And we convened a gathering around the connection between the built environment, child obesity, and nutrition and produced what I think is a wonderful publication called "Green Health: Building Sustainable Schools for Healthy Kids" that has some terrific information in it. The outcome of these efforts—the academic paper—will be published soon in the *Journal for Preventative Medicine*.

We just received a grant from Robert Wood Johnson to continue to collaborate with members of NCCOR on this topic in particular, whether it be active design—which is the principle you were basically alluding to, keeping kids moving through the design of the building and the flow of the space—to safe, walkable paths to school to kitchens that are set up to facilitate healthy eating to edible schoolyards. There are so many ways in which we intersect with this conversation about physical fitness and wellness and preventing obesity in our kids.

Schuler: The Center for Green Schools recently launched a program focused exclusively on community colleges. I was intrigued by your choice to put significant resources into these institutions. You helped us put together a whole feature on this (p.86), but in your words, why are community colleges such an important part of the education landscape of the United States?

Gutter: One of the most exciting things is that [community colleges] deploy so quickly. They are going to be the best hope we have for educating this green workforce that we pay so much lip service to. They move so much faster than four-year institutions. So even in a short period of time with just a little bit of support, they are moving at breakneck speed to create new courses and to engage their students in activism and career building opportunities. When you think about it, many students—perhaps the majority. I can't say for sure—not only are going to be rapidly deployed to the workforce, they are already in the

workforce. When you compare that to the numbers of students at four-year institutions who go directly to grad school, and simply the four-year timeline, community colleges are a place we can invest to rapidly catalyze transformation and one that's going to have a local impact because the majority of students who are attending community colleges are going to stay rooted right in those communities.

PART III. OUR GRAVEST MISTAKE

Schuler: When I think about people that I consider to be contemporary heroes in education, I think of Geoffrey Canada at the Harlem Children Zone, I think of the Kalamazoo Promise, trying to get every high school student to college, I think of Gary Comer here in Chicago, down in Pocket Town and all the investment that's been done specifically around education. Who are some of the heroes you've found out about and maybe even been able to partner with?

Gutter: For me, forever and always, the biggest heroes are the teachers themselves. And one of the most inspired teachers whom I have ever met is Steve Ritz. He has a terrific TED Talk that I highly recommend. He's one of our Green Apple Ambassadors, and he's one of the only—well, I think he's a celebrity, but technically he probably doesn't meet the definition as a teacher in the Bronx—non-mainstream personality Green Apple Ambassadors that we have. He's just that amazing, and he is that kind of hero. Teaching students in the Bronx, who not only are not expected to go to college, they're not even expected to finish high school. Teaching them about indoor organic farming, helping them to feed their families, helping them see there are ways to make money that don't involve illegal activities, instilling in them a sense of pride. The work that he is doing is so transformative. He is just this incredible bundle of joy and energy.

Schuler: You used to be a teacher. Do you ever miss teaching and being in the classroom.

Gutter: What I miss is the regular contact with kids. I think people assume that my job entails a lot of that. It turns out I spend the majority of my time with elected officials and potential and existing funders and college and university presidents and superintendents. I have precious few opportunities, unless I really seek them out, to actually just hang out with children and listen to them.

Schuler: Do you ever have moments where you think, "If all these schools and all these companies make better decisions for the environment based on the case that it will save them money, will we lose sight of why we're doing it in the first place?"

Gutter: It doesn't worry me at all. The thing that the environmental movement gets wrong, our gravest mistake, is that we continue to insist that intellectual agreement is one and the same as the inspiration to act. It turns out that all of the research around everything from consumer purchasing patterns to political affiliations are, at the end of the day, largely emotional and related to your community and not tied to the science, not tied to the facts. If I have to hear another one of these leading, iconic environmentalists say, "We just need better science to convince the skeptics," I might punch them in the face.

Schuler: (Laughs)

Gutter: Because that is so wrong. That's us ignoring the facts, because we have all the science we could ever possibly need. It's not compelling even half of us on any given day—and actually, it's not compelling way more than half of us to actually shift our behaviors.

So my perspective is, I really don't care why you vote in favor of a green school policy as a school board member. I really don't care why, as a student, you decide to go to a college or university with a significant sustainability commitment. I really don't care why a policy maker wants to make this their public-facing legacy. I don't think it matters. I think it's about how many more schools can we green, and how quickly can we do it? Because at the end of the day, regardless of why you make the decision, we're putting our kids in schools that are healthy, safe, and efficient and positioning them to be successful into the future. I'll worry about getting to those kids and making sure they understand that this is part of a "higher calling," if you will. I'll worry about educating those kids to be sustainability natives. But I am not going to waste my energy trying to [appeal] to the altruistic side of grown-ups. I think most of us—and on some days, I count myself among these ranks—are sort of beyond repair.

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