

## Episode 13

# What Preparation is Necessary Before Building a House? (Client Case Study)

The show notes: [www.houseplanninghelp.com/13](http://www.houseplanninghelp.com/13)

Ben: I'm with Jason and Lucy Reeve today and we're doing a case study looking at their project so far which has just about got to the build stage, which is very exciting for them. So we're going to see what lessons they have learnt, how they got going. First of all, hello!

Jason: Hello.

Lucy: Hello.

Ben: And when exactly did you come up with this idea that you wanted to build a house?

Jason: It was really born out of the fact that we couldn't find anything to buy that was appropriate. We had looked for a long time for a renovation project and missed out on a house that we really fell in love with, but in hindsight are so pleased we did miss out on it because that just fuelled the fire to end up buying some land for redevelopment. Luckily enough we managed to find a plot that had planning permission already granted and once we realised that was a possibility there was no looking back really, was there?

Lucy: No. It's been a long journey. We probably started looking about four years ago. We've owned a site for two years, over two years now, and yeah started the build two weeks ago. So it takes a long time.

Ben: Lucy, is this something that you wanted just as much as Jason?

Lucy: Not at the beginning. Like Jason said we were looking to renovate somewhere and we both liked the idea of an older style property with its features but when Jason first started talking about possibly us building a new house I think it was me then that really took with that idea. Then the more we started looking at properties to renovate the more I had in my head that we would just be making do and if I could start from scratch I could have everything that I wanted. So I think once he'd planted the idea I think I probably

overtook and then that was it. Then I think I sort of stopped, refusing to look at other houses to renovate and it was all about looking at somewhere we could knock something down or where we could completely start from scratch.

Ben: For me having seen the plans of what you're building at the moment and having those initial ideas of the property you wanted, they're two vastly different things. So Jason, how did you come to this idea together? Take us through that process.

Jason: I think, as is the case with most already built houses or flats or properties that you move into, you change your life to fit in with the property. The one completely and utterly different factor with what we're doing now is that it's the other way around. We decided that rather than to give a prescriptive idea to the architect of what we wanted the house to look like, all we did was tell him how we wanted to live within the building and then he used his skills to come up with a blueprint to show us how we could live in the newly built house.

That was quite a revelation for us. I've done refurbishments before with houses that I've lived in and you tend to have to compromise. There's always a compromise. We're hoping that this won't be the case that we'll have to compromise in this property. So once it started to evolve, and you can discuss with the architect using his skills how something can be done he then gives you many, many other ideas that you can try and incorporate within the property.

Ben: I think that's great and I know that the more that I look into this the more that I can understand what you're saying. I've had in my mind the type of house that I've wanted and I think I'm staying a little bit more open to the various options.

Lucy, what was on the brief or what, from your side of things, did you add to the brief?

Lucy: I think as Jason said we gave the architect an idea of how we wanted to live inside the house but we also found that quite hard because like you said you tend to move into a house and live within the house. So when you're actually starting from a blank piece of paper it is actually very difficult to decide, what would we do if we could do anything we wanted to do?

So I think the ideas came from there that we wanted quite a social house. If you have people over, everyone congregates in the kitchen, even if you don't want them to, so we've got a very open,

social area that will include our kitchen, dining room and lounge. For us, that idea came quite quickly.

Again, this is all, we've never lived like this. So we're hoping it's going to work out but it's still very much at the design and planning stage. Yeah, it'll be interesting to know in a couple of years' time if we've got all of those things right because at the moment it is just, I guess, dream and guesswork on our part that that's how we'd like to live if we're able to.

Ben: You sound like you know a lot about this process but imagining you didn't and this is what I always find when I meet people who've been through the process. I know that your house is getting built right now so you're not all the way through but that's what's interesting, just getting up to the point where they're laying the foundations and the building is going up so how did you find out what the process was and get into that, Jason?

Jason: The process itself has evolved, as well. When we first started thinking about the idea, we wanted it to be, we felt that we had a responsibility to start with to build something that was very low energy and we did a fair amount of research to find ways in which that could be done.

The first part of the process was contacting the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) to try and get a referral for architects that have been involved in low energy buildings in the past. We shortlisted those and went to interview those just to get a feel really of what they could do for us.

Ben: So, how many people did you interview?

Jason: We interviewed 6 out of the 8 that RIBA recommended to us and that was a really worthwhile process. It was quite time consuming and the experiences differed significantly as well, but I think that was a good thing because it just manages to allow you to crystallise your own thinking. 'A' as to the type of building you're interested in building but also as to the kind of characters you're interested in working with.

