HOUSE PLANNING HELP

Episode 74

How a Public Consultation Helped a Rural Self Build

The show notes: www.houseplanninghelp.com/74

Intro: Alex Baines is someone who I've been in contact with over the course of the last year. He's been telling me about his build and it's been edging closer and I've been wondering, *could we do something with this*? So you'll hear all about what we have hopes for.

I started by asking him when he first came up with the idea of building a house.

Alex: It was really something that came out of the necessity of where my life had got to at that stage. I got married in 2010 to Louise and we got married here. Louise, my wife, is a local. And we started looking around for somewhere to live and frankly we couldn't find anything. So, we were living at the time in my mother's house and we stayed there for another year and a half. And as we were there we realised that actually the only option we had was to find somewhere to buy and to build. We had a certain amount of money, just not enough to buy what we actually wanted to do, which at the time was a small house with a little bit of land around it. We love our dogs and that was the aim. Luckily, my mother had a parcel of land and we thought *well let's see what we can do here*.

That's really where it came from. There was the initial idea, there's a bit of space here, can we do it? Eventually we decided that actually we probably couldn't because all the planning rules stipulate in the area that you can't build anything new unless it's in what they call 'eleven sustainable locations'. But we decided that actually that was exactly what we wanted to do, so we then started that process and that was now about four years ago.

Ben: Often in this podcast, because we have people who listen all around the world and want to get something that's valuable to them, I say let's not talk about planning because it's so specifically down to the UK. But we're looking at doing something quite interesting with your project and I'm hoping it will be the first of many, and that is to follow it all the way through. But this could be a

really interesting one because we're sitting with a pile of papers right in front of us and I have no idea what these are. And it seems as if you've worked through different iterations of the house. So, what was stage one? You've said what you've just said, where do we move on from there?

Alex: Well, planning itself, the actual rules of the planning are relatively irrelevant. We decided that we wanted to live in this location and to live in this location we wanted to build a house. It was pretty obvious what we needed to do was to get all the locals on side because we don't want to say, "Right, we are going to build somewhere here," and we are going to annoy everyone by doing something they don't want. The point of being here is because we enjoyed the people and we enjoyed the location, so it was very much *involve the locals* right from the beginning for us.

So actually the overall process before we even went to planning, we did three or four public consultations, which was effectively we hired the local hall which thankfully cost very, very little at the time, and we opened it up for a couple of hours at the weekend for people to come in and see where our current ideas had got to. To Louise and I it was purely let's get the right size, what suits us, but effectively the externals let's let the locals decide what they actually want to see in this location.

So we came up with a number of ideas with the architect. I think it was even by the second consultation we got to idea 13 or 14 by that stage and that was put forward to them. Each time we let them say what they liked, what they didn't like and we went forward and backwards, which eventually meant that when we did settle on a plan that everyone seemed to appreciate, that we went to the planners we had a vast amount of local support. That's why it went through even though the planning regulations in this particular location were against it.

Ben: But that to me, seems that in a common sense world, yes, it's great to appease your neighbours, but, that's almost designed by everyone in the community. Is that really what you want? If you wanted to go and build… you're only going to get a chance to do this once. Is it going to be what you want?

Alex: You have to keep boundaries to what you are trying to do, so this is what we're looking at. Does this type of concept work with you, or does this? So initially we had very contemporary designs and very traditional designs for this location, and there's aspects that people liked and people that didn't like. What we got to do is actually to get

people to be a bit more specific about what in particular they liked and what they didn't like. And we could pick and choose and try and get both parts into it. So we've ended up with a building that by form is quite contemporary but by material is quite traditional. So, the externals of the building are all Cotswold natural stone but you look at the design and it's a curve, so there was a mixture of both to a certain degree in it.

There's a fair amount of glazing on the south whereas on the north side there is very little. That's partly to do with producing the energy but it is also partly to reduce the actual visible impact from those areas that people can see it from.

Ben: How did you do this consultation? Is it a simple process? Is it something you put together or are you hiring someone to take you through this?

