

Episode 107

What Does it Take to Create Sustainable Neighbourhoods?

The show notes: www.houseplanninghelp.com/107

Intro: Jon Broome of Jon Broome Architects is our guest today. He has decades of experience in self building and even worked with Walter Segal in his early career.

While Jon believes we are getting better at delivering high performance homes he feels there's still more that could be done in terms of making better places. And that's going to be our focus in this interview.

I started by asking him to share some of this story and explain where his passion lies.

Jon: I started getting involved in people building their own houses back in the 1970s with Walter Segal, who some people may know as a designer who pioneered the idea of lightweight timber construction for self-building. And we worked together in Lewisham on a couple of schemes in the 70s and 80s which were very successful.

And following on from that I continued to work with groups in South London and elsewhere, building housing co-ops using that kind of technique.

Over the years I mean the interest in, I suppose what you might think of as group self-build and social community based self-build, has waned. Housing associations found it quite difficult to cope with. It's quite resource intensive and it takes time. But nevertheless I think over the years I have seen a lot of people getting an awful lot of benefit out of working in this way, designing and building for themselves.

And more recently obviously there's been quite an upsurge in interest in the idea of custom build and so we've started working again in that field. We did a design and fit-out scheme for a housing association in Walthamstow recently and a number of individual houses for kind of Grand Designs type clients who are wanting big, low energy, Passivhaus family houses. And more recently working

on a Community Land Trust Development in Lewisham which we've now secured a site for, we think around 13 or more houses and flats for people who wouldn't otherwise be able to get into decent housing in the city in London.

Ben: There's quite a lot I could dig into there. I think I must ask a question, at least a couple of questions, on Walter Segal because he's got a bit of a reputation and I know that whenever he's mentioned you seem to pop up in the background! So why was he so significant and what was it like working with him?

Jon: What Walter did was reinvent building construction from first principles to make it very simple and economic to build. And that technology if you like, very simple as it is, opened up possibilities for people to design for themselves and to build for themselves from start to finish, and so very economical buildings. And that opened up a whole range of possibilities which I think are yet to be realised fully actually.

Ben: I was going to ask you, how that has developed? Because obviously this was some time ago now, so is it something that's waned before it's maybe gathering pace again?

Jon: I should think there must be 200 or 300 houses inspired by Walter's work built in the UK. But from the mid 90s, I'm guessing, there hasn't been an awful lot of interest continuing in what he achieved. Partly I think because people's preoccupations in housing have moved on. There's always something new on the horizon, policy-wise. So it's value for money or prefabricated building, or currently you know custom building has become quite of interest. And so I think there was a bit of a period when people were preoccupied with other things really.

Ben: We're going to be talking about creating sustainable neighbourhoods today. Shall we start with why this is something you're particularly interested in?

Jon: I mean I'm concerned about the possibility of good building; buildings which perform well, low energy, sustainable, comfortable, light, airy, well ventilated, all those kinds of things. We can do all that.

What I think in the UK we find much more difficult is creating places, creating neighbourhoods which are convivial and support comfortable social living arrangements and so on. And so the question is what are the ingredients of such a sustainable

neighbourhood, and what would make it different from the kind of standard developer housing estate or council housing estate.

And I think one of the key things behind it is this idea of residents having control over the major decisions that affect how places are and how much they cost to live in and how they're built and designed and so on.

It's my belief that whilst the private sector delivers what a lot of people want and can afford, and whilst the public sector can deliver us a limited number at the moment of affordable homes for people who don't have a great deal of money, there is a big area in between where what's on offer doesn't satisfy what people want necessarily. It's not of a price that they can afford, it doesn't offer very decent places to live necessarily, a bit mean, a bit small, not very energy efficient, not terribly well built. And so it's bringing good building together with people.

It's to do with low energy building. It's to do with sustainable development. It's to do with, I don't know, just living in a convivial way in a city which normal housing arrangements don't encourage I don't think.

