

Episode 169

Embracing contemporary vernacular architecture with Clare Nash

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Intro: Before the era of mass housebuilding, many homes were self-built. This vernacular architecture still has much to teach us today about what makes a sustainable build and a sustainable community. In this episode we speak to architect and author Clare Nash about her research into contemporary vernacular design. I started by asking Clare to tell me a little bit about her background.

Clare: Well, I'm Clare Nash. I'm an architect. I set up Clare Nash Architecture six years ago, and it was just me. Now, we're five but we're all part-time. We're all female, which is a bit strange, but that wasn't by design. It just happened that the best applicants were female.

We all work without an office. So we meet up once a week in a café and then the rest of the time we work remotely or in co-working spaces. So that's also a bit strange about how we operate.

Ben: You mentioned you meet up. Does that mean you're all local?

Clare: Yes. I'm based in Brackley, everybody else is in Oxford and Banbury. So we are all pretty local. But we meet up in Oxford for our meetings because there's lots of nice cafés in Oxford.

Ben: You don't need to explain this to me because this is exactly the way I work and I get it.

Today, we'd like to talk a little bit about your book. It's called Contemporary Vernacular Design. First though, why this book?

Clare: It came out of two things. I studied Part Two Architecture diploma at Oxford Brookes University and as part of that I studied vernacular architecture.

I became really interested in the really centuries-evolved design of buildings that were inherently sustainable without actually meaning to be. Because obviously, somebody in the past was just literally

building with local materials. They weren't thinking 'I'm being sustainable'. And they were developing ways to save energy because they didn't have energy to expend. They certainly couldn't import stuff from China. And I thought we seem to have lost all these really good ideas in modern housing design or any kind of building design actually.

So, this was paired with a growing frustration that the quality of housing that was being built around me, the standard redbrick box that you find in Southampton and Northampton – it used to be much more varied in olden times ...

Ben: And it's right on your doorstep. As I drove up here I thought oh, my goodness. This is where you live, Clare. Was that the inspiration?

Clare: Yeah, well, it was. I mean, this is quite recent, the development around here in Brackley. And I started writing the book way before that even began. But in general, yes it was that kind of thing.

I just thought we don't need to be doing this. Why is it right that there are really six big house builders and they are completely dominating the landscape and what our edges of towns and cities look like? Why is that right? Why is it only in the UK that really happens, compared to Europe where you see lots of individual developments dotted around? They might not be to everybody's taste, all of them, but at least there's variety and it represents what people want locally.

And also, there isn't six big firms that have dominance. Smaller developers get a look in, self-builders can build much easier than in the UK. So, they were really the main reasons for writing the book.

Also, I forgot to say, I also wrote a Masters thesis on that topic, more or less, and did some research in Papua New Guinea, Bolivia, China to see how they were using vernacular materials and vernacular technologies in modern, sustainable housing design. And then also, some case studies in the UK and comparing and contrasting.

And then I thought that's just going to sit on a shelf in the library. Only other students are going to read it. Wouldn't it be nice if the message got spread further? So, that's when I decided to write a book.

I sent off my dissertation to RIBA Publishing and was really surprised when they said 'yeah.' And then I thought, 'Oh, no. Now I've got to find all these other case studies and do all the research and write about it, as well as running my practice and all the rest of

it.' But I did it and I really enjoyed all that research. It's been really, really useful, both in the practice design but also what I teach to students.

Every time I talk to people – they don't have to be architects, they can just be somebody from the public – they're all really behind it and passionate about it because also, they're kind of fed-up with just the standard redbrick box plonked everywhere.

Ben: You talked about research. What did that go to? What extents?

Clare: Well, I interviewed architects, designers, housing associations, property developers and most importantly, I interviewed a good selection of the residents at each housing scheme. Because I really wanted to get to the bottom of what actually worked.

It's all very well architects or housing associations saying 'this is great' but the actual residents will definitely tell you if it's not working.

So, I found that really interesting and I learnt lots from them about things that really worked, things that didn't work so well. Lots of teething issues. I've found across the board lots of teething issues with particularly renewable systems, district heating systems, where they've been promised it was going to be a very easy run but actually there were quite a few teething issues to begin with. But then they resolved themselves.

