

## Episode 198

# Creating an interior that works perfectly with the exterior - with Emily Bizley

The show notes: [www.houseplanninghelp.com/198](http://www.houseplanninghelp.com/198)

**Intro:** One might assume that a house build is finished once you can move in and start thinking about the interior. However, planning the interior as early as possible helps your home feel like one cohesive design, inside and out. Emily Bizley's self-build was shortlisted for RIBA Grand Designs: House of the Year in 2015. She talked to us about the design process and achieving the feeling that she wanted for each room. I started by asking Emily to tell us a bit about her background and how she got into interior design.

**Emily:** I always wanted to be an interior designer since I was very small. I remember in my parents' house I was always painting this and that and doing my bedroom a hundred times. Then I just went down a completely different route at university. I did French and Psychology. I'd done Art Foundation before that, and then I went to work in Paris and I just really thought, "I need to go back and do the thing I always wanted to do."

So then I went to Chelsea Art College and did some more qualifications and then I went to work for architects to get some experience and from there went to work for an interior designer in London and I've been doing that ever since.

**Ben:** That's quite a good context for our discussion today, because you are married to an architect, Graham, and in fact I've been here before. This is one of my favourite houses.

However, the reason I wanted to chat with you was because this building has this great connection inside to outside. The interior seems to feel like it belongs to the outside of the building and I think that's actually quite unusual. I've seen lots of buildings. Sometimes the interior's a little bit of an afterthought. So where do we begin on this story, just with the house first of all?

**Emily:** We lived in London and when we wanted to move back here... Actually I'm from Somerset, so we had this yearning to head back to the countryside and have our children. I think we'd been holidaying in Switzerland and places like that and we just love the

timber houses and just how they felt so snug and just really something about a timber house in this sort of landscape just seemed right.

So that was our starting point and I think the point you make is really interesting about the inside and the outside marrying up. We saw a lot of houses that looked fabulous on the outside. Timber cladding has been all the rage for I don't know how long, and then you go inside and it's all a crashing disappointment because it's all white plasterboard with twinkly downlighters and absolutely no atmosphere. And it's almost like, what happened there? I thought I was going into a wooden house. I think if you look at those houses in places like Tyrol in Switzerland, they are wooden inside and out. They're made of wood. That's what they are.

I think in this country, with particularly the sort of 'Grand Designs' thing, people have this idea that everything is all an option. So you think, "Oh, I like the wood on the outside, but inside I want it to be more like this." And people make those decisions, which is fine, but I don't think they necessarily make them in a very coherent way and with a bigger idea about what the building is supposed to be. I think that's where we came from. It's a wooden building.

Ben: So that was very early in the process when you started to formulate a plan for what the house would look like, and we need to talk about where we are too. So how did you find this piece of land?

Emily: We'd just been looking in auctions for a long time before we sold our house in London and then just realised actually that we can't buy anything, because we kept seeing these fabulous places but you have to sell before you buy. So we did that and after we'd sold our house, this was pretty much the first thing we saw and we went to the auction and we bought it.

Ben: Was it a building or did it have planning permission on this site?

Emily: It was an old timber bungalow from the 1920s, so it didn't have planning permission but if it's got a building on it you can replace it. So we went down that route. It was assumed we would get permission, which we did. We got permission to enlarge the new house from what was there before, and also the original bungalow was timber so it felt right not to be replacing this quite light building with just a really trad stone thing or something.

Also we were away from the village so it didn't make sense either. We're stuck out in a field.

Ben: And you didn't come up against any planning constraints that someone said, "No, you can't build something like that here." Sometimes they can get very descriptive about what they want.

Emily: No, we didn't have that but then we've always had a very clear idea. I think the planners don't like it if they think you're just following your own agenda too much. I think replacing a timber house with a timber house in open countryside just seemed sensible. It's not like we were trying to build a six storey tower or something. We were trying to do something unassuming and that had connections with the other buildings around here like barns and things. We're not trying to make it look like a barn. I know that's quite a thing people do. "It's in the countryside so it needs to look like a barn." We weren't doing that. We were just having a relationship to those things, being sympathetic to them.

Ben: Maybe you can just explain a little bit about the site, some of the potential that you wanted to explore.