Ben: How do we get started, because as self-builders, a lot of us will just be doing this on our own? We might be wanting to be part of a sustainable neighbourhood but I'm assuming you have to start with that from the outset?

Jon: Yeah, I mean what we're doing in Lewisham is organised as a Community Land Trust which holds property in trust, as its name suggests, for the benefit of the community. And so anyone can join a group of that kind. There's a nominal membership, it's run by a board which are elected, so it's a democratic, open organisation.

And we're working with a number of different arrangements financially to give a spread of affordability, so at the bottom end of the range there'll be places you can rent for the sort of money that you would expect to pay for a council house for instance. There'll be shared ownership and shared equity dwellings where you can buy in at 25% of the ownership of the building, rising up to 80%. The Community Land Trust retains some of the equity to ensure that the overall development remains affordable in perpetuity so that the dwellings can't migrate into the private sector, the private market, which there are no limits.

Ben: This is how it gets out of control is it, and becomes something that's not very affordable?

Jon: Which is what happened with the original Lewisham self-build schemes which were built as shared ownership developments, which now change hands for half a million quid or something.

Ben: If we had land, I know it's a big if, is self-building still something that's actually quite cost effective if we get stuck in?

Jon: For sure. I mean I think you could save nearly half the cost of a dwelling I think. And it's significant.

And so in the Lewisham example that we're looking at at the moment we're encouraging a high degree of self-build because we feel a number of advantages follow from that. It reduces costs significantly, but also people in my experience have got a huge amount of self-confidence really out of building and designing and achieving something, which they're proud of. And I think the social benefits of that are enormous and currently underestimated and not understood really by a lot of people I think.

Ben: We had Michaela Benson on the podcast recently, who is a sociologist. And I was interested that one of the things she said is on the whole self-builders tend to be getting towards retirement and have worked their way up the housing tree so that they start with something small and perhaps do a little addition at the back and then get to that stage that they can build or are prepared to tackle a whole house. So is that your experience or could you come to this quite fresh and be part of this scheme for example?

Jon: Self-build covers a very wide range of experience and possibilities I think. One of which is as you say, people acquiring access to wealth through equity in housing and reinvesting it. It's not the only way and I think our members of the Community Land Trust on the whole are young singles and couples, and they're people who are struggling to find places which they can buy or rent for their income within London. So there's a very high proportion actually of young people.

Ben: Are they trading time, is that one of the factors? I know that this Lewisham scheme for example, you're saying that the leader of this project has spent about three years so far pushing it through, and I imagine that must also be one of the reasons why developers perhaps don't want the, if they've got a product that they just want

to shift on and sell, they don't really want this involvement because it does take a bit of extra time.

Jon: It can do. I mean I think the current interest in custom build can be beneficial to developers too because it means that they can reduce their risk by selling service plots for instance. They'll get their return on the land very quickly. So it can have benefits for developers, it can certainly have benefits for self-builders reducing costs. It's never going to be the solution to the housing problem which I think some policy makers rather hope it will be.

Ben: What are the issues then? What are the key issues if we put them on the table now?

Jon: It does take time but I think the benefits are long lasting in terms of quality of construction, design, maintenance, all these things. Satisfaction generally is much higher I think. But these are not the things which are prioritised by developers and policy makers really.

Ben: So why do their houses sell in your opinion? Because I often think, as we probably said at the beginning of this, that people are just buying it because they can't get anything else and it's too complicated to go down the self-build route.

Jon: I'm sure there is a hidden demand for something other than the market generally offers. But a lot of people can't, I mean it suits them fine. They don't want to get involved in complicated time consuming effort if they can buy something that's fine by them. But it's not everybody who wants to do that. It's very simple in my mind, it's just what's missing are the opportunities to design and build for yourself.

Ben: Talking about sustainable neighbourhoods, I know that you've been abroad so what has been the purpose of going to other countries and just having a peek at how they do things?

Jon: On the continent the culture of people being involved in self providing housing remains strong.