Initially, I was a bit off-put because I also recommend really good renewable systems and district heating is meant to be the thing for larger housing developments. So, when they were telling me some horror stories, and one particular development in Portland, they told me about how the rainwater collection toilets hadn't actually worked for about two days, which in the overall lifetime of a home is a very tiny thing but it's quite a big event for a person to experience. So that was a really big, key thing that had happened. But it was resolved, the pumps were replaced and they've since had no problems.

Also, a thing that the developer did down there, he always installs back-up gas boilers for the renewables because he realises that there's always teething issues at the beginning of development. So he always puts in the gas ones. Which I thought was really good foresight from him.

But that was the really nice thing. I met some really exciting developers as well, the ones that are really trying to make changes and be proud of what their mark is leaving on the planet. And they

also find that people who have lived in their developments are then seeking them out in other areas when they need to move, which is inspiring.

Ben: Under normal circumstances, I would say what is stopping them from growing and levelling up the market?

Clare: Well, it's basically the housebuilders have such a dominance on buying land because they can just outbid everybody else. The problem is that historically, it's always been that councils have to go for the highest bidder.

When I spoke to Mark Hallet of Igloo Regeneration, he said that councils are now starting to see that if they go for a slightly lower bidder such as Igloo, long-term their benefits are much higher. Because Igloo particularly goes for mixed-use schemes. So, the community is much higher. They go for owner-occupiers rather than buying to rent, so that the populations stay put. It's not such a transient population, which improves the community and means overall less maintenance. Not only that, but they also incorporate really good landscaping so that people talk to each other, which also improves the longevity of the scheme.

Councils are starting to see that now and would rather go for a lower bidder because of the long-term benefits. So, that's a big hooray and something to look forward to, hopefully.

Ben: There are a few things in the book that I want to draw out. I suppose it probably makes sense just to start with those basics.

I know you gave an overview but is there a distinction between vernacular architecture and contemporary vernacular architecture?

Clare: Yes. So, vernacular, I think, doesn't really exist anymore, apart from in developing countries where people are literally just self-building.

These days, it's extremely difficult for an average person to realistically self-build because they have to pay the bills which means they have to go to work. Plus, in this country, the cost of land is so high, it's quite difficult.

So, vernacular architecture does continue. I'd say in my book, the closest to that actually is the Ashley Vale case study, which is about a group of self-builders who managed to win a battle against a developer who wanted to put homes on an old scaffolding yard and then they said to the planners, 'We can do better than that. Why don't you go for us instead of this developer?' They won that and I think it's about twenty homes on that site now. But they all built at

the same time so they all helped each other. Well, I'm not saying all but quite a few of them helped each other with skills and tools and things.

You can really tell, when I interviewed the residents, the strength of community there. Not only that but the uplift in the site value, because they have built such a strong community, it's really highly sought after in Bristol. People really, really want to live there.

This also shows, housebuilders commonly say that 'we can't do this because people won't pay more for it', but actually they will.

Ben: As we're talking about community, there's a whole section that you devote to co-housing. Why?

Clare: So, going back to that thing, the difference between vernacular and contemporary vernacular, I think because on the whole, actual vernacular building, as in when you do it yourself without architects and you literally hand-build your home, the alternative is either buying a house; custom build, for example, like the one that's by Igloo in Cornwall; or you could form a potential new community such as a co-housing group, find some land and then build together that way.

I thought because people are still building as a community, that's probably the closest thing we've got in the modern-day world to a vernacular way of building. So, I'd call that a contemporary vernacular design. But it is different to contemporary vernacular design, what I'm talking about in terms of mass-produced housing because in that sense, that's more about getting landscaping right, getting the place right, having some kind of feel of identity in the design of the home so it's not just repetitive.

For example, in Holland the main master planning architect employed other architects and they all produced different types of homes that they dotted around. And ordinarily in Holland you'll get whole rows of the same architect design. Which is fine. It's still very good quality housing but they wanted to create a rural atmosphere. So, they did that with bisecting canals and then pockets of green weaving through it, inspired from a Mondrian painting, and then with these different types of homes all dotted around.