Some guys are quite prescriptive. They tell you what they want rather than other architects that are much more interested in listening to you and trying to understand what you want to achieve out of, what is effectively for us, our lifetime dream home. I can never have imagined that I would allow an architect to say right this is what you need, I'm telling you this is going to be the best way

forward. You know, that's the exact opposite of what we've ended up with, a house that we do truly believe, or we hope we're going to end up with a house that we do truly believe is perfect for us. Our architect really managed to get into our minds and understand what we wanted out of it.

So, I suppose, to go back to your original question, the low energy was always number 1 on the list and I suppose most of your listeners will probably do the same thing – you read as much as you can to try and understand as a laymen what you're looking for.

Eco houses tend to be light and tight on mass and glass, and we've completely changed our direction. Originally I felt that I wanted to live in a house that was very heavy weight, high thermal mass. I've always lived in either a brick or block built house before. I like the way it feels, I like the way it performs but we've ended up choosing to go down the timber frame route and having, not a SIP's (Structural Insulated Panel) building, but a very low U value timber frame building insulated with WARMCEL, which is recycled newspaper.

Ben: So you're going for a lot of insulation.

Jason: Yes, we are. We are going to still try and achieve Passivhaus standards. That's the ultimate aim.

I never realised at the start of this process that the PHPP package, which is the Passivhaus Planning Package was something that you could, not mess with but you can lower the U value of a wall and then maybe increase the U value of a window if it will still allow the building to perform and still match Passivhaus standard. It's not something we are totally and utterly beholden to.

I'm a subscriber of the Homebuilding & Renovating magazine and people in there often write to be beholden to the PHPP package is sometimes not the best way to look at it. Ultimately we don't want a hermetically sealed box, we want a family home. So to be focussing on something just so prescriptive is sometimes maybe not the best thing to experience.

Ben: Lucy, how much have you got into finding out all about this? Have you been surprised how much you've enjoyed learning about how you build a house and some of the ways to make it more energy efficient?

Lucy: Yeah, obviously Jason leads the way with that. Like he said he's been subscribing to this Homebuilding magazine for, I don't know, about 4 years now. But we've been to several of their shows. We've been to some Ecobuild shows and open houses, which I always find very helpful. There's nothing better than talking to other people who have done it or are trying to do the same thing and they do give you lots of help and guidance.

There is, I don't know if anyone's ever been to the Ecobuild show, which takes up the whole of the ExCel Centre. It is huge and if you walk in there and see 200 companies selling solar panels it can be very, very daunting. I do find that side of things still quite hard to get to grips with, but we've been learning all the way and we're still learning now.

Having got a project manager on board a few months ago we'd already realised that there'd been lots of things that we wouldn't be able to do ourselves and there are still lots of technical issues, especially with the drawings, that he's helped us a lot with along with the architect and our timber frame designers. Yet when they all get involved and they're all asking lots of different questions, sometimes it's very hard to keep up with specifically what they're talking about.

Ben: Does it matter though that you can't understand fully what they're saying?

Lucy: Not always. And I don't mind, I'm quite happy to be the person that might ask that stupid question.

Ben: I ask them all the time!

Lucy: Sometimes Jason says to me: "Well, of course!" You know, you've got to assume they're doing that and I've learnt . . . I said: "Well actually, let's not assume." I'll quite happily ask them and if I look stupid, I look stupid. We've found out a couple of times that we've asked a question and actually nobody's either thought about it or it wasn't what we thought it was going to be. So, it's a question of saying: "Hang on a minute. We don't agree with that. Let's take one step back."

You don't have to get into minute detail with everything but you do have to keep on top of everything. And why wouldn't you? It's our house, it's our dream home and we're the ones that care about it the most. Like I said, we're only starting the third week of build and

I've been out there every day, sometimes a couple of times a day and we're . . .

Ben: Hold on, hold on. You've been on site every day?

Lucy: Yup. Every day.

Ben: But you've got a project manager?

Lucy: Oh, I know but I like to go and see what's happening and take a few photos and ask a few questions. I just think, like I just said, it's our house so nobody's going to care about it as much as we do. Plus, as well, we've been looking at pieces of paper for almost two years now and when you see it, some things look completely different in the flesh, sometimes in a good way, sometimes in a bad way. You know, even now there are going to be a few things that we're going to be able to tweak so if we didn't see it we're not going to know about it but yeah, it's been a great experience to go out there. So, take lots of photos and keep track of what's happening. It changes every day.

Ben: So you mentioned a couple of years, does that mean that some things have surprised you about how long they've taken?

Jason: The biggest surprise was the length of time it has taken us to get planning permission, ultimately for the exact same design that we wanted originally two years ago, which sounds rather odd and I'm sure there are lots of people that have had similar experiences.

