

## Episode 131

# Building a home in your garden for your retirement – with Robert Young

The show notes: [www.houseplanninghelp.com/131](http://www.houseplanninghelp.com/131)

Intro: Today's podcast is a case study. It's a story of downsizing for retirement and building a low maintenance, high comfort home that's fit for purpose.

First, however, I asked Robert about his old home.

Robert: Well the old house is an early Victorian, large house, which was originally the infirmary for Swaffham's workhouse. And it was extended and made into a private house about the beginning of the 20th century.

Ben: And as a house I think you've already told me you've had many happy memories there.

Robert: Yes, we have indeed. We came to the house in 1984. It was semi derelict at the time. We had a lot of work done to it, but it was a lovely house to live in. Big spacious rooms - or should I say wards! - and sash windows, lovely floorboards, a real treat, and of course an Aga in the kitchen too. The children loved the large garden and we all benefited from it. It was a very, very nice place to live.

Ben: This large garden, well a part of it, was eventually going to end up as your new home. However I'm interested in another aspect, that you sold a portion of your land to a builder. So how did that come about and why did you go down that path, how did it all evolve?

Robert: The southern end of our garden was surrounded by trees and it wasn't very well used by us really, but a local builder came and he bought an old farmhouse which was adjacent, immediately demolished it and planned to build four houses on the plot. The end of our garden would have made a fifth. And he approached us and said that to us that to us: "Would we like to sell?" After a bit of discussion we thought it was quite a reasonable thing to do. We could never have had access from that plot or to it, whereas of

course with it crossing his land it was useful to him. So that went ahead. It didn't reduce the nature of our garden significantly which was still about 3/4 acre.

Ben: I'm quite interested that as a self builder, one of the routes I realise is very popular is to approach people who might have a garden of a reasonable size. So, are there any tips for me? If I try and knock on your door, if you're back in that house there, what do I need to do?

Robert: Well you need to offer me some money, I suppose. And it has to be something that is worthwhile from our point of view, not just financially. I wouldn't have wanted this to spoil the nature of our house, which we'd lived in for nearly 30 years at the time and was a really nice place to live. So, for example, we wouldn't have been interested had it been a two-storey building. The fact that he was planning to build sophisticated bungalows made it more interesting. But obviously, ultimately, we are looking for a price that we can agree on within those specifications of the type of building.

Ben: How did you set that price? Did you get any advice yourself on how you do that?

Robert: Yes we did. We spoke to an agent who came round and looked at the site and gave us some indication of what was reasonable. We didn't get the best price because of course it was land that we could never have developed. So obviously we had to accept that there were factors there which were going to reduce the income we received.

Ben: And that's another reason that you wouldn't immediately think, *oh I'll put that on the market*, because it was only useful to him.

Robert: Yes, it would never have crossed our minds to put it onto the market, ever. It was the fact that we were approached at the time that caused us to consider it.

Ben: And then to the house that we're sitting in now. This was obviously part of your garden. At what stage did you start thinking the old house was not where you wanted to be for the next few years?

Robert: Let's say when I turned 70. [Robert laughs.] We were getting older, we still had a sizeable garden, we had a big house that being old required regular maintenance. It was costly to heat, it was costly in many ways and the appeal of a smaller building suddenly began to become important. I've always thought in life you should do things before you have to and I think we were trying to prepare ourselves

for a time when we're not as mobile or as agile as we hopefully still are.

Ben: What were the first steps?

Robert: Well the first step was to acknowledge that we wanted to do that. And then we didn't do anything with it for a while. But I did go to a meeting in Swaffham, organised by the local Rotarians, on architecture. I've always had an interest in architecture. This was about domestic architecture and in two parts - the vernacular in the past and future developments. And Chris Parsons spoke about the future, and he spoke about the future as a passive future, Passivhaus future, which was extremely interesting and I became a convert almost straight away. It seemed to me such a good idea that we could live so comfortably and relatively cheaply in this kind of house and recognise the green credentials that were important to us.

Ben: Jane wasn't at this meeting, was she? So did she take some convincing?

Robert: She did. She did. She comes from a family who do feel the cold greatly and she couldn't quite get her head around at first the idea that we wouldn't be cold! Or that we wouldn't be able to turn the heating on and boost the heat to keep us warm in the winter. So we did have to investigate a bit further and I think like many people who've taken this route it led us to Denby Dale and to a Passivhaus there which I think is famous. We were very, very impressed by what we saw and what we heard. Even Jane on a cold November day found it surprising that in a room with 10 people we had to open a window.