It doesn't feel like it's been there a long time but it definitely feels like it's got lots of character. The quality of the materials is really good. And the translator that I took with me, a Dutch landscape architecture student, said that it felt like home to her.

I was walking around just last night, the local homes to me, the new build, and it just feels like a toy town. It's a bit eerie.

Ben: It feels like an invasion. They've arrived!

Clare: Yeah, exactly. I don't know. It could be so much nicer. And I actually thought maybe it's because people aren't living here yet. But on every drive, I saw a car parked and there were lights on. So, I thought it's just a bit soulless. Which is why I called the book 'How British housing can rediscover its soul.'

Ben: I notice as well when you go through each of your case studies, that you almost sum them up in a similar way. Can you talk about some of those points – I think you've probably mentioned a few of them like landscape – and just why these aspects are important and why you wanted to look at them all in the same way?

Clare: Mostly it was the resident feedback that I concluded with and I put it into, I think, four categories.

There's 'Comfort', which was a big one because I thought if it's not working thermally and people aren't happy with the levels of daylighting then what's the point? Whatever the design is, it's not good enough if they're not happy with that. And pretty much everybody was really happy with that, which was really pleasing.

I know that a lot of the projects in the book, they were better than building regs in terms of insulation levels and certainly in terms of daylighting levels. There weren't small windows, for example, like you see on a lot of the modern housing developments now. Which I know is because it's cheaper to have a smaller window and also because they're trying to do this cute chocolate box vernacular idea of small windows, which doesn't work on a bigger house anyway, it just looks odd. But also, in the olden days, when people had small windows, it was because they couldn't afford to heat their homes.

We can afford to heat our homes now and we have better insulation, plus we're not working in the fields all day so we're not sick of daylight and the elements. We actually really need the light because we're inside all the time and we get seasonal affected disorder if we don't get enough of it. So, it's really important to have bigger windows.

And then there's 'Appropriateness', which is how appropriate is it for that area. I thought that was particularly important because it was highlighting the need for different types of housing for different types of areas in the UK or in Europe or further afield.

That took into account culture, particularly in the ones that were further afield, but also the context, the surrounding buildings, the surrounding landscape, local materials, local craftspeople. So, that was really important.

Then 'Sustainability', of course. Some of the homes in the book were incredibly sustainable. So, in Sieben Linden in Germany, everything was built out of straw bales and timber frame, because they really, really cared about the embodied energy as well as the actual running of the home afterwards. There's a big focus, I think, particularly in the UK, just on saving energy bills, not so much on the actual embodied energy to create the materials in the first place.

They literally self-built that as well, all of them as a community, which meant that the build costs were extremely low. But they're in a very fortunate position because the government were keen for them to have this land. They got that just after the Berlin Wall came down and they wanted to recreate, I suppose, happiness between the borders, creating a community, a way of speaking to each other. And this piece of land was on that old divide basically and it was seen as a way of regenerating bonds between East and West Germany. But in any case, it's much easier to get hold of land in Germany.

I think I've gone off-piste now. What was the question?

Ben: We were originally looking at those various points that you sum up in each of the case studies. Have we gone through them all? We're definitely close to the end, I think.

Clare: Yes. So, it's really about sustainability and 'Improvement' was the final one, which was is it an improvement on what is currently built locally. I mean, I wouldn't have gone to see them if they weren't. I kind of knew that from the beginning. But I particularly wanted the residents to also agree with me. And they did, fortunately.

There were minor niggles. There are always minor niggles. Nobody ever gets everything right first time. But on the whole, people were really happy with the big, important things like community, quality of life, daylighting and thermal efficiency.

They were just very happy to live where they lived and they didn't want to move. Which I think says it all really.

Ben: How did you select these case studies in the first place?

Clare: Some of it was I have bookmarks on my internet browser of favourite architects who did this kind of contemporary vernacular

stuff that I already know about. So I did just do a bit of looking on there and seeing if they'd done any housing schemes. I knew they'd done a lot of one-off homes but I didn't know that they'd necessarily done housing.