And so in Germany a very significant, probably more than half the housing market, is of that kind. And so in other cities in Germany, Berlin we were recently, probably something like 10% of the new housing in the city is being produced by groups of people getting together designing and then not necessarily building but commissioning housing. And that process is aided by the city government which has a small department which holds regular

public meetings for people who may be interested. The financial system encourages it because there are lenders, banks, regional banks which we don't really have in the UK, have established networks of professionals, architects and others who promote these schemes, and they are willing to lend on schemes which they know are being professionally managed and developed. So there is an infrastructure of people promoting this kind of thing.

And the availability of land is, I mean Berlin is a special case to some extent, but the local authorities in Germany have the power to compulsorily purchase land which they then put the infrastructure in and sell at a profit which gets ploughed back into housing development to groups who then build. And interestingly, the price is set. It's a fixed price and the competition between people who might want to develop the land is on the quality of the development, rather than on the price which they are willing to pay. [Ben laughs.] So it's quite a different way of thinking about land and what it's worth and how it should be used.

Ben: How do they assess what a quality development will be?

Jon: The things they're looking for, I think, are to do with value for money and I mean the number of dwellings, the quality of the dwellings, the groups. I mean a lot of these groups are serving special needs of one way or another, disabled people, older elderly people, things like that. And so it's about social provision, it's about quality on the whole.

Ben: And back here it's just that land is all about making as much money as possible?

Jon: Yes, and that includes public bodies as well who are required by government to do exactly the same.

Ben: Hmm. Interesting. Okay, so all of this time spent abroad, were there any practical elements you could bring back or was it really just seeing that's how we'd like it one day maybe but we just have to deal with how things are at the moment?

Jon: No I think there's a lot to learn and we can put a lot of that to practice in terms of how groups are organised, how design processes are organised with workshops and design sessions on different elements of the proposals and so on. It requires a different set of skills I think that architects and developers don't generally have about listening to people, about communicating effectively about controlling costs effectively, because self-builders are very at

risk of budgets going out of control and so on. So these are all important lessons I think which we'll be putting into practice in these developments.

Ben: In the case of Lewisham, you are the architects. Can you explain how you're enabling this? What are you doing in this process?

Jon: Well so far I mean we've been working up the ideas, so what does affordable housing mean to who, how are you going to measure it? We're aligning the cost of people's housing with their income, rather than with the value on the open market and that's the first step.

The second step is to make sure that houses are cheap to run. That you're not spending a thousand pounds or more a year on heating and lighting, you're spending £100 or £200. We're concentrating on making sure that issues like the sustainability of the development as a whole, so it's car free, we'll have electric shared cars on site, we'll have provision for bicycles and so on.

All those kind of measures making sure it's a mixed community. It's not just people without money or people who've got a lot of money. It involves a certain level of cross subsidy from people downsizing, let's say getting on wanting to find a congenial group to live with in a supportive environment. A bit of money to put in, supporting young people who are struggling to rent or buy.

Self build to reduce cost but also to create opportunities. The local authority is keen to create opportunities for people to acquire skills to improve their employment prospects. They're the kind of basic building blocks that we're working with.

The group has developed ten principles in conversation to guide the vision if you like, which encompass these ideas of sustainability, affordability, of resident involvement, robust financial model to base it on.

And the task now is to translate that into a design brief into plans for flats and houses and also a method of construction which is going to be capable of unskilled people constructing on site, and all the necessary kind of contractual arrangements to make that happen, and that includes sort of legal frameworks for leases and things. It includes financial arrangements for loans and mortgages. It includes all the kind of measures that you know building standards, control and so on, planning issues. So there's a lot to do.

Ben: You've been through this scenario a number of times, so just talking about what people want in a community and what they want from their home, can you draw any comparisons?

Jon: I think what matters more than anything else is having a feeling of being in control of their destiny and knowing how the building is and how and why it's designed in the way it is, how it can be changed, developed, improved. That's a great facility I think which people enjoy more than anything else. It's just being in touch with your immediate living surroundings.

