

Episode 77

Inspiration as a Big Developer Loses Out on a Plot to a Local Group

The show notes: www.houseplanninghelp.com/77

Intro: Today's podcast came about when I went on a tour of Ashley Vale. This was as part of the AECB Conference a couple of months back. And I found it so inspiring because it's 15 years ago since things got underway and it's now very established. The land was initially going to be scooped up by a large-scale developer and you know we're not big fans of them! Their speciality is those poor quality little boxes so for me that fork in the road of which way is it going, quality house or just one of those boxes to sell on for profit? So let's hear that story.

I started by asking Jackson how he came to be part of this project.

Jackson: Well I was renting a room with my partner and I wanted to find a way of making my home more sustainable in terms of its use of resources, it's energy efficiency and stuff, and actually renting a space it's very hard to do that because obviously there's a long term issue of if you invest in that property you don't know how long you're going to be in there.

So I was really keen on finding a way of actually buying my own home. Now I couldn't afford to do that. We were looking around at old warehouses and potentially rundown buildings that we could maybe take on and while we were doing that I got a note through the door, where a site near where we lived was coming up for sale and a planning application was in place to develop the site. And the local community, they didn't really want to have a developer come in and create a sort of generic housing model in the area but wanted to look at what other things they could do with the site. And because we had already been looking at what options were available to us and because it was on our doorstep we thought, well let's go to the first meeting and see what happens.

Ben: I like the way how you said that you didn't have any money, and so that you were going into this because when you consider the price of a piece of land and then trying to wrangle that away from developers, it almost seems like you're going to incur way more

costs, but I'm sure we'll get to that bit of the story. So, you went to this meeting and then what happened?

Jackson: So we went to this first meeting in the living room of a house in the Ashley Vale area of Bristol. And there were probably about 12-15 people also turned up and there was quite a sort of energised discussion about what the site was, what was happening to it and whether as a collective could we do something else with it. Two of the people that came to the meeting were people that had already built a house right beside the site. There was one guy called Graham who was amazing in terms of just saying self build is a really great way of empowering people to create their own home. Certainly in a way that's going to be more cost effective than actually buying a house that's already built. So I think that directed the group so there were a few people that were really championing that and I guess it grew from then.

Ben: Maybe you could describe the site for us?

Jackson: Okay, so the site is amazingly situated. It's not a through road site so you end up here if you're lost or you actually want to be here! And there's a city farm in . . . so it's a valley as well, so it's got banks on effectively three sides. One side has got allotments, the other side is a sort of raised railway line that heads north out of Bristol, and the other side is a nature reserve that is a large embankment that goes up and you can stand up and look out over Bristol.

The site was an old scaffolding site, completely covered in a large concrete slab that they used to store the scaffolding on. There's two big warehouses on the site: a big brick warehouse and a pre-fab'd metal warehouse.

There were a few other buildings on site. There was a 1960's office building that the company used and there were a couple of other smaller sites, there was a toilet block and a garage space to fix up the trucks. So a fairly straight forward industrial site and beside the site there's a few conventional sort of Edwardian terraces running along, so there was probably, I'm not sure, maybe 60 homes already in this immediate local area.

Ben: It's quite difficult when you're buying land, because a lot of the time it goes to the highest bidder. So this scaffolding company, why did they sell it to you?

Jackson: Okay, so the scaffolding company wasn't particularly interested in selling to the community. They were as you say, just wanting to sell the site. They were moving on. A developer was already in negotiations with the scaffolding company and they had a planning application in. So the community, once we'd had this inaugural meeting, thought okay how do we . . . If we want to do something else with the site, there is almost two pathways that we need to run in parallel. One is we had to look at how do we stop the developer doing their plans, but at the same time you can't just stop something happening, you have to come up with an alternative.

So it was like okay, what do we want to do as a community and start developing that as an idea at the same time as trying to stop the developer doing what they were doing. And because they had a planning application in it was really looking at what their plans were and then presenting a case saying that this isn't what the community wanted.