Alex: No, it's something that we put together. It was something that Louise came up with, saying basically, "I don't want to annoy everyone. If I'm settling down with my kids in this area, I don't want to be the bête noire in the corner, so I want everyone to know what's going on." So effectively all we did was we wrote a letter and we posted it through every single post box in the village, inviting them to come and see what we were proposing.

Ben: So this is something that you could do anywhere in the world?

Alex: Yeah, absolutely. This is what you want to do just to involve people in the process. And we did it off our own backs. We just had an architect draw up plans because frankly my ability to draw anything is pretty useless.

Ben: The first time you did this then, what did you come up with? I've just thought perhaps in the show notes to this episode what we could do is show a few of these evolutions. We can talk about it here if that's the right term?

Alex: Yeah absolutely. I'm trying to remember those first early designs. There was an element of a design which I liked. Because this project was also to do with my background and my work was actually to allow people to experiment and try and find new ways of doing things. In the architect's practice, we said: "By the way anyone who wants to do a design here's the number of rooms, go! This location, go."

We ended up with some intriguing drawings to say the least.

Ben: Wait, wait, wait! So, you've got the architects . . . isn't this costing you a fortune? You're saying just go for it . . . come up with some interesting designs.

Alex: No, well we had our design that we were working up with the architect, that we were considering. But what we said was for some of his juniors that had never really been full on to the design, if they want to spend a bit of time they could come up with an outline design. Now this is not a detailed design or anything like that. It is almost a hand sketch or possibly a CAD sketch of a design that they liked or a concept that they liked, so it's a bit of a work experience item for them.

Ben: And based on the location and the materials in that area or just whatever they fancy?

Alex: It was basically based on the location and our client, our simple overview client brief, ie, literally the number of rooms, and that was it. That was what they were given, the location and the number of rooms.

Ben: So, at what stage do you start filling out your brief more, was it after you'd got further down the line with these? I'm not even sure what is in front of us now. You've flicked through a couple of the things but these are the consultations we've been talking about?

Alex: Yes. What we've got here is the printouts of three of the consultations plus all the forms. So each time we did a consultation we had feedback forms from all of the individuals that attended. So 30 or 40 people would come in, some people would say they hate it, some people would say they love it. The great advantage of putting in three or four different designs at a time or drawings, ideas, whatever you wanted to call them, was that people said: "Don't like that but I do like this, don't like that but I do like this." And that's effectively what we got here. So we got what was put forward to them and we've got some of their responses.

Ben: I suppose now we should look at the building that you are going to construct. How did you know that this was the final iteration?

Alex: That's an interesting one. It basically came down to what worked for us and what everyone seemed to be happy with. So the last consultation, the comments had got quite specific. And there was particular nuances that people wanted and they didn't want. And so we then took those on board and came up with this final design.

And it was remarkably simple compared to a lot of the earlier designs. It is in effect a rectangular box from a thermal envelope point of view. But from the aesthetic point of view, it doesn't look like it in the slightest.

Ben: I was just going to say that having looked at this. It looks quite curved, so it is a box disguised in some way?

Alex: Yeah, the only variation is that we are having a slightly curved roof on top and that's it. The rest of it is literally just a rectangular box. And yet we didn't get to that stage interestingly enough until after that final consultation, and it's ended up with a much cheaper, simpler conceptual design. But it's had all that background from everyone else which is why it was eventually able to push through.

Ben: And we talked about the brief before, so at what stage did you put in all of the bits and how you wanted to live in that house? Maybe you can take us through that process.

Alex: We outlined that at the very beginning as to what we wanted. We both lived in this area for quite a while, we knew exactly what we wanted. But from us what we wanted was very simple. It was a certain functionality of room types and room sizes. One of the main items was basically having a boot room, and a boot room that had a shower because dogs go out and play, kids go out and play, all of us get muddy, shower before you basically get into the house. That was almost it. Everything else was just simple; dining room, living room, a few bedrooms and a couple of them being en-suite.