Ben: It's funny, actually, you mention Denby Dale and I think even in the last podcast that was the inspiration . . . or at that stage it was the one research project that everyone had access to.

Let's move on. How do you segment your garden so that one is your old house - that plot there - and this is the new one. Is that a relatively straightforward process?

Robert: It was because there was a Norfolk red brick wall dividing what had been the old area, and we were able to simply add a small extension to that to make a very neat plot.

The only slight downside was that we wanted to share access with the old house and that wasn't possible according to the Highways

Authority. So we've had to find a different access to this plot and that has been a little bit difficult but it's something we've overcome. That's not now an issue.

Ben: In terms of the plot itself, I know that there was one tree which was particularly distinctive and important. So tell me about this. Did you know about this to begin with, as well?

Robert: Oh yes, this area was a wooded area. There were a number of conifers. There were at first a couple of ash trees as well as the lime tree that we still have. One of the ash trees came down in a storm. The other ash tree we had removed in case it came down in another storm, which made the lime much more dominant on the landscape. It's a beautiful tree. We liked it when we were in the old house and we still like it in the new house, even though of course we're a lot closer to it.

Ben: And it's just a Tree Preservation Order (TPO) that's on it?

Robert: It is, yes. I'm not sure totally sure I would have removed it even if there hadn't been a Tree Preservation Order. We haven't been here a year yet so we haven't felt the full affect of what comes down from the tree. Certainly we've had a lot of leaves in the autumn. We were prepared for that, but we have had a lot of seed covers that have come down recently which were a surprise to us really and did cause a bit more work. But they're minimal and the tree is very effective in giving us shade in the summer when we don't want to be overheated in a Passivhaus.

Ben: You've talked about above the ground but of course a tree - particularly such a sizeable tree - has lots of roots below ground. How do you know where those roots are, whether it's going to cause a problem, what sort of research needs to take place?

Robert: Well we did have a dendrologist, I think.

Ben: A what! That's a new one.

Robert: Well someone who came and plotted all the trees, did some work with our architect and . . .

Ben: Just above ground?

Robert: Yes, just above ground. But from his experience he was confident that we were able to build close to the tree, I think several metres distant from the tree. We have had special foundations as you are

probably aware with piles and with concrete, a raft, to make sure that we are protected from the affects of the tree root. I'm confident, seeing the concrete that was laid, that we'll survive.

Ben: We often hear that a house, really, a lot of it is to do with the constraints that you face, that it forms. So could you have had a very different house on this plot? Or really because this was such a massive constraint . . .

Robert: I think that's a difficult question to answer. I mean the tree led to perhaps one of the nicest features of the house which is that we are curved. And the curve is really special to us. Now if the tree wasn't there we would have had a straight, I'm sure, conventional box and that's something we would not really have welcomed. So although it's a constraint in one way it's given us a lovely shaped house. And I think that we feel that the inner curve is embracing and welcoming, and it's terrific.

Ben: In terms of the brief itself and what you gave to Chris, what was on there?

Robert: We wanted a two bedroomed bungalow. We wanted en suite facilities. We wanted an open plan kitchen diner.

We acknowledged it was going to be small but we wanted a small bungalow too that we could manage in our old age. Those were the factors that we were really giving him and then he built his plan around that brief and did so extraordinary well.

Ben: And I like the way that you've said to me before that actually you just let him go ahead and do it. So why that approach?

Robert: Well I suppose we were naive maybe. I don't know. [Robert laughs.]

Ben: It's a good approach. I like it. Some people can't do that. They need more input.

Robert: Well right from the very beginning - and I'm serious - from the very early meetings he was sketching away with curved buildings, with exciting open plan approaches and big windows, all the things that we've found very exciting and were just wonderful. So we were really happy with what he was coming up with. I don't think we ever said: "No, we don't want that," or "This is not suitable." I think he had the imagination to support us and to help us.

Ben: You saw Chris do this talk. Was there some connection there at that point? You could have said alright I'll go and do a Passivhaus, and go to another architect. Was there also a connection made at that point?

Robert: Well there was a geographical one in that his office is quarter of a mile away.

Ben: Okay! [Ben and Robert laugh.]

Robert: And I've known Chris for a long time.

Ben: Oh, okay. Alright!