Emily: It's a very small site. I think ideally we'd have had something bigger, but what we really liked was the location. It's on the edge of the village. It's not in the village. Didn't want to be isolated and it's on a south-west facing slope, so very sunny and the passive house obviously that's important. You're wanting to really maximise your solar gain on the south side, so that was really good and we're very sheltered by the hill to the north side. So we're on a gently sloping site.

And because the site's quite small, the house plan is very compact which again is good for passive house. It sort of designed itself in that way.

Ben: You must have been looking for a site that had that south facing aspect that you could exploit. Were there any other eco responsibilities that you felt going into this or was it just 'this is going to be a passive house and we'll work out everything else'?

Emily: We didn't even set out at the very start to say it's going to be a passive house. I think we always wanted a south facing side. I'm just a bit obsessed with light and warmth and I suppose I'm a bit of a sun worshipper really. Also I grow a lot of vegetables and flowers. That's really important for me, the aspect of the garden from that point of view.

I don't think there was anything else eco about the site. We don't have masses of room for ground source heat pumps and that sort of thing. It's a very small site.

Ben: But you were building timber frame, so you could say that is a good approach anyway.

Emily: Oh yeah, and everything we've used in the construction has been hemp insulation and warm cell and solar and everything. Yeah, we've totally tried to make it as eco as we possibly could.

Ben: So how did things progress then because you're obviously both coming from a slightly different aspect? You've got Graham on the architecture side, you on the interior design. Did you meet okay in the middle?

Emily: Yes, we did. I think we've got really similar ideas actually so it was fine. Yeah, it was a really constructive sort of dialogue that we had. I at the time had a very small baby, so a lot of it was me almost being the client and saying, "Oh no, I don't like that and I do like that." Having a lot of discussions about that and then Graham would sort of go away and change the drawings and then we'd look at it again, but we were both sketching.

We did a lot of sketching, "Okay, what does our kitchen want to feel like on a sunny morning?" and we'd be drawing all those things just freehand, just imagining our lives I suppose. That's the way I always design anyway. I just start drawing stuff, just drawing the room scenes, because to both of us the atmosphere's really important. We're much more 'How do we want it to feel?' than "How do we want it to look?" That's definitely how we would design any room or house.

Ben: And did you start on the inside? Was that how it was built? You'd get that sorted first and then work outwards?

Emily: No, I think both totally going alongside each other.

Ben: Interesting.

Emily: Very much so.

Ben: So how do you do that then, doing both at once?

Emily: Really pretty much like I was just saying. You're saying "How do I want my kitchen to feel? What do I want to look at when I'm having my breakfast? Where's the sun coming in?" So you start drawing that. And you say, "How does that affect the elevation outside if I have a really big window there because I'm wanting to look at the orchard? How does that look? That doesn't sit very comfortably. Okay, what if we shift it just that way? What does that feel like

inside then?” And you’re constantly doing that inside, outside, inside outside and pushing it around, pushing it around.

And we had the luxury because it was our house. The clock wasn’t ticking on us so we could do that as much as we wanted.

Ben: Did it feel funny doing it for yourself because obviously you’ve had a lot of clients before this?

Emily: No, it was really exciting. It was great because I’d lived in a house for some years that Graham had designed before I met him.

Ben: Did he do a good job?

Emily: There were a lot of things I wouldn’t have done, so this was like, “Okay, we’re going to do this one together and we’re going to get it right.” He built a house for himself as a single young man, so this was a house for a family.

The only unknown in that was while we were designing, although we had this baby, you just don’t know what it’s like having small kids running around. We were having to guess a bit and friends said to us, “Oh no, you wouldn’t do that if you had young children or whatever.”

Ben: So what would you change, because there are certain aspects...? I’ll just think of a couple outside. You can step out and look at the view on the veranda. You’ll tell me what the correct expression is. I like the way how we’re sitting in a snug at the moment and you step down. That’s an interesting thing because you could say, “Well, you just want it all flat. You get an opportunity to build it all flat.” What were some of these things you were trying to bring out?