The other aspect of it was my background. I do a lot of sustainability work and low energy construction and there was no doubt that it had to be Passivhaus. There was also, because of the planning regulations here, I wanted to show them that we could do more and we also went for Code level 6 (The Code for Sustainable Homes) at the same time which was quite easy to do for this type of build. But to my mind we could, with a few tweaks, make any building Passivhaus. It was just getting those tweaks right. And it was that that allowed me to take the input from the locals and to say, "Well yes, well no, that doesn't work from this point of view." They were all, once they understood what we are trying to do in terms of low energy and the ecological aspects which are external to the building, they were all very supportive of the concept and then it was just a question of getting the design to work and fit them.

Ben: Will this be certified Passivhaus?

Alex: Yeah, certainly. I'm a certified Passivhaus consultant, so for that aspect I'll want to make sure that it is fully certified.

Ben: What is the construction method that you'll be using?

Alex: On this particular one, we are looking at ICF. Now the reasoning behind that, and I know a lot of people are . . . There's this big debate about concrete, but the reason behind that is, we're looking at the longevity of this building and of the site in general. So the externals of the site is all about improving the ecology and improving the landscape, and we're working closely with the planning committee on that. The building itself, we've gone for ICF because we're trying to create a building that is going to last for hundreds of years and it is purely the shell and the floor that is effectively the concrete.

So we've got this set size. It is completely clear inside which is the reason we went with it, which means that anyone, and as families evolve, as our family evolves, and as those families that may use the building in the future, they can completely change the internal set up of the building, without changing the externals. It has that completely clear span inside and that was one of our key sort of drivers, as to how we want the building to go towards the future.

Ben: That's quite interesting having a) learned quite a bit about ICF, and also thought that the worst thing is when you've created something out of concrete and you hope that it will last generations and then the next user comes along and thinks, *oh right knock this down and put up what I want* . . . But you've created this space that can be changed, which I like and I think that's good.

Alex: Yeah, well we've done that because . . . It's unlike a normal building. This is built into the ground. It would look really bizarre, I mean it looks slightly bizarre as it is, but it would look really bizarre to then try and put an extension on it. You can't really put any extensions on to it. So, therefore, the building itself has to be flexible internally rather than externally. And so that was where that design aspect came from. There's a slight professional side to it, which as you mentioned the ICF. There are areas there that we want to research and check into in terms of how it fluctuates over the course of the year, and that's another reason I've gone down that way to find out exactly how it works.

Ben: And on top of this, how is this building finished off? We know that the actual structure is ICF, but what else can you tell us about it?

Alex: The landscape and the externals, currently it is a farmer's field and a bit of mown lawn so, ecologically wise, there was very little there. And the aim for this was to enhance the whole landscape. So what we've created is in effect a building that has a wildflower meadow that goes straight over the top and into the surrounding landscape. So there would be no variation apart from the fact that you're suddenly walking up a slight hill over the building and down the other side. That then links in to other areas around the side where we're doing specialised planting to encourage all the local wildlife. There's pond-life as well. So, all of that is really to encourage that area.

That is also partly why we went down for the Cotswold walls on the outside, because those are habitat locations. So, all in all it was to try and develop as much habitat as we could, because effectively we had here farmland that was hardly ever being used, had no benefit. And what we're looking at in this particular area is increasing our ecology. It has died out somewhat. We want to help it develop. So, the externals was all about seeing what we could do to increase the ecology.

Ben: Now, I want to ask you a couple of questions just as we get towards the end, about you and some of the practicalities. I know that you're a busy guy, so how are you going to be overseeing this build?

Alex: With a certain amount of trepidation! But actually in reality what's happening is we've decided to split this out. So we have gone to a company that does ICF manufacture and they want to use this as a slight test project. But what we've done is slightly different to a lot of people. We are working with them to do just the shell. So, I will hand over the land to them, and they will hand back, a couple months down the line, an airtight, watertight shell, and they are managing that aspect. Now, to me that is the best way, once I've checked all the details of the Passivhaus side, of making sure that it works every day. The only other way I could do it is basically by being on site every day, and as you say that's not possible. So that is the first aspect, they are there, they have a contract to deliver the shell.