And at the planning meeting the community stated that we wanted to have more of a sustainable type of project, and obviously you can't say as an alternative this is what we want, but all we could do was look at the planning application as it was and we wanted to ensure there was more of a mixed use on site, and that that was important in terms of sustainability for housing. And at the time Agenda 21 was a key policy that was being put around so we were using that and saying the future of housing is really important, that this is a key consideration and that the current planning application wasn't sufficient really in terms of how we need to create homes.

Ben: I imagine at the time there were very few other group self build schemes to draw any experience from? Even now when I look around I thought I'd seen a group self build scheme but it was more cohousing.

So take us through how you all had the confidence, not only to get this plot of land, but then start developing, designing or whatever that process was for you?

Jackson: Well there were a few other schemes which were more, I guess, people led. You know so at the time we investigated the Hockerton housing project. And a few of us went off and explored other things. So there's the Findhorn project up in Scotland, and we had a look at Christiania which is in Copenhagen. So we were all trying to get inspired by other things like that.

But I think a lot of it came down to the encouragement of a few of the people that were part of that first meeting. You know there's a guy called Mike, Graham, Martin, Janet, Felicity . . . people that had experience, particularly Graham and Martin who had experience of building their own place. They were saying self build would be a really great way and would really meet the objectives I guess of this area and would allow people to actually create a home that suited what they wanted, at a budget that suited them rather than it being dictated in more of a top down process.

Ben: What did you have to do to commit to the project, so that you've got a plot, you're building a house now?

Jackson: Okay, so for anyone to get involved obviously they would want to know what they're getting into. And so we went through a bit of a process. One was that, obviously as I said, we had to be fighting the planning application that was already submitted.

At the same time we had to come up with a design for the site that worked and there were conditions with the site that we needed to deal with. Particularly there was a large culvert, so a large waterway, that runs through underneath the site and there's various sewage pipes that run across the site that we needed to take into consideration.

So we had to look at what sort of layout would work for the site, how that would divide out into plots and the size of plots that would be available and that master planning was undertaken. Then people knew if they came into the scheme that the plots were of a certain size and because the cost of the overall site, which was in the region of about £750,000, with an estimation of the costs of putting the services in, that all being divided out between the number of plots and the other things we wanted to do on site, came up effectively with the plot price.

So at the early stage once that had been worked out then firstly we had to do some local events where we presented the idea and we started saying you know is anyone up for doing a self build? And also I think there's a real drive for people to be part of something exciting.

Obviously there was a lot of risk at that early stage, you know people were buying into something before we knew it was possible. And the commitments at that early stage were that at the call people had to put their deposit down, which was 10% of their plot price. Around £3000. £3000 to put into the scheme, at the point

before we even had planning. That was probably my personal biggest hurdle - where am I going to find £3000? - which seems a bit bizarre when you think how much a house costs. Finding £3000 was like, well I didn't even have £3000 to find!

So we managed to pull that together and then it was like, okay, how do we move on to the next stage? At the call and at the point where we . . . so this was all happening again while we were still fighting the existing planning application. But we didn't put all the deposits down until we were successful in getting the developer's planning application rejected which happened. That's another story in its own right!

But having got the planning application rejected we then went okay, who's serious about this? If you're serious put your money on the table, put your deposit on the table. From that we had the overall master plan that we had 20 plots on the site - 20 self build plots that is - and then there was space in the centre of the site for 6 other plots that we got a housing association involved in. So they were going to build 6 affordable houses on those plots. And then we had the existing office building, 1960's office building that we were going to renovate in some way.

And so those 20 plots, those 20 groups of people, had to put their deposits on the table and at the call had to come up with the rest of their money to buy the plot at the point when we needed to exchange with the landowner. And so that became quite complicated because there was you know, a solicitor who represented the landowner, we had a solicitor that represented the new organisation that we set up called the Ashley Vale Action Group, and that consisted of those people that came to that inaugural meeting, and then we had the self-builders that came in. So the self-builders weren't necessarily the people that were part of the community group. So that's probably a key difference to this site, to maybe other self build projects, is actually this project was set up, designed, created and delivered by the community group that existed of local people that weren't necessarily wanting to build their own home.