Robert: So he seemed to me to embody the Passivhaus spirit and we just didn't see the need to go anywhere else, and try and search for a Passivhaus architect.

Ben: Alright, so we've decided on the plans now and we've got the plot. That's all fairly easy. What happens next in terms of getting the team together and making this happen?

Robert: Well the specification went out to five local builders. What was very pleasing for me - and this is the first time I've ever done this - was that two of those builders said they wanted to meet us on the plot to discuss what they were going to do and how they were going to work and what their modus was, their method of working.

The team that we eventually got were very impressive in that the builder came with their bricklayer, their carpenter, their plumber and their electrician. It was very apparent very quickly that they were on board with the Passivhaus project. They wanted to do a Passivhaus too and they shared our vision and Chris' vision as well. So that was very important and I suppose it's very important to say that their tender was a very acceptable one.

Ben: In terms of the prices that you had before you, I don't know, maybe I should ask this in a different way . . . What made you go for them? Was it price? Was it something else, just a gut feeling?

Robert: Well it was a combination of both. They were I think 60% lower than one of the prices but they had convinced us that they were working as a team. They were not subcontracting, they were actually a company that worked together and that was absolutely correct. We found that right through the build, that it was the same carpenter, the same bricklayers that were working here, not subcontractors

who came in and didn't have a care really for what they were doing. Their attention to detail in things like the cavity wall and stuff was just superb. Absolutely wonderful.

Ben: At what stage did you leave your old house? I'm assuming you might have needed the money for the project. [Robert laughs.]

Robert: Yes, we were not brave enough to start the build and then try and sell. So we sold first. We sold very quickly and that was a bit of a dilemma. So we then moved into a village a few miles away to rented accommodation. That was quite good in a way because we were not totally on top of the project which could I think be daunting for the builders, although we were regular visitors. We were always made welcome too so that was very good. And for people our age doing this for the first time it's very exciting to see the developments week by week.

Ben: And when you sold your old house, do you have to make them aware that there's a project about to take place or really it doesn't matter?

Robert: Well, we actually said to the people who came and had a look round that they were looking at the house - our old house - in terms of wanting to buy it - and we were looking at them just to make sure that they were going to be good neighbours. [Ben laughs.] There was an element of seriousness about that. There were some people perhaps that we might not have sold to.

Ben: It's a different situation, isn't it. I can understand you entirely.

Robert: And we did have to put into the deeds the fact that, a covenant to say that they couldn't put up a two storey building in front of our fence which would have blocked out the sunlight on the southern boundary. So we had to consider things like that as well.

Ben: So let's go back to the rental property. When you came to site, were you checking anything or really just seeing it had moved on?

Robert: Well sometimes we would be invited to check things and other times we would come for a routine monthly meeting, progress meeting, to see how things were going and meet with the architect or his agents and the builder to see how things were on schedule, that sort of thing. Generally we would be coming just to have a look and see how things were developing. And of course we've lived here for 30 years, friends were also interested to come and see

how our new house was going so we sometimes can accompanied by friends and relatives.

Ben: How long did it take to complete the build?

Robert: They started at the end of January and we moved in on the 13th August. So it was very efficient and exactly in line with their projected timescale.

Ben: Is that a big benefit of going with a contractor? Just knowing almost that they've said they're going to do this, they're a team, they've done it before, I know they hadn't done Passivhaus before.

Robert: It didn't worry me that they hadn't done Passivhaus because one of the things that they said right from the beginning - I think it was in the contract - was that they wanted to go on the Passivhaus tradesman's course and they wanted the Passivhaus Trust to organise some courses at their headquarters in Norfolk for their other tradesmen. So we could see that they were really concerned to do it right, to do it properly, so that was good. In terms of timescale, we never had any real worries but obviously you are at risk of the weather and that can hold things up and delay you. Fortunately we had a good dry-ish six months.

Ben: What were the tough decisions that you had to make throughout this?

Robert: We are not immensely wealthy people, I have to say, and we were making decisions often on a financial basis. Some of the things that we've got in the house are not top of the range, others are but not everything so we had decisions to make about kitchen units and bathrooms and suites and things of that nature. I wouldn't say they were really tough but they were the more pressing.

Ben: They come at you, lots of them, don't they!

Robert: They do and you've got to decide. One or two things we've got which probably we didn't really need. We've got a nice light that lights up the lime tree in the dark. [Robert laughs.] But generally speaking we didn't have massively difficult decisions. We made some compromises and that wasn't too difficult.