Emily: I think the thing with the snug being on a separate... Well, like a little half level up, it was a reaction to people at the time. For a long time we’d been doing open plan living kitchen dining areas, and that was the big “Oh, you just want everything open plan. You just want to...” And actually we just thought, “I don’t know that you do.” I think it’s really nice to have a sitting area, the snug room, because you step up and also it follows the roof line so the ceiling comes down. It just makes it much cosier and it’s just a little bit of articulation.

It just slightly separates the room from the kitchen and then those doors you can put across but we don’t tend to. It was just giving the space a different atmosphere to the adjoining kitchen dining area by just doing something quite simple, quite a small move. The materials are the same. It’s not wildly different in that way but it’s

how you slightly manipulate the space to create a different atmosphere.

People said to us at the time, “Oh, with little children you don’t want steps,” and actually steps are a fact of life and they pretty soon get used to them. I know they are access issues as well but...

Ben: What about internal glazing? Did that go down okay?

Emily: Yeah, internal glazing was something we’d always really liked from French houses and that was just something that was always in our list of things we’d like. It just allows light to flow and it allows interesting relationships between spaces. It’s not a series of boxes with doors.

For example, the glazing in the office means that you get the sunset in high summer coming straight through to the kitchen because it sets over there. It just makes things a bit more interesting really.

Ben: And you’re very hands on. At what stage did you start doing things and tinkering on site? Was it from the beginning? Maybe first we should talk about what structure this is underneath us. You talked about timber frame, but I imagine there’s going to be some foundations first.

Emily: Yes. There was a concrete slab underneath a retaining wall, so we dug down a bit.

Ben: Was that pricey?

Emily: Yeah, I think so. It always is, but we did it because we didn’t want to make the house unduly high. We wanted it just to sit back in the hillside, so it’s not really any taller than the original bungalow but we’ve got two floors. A developer house would just be plonked on some stilts at the front to make the site flat, but then you lose the relationship to the garden, as we very much sit down into the garden on the lower floor. Yes, so there’s a concrete slab and then the timber frame is built off that.

Ben: And then you got involved after that stage when you had a structure to play around with?

Emily: Graham managed the whole thing, so he was involved every single day the whole time and did everything. He managed everything. He’s a Contract Manager so he ordered everything, so he was full time doing that for about a year and I helped when I could mainly after we got to the stage of putting in things like the hemp insulation. I did a lot of that and then later on plastered lots of... We

used this Fermacell which you then use a kind of plaster for finishing it. I did all of that.

Then after we'd moved in, there was lots of decorating and then lots of moving on to design bits of furniture and all that stuff.

Ben: I don't feel I've discovered how you've got this great interior. I know we talked a little bit about it. Did you devise mood boards in those early days? Where did this fit in to all the things that happen on site?

Emily: While we were designing the house we had this folder where we just collated, we just put anything that we really liked, images that we'd collected for years.

Ben: Both of you, because I've had this where perhaps it's not 50:50?

Emily: Yeah. I suspect it was mostly me, but, you know...

Ben: Honesty, I like it!

Emily: But we were very much liking the same things and we've still got that and we really like looking at it because you can see all sorts of ideas definitely flow through to what we've got now.

And there were two quite distinct overall sort of atmospheres in the house. One is the rooms that are lined with oak and one is the rooms that are lined with plywood and then they're painted. No wall is just a plastered wall. It's either got plywood and painted, or it's oak and that was quite a conscious decision because we just decided actually if all the bedrooms are full of oak... We're not in a ski chalet. I think you want a little bit of – I don't know, calmness and lightness in the bedroom. So we did that, but there aren't too many ideas in the interior. I think that's really fundamental. There are a few ideas and they're carried through with some rigour. They're not "Oh, actually no, I'd really like to have a red whatever and oh, I've always wanted one of these." It wasn't like that at all. We were quite disciplined in restricting the pallet and not trying to make it "Oh, I've always wanted..." A mishmash of everything.

It was quite light and definitely not a mishmash of a load of shopping, which I think is the other thing people do with interiors. It's all about product and actually we've got a few things we really like that we perhaps spent some money on, but not very many. That lamp was an example. That was like, "I really want one of those," but that's not really the way.

Ben: So the furniture at that early stage, did you have an idea of what it was or was it just “I know what this room’s going to look like,” and that will come further down the line? By the time you’ve finished a house I can see money will be short and if you haven’t budgeted well or you haven’t got everything ready to go, that’s when you end up with all your old furniture.