Ben: I'm not sure I'd even grasped that because I know some of the background of this project from before, so that's interesting that they were just really fighting for their neighbours effectively!

Jackson: Yes, and that I think gets kind of lost sometimes that this project was created by the community that already lived here that wanted to make the opportunity for other people to be able to live here in

an affordable and sustainable way. Obviously there's a benefit in one way, that's tangible, that actually there's an exciting project that happens on their doorstep but they weren't, the people that were involved in that initial Ashley Vale Action Group, weren't directly going to benefit through actually building their own home.

Now there were some, like I was, I think I was the only director that ended up building my own house, so I ended up being one of the directors and then I had to not be a director of the Ashley Vale community group and then became a self-builder, and there were a couple of people that their children got involved in doing the project, but effectively most of the self-builders that came in weren't part of that community group.

So when we bought the site the self-builders were actually buying the site, they were buying their plots as freehold plots, and because they were buying the plots they had to have their own legal representative. So we ended up having a representative of the self-builder, a representative of the community group and a representative of the seller of the land. And obviously the community group didn't really want to be involved in terms of the purchase. It wanted to transfer straight from the seller to the self-builder, but obviously the seller didn't want to deal with a whole load of individual self-builders, so there was quite a legal logistical process there. So there was a bit of a fun happening there on the legal side.

Ben: Take me through your individual plot. Once you've bought it, are you doing everything yourself? Are you bringing in an architect? How did it work?

Jackson: So each of the plots were sold as freehold. Effectively that meant that each plot holder was in control of the delivery of their own self build. So effectively you could have taken any plot and it could have been in a field somewhere, but happened to be beside a load of other plots that were doing a similar thing.

As the community group, the Ashley Vale Action Group, for people to sign up to it we created a policy that we wanted people to conform to. So obviously, we wanted people to build sustainably, we wanted people to think about where their materials came from, their energy consumption and how it could be designed in a way that was beneficial not just to them but you know future residents that end up living in the homes they are created. And as a community group we instigated a number of training sessions where we got experts in to talk about passive solar design,

renewables, energy efficiency, layout, use of materials, those sorts of things.

So we had a number of training sessions. We also got all of the self-builders together to start establishing them as a collective and we ended up setting up a self-builders co-operative so we could create a better sort of economy of scale in terms of buying, so because each self-builder was responsible for their own space it meant that, and I think this is one of the key things that was really valuable for this site and what made it work so well, is there wasn't a requirement for everyone to work on everyone else's houses.

Now quite often you'll see a community or collective self build project happen where everyone works on House A, everyone works on House B, everyone works on House C. And there is great value in that and it brings people together, but then you've got to start creating some sort of measurement of how much time has Person 1 put into House A and is everyone putting in their 20 hours a week or 30 hours a week or whatever it is and how did you measure that and how do you then value the time? You know, is one person's hour the same value as another person's hour in terms of price, but also in terms of the amount of work that they do or the quality of work they do. So there's lots of things that become difficult. Because every plot was effectively independent it meant everyone could work in whatever way was most suitable to them.

So we, as a collective, we went through the design process. And Graham who was part of the community group, sat down with everyone and people sort of expressed what they wanted out of a home, and he formulated that into some designs which then helped create an overall planning application which meant that we had the 20 self build plots designs for each one separately, all compiled into one big document which we put in to the planners.

And then if we sort of jump the planning bit for a moment just to talk about the design stage, it meant that each self-builder could try and deliver it in whatever way they wanted. So they could go okay, we will instruct an architect to help detail it. But also it meant that each self-builder could instruct the delivery of it in any way they wanted.

So some instructed a timber frame company to actually build the frame, some built the frame themselves, some people collected together and got a timber frame company to build 5 or 6 homes on the site at a similar time. Some people got a different company to build their frame, and then the next stage is some people got contractors in to do different elements of the work. So some people

were really sort of hands off self build so they designed or helped design what they wanted, and then they just project managed effectively the build and they just got contractors in to do it all. And some people just went the whole hog and just did virtually everything themselves. Maybe they got people in where it was required by warranty or required by regulations, you know to actually get certain things signed off. So it was quite a diversity.