Ben: Is there anything else I need to know about the build? It sounds like it was pretty easy.

Robert: Well I think it was really. If it wasn't, we didn't know about it. That's always a good thing, isn't it! But we've been in several months now and everything's working very well. We're very comfortable in the house. It meets all the requirements that we have and there were no exaggerated claims about the comfort of a Passivhaus so we're very happy.

Ben: And what about looking at those plans when they're just on a piece of paper or on a computer, is it what you thought you were getting?

Robert: It's difficult because we're not used to seeing that kind of work all the time. We're not familiar with it but you get a vision when you look at them. I was a geography teacher so I'm used to working with plans and maps, but it's getting the 3D factor. And of course you can go through, I don't know what the technical term is, 3D models of your house beforehand. It's obviously nicer when it's done and when you actually walk in and you realise how nice the sloping roof is or how nice the curve is but yeah that wasn't a major problem.

Ben: And I suppose one aspect of a curve is that you have a fair bit of corridor space but because this is a smaller house, maybe you don't really. It's not that long, is it.

Robert: No, it is a concern and right from the beginning we were worried about that because you go along some soulless corridors in some bungalows and you think gosh this is grim! They're dark and gloomy, and not welcoming. This is elegant and it has a beautiful shape to it. I think we've got the colour right as well. The painter gave us a number of options and I think it fits nicely, this not quite white but off white. It leads you into the living end of the house and encourages you to explore. So I think it's actually a bonus almost. And the open plan where my study is, it draws you to it as well. Yeah, we're pleased with that.

The interesting thing is people said of course is that living in a curved house you'd have a curved television. [Ben laughs.] Sadly the curve is in the wrong direction.

Ben: Well talk about that curve for a second. How have they managed to achieve that? You don't notice it. It's very subtle, isn't it. I've seen an ICF one. How have we got it and how does it vary according to where it is in the house?

Robert: Some parts of it disappear with familiarity. The corridor never does. It's always a conscious situation that you're aware of it and I like it.

Inside the house, in the rooms sometimes you're no longer aware of that curve. Then suddenly something will, the lights on the wall or the elegant lights, the down lights just draw your attention to it. It's terrific.

How they actually do it, how they actually build it, I know the curve was plotted using GPS facilities and the bricklayers broke down those units into ever smaller and smaller sections, so that the bricks that they were laying were no more than perhaps two or three before they took another check and another alignment on the curve. I think they've done an absolutely fantastic job. It's so elegant, particularly on the outside.

Ben: When the house was completed and handed over, what did you still have left? Did you have a plan for landscaping? Were there other things that you then needed to do once you moved in?

Robert: Yes, there was no landscaping. The whole garden was nonexistent. So we set about to do that fairly soon, particularly levelling and sorting it out. So we put down some turf pretty quickly and of course that's in a curve too.

Ben: Is it?

Robert: And I think that draws your eye around the house.

Ben: I'm going to have to have another look, I think! [Ben laughs.]

Robert: It's not a large plot and one of the things we were concerned about is whether the house would be too big for the plot, whether it would dominate. But we're confident now . . . I think the total plot is 500m<sup>2</sup> and the house is 110m<sup>2</sup> so there is still quite a lot of space. And that's enough for us, for our gardening needs. Perhaps I'd like a little bit more for my vegetables but it's fine.

So that was work to be done but it was the kind of thing that we love to do anyway and in the late summer, early autumn we spent some very happy times there preparing the plot. There's a lot to do and we haven't got the planting right yet but we enjoy doing that kind of work so we're quite happy to take our time.

Ben: As we sit here we are looking at your old house and it's just an interesting juxtaposition, so I think this is my final question. What does it feel like moving from there to here but still seeing there?!

Robert: It's been surprisingly easy. We were in the old house for 32 years and I thought we would feel a wrench leaving it. I personally didn't. I thought it was time to go. Now we're looking at it, we hear the children playing in the garden, the people in it I think have the same care for it that we had, I actually find it very pleasant really. No great difficulties. It might have been different if they were allowing it to fall into disrepair or you know not looking after it but they don't seem to be of that nature and so yeah, it's great, it's good.

Ben: Well Rob, I really enjoyed having a look around the house. Thank you very much. I appreciate your time.

Rob: Thank you very much and thank you for coming, and we've enjoyed your company too.