Ben: Because it always used to be like that didn't it? If you go back hundreds of years you'd have had to do it yourself?

Jon: Yeah, of course. I mean before the industrial revolution really everybody was building houses for themselves one way or another for sure. And they were using local available materials which were necessarily economical to build with. We enjoy much more comfortable places to live now in terms of artificial light and central heating and all these other things. And it's making all that accessible to ordinary people, to manipulate I think which is the trick. It's not self-evident how for instance modern buildings are ventilated. How you get fresh air, how much, how do you minimise, you know, in the old days you opened a window but you got a blast of cold air, so it's making modern construction more available to the man in the street as it were.

Ben: In terms of how sustainable communities will grow, are we always going to have that split of people that just want to buy off the shelf and those that want to be more involved in the process?

Jon: I think it's my belief that what matters is getting developments on the ground that you can look at, talk about, demonstrate what it means, and I think this goes for sort of cohousing developments for instance of which there are a handful in the UK now. Common in Scandinavia and more recently in America, where people have got together in this way and one thing has led to another and I think the same thing can happen here. That people will see the real advantages which lie there. I mean as I said I don't think it's for everybody but I think there's a significant number of people, as in America, who find that this way of living suits them very well.

Ben: I've been to a number of cohousing communities and I do think that it's something that more people would like if they experienced it. It's the same with a Passivhaus that if you go into one and experience that comfort and air quality then you'd probably want that as well.

It's just how you get over that bit of knowing that that is actually something that you desire.

Jon: Yeah, and the critical thing is getting stuff on the ground that works. I'm very keen about this Lewisham's RUSS Community Land Trust's project, because if we can pull it off and demonstrate what the possibilities are in an urban situation, you know I'm hopeful that a lot of people will recognise that there's something in that.

Ben: So how long will this project take to achieve and what are the steps forward from here?

Jon: Well we've just secured a site and so we'll be embarking on a year of developing the designs and so on, and probably something around two years to build.

Ben: How did you acquire that site?

Jon: The site is in the ownership of the council, and so the local authority have assisted the development by making that site available. Now I mean it hasn't been easy to persuade them. It's taken time and it's taken a lengthy and expensive tender process in fact, to secure the site which I think is unfortunate because a small community group doesn't have resources of money and all the rest of it. What it does have is enthusiasm and determination and that's won through. And we were fortunate in getting grant aid from the Greater London Authority as well. The local authority are supportive, don't get me wrong, but it's not easy.

Ben: Has this situation really been an example of them giving you land for cheaper than it would be, or have I got that wrong?

Jon: The site has got a lot of difficulties, as do most in London. There's always a good reason why they're not built on by and large! [Jon laughs.] So there are costs associated with that, and at the same time the local authority is mindful of the social benefits arising from getting more affordable homes in the borough, and so that's recognised in the deal for the land. And this is quite a usual arrangement really, so it's not what the land would be worth on the open market for a developer to pile flats higher and higher, it recognises that what we're creating is something different and that there are costs involved in that in terms of energy standards, sustainability and other things.

Ben: Well maybe this is an episode actually where we should follow up on this when it's all complete. Do you fancy that?

Jon: Yes, I think it would be good to sort of keep in touch with how it develops for sure.

Ben: Excellent Jon. Any final thoughts then? We'll come full circle to where we started. We talked about residents having control, clearly affordability has come up a few times, but creating sustainable neighbourhoods - is there any other key factor that we need to mention in this first part?

Jon: Well I think it is a case of people having a vision of some way of improving the circumstance in housing and having the determination to follow it through. I mean there have been other groups that have done exactly this. In Bristol the Ashley Vale development there is a very good example. And again they had help from the local authority through the planning system there. But they pushed it through and I think it is a very good example of this kind of thing.

Ben: Jon, thank you very much.

Jon: Thank you.