And also that diversity also led to different timescales which people worked at. You know so everyone's situations were different. Some people had more time in the week and could be on site and do stuff, and some people were working flat out in the week and came and did stuff in the evenings and weekends. That flexibility really was great for the site because it allowed people to work at whatever pace suited them and in whatever way suited them.

Ben: Does that mean that you're living on a building site for a number of years, or you just take that in your stride on a project like this?

Jackson: Yes, it means exactly that. And I think what we see quite regularly with TV shows about self build or about developments or anything like that, quite a lot of the excitement is set around are they meeting their deadlines, are they going over budget and everything is left on this sort of hook to pull people in after the adverts or whatever. And in my mind I'd really like to turn that upside down and say if people are getting involved in a self build then the process, the journey, is as important as the destination. And actually the journey, especially for a community scheme where you're doing it in and around other people, the journey is crucial, because it's the journey that creates the community to start with.

And obviously there are impacts to timescales. You know, if you're borrowing money then you're paying interest on that and all those things. And while you're living on site in a caravan then you're living in conditions that maybe you don't want to be living in, or whatever the situation. So I'm not dismissing the issue over time but I'd just really like to point out that the journey can be a really positive process and actually if the journey is seen in that way then actually living on site can be really rewarding. You know, if the site allows that to happen.

We had quite a few people living on site during that process and we had a really strong community of people living on that site while that happened, so I think we had 6 or 7 big static caravans on the site. Some other people in smaller caravans.

There's a really good grounding time where people were very much more involved. The outside space was really important because you're in a smaller space. And I think even the sense of community was very strong then. In some ways it may even be stronger than it is post development, because once people have got their homes they kind of get into their home, they get on with their lives, they've got their jobs, they're kind of off in the day and back in the house. When you're in working around each other every day and you're building and someone's got a delivery and you go and help them unload, or whatever, then actually they'll come and help you and you've got that real sense of connectivity between people around you.

Ben: Were there any other challenges through the build process that we should mention before we go on to what we have here?

Jackson: I guess a challenge was that lots of the people that got involved weren't builders. You know, they weren't people that were involved in building, or even in construction. So a lot of people were learning the ropes, you know, learning as they went and some people they either got the frame built and then worked out what they were doing.

And what was great about building your own place on a collective site, is a lot of people around that either had just done what you were about to do, and you could ask them, or they knew that they would be doing what you're doing, and so there was a lot of places where you could actually go and either chat individually to people or as groups, say we're trying to work out insulation, you know, what have people found is a really good insulation, what eco-insulations are around, that sort of thing.

And as a collective we went okay, let's go and visit the recycled newspaper factory and go and see what they do and how they work and get a feel of that. And so we set up a group and a load of us went off and went and actually visited the factory, and went okay, this looks great, let's use recycled newspaper for our insulation.

So there was I think . . . building your own place can be quite daunting, and I think there's a real aspiration, particularly in the UK at the moment, of this desire that people want to do it. People go: "I'd love to build my own home," and it goes right back to as children, people building their dens. I've got a couple of little kids and they just spend all their time building dens, pulling the living room apart. Or suddenly you'll come back and the sofa's upside

down, and it's like it's somehow part of our psyche to create a home, create a den, create a space that we're going to be in.

And somehow over the years that's been indoctrinated out of us. We've been removed from the idea that that's a possibility for us. And I think there's an inner instinct that's pulling people back to that and I think people are starting to stand up saying: "I don't want to have a house that's built for me that I've had no control over what's happened in it. I want to have some say over it." It might be for financial reasons, or it might be taste reasons or they want to influence the community they're going to be in.

Ben: Looking at the finished, well actually no perhaps there's one thing I should bring up before that, and that's the one house that isn't quite complete, nearly 15 years on. So has that caused an issue or has that made you think about what you might have done differently?

Jackson: Yes, interestingly that's my immediate neighbour's house, so I'm probably the one that's affected. Yes, we did have in place requirements that people had to build within a few years of actually taking on the site. And it's how you police, or how you enforce something like that. And as a community we've wanted to remain sort of positive and go, *how can we encourage people to do things in the right way*, rather than being too dictatorial.