We can then work with our local electricians and plumbers to effectively deliver the internals. Now, I mentioned earlier that the internals or my ability to draw was nothing and my ability to design is even less. That is very much Louise's place. She will come up with the actual aspects of how it works and what it looks like inside.

So when we get to that stage, that's going to be much more her side as she is here with our two kids, she is able to look over that side more and more.

But that early stage, which is the important part to me which is all about getting the envelope right, we do all the detail. We do all the detailed work now and that has taken us a number of months. We got planning now six months ago, and that's what we've been working on is purely the shell. So, we're now getting ready at the stage to start the build and they have this contract to effectively take it through and to deliver this exact item and that means they will manage it. They will manage the site and we work that way.

Ben: Is this quite a simple build then? As I see it in my mind it's getting that foundations in to begin with, digging down obviously first and then you've got the box that goes on top and pretty much you're just fiddling around in the inside? I've probably hugely simplified that, but is that what you are doing really on this build and then just disguising it in the meadow?

Alex: That was the intention. Unfortunately that's not quite the case! And that's happened purely because of the views that we've got at the site. We've got these far reaching views actually across the M4, which I think is about 40 miles away. And as such, we wanted large windows. Unfortunately putting the large windows in has meant structurally we've had to play with it slightly internally and it is not as simple as we actually thought, because of the depth of the building and trying to get this clear space.

But in essence, yes it is that simple. We are just trying to get a flat bed, build a box on top of it and get the windows in and get that ceiling right. So, a lot of our detail is actually about making sure that we've got the window junctions right, because that's effectively all there is left because of the ICF construction. That was one of the other reasons I went down the ICF line was to make sure we were creating a simplified system. We didn't have to think too much about our airtightness, and our insulation was effectively built into it. We knew we could get a solid core the whole way around.

Ben: Does that help with costing this as well, keeping it simple and choosing a build method that you can take all the way through?

Alex: It helps with working to a cost and you know what you are dealing with. It is possibly slightly more expensive. It depends on where you are coming from and what you're trying to do, certainly in this case because of the complications of large windows on the south side.

And then because we've got the large windows, we've got to work out what we are going to do from the shading point of view. And we are having to over-engineer that aspect of it, which I prefer not to do but this is working to the site rather than working to the building. But it's the only area that we are effectively over-engineering slightly. It allows you effectively to work to a budget. You know how much it's going to cost to do it in ICF and that's the benefit rather than trying to fiddle things thicker, thinner, do I need an extra structure here, do I not? It's giving us that benefit of working to a closer budget.

Ben: Daylighting was something that I was going to ask you about. Are there any dark spaces, perhaps particularly so, or have you had to be clever about how you let light into the building?

Alex: Yes and no. Most of pretty much all the living area is on the south side of the building. There is a bedroom and there is a hallway on the north side. We were very worried about one of the rooms downstairs because the whole basement level is underground. We are digging out in front of that basement on the south side, and you've got windows there but yes the back end of it does get dark and to be fair it was something that was really worrying us for quite a while. Although on the north side on the upper level or on the ground floor, we had one large window by the front door which allowed light to come in from that side.

It wasn't until actually working with the structural guys that someone threw in a brainwave which was to do with the stairs. And we had the stairs coming out of the hallway going downstairs. And I mentioned that it was part of the Code stuff we actually wanted to put in a location for a lift, so we needed to work out where that was to go and then they mentioned: "Oh my god, that's going to make a whole load of changes to our floor structure in certain locations." And then someone said: "Well why don't you make the stairs wider and the lift goes in between the stairs?" So it's all built into that one area where we're going to have to beef up the foundations possibly anyway. But as we're not putting in the lift until we need it, we've now got a huge light well down into the back of the house through that stair core. So, in reality, we haven't got so much of a problem that we thought we had.

Ben: Well I'm looking forward to seeing how this building progresses. Hopefully, as I said at the beginning of this, it will be the first of many that we can put inside our archive of houses that you will be able to access through our membership website, but in the meantime, Alex, thank you very much.

Alex: You're welcome, thank you very much.