And then I'd already got six from my Masters dissertation so I included those and elaborated on them a bit. And then I just did lots of Googling in different languages as well, trying to find the right thing and talking to people I knew.

For example, the Wales case study, I couldn't find it at all until I contacted the Royal Society of Architects in Wales. And they suggested three potential ones that might be suitable. And then I found the one by Gillard Associates, which is in St Fagans on the edge of Cardiff. It's actually an old farmyard that they've converted.

So they've created a terrace of houses, which looks like a long barn, with a green roof. And then there are other extra dwellings associated with the place. But they've done two really clever interventions, which have really improved the community. One is open-ended gardens, which lead to a lake at the back, which might put off a very conventional or conservative house buyer in the UK but actually means that because they often walk to the lake out the back, they all know each other.

They'd been living there for less than a year when I interviewed them and they all knew the names of each other's cats, they all looked after each other's plants.

And then the other thing was a shared garage, which looked like a farm building. Nobody had their own individual drive and their own individual garage.

Ben: In one respect, I think this is brilliant and I would like to live this way. But I don't live this way and I sense that you would like it too. Why are you not living like this?

Clare: Well, because I, like most people, also can't afford the costs of land.

Ben: But often there are spaces to join a co-housing community in the early days. But for me, I think it's more it's me that wants to do it rather than the rest of my family. And although I think they would like it, there's some barrier there. It's weird. I can sense it but ...

Clare: Yes, I do think as a nation we are much more conservative. When I went to interview people in Germany, they were really astounded at our privacy laws.

I was telling them about how we have to have opaque windows in the side elevation and certainly on bathrooms. That's just not the case in Germany at all. Not even on bathrooms.

I commented on this because I went to look at a really beautiful house in Überlingen and it had full-height glazing almost all the way around and not a huge plot around it. And then there were the neighbours also with lots of glazing all the way around. I realised they could look directly into each other's living spaces. I said 'how did you get this through planning? Is this normal?' And they just said 'Yeah. Why wouldn't it be?' It just didn't bother them.

But actually I also found that at Ashley Vale, because they'd all built more or less at the same time and they were quite close to each other as well and they did have overlooking windows. They said you just monitor yourself. You don't stare at them and they don't stare at you. So it's not an issue.

Ben: But I've noticed this where I live, just a number of things that almost seem to be going in the wrong direction. Sometimes like politics as well, you feel that you've made loads of progress.

Say, for example, near to where I live, I've noticed that fences get higher over time. They never seem to go down. Or hedges get removed for fences, front gardens disappear for cars. I don't know whether it's just people, perhaps the people are different in the co-housing communities, or what it is?

Clare: Well, one thing that I did notice that I was particularly interested in, was the housing association tenants because they didn't choose to live in those places. So, I really wanted to get their feedback.

There was the odd one who didn't really get it but on the whole, they did. They didn't use the word 'vernacular', for example, but they said 'I can see why it's like this. It looks a bit like other buildings in the village. It looks a bit like that and it seems like it's from here but it's different. It's more contemporary.'

There was one particular one by Mole Architects in Norfolk where because of the way the site was, south facing meant to have a front garden instead of a back garden. And also, it just worked much better visually. So they made the front garden as *the* garden and then they had green wire fencing between. So it was like a barn in a landscape really, rather than individual little suburban plots. Which worked really well in this village in Norfolk.

I interviewed the residents there and they all really liked it, apart from one lady who did say 'I'd like a bit more privacy so I can sit out here and not feel that people are looking at me.'

Ben: But what happens at that point is she builds her fence up. And then that's fine, everything stays like that for a while. Then five years down the road, someone else moves into one of the houses, seeing the higher fence and, I don't know, it's just strange. Well, maybe that won't happen. Hopefully it won't.

I've probably taken you off course here. Just a few observations I've thrown in.

Now, what did you discover from looking at various different examples here in the UK versus the co-housing, versus Europe, versus the world? Big question.

Clare: Yeah. Well, the biggest difference between us and Europe is how the government gives out land to developers.