And for that one particular that's not finished it is a real shame because there are people that would love to be part of this project, that would have built and would love to be living on this community in this space, and while no one's living in that house it's a waste of resource for people. There's a question of what are the reasons around that. There's been quite a push by the community to try and find ways to resolve that, either providing support or encouragement or even trying to buy that plot. You know, offering to buy the plot off of the self-builder that took it on.

Ben: They weren't a developer though were they?

Jackson: No, but the person that's got it does have other homes. So there was, I guess in hindsight, giving the opportunity to people that don't have a home. That was one of our key criteria at the beginning, is providing an opportunity for people who didn't have a home. But there was also a little bit of a scrabble of going, okay we need to find people that have got the money to buy the plot so we could purchase.

And also we were, as a collective group of people, working voluntarily. There was a real risk in terms of what we were trying to do and would we be able to make it all happen and be able to pull together the finances and deal with the legals and win over the planning application by the developer and make enough of the things connect to make the project even happen from the beginning.

So there was an element of going, okay we want people to be part of it who don't already have a home, want to build sustainably, want to live in the community. But also going, do we have enough people who have signed up that have got the finance?

As I said we had a lot of people sign up but then when it was like, come on, get your deposits on the table, that's kind of where a lot of people dropped out because they went, actually I don't have £3000 to do it. Or they went, oh it was a great idea but actually I don't think I can cope with building my own home. It seems too much for me.

So there was quite a few people that were offered a plot who then went it's the wrong time in my life to do this. So there was a sort of closing down in time of going do we have enough people to be able to do this. And the guy that's involved has been very helpful in other ways on the site to the project, but it is very frustrating that it's not built yet, particularly in terms of people not actually being able to use that as a home and live as part of the community.

Ben: Leaving that aside, how do you view your finished community that you've created here, and the alternative timeline had the developer got hold of it?

Jackson: Well I guess that's all hypothetical what would have happened had the developer got hold of it. I've got no idea what . . .

Ben: I can guess!

Jackson: Yeah! [Jackson laughs.] I'm sure! If you look at any other housing development that's what it would have been like. Looking at it now, walking around it and when people come and visit, you know we've had huge numbers of people. We've had delegations from all over the world that have come, right through to local primary school kids and architecture students and you know, we regularly do tours, we run workshops. As an off-shoot of the original community group we set up an organisation called Ecomotive (ecomotive.org). We run workshops to try and help people through the process of coming together as a group.

But when people come round it's hard to imagine the site being a big slab of concrete. It's very easy looking at it and going, *I wish I could be part of something like this*. And that is possible, but to visualise what we've got now back in 2000 and go, is this possible, I think it really took that really positive progressive push by the community to try and create something. And for that real push by some of the existing members of that community that had already been involved in self build or were handy or were . . .

We were fortunate in that people in that original group had skills to be able to make it happen. There was a guy that worked on the water board / water industry, who knew about services and there's a guy that worked in highways in the council and he was amazing in terms of guiding on road and systems and things like that. And there was carpenters and architects and you know, all sorts of people. And I think that's the beauty of when you open stuff up to the community, because out in the community there's a whole host of amazing expertise that we're able to feed in.

And I think you know that we were really fortunate that these people wanted to see something happen in a positive way and in a different way, and it really came down to that push by the local community to make something happen. And I think that's hugely powerful and it enabled a lot of people who otherwise would not have been able to have a home, being able to create a home. And for me personally I've been able to have a home that I just feel blessed that I had that chance to do it. You know, I've had the experience of building my own house now. I've learnt a lot of skills in that process. I've had fun cutting up bits of wood and fitting windows and fitting roofs and fitting electrics and you know the whole host of stuff. But I've got a home that I enjoy being in.

Ben: Well Jackson, thank you very much for your time today, for going through this story. I feel it's a very diverse community and I really enjoyed having a tour around it earlier in the year. Thank you.

Jackson: Brilliant, thank you very much.