Episode 7

Building Up Your Knowledge As The Client

The show notes: www.houseplanninghelp.com/7

Ben: I'm here with Tahir Sharif and today I'm hoping this should be quite interesting because Tahir has had his own house commissioned, but he's been very active and involved so let's say hello first of all.

Tahir: Hi.

Ben: What was in your mind first of all when you started in this process, compared to the house that as we look across the field, we can see just up there now? Have you ended up with what you expected of have you been on a journey?

Tahir: Well, our expectations changed a lot through the course of the planning process and just different iterations of the plans as it went through because it's taken quite a long time to get here. We started on this in 2005, December 2005, so it's almost 7 years. And in those 7 years we've had our battles with the planning people, we've also had some internal issues as to the form of the house, how it was going to be laid out. So yes, there's been lots and lots of change but the initial expectation was that we'd end up with something that was beautiful, something that worked for us as a family and something that would take very little lighting and heating, and I think we've achieved that.

Ben: So tell us about how it came about, how you've got to that position now, the challenges that you've had in your build.

Tahir: How we got here, I guess was, we bought this farm. There was a house here. The house was in the worst location in the plot possible. It's at the lowest point. There's a stream just running by it. There's a well just outside the front door and so it's just surrounded by damp and it's got a very bad damp course. So the whole house is full of damp, it's a poor floor plan, it just didn't make economic sense to try and make this any better. As soon as we realised that we knew that we wanted a new house. When we decided we wanted a new house… Our previous experience of houses was your general 30s suburban either semis or terraced and my mum and dad have a big detached 30s house, but mostly quite dark, mostly poorly insulated, mostly compromised in a lot of ways. So what we wanted to achieve is something that's well lit all the time, something that was flexible enough in its layout that we could use it as a family, then once the kids had left we'd still feel comfortable in it. We wouldn't have to move because we've got this huge house and it just sort of feels empty. I mean, it is quite a large house so one of the things we were conscious of all the way through was we didn't want to end up in a position where we were in our 60s and 70s and would have to move out because we wouldn't be able to afford the upkeep.

Ben: Is this when Passivhaus was introduced to you? And how did you react to it, how did you learn about it and what finally convinced you to go ahead with it?

Tahir: We never had Passivhaus as a target ourselves. Jon, the architect, has built stuff that's very near Passivhaus. I think he might have built one that's actually certified Passivhaus but he'd never built a Passivhaus at this point when he was designing this house. The engineer, Alan, Alan Clarke was quite keen to see us go for Passivhaus but I had no problem with it not being Passivhaus. In fact it's not going to be Passivhaus because we've just had our last air test last week and we came in above the level that's required for Passivhaus. Our main objective was to end up with a comfortable house and the principles of

Passivhaus made sense, so whether we achieved it or not we were going to adopt that methodology and it made sense to me because you're not bolting on lots of kit to provide extra energy, you're doing things to mitigate your energy usage. For example, in a normal house if we have the daylight levels that we have in our house, you'd probably need an air-conditioning system to extract the extra solar gain but in this house because it's been designed from the outset to deal with that level of sunlight it's not a problem. Those were the things that appeal to us.

One of the big influences, apart from Jon, on the project was Nick Grant who's a director of the AECB and every time I spoke to him about it he said invest as much as you can into the envelope of the building, the structure of the building. That's what you want to do. Don't buy kit, don't invest in grey water, don't invest in renewables, don't invest in any of that stuff because you've got no need. You're on mains sewage anyway. We're on mains services all the way around so there's no issue with that. It's not like you're in the middle of Scotland with no electric mains or anything like that, where it would make sense to have your own PV and wind turbine and whatever.

And…so, from the Government's perspective we have the Code for Sustainable Homes which awards points for eco features in your house and we found it quite difficult to meet code level 4 because we were investing in the wrong place as far as code is concerned. If we'd invested in kit we would have found it very easy to comply with Code Level 4 but because we were investing in the fabric of the building, stuff that's going to last forever and isn't going to break down, unfortunately that didn't really help us with Code. To get through Code we're going we've had to do things like we're going to have to install bat boxes and bird boxes and stuff like that, which is insane when we're going to have a house which is way beyond

anything that current building regulations can even imagine in terms of efficiency and performance.