Emily: Yeah, and I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that. We took a long time finishing the house and it’s a luxury because you can’t do that with a client because they want to move in and they want everything there. But your interior will definitely benefit from the longer you can let ideas... Then you put something in and then you react to that and think, “Actually what it really needs now is this.” I think all good decorators, as they’re called, people who put rooms together in a much more ‘things’ sort of way, I think they’re all really good at doing that, just putting something, looking at it, thinking about it.

It’s good to have an overall idea but you also need to be able to respond and build things in an organic way, I think.

Ben: And there are things that can’t be done that way. For example, electrics, I had a brief look at while you were speaking. Is there a light in the middle of the room? Of course there’s not a light in the middle of the room, but that does mean that you’ve got your one light that’s plugged in the corner there and another one that’s hanging from the ceiling, interestingly close to the window. Why is it close to the window or is just because at night time, I suppose, that window’s just not going to have any light coming through it?

Emily: Yes, it’s just relating... Electrics is one of the things that you have to be able to pretty much know what you’re going to do. Yes, maybe I’m being slightly misleading. When you do your plans, you do furniture plans and you do your electrical plans and you have to. Maybe things change slightly down the line and you might move something, but you pretty much need to know, “Okay, the sofa’s going to go there.” As to what those things are you might not yet know, but you definitely need to say.

And lighting I always think needs to relate to furniture. So that lamp is there because if you’re sitting in this corner and you’re reading you want a light. And it doesn’t bother me that it’s near the window. I think that’s fine. It’s a great big window, and like you say, yes, you would only have the lamp on in the evening.

Ben: Do you ever open that window and do you know what the dimensions are?

- Emily: It looks about a metre and half square.
- Ben: I'm just thinking from my house. I'm wondering, some of the windows, will I ever open that? Do you open this one?
- Emily: No, we don't tend to because with a passive house you don't need to. Because this is an evening room... and in some of the rooms that we're in a lot in the day time in the summer, yes, you just open everything up, but in the summer we're not really in here.
- Ben: Are there windows that you might open for a little bit of summer ventilation? You've got bi-fold, am I right in saying?
- Emily: Yes.
- Ben: So that just takes you straight out onto that balcony area, but do you have a little repertoire of: these windows might be open more often, or doors or...?
- Emily: The kitchen and dining area in the summer, I'll open the door and the big, folding sliding doors. On a nice day that's all open and if it's very warm there's cross ventilation. Maybe put some of the windows on the north side on trickle vent and then there's the big roof light over the stair. Those are the ones we use mostly for ventilation.
- Ben: You've got a flipped layout as well, which is something I always like, particularly when you drive in on the top level. So it's not as if you're lugging all the stuff up to the kitchen, because you're on the level of the kitchen. Was that quite purposeful with the site as well, thinking... Did you want an upside down house?
- Emily: That was probably the biggest decision that we made really early on. Which way are we going to do it, and a lot of friends were like, "Well no, because I think you just want to walk straight out of your kitchen into the garden." But we were like "Yes, but then you'd have to come through your front door and go downstairs." So we did umm and ahh about that a lot, but for us we've definitely done it the right way round. What we took quite a lot of care over, therefore, is that you can get out to the garden in various different places. You can even go out on the upper floor to the garden on the same level. Well, you can see the way the circulation works.
- So we didn't want that feeling of being on the upper floor and feeling really disconnected from the garden. That was the only concern that we had.

Ben: What else have we not mentioned? Are there other things that you've made and do they all have to be out of the same wood, your oak upstairs and slightly different downstairs?

Emily: I don't think we've made any furniture out of the oak. I think the oak is very much the house and then things that we've put in it.

Ben: What about the kitchen then, because that's quite bespoke and looks fantastic. Is that something you crafted?

Emily: Yes. We had a really good joiner in Langport who made our kitchen and the idea was that it just followed on from the oak lining of the walls. It just flows right across the kitchen. He got the wood from the same supplier and things so that it would completely tie in. The kitchen is intended to look like the walls, and blend in.

Ben: And are you checking out that it's FSC certified, all of those things are important?