For example, in Sweden, no more than 100 houses can be built by any one developer in any one area. So that already creates a diversity in housing. Plus, they stipulate that everything that's built has to be 50% more energy efficient than building regs. So they're also asking for better quality. That's a good start.

In Germany, they often have what's called baugruppen, where people join together and they build together. Or there are really good catalogues. It's also much cheaper to get hold of land. But also, the mindset is different because people tend to build much later. They'll rent for most of their life and then when they come to build, they're thinking long-term. They're thinking they will pass this to their children and their children will pass it to their children. So they're building really, really good quality homes.

That's also a different mindset to here where we tend to build as cheaply as possible because we're not really thinking long-term.

In Frauenberg in Austria, they don't have a green belt. So anybody who owns a piece of land can just build on it. Their planning rules are quite different in that they have design experts – and they are proper design experts – who will assess whether it's appropriate for the region or not. And that doesn't mean everything has to look like some nostalgic version of a traditional house or a barn or something.

They're really progressive and in Frauenberg the government has really pushed modern design, but something that's appropriate. So

it uses local crafts and it represents the region. So you have a really modern home right next to a really ancient barn but it looks beautiful. And that's just an attitude thing.

That was also interesting. When interviewing people, every single resident, I asked them, what do they think of traditional homes and what do they think of modern homes built now. And in this country, people were quite suspicious about modern homes whereas in Holland, Germany, Austria, Sweden, they all unanimously liked modern homes.

But that's because what they see is so much better than what appears in this country. People in this country tend to think of the post-war stuff, which was really poor quality unfortunately.

Ben: There's also something in it that I think as self-builders or, let's say you're someone who's lived in a very traditional house, you have that experience and there's some journey going on there that really what you do want is the modern stuff. But you start out at the other end of the spectrum.

I wonder whether that is the case, that a lot of self-builders might develop over time what they actually think they want. And that's my experience, often, of meeting them.

Clare: Well, I think that's what people want because you only have to pick up a Homebuilding & Renovating magazine or one of the other self-build magazines to see what people are actually building for themselves.

Some people are building almost replica traditional homes but they're doing a much better job than the average housebuilder. Lots of people are doing very contemporary stuff and they're being really quite bold about it, which suggests that actually there is an appetite for that.

Also, the custom build site in Cornwall, six architects have provided their designs, which can be tweaked per self-builder and they're really doing well as well. People are really going after that.

And there is a really funny test that they did in Holland. The architects for this scheme that I looked at in Biesland they did a taste test, they called it. An architecture taste test. They asked everybody to answer questions, whether they were just an ordinary member of the public, an architect or a design professional, anything.

What happened was there was a unanimous agreement that everybody liked this new third way that FARO Architekten called it, which is a hybrid or a mixture between the best of the old and the best of the new. They didn't like the pastiche or the old and they didn't like the super, super modern. But they liked this hybrid in the middle. Which is basically contemporary vernacular design.

So, that was really fascinating to me.

Ben: Are there any other loose ends that you tied up in your conclusion, that might be relevant to self-builders?

Clare: Yes. There are really interesting elements from each case study that you could take bits of. There's something for everyone in there because they're all so massively varied. And that was what was really nice about it, that you could have a flick through and just go 'I like that. No, I don't like that. Oh, I get it. I really like that.'

There's lots of really good take-out bits that we use in our own work really frequently. It's been massively useful for us in our design work because we actually know what actually works for residents. So the post-occupancy questions and research we've got.

The white paper, I'm really hopeful. Because Gavin Barwell has actually said that they're going to make it easier for smaller developers to get land and to start developing, essentially. Which would be so nice because the developers that I interviewed, the ones that were really progressive and interesting, they were all smaller ones. It would be lovely to see them being able to do more stuff. And also for self-builders.

At the minute, planning authorities have to find out if there is a need for self-build land and then if there is, they have to provide it. But I think in some cases, it's proving difficult to actually get them to provide it. Hopefully this housing white paper will really push that through.

I think it's quite exciting times now. I'm really hopeful for the future of housing and house building in Britain.

Ben: That sounds like a really good place to leave it. Clare, thank you very much.

Clare: Thank you.