Then you've got the industry and the industry basically just wants to sell you more kit. So when you've got the two things in conjunction, for example talking about industry the first mechanical engineer that we employed on the job, came to their first meeting with us with folders full of brochures for solar PV, solar thermal, wind turbines of all sorts, ground source heat pumps, everything that you could think of. After our first meeting I told them not to bother to come back because they were obviously there just to sell kit and we weren't in that market.

So, as the consumer at the moment you really need to understand yourself how a building can perform and what the implications are. You can't rely necessarily on government or industry to guide you sensibly, which is a shame but it is the fact. I guess you could say we were lucky but on the other hand we spent a long time talking to people before we chose any particular direction in terms of how we were going to build. There was the AECB which was very, very useful and also Jon, the architect, was very pragmatic. He didn't want to push us one way or another but he did have experience of low energy building, he did have experience of low impact building.

Ben: Maybe while we're on this subject, you chose Jon Broome Architects but how did you make that choice? Was it a connection? I know it's very important to try and create a team that you can work with.

Tahir: Yes, basically Nick Grant from the AECB recommended Jon. We interviewed four different architects. Three of them had eco experience, one of them did not. None of them had done the kind of project that we have ended up with. So we had to take a stab in the dark, really. What we decided was that we knew that we were in for a long-term relationship, because at the time we thought 2 or 3 years

would be a long-term relationship. We were anticipating at least a 2 or 3 year relationship with the architect and we wanted to be comfortable with that person for that period. That's the way that it did work with Jon. We've got no issues with Jon. We've been very comfortable discussing any kind of issue with him, small or large, he's always been accessible and he's never tried to impose anything on you, which I think a lot of eco people will try and do. Some of them can be very dogmatic and say that their way is the only way. I think you've got to be aware of that, too. It's not easy whichever way you go so you do have to have trust in your team to actually guide you but you've still got to build up your own knowledge. You do have to know enough to have an opinion about things. You have to know enough to be able to make a case for what you think is right, because at the end of the day whatever the architect thinks, whatever building regulations think, whatever anyone else thinks it's going to be your house and you're going to live there.

Ben: So how? That's the question. How do you build up your knowledge?

Tahir: How do you build up your knowledge? By talking to people is mostly how I built up my knowledge.

Ben: So like I'm doing here will help increase knowledge?

Tahir: Absolutely, dialogue. The thing is we took every opportunity to visit other people who had built similar houses. I can't remember the number of window suppliers, for example I visited. We were at Eco Build every year for 6 or 7 years. Anywhere we could go and talk to people, we were talking to people. So, the thing is be brave, go out there and talk to people, is the best way to do it. There are other places on the internet, where you can actually learn. I think there's one called the Green Building Forum, isn't there? But no, the AECB for me was the main one and then there were books. I had a shelf load of books on eco building that I'd read.

Ben: Did you disagree with any of that as you went through?

Tahir: Yes, absolutely. For example, one of the building techniques that we looked at was structural hempcrete. So basically you have what's in effect a stud wall and then you spray lime and hemp concrete onto it and that forms your structural wall. The claims being made for this were immense and it just sounded too good to be true. So I did some research, I spoke to people and I couldn't find anybody who agreed with the data so therefore I discarded that as an option.

In the end we've gone for what's a very simple structure, not using any fancy materials at all. It's mostly off the shelf stuff and it works.

Ben: Let's talk a little bit about the planning permission and the number of times you went through this because I'm still unclear myself and maybe you can shed some light on going through the planning process. Having had this house that's got a lot of mould that we're sitting in now, that's probably disintegrating as we speak, compared to your new house just up the hill.