What we found was originally the planning authority was extremely supportive in what we wanted to do. They didn't want a pastiche of what had gone before. They didn't want something that was not part of what they considered to be the vernacular.

When we started talking about the performance of a low energy building they were very, very supportive, but ultimately it came down to what they liked the look of and the fact that they didn't understand what a Passivhaus was, which again may surprise some of your listeners but that was the case. The architect had to explain to the planning officer exactly what we were trying to achieve and I think we suffered because of that.

But it just made us more determined, particularly with the housing minister in this country saying that generally speaking this type of project should get the green light almost automatically, without us

having to do any further due diligence and proving how the building was going to perform, so that was the biggest surprise, I think.

Also the length of time it's taken to try and specify a lot of the building. We knew there was going to be a lot of work involved but to try and ensure that as many decisions that we have taken don't change once the building starts to be built. We've seen so many case studies and read so many and seen so many on TV where changes end up costing the clients a hell of a lot more money than their budget gives them the ability to build.

So we're trying, or we have tried as much as we possibly can, to nail every single decision down and as Lucy said, some of the areas we, with the building method that we've chosen, we do have flexibility. If a plug socket needs to be moved 18 inches to the left, wherever, we can do that, whereas in SIP's buildings (Structural Insulated Panels) it's impossible to do that once the frame is built in Sweden, Germany or Austria, wherever you get the thing from.

So we wanted that flexibility and that's ended up being a really good thing.

Ben: Is that one of the reasons you selected a project manager so that now you can hand over that authority and you don't need to worry too much about making changes? Or . . . I'm not even really sure what a project manager does. I know that they're there on site to answer all the questions.

Jason: Sort of is the answer. We had an architect that doesn't project manage so we knew there was going to be a gap there. We had chosen a timber frame erector and designer and manufacturer, who didn't project manage. We knew we could either go down the sub contracting route or a main contractor route, the cost differences of which are quite significant.

When we had our first site meeting with the architect, the timber frame designer, the timber frame erector, Lucy's father is an underfloor heating engineer and it soon became clear to us that there was a void and that void needed to be filled by someone that was pretty much an expert in the field of energy efficient buildings but just as importantly was going to control the purse strings because we could easily see how a situation may arise that we, as Lucy again mentioned earlier, we thought we were talking about the same thing when in actual fact we were talking about cross purposes.

Again, I know through experience and from case studies that that is a clear way in which the budget can spiral out of control. So the project manager is overseeing pretty much everything putting a particular emphasis on costs because we do have a finite budget.

Ben: Lucy, you seem to work very well as a couple. Is there some strategy to this or are you hiding something that when I walk out the door . . . ? [Lucy and Jason laugh.]

Lucy: I don't think so. I think it's something you both have to want to do because, as Jason's alluded to, it takes up a lot of your time. I'm sure if you interviewed all of our friends they would tell you how bored they are about hearing about a house that doesn't exist yet and they've been hearing about it for a couple of years and it still doesn't exist. It's been our life for a couple of years and will probably now continue to be our life for another year while it's being built so you both have to be 100% behind doing it. Otherwise I think that's what would cause problems. So I think because we're both very keen to build it then that's worked.

I think we're quite a strong couple anyway so I think that helps and yeah, we've been, like I said it's been going on for a while now and Jay said about all the problems that we've come up against has just made us a bit more determined to be able to achieve it and I guess we're both quite similar in that respect. We're of the attitude that we'll prove everyone wrong and we will have our house and it'll be lovely.

Jason: I'll echo that sentiment as well as it is about compromise. It's not only compromise with regards to the budget, compromise with regards to the size and location, it's also about compromising with each other.

This is like anything you can buy together, one of you will always be prefer certain aspects whether it's a car or whether it's a holiday or whether it's a piece of art to hang on the wall. The house is no different. We both have things that we will absolutely love within the house and other things that we think to ourselves, well, I could've taken that or left it. So it's really important that you both get certain areas within the house meant for you.

Lucy: The way we've done it is there's sort of key rooms that we're both interested in or we've taken the lead in. For example, I've said the kitchen, that's mine! I'm having exactly what I want in the kitchen. That's where I spend the majority of time in there.

Jason's getting the basement! He can do whatever he wants in the basement. [Ben laughs.] In that respect, it's areas that we'll be able to put our own stamp on, not that the other person will hate it. You know, they've been able to influence and say what they like and what they don't like, but we have given ourselves some areas where we've said: "You can do what you want there and I'll do what I want here."

Then it helps to balance out the other neutral areas where you can give and take on things.

Jason: I have to say that if Lucy's strategy is to spend all the money in the kitchen so I'm left with a dark, empty box downstairs then you can scratch this interview and we'll go through the divorce courts! [Everyone laughs.]

Ben: Now, come on. We'll have none of that! [The laughter continues.]

In terms of financing, did you use any special ways of financing this or is this all money that you've saved up? And when did you know, now I've got the right amount of money?

Jason: Well, the house that we went for at auction 4 or 5 years ago now, we needed to show that we had our existing house up for sale. We needed to have a hefty deposit, so we ended up speaking to a neighbour of ours at the time who had sold their house on the Internet.

Lucy just took some pictures, posted the advert on the Internet and we sold our house on the Internet and were left with the cash from the house that we used as a deposit for this. So, we had the cash for the land and it's just been a case of as it's taken such a long while to get to where we've got to, we've just been putting every spare amount of money aside. We rent the house that we're currently living in, so at the moment, hopefully, it'll be self-financing but there are a reasonable number of quite attractive financing options available for self-builders, different areas of advancement.

I think the majority of them are 50% once you get out of the ground, so they're quite attractive and reasonable interest rates compared to the rest of the market, so if push does come to shove then that will be the way forward.

Ben: Well it does sound like you have a lot of the different angles covered here. Just as we wrap up this interview, is there anything you would have done differently on the approach to the build?

Lucy: I don't think so. I mean we have already touched on the difficulties we've had with the planners. We felt that we'd approached them the right way round as in we met with them very early on, discussed our very original sketches and ideas with them and the response we got back from them was very keen.

I think the only piece of advice I'd give on that would be to take minutes of meetings you have with planner officers. Then you can both agree afterwards what was said and what was discussed and what was agreed, although when I said agreed they do keep their responses quite vague so . . .

Jason: Definitely confirming what was discussed in the meeting by email or even by hard copy letter, I think would be definitely beneficial. So, you could refer back to something that was previously mentioned in a meeting, particularly if you're doing something, not necessarily ground breaking but something different.

I think it has to be acknowledged at the start, both from your perspective and the planning department's perspective that it will be seen as different, if of course it is different so if it's next door to another eco house then it's absolutely fine. There's more of a chance of that being successful, but in our case it was completely different.

The plot is next to a listed timber-frame building and we always knew there would be concessions that we would have to make for that, so Lucy's advice is absolutely spot on. We wished we had done that. The architect and other people we've consulted said that it would have been a lot easier had we been able to refer back to conversations that we had had where they had specifically given their blessing and agreed to many, many design facets of the building.

Ben: And is there any advice that you would like to pass on to anyone going into this process that could help them in any particular area?

Jason: Definitely the more people you can speak to, the better. That stood us in good stead. Doing your research never cost you anything other than time.

Probably trying to have an idea as to how you'd like to proceed from the outset. Certain aspects of the way we've gone about it, for example, the fact that we have ended up with a light and tight building rather than mass and glass. It would have been useful if we'd been able to be informed enough to make that decision early on and maybe had a few more ducks lined up in a row, so when we were ready to pull the trigger and we did get the go ahead from the planning authorities, we could have had a little bit more information to hand or even some contractors to hand.

Lucy: Yeah, but I'd also say on that respect I think, as Jason said we originally started with the mass and glass direction, and that's the main area that the architect works from and obviously then come full circle.

From my point of view I think we've got the best of both worlds because the architect wouldn't have designed the house he'd designed had we gone down the light and tight method so I think actually we've got quite a different design than you'd get from most SIP's buildings or similar buildings to that.

So I think sometimes going about it the way that we have, we've actually ended up with something that would've been a bit different had we started with the light and tight method first even though it probably seems to a lot of people that we've gone all around the houses to get to where we are.

The only other thing I would say is . . . I don't know if other people do it. A few people we went and saw have made comments on it but we put together a scrapbook for our architect and other people that we've seen. That was just made from things that we liked and things that we didn't like.

As we said, we tried very hard not to have a set idea in our head of what the house should look like from the outset because I think at the time we didn't have a plot, so location can make a difference. You can have different restrictions and sites make a difference to how a house looks.

I think it's a good idea if you can keep away from having an idea of what you want your house to look like, but we did put together lots of images and things that we've seen over the few years that we've been trying to get this off the ground of what we did and didn't like.

They were different. The comments in the book show what I like and what Jason likes and they're not always the same thing but I

think when we picked the architect it gave him a good understanding of what we wanted out of the house. Like I said we've got a lighting designer involved now as well, so different people that we've shown the book to have said how helpful it's been.

So that would be another piece of advice I might give somebody.

Ben: And it's very, very neat as well!

Lucy: Thank you.

Ben: Well, it's been fantastic to chat to you. I'd just like to thank you both and good luck, I can't wait to see this building.

Jason: Pleasure. Thank you very much.

Lucy: Thank you.