Emily: Absolutely, yes.

Ben: That's interesting. You gave me the 'Of course I know...' Okay. What else do we need to mention then, particularly going back to what I was saying at the beginning about this interior exterior just working so well? Any tips you could give someone coming to build a house and wanting to do this? Are you going to tell me, we have to hire an interior designer?

Emily: No. I think just have some clear ideas and follow them through and don't get distracted. And just try and think about the atmosphere. For example, in this room it doesn't have a smooth white ceiling. It has a very textured, this rough sawn softwood batons, which are nailed up there and then painted rather badly by me, but I quite like that they're painted rather badly. It's texture and it gives an atmosphere.

Ben: And what's this by the stove that you have down here? You've got some tiles and it looks like there's concrete slabs?

Emily: Yes. That's an in situ concrete hearth which a friend of a friend did for us. We looked at various ways of doing that and just decided actually it was going to be much better in situ because then we don't have any joints.

This thing, the idea is that it's like an old inglenook, black. Look at it, it's got like a black hole. You can see the tiles are so shiny. You also get a lot of reflections from the window, so they're a really dark aubergine-y brown colour. They're Moroccan, very finely joined so

you don't see much grout. Yes, it's like a modern day inglenook, is the idea.

Ben: Now I'm just wondering – I haven't ever done this in a podcast before – but I just have a feeling that we should walk around maybe just in case we suddenly spot anything that we should have talked about. Does that sound alright just to finish off the podcast if you feel any inspiration to tell me anything along the way.

We've mentioned the kitchen, the stainless steel unit there.

Emily: That was three different local craftsmen. One built the frame, one did the worktop and then the joiner did all the cabinets that are suspended underneath it.

Ben: What do you find when you're cooking - because this is how we're going to have our hob on a unit like this – you haven't got any ventilation, have you, right by the stove?

Emily: No, the MVHR extractor is up there in that cupboard. Essentially that's constantly extracting and that's pretty good. That works really well. I must say we barbecue a lot outside on the deck. We've got a gas barbecue so anything really frying or chargrilling, we do all that outside. So the combination of that, because it's literally just outside that door, and the hob means that we don't tend to do very greasy, smelly cooking in the kitchen. That's quite a conscious decision because we don't have some big extractor hanging over the hob.

Ben: I'll have to remember that because I do lots of smelly cooking. What about the length of this balcony? I'm sure I've got that name wrong. What do you call this section outside?

Emily: Deck. Veranda. That sort of thing.

Ben: Were you looking for a very specific thickness so you can have your table and chairs out there?

Emily: The house is not a square box and that's quite intentional. It's pretty much square in plan but that wall slopes out so that meant that corner of the deck gets wider for the table and chairs, and that's quite intentional. We couldn't afford to have a really deep one because... in terms of space because the site boundary is just down there. So all those little tiny manipulation of things are actually really important, that wall slopes so that gives you that space and then it cuts back in there. So yes, every little bit is really intentional.

Ben: I noticed that you don't seem to have much hanging on the wall here. For example, I'm looking at a mirror that's propped against the wall and you have got one painting, I think it is. Am I right?

Emily: Yes.

Ben: Over there. But everything else, it's a lot about the furniture and what's on top.

Emily: Yes, I suppose we didn't want to... It's slightly tricky hanging a lot of things on the oak walls because we really like the oak, and I'm quite keen on just, yes putting... You can have the changing tableau going on when you're putting things onto the furniture.

Ben: Shall we just walk past the office? We talked about the glazing, didn't we? Everything, just the staircase now we're looking at. Were you always going to have sky lights there, because you do have the overheating issue sometimes with passive house, but I guess we're on the north side of the house now.

Emily: On the north side and it's very good for the chimney effect here just drawing warm air up. If it does get hot we just open that because that's openable. It was really important to us to have this light going... basically that's the darkest bit of the house, really the centre of the plan down there, but it gets this light right into the middle so you don't have any dark dingy corners. Everywhere's got light from all sides.

Ben: Which you can do on an earth sheltered type dig into the hill on that bottom level.

Emily: Yes.

Ben: Let's just have a wander down. And then you've just got the three bedrooms down here.

Emily: This space is really important to us. This is the hallway. I think in other houