

Episode 18

Ecobuild 2013

The show notes: www.houseplanninghelp.com/18

Ben: Hey, hey! How are you doing? Hopefully you are well. As you might be able to tell from my voice I'm slightly croaky at the moment because I've had the flu for the last couple of days but that doesn't dampen my enthusiasm. We've got a really good episode for you with some interesting interviews and they were all recorded at Ecobuild, which is one of the big industry events. I thought as I was going to attend the full three days in London that I ought to use that time to create some content, which is what I did. The trouble is that you get so engaged in the different seminars and conference sessions that they have and then at the end you're thinking now I've got to go and get an interview. So this is going to be scratching the surface of what went on there because there were about 800 different speakers at the event so there's no way this would be a fair representation, just my experience of Ecobuild.

If you're a regular listener to this podcast then you'll know that we've talked about the Passivhaus standard quite a lot and so I went to several seminars organised by the Passivhaus Trust but at one of them was Janet Cotterell. You might remember that we've spoken to Adam Dadeby, who is the other co-author behind the Passivhaus Handbook. That was in session 5 if you want to go back and listen to that but during Janet's talk I was intrigued when she mentioned that she had an extension, which she had constructed to Passivhaus standards even when the existing building hadn't been retrofitted. So I asked her why she'd taken this approach.

Janet: Well, to retrofit an existing house which, ours is a very typical semi-detached Victorian house, it is a lot of intervention into the fabric and the way we thought we would do it over time was to phase it. Obviously we're going to be living in it. So we did the things that we felt we would never be able to do again before we moved in which was the floor, so we have done something to the house, we've highly insulated the floor and dealt with the air tightness of the ground floor. Actually all the flood voids on the first floor we've plastered in between the floorboards which is where you get a leakage in an existing house so we did do that and dealt with the

timber ends because we were putting a heating system in, so we were trying to think what we needed to do when and not block off the possibility of eventually getting to something to what is the EnerPHit standard, which is the Passivhaus equivalent for retrofit.

So we did that and then obviously we wanted an extension to make the house in the way that we wanted it to be, so we did that right, basically. We did it the way you'd want to do it. Do it once, get it right and I've made sure I can bring the insulation that we will hopefully eventually put on the outside of the house, it will come and sit against it and tie up quite nicely. It also meant, funnily enough, the extension removed a good proportion of the north façade of the house, which was the worst bit of the house in terms of energy performance. It had the most awful windows, single-glazed, big leaky patio doors, our extension in a sense improved that part of the house and took it right up.

So we're taking that principle of trying to phase it as we have money, do what you do right when you've got the opportunity and make sure you haven't blocked yourself from eventually getting to the place where you've really done the whole job.

Ben: Have you actually got that end vision now? Do you have to come up with that? Or are you saying that you've just worked out where it will connect to the house?

Janet: I know that I can do now the rest of the main part of the house, except the front which I'm still puzzling about because I've got a very typical bay, which is very typical of English housing and that is an expensive thing to try and deal with. This is the thing with Passivhaus, you start retrofitting and you've got details that are may be very difficult to bring up to the standard and will change the aesthetics. And it is a very typical house that is typical of that street and some surrounding streets.

It's interesting now to do it in part because you get the benefit in bits and you see how they impact. For example, it was very draughty when we first moved in before we did the extension and now the draughts in the whole house have reduced because the back is leak free. So there's nothing to draw the air through the house. To get a draught you need an entry point and an exit point, so basically we've no longer got that terrible draught from the front to the back of the house.

Also the Passivhaus seems to keep its own climate because again there's nothing to draw the air, to move it around too much, it

seems to retain its own little climate and work as a little Passivhaus area so you get quite a constant temperature even though there are no doors separating it from the rest of the house. And I didn't want any doors separating it from the rest of the house because it's not got the MVHR. I was interested to see how that would affect it. Would there be a problem or how would we feel? Really I need to do more data to see what's happening with the humidity of that space but it feels absolutely fine.

It all seems to make sense when you think about it. It is performing as one might expect it to perform but interestingly attached to what is still a relatively leaky house.

Ben: Really interesting. I hadn't actually considered those benefits of a Passivhaus extension and how they would fit quite neatly with something that you haven't retrofitted yet, but I do realise that we've got to do an episode at some point on phased retrofits and finding out more about how that works because a lot of people are not going to have the money to do everything in one go, so it's on our list. I'll also put a link in the show notes if you want to check out the Passivhaus Handbook and you hadn't heard about that just yet.

There definitely seems to be a growing awareness of Passivhaus from within the industry and over the three days that I was wondering around Ecobuild checking out totally unrelated seminars and Passivhaus would still crop up. I don't know whether that's just coincidence but I went and had a chat with Jon Bootland, who is the Chief Executive of the Passivhaus Trust, and wanted to find out whether there had been a lot more interest about Passivhaus in the UK.

Jon: Passivhaus started in the UK in about 2008, 2007 maybe, and then we had one building. Then the next year it was 3. Then the year after that there was 10. So now we're up to 2012 and at the end of 2012 there was 150 Passivhaus buildings completed and certified in the UK. By the end of this year we think there'll be 500. So, it's taking off very quickly indeed. Still quite niche but it's taking off very quickly.

Ben: I notice that in Germany it's now becoming part of the regulations in certain cities. That's a big thing, isn't it?

Jon: Yes, it's a massive step and it's not just in Germany but also in Austria and in parts of Belgium as well, so Brussels has committed to public buildings to be Passivhaus standard from 2015 or 2016,

so it's happening in several places. So, it's happening in several places across Europe.

I don't think we're quite ready for that in the UK to be perfectly honest. I'd love to say to you that everything ought to be built to Passivhaus standard at the moment but we're not ready, we don't have the supply chain in place, we don't have enough designers to be able to do it and we don't have enough experience and evidence of how they work and how it's done. So let's just take it slowly, build it gradually, make sure we get it right and then we can grow beyond that point, but let's not rush it and make a mess of it and get it wrong, let's do it properly.

Ben: So what does that mean for people who might be interested in going down this route, if we're investigating into Passivhaus, what is the best route as a client to make sure that we're connecting with the right people?

Jon: I could just say the Passivhaus Trust, couldn't I, and then our members. [Jon laughs.]

Ben: You can go for it.

Jon: But actually it depends on who you are as a client. If you are a housing association or a private sector client for an individual home of your own then I think Passivhaus is something you ought to consider. I think it would help address fuel poverty for housing associations and it gives you a very high quality home with very low running costs for your own private home.

If you're doing a school or an office, you might also want to think about it and then Passivhaus has a whole quality-assured process, so you can have a quality-assured designer, a certified designer, you can use certified products, you can use certified people on site, and you can get certification at the end of your building.

All of those are very useful, but the most crucial thing, I think, is to pick someone who's done one before. So it is difficult, you do have to rethink how you do the process. You have to start in a different way in your planning and layout of the site. Somebody who's been through that learning process already and worked out how to make it work is invaluable.

So, that's what I would do. I would look on the Passivhaus Trust website, I'd look at our members, I'd see who's done a project, the kind of project you want to do and then go and talk to them.

Ben: That's Jon Bootland from the Passivhaus Trust. Before we move on from Passivhaus, I got the chance to see Jonathan Hines from Architype in a talk and he's definitely someone that we want to get onto the podcast, because he's a very engaging speaker and also seems to have a strong vision but I loved one of the thoughts he made about the rules for cost estimating – *if you think it costs more, it will.*

This was in connection to Passivhaus costing more and I totally agree with that philosophy. It reminds me a bit of the Henry Ford quote where he says – *if you think you can do a thing or you can't do a thing, you're right.*

Jonathan, in this talk, I think his key message was one of simplicity, talking about the efficiency of form, a simple palette of materials, simplicity of detailing and simplicity of systems but we'll try and get that interview arranged because I'm sure you will find that fascinating.

That theme of simplicity overall though for the whole Ecobuild event, I think it would sum it quite well because sometimes it can seem that we're trying a bit too hard and I got this impression . . . I'm not sure which talk this was in but I was hearing about this new development with all these great houses but quite a lot of gadgets and heated by an air source heat pump, and air source heat pumps have had some bad press on and off, I think largely because they haven't been installed properly or people didn't know how to use them.

And so this woman disconnected hers or switched it off and when the people came round on a follow-up, just seeing how you're getting on in your home, they noticed it wasn't providing any heat and they said, how are you heating your home? She answered, I'm using the cooker hob! It's absolutely incredible, isn't it, but it does bring you back to this importance of engagement.

That's why this session here, about reducing energy use through community engagement was something that I wanted to check out. It covered cohousing as well, which I know is a topic that we'll want to look at in the podcast soon, but I caught up with Jo Gooding from the UK Cohousing Network and asked her for a quick overview.

Jo: I mean its exact origins you could trace back to 150 years ago in England through Ebenezer Howard's garden cities movement. There was aspects of that and the design principles and the

community building that I guess could be foundations. Others would cite Sweden, the Hoya article - Every Child Needs 100 parents. That's not the exact title but it's something like that, which encouraged a group of parents to get together to think about how they were going to build a community where they would raise their children together but maintaining that kind of privacy as well, which was the first cohousing community in Sweden in the late 1960s, so there's a flavour of the origins. It's coalesced around the world to northern Europe, Canada and Europe.

In England at the moment there are 15 built cohousing communities – in England – but there are 45 communities in development around England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. They vary. I would say about 60% are intergenerational communities, perhaps 40% are senior cohousing communities and they vary in size from about 20 to 40.

Ben: How essential do you feel community is to energy efficiency? We're at Ecobuild, a lot about construction, and we've had this session about cohousing. There's definitely, I can see advances in the thinking really, how all of this together, it ties in. It's not just one aspect, you've got to draw it all in.

Jo: I would say it's pretty paramount, really, because you could have technology, building fabrics that are designed to the hilt but if you haven't got the mechanisms for people to structure and create systems to be able to reduce, reuse, recycle and all of the other things that we would aspire to and you haven't got that kind of peer support as well to help you to do that and education. That's where the community comes in.

I guess at community level things become infinitely more viable as well, whether it's car-pooling, whether it's renewable energy schemes. We could draw up a list but I guess also having that structure to be able to finance, manage and to sustainably run, that's got to be at a community level. Then we have a whole set of learning of which we could look into cohousing about, OK, so to get that structure, how do you maintain it? How does that become not a drag but an actual real positive benefit so that you are running your environmentally friendly systems.

Ben: Where do you think this is going?

Jo: I think we have, we definitely have a fledgling movement. What's really interesting, I've been working in community housing in different models of development for the last 7 years and there's

been a lot of work driven by community members wanting to do something in their community, provide affordable housing, provide better housing. What increasingly we're seeing is individuals looking towards the models of cooperative housing and so forth to create housing solutions so we've got a real surge in interest in cohousing, cooperative mutualism. That comes because people want better places to live, they want somewhere affordable, they want secure tenure but they also want, there is that growing need for mutuality in support. Not just in where you live but how you live so if we're all working too hard, isn't it great if at the end of the day somebody's cooked you a meal? Or you go home and you don't have to clear up afterwards, somebody else will do that. You get to spend some time with the children. You've got a safe place because of the cohousing design. You know your children are going to be safe within the neighbourhood. You know that informally people have got oversight. You know that suddenly you want to, I don't know, do a new activity . . . You've got a shelf to put up and you don't have a drill. Somebody in the community has.

I think people recognise both the social aspects, which are really important, that social capital but also the real cost benefit as well.

Ben: In the show notes I'll put a link to the UK Cohousing Network. We also heard from Dr Paul Chatterton from the University of Leeds in this particular session and he's moving in on a project. It's called LILAC, but I thought I'd put a link for that as well so you can see how one of these operates and there's another project that's mentioned quite a lot called Lancaster Cohousing. All of those I want to find out more about in due course.

Running out of time on today's podcast. As you can see I can't fit in very much, can I, but I want to mention one more session that I went to. This is more, I told you before how I'm involved in my local town of Hertford, how we look towards the future and so I saw this session on reinventing the high street and thought I'd pop along there. If you live in a high street where lots of the shops have closed, it can be quite scary. You want your community to thrive and somehow the people seem to be going elsewhere or spending the money elsewhere or on the Internet. Is there anything you can do? And that's what this session was all about.

One of the most interesting points I heard in that session was that when towns hit rock bottom that's where sometimes there can be a light at the end of the tunnel. The landlords sell. They can just constantly be putting the prices up of rent, making any shops a waste of time even starting because you don't know where you

stand as rates get upped all the time. But once those properties are back in the hands of the community with a few visionaries and a few people really keen to make it work, it can become more sustainable again.

The other point that seemed to be hammered home a fair bit is the clone town is dead and you've really got to pursue your unique identity these days.

Also, how we use town centres has changed. It's very much about entertainment as well as buying things so you've got to bear that in mind that as perhaps houses have changed and how we use them, so has the high street. But I thought that was really interesting and I'm going to take that information to the next meeting we have in our Hertford Futures group.

There's just time for one more interview clip and I suppose this is another big side of Ecobuild, it's the networking, those people that you're not sure you're going to meet until you go and you start chatting and one thing leads to another. I bumped into Robert Stern who's a filmmaker. He's someone who's trying to crowdfund a documentary on woodsman Ben Law, so I asked Robert to tell me a bit more about this.

Robert: I don't know how many of your listeners will have heard of Ben Law. I mentioned the name may not mean anything to them but what I've found is if you say: "Do you watch Grand Designs? Do you remember that episode with that man who built his house in the woods?" Then people start to remember because I think there have been more than 100 episodes of Grand Designs now and the one on Ben Law building his house in the woods is the most popular, the most repeated, it's Kevin McCloud's favourite and the audience's favourite and it really made a very deep impact on people.

I recognise in Ben, as a filmmaker, he's one of these rare people, especially involved in sustainability, he's a fantastic exemplar of sustainability but he doesn't preach. When you see what Ben does and hear him talk you don't feel you're being told what to do, you aspire to being like him actually. That's true whether you own woodland and want to live in the woods like him or whether you live in a tower block, I think.

Ben: So why have you chosen him as a subject? Why particularly him?

Robert: Well, I make broadcast documentaries for a living and a year or so ago I just spent a day filming, making a short film for Japanese public television, funnily enough, about Ben, and I was just fascinated. And we got on very well personally. In the pub afterwards, actually, we were chatting about this and that and I was saying: “Your lifestyle is amazing. Dropping in for a day is really interesting but seeing what you do through the changing seasons and how it all connects together and all this incredible variety of things that you do, from construction to coppicing to foraging, it’s all connected by the seasons. So why hasn’t anyone made a documentary about a year in your life?”

He said: “Well, people have asked about that before. What kind of film would you like to make? What are you thinking of?” I described off the top of my head what I’d like to do and he said: “Yeah, that’s what I want to do.”

What I then discovered is that Channel 4 and the BBC, ever since the Grand Designs thing, various broadcasters and production companies have approached him to do something like this but he’s refused all those offers, mainly because they want to do it in a TV kind of way. They want to make it a reality show, they want to pump it up a bit, they want to make it more exciting.

From my point of view what he does is absolutely fascinating, interesting enough not to need any sexing up.

Basically there’s one opportunity . . . Although it’s an annual cycle, you really need to start in September because that’s when Ben takes on two apprentices that stay with him throughout the whole year. It’s obviously great for a documentary maker too because instead of watching one lonely man in the woods talk to you, explaining what he does, you get all these different levels of narrative. We’re watching him explain it to the apprentices and they stand in for us. They ask the questions we’d ask and they make the mistakes that we’d make and then we see how they’re getting on in the woods because it’s pretty tough going through a winter. They live in caravans in the woods 100 yards from where Ben lives. It’s pretty tough.

The apprentice selection process which takes place in September was fascinating. Basically Ben gets dozens of applications from all over the country, he whittles them down to 5 or 6, he invites them to Prickly Nut Wood where he lives and works in Sussex, and he just spends a week doing various activities and observing them. At the end of the week he selects the two that he wants to spend the next

year with. So this is the real Apprentice! I mean, why do TV companies need to sex this up? The stakes are much higher. Sir Alan doesn't have to live with whoever wins his competition for the next year. The stakes are much higher here, actually.

Ben: Well, it sounds like this is going to be a crying shame if this doesn't get made. So, how can we support you and make sure you get to your achieved goal?

Robert: Well, I'm delighted to tell you! [Robert laughs.] The reason I work with broadcasters in the past, it's very clear why I can't go to them for this particular film. I've had one experiment last year with crowdfunding that went very well and I'm trying it again. I just launched the campaign. It's on Kickstarter.com, which is the biggest crowdfunding platform. If you go to Kickstarter.com and search for Ben Law, it'll get you there.

The project is called Ben Law's Woodland Year and I'm looking to raise £50,000 by March 31st, which may seem like a lot of money, it is a lot of money but I've got to film for a whole year and then edit it all and you may as well do it properly. That's actually a really low figure for making an hour of broadcast quality TV. I think Ben's story and what he does merits that treatment.

Ben: I'll put a link in the show notes to the Kickstarter campaigner, where Robert has made a short video explaining more about him, but he's got a long way to go in the funding and not much time left so help him out if you can. He needs your support.

Well, that rounds off another podcast. Again trying to do something different, experimenting a little bit, but next time we'll be back to our normal format of one long interview. My guest will be Mark Brinkley, author of the Housebuilder's Bible, which is coming up to its 10th edition. So don't miss that one. Until then, take care.