Tahir: The biggest objection I have to our planning system is that it's adversarial in its nature. Also that it's very, very subjective. So when I say adversarial, for example I've got a friend who lives in Switzerland and he built a new house in 2006. He bought his plot in 2005 and he'd moved in by the end of 2006. When I used to talk to him about my house he used to laugh at me [Ben laughs] because he basically bought his plot, went to see his local planning department, they told him the parameters within which he could build. They said okay, this is your plot size, this is the maximum size of house you can build, this is the maximum ridge height you can have, this is how far it's got to be away from boundaries, so on and so forth, and this is the environmental performance we expect it to achieve. And he went off and did that, and he said that as

long as you're not doing anything too outlandish, it's just a process, you take your architect's plans into the planning office, they rubber stamp them and that's it, off you go and build.

Over here the planning office will not tell you anything. They will not say, okay well you can build a 320m^2 house or a 200m^2 or a 500m^2 house. Their approach is put something in, then if we knock it back then you know that this is not acceptable, which is a bit pointless isn't it. You've spent money on architects, you've spent time, you've done all of that so why make it like that but that's the way that it is.

There's an added layer of complication in here because this is where subjectivity comes into it. Every individual planning officer has their own view on things, so when we started our dialogue with the planning office we spent 18 months talking to the planning office before we put our first set of plans in and we thought we'd ironed out all the issues. Unfortunately when the application went in it was dealt with by a completely different planning officer who took a completely different view. Even fundamental things like where on the plot we were going to be allowed to build were changed so it just doesn't work. It probably works if you're a commercial planner and you're building a development of a hundred houses, then yeah, I think they're probably going to give you much stricter guidelines at the start, well this is what you're going to achieve and the fact is as a big developer you've got the legal fees to throw at it, you've got the professionals in house, you've got everything that you need in order to deal with it.

But for us, what this ended up being was 18 months of dialogue, 6 months of design and engineering and so 2 years overall before we submitted and then it got rejected, which was gutting. We had done everything, we thought, by the book. We'd gone absolutely within every parameter that the planning officer had suggested and because it

was going to be in a more noticeable position in the field, it was going to be quite a complicated structure that was going to allow for 6ft of field to go over it, it needed a lot of engineering work, we lost a lot of money on that… apart from the time, the money was amazing.

And the other thing is, there is no magic bullet here. You can talk to planning consultants, some people think particular architects in a particular area have an inside track to the planning department. I don't believe in any of that. There's no magic formula here. You've just got to keep battling and just be pragmatic. At the end you've got to achieve what you've got to achieve so if they say for whatever reason it's got to be 3m smaller then go for 3m smaller unless you're really prepared to put in an appeal, go through all of that.

Ben: I would certainly like to build my own house before I'm 40, so in conclusion, maybe you could just pull together 3 tips or 3 useful things that I might find upon my path. It doesn't necessarily have to be connected with energy efficiency, it could be the whole process of being someone wants a house built and coming into that fairly green and then learning along the way.

Tahir: I think the most important thing is to learn as much as you can about building a house and about how you want to live in that house. Going back to Nick at the AECB, one of the recommendations that he made to me was to read a book called A Pattern Language by Christopher Alexander. That's primarily about how people interact with spaces and we used that to inform our floor plan quite a bit, because I'm a firm believer that whatever kind of house you build it has to be a working functional home first before it's eco or before it's mud brick or before it's whatever else it is. That's the first principle of building a house. Build something that is going to work and is going to be desirable, because if you build a pile of poop somebody else is going to come along, knock it down and start again. So that's the first thing.

The second thing is as much as you can assemble a team that you really believe in, whether that's engineers, architects, builders, whoever you're going to encounter along the way. Get people that you really think you believe in and that you're going to be able to work with over a long period, because it probably will take longer than you anticipated. If you've got any doubts as to whether you're going to get on with somebody, then just don't go there. We only had one person on this job that we didn't get on with and that's the structural engineer and he was the one who let us down in the end. So from our experience, be aware that you've got to get on with your team.

And the third thing I guess is you've got to be determined. Whether you go for an eco build or you've got just a normal house in mind, you will have setbacks, it will cost more than you thought, it will take longer than you thought and the thing is you've got to be able to plough on through. Keep calm and carry on.

Ben: Tahir, thank you very much for all your advice and for chatting to me today.

Tahir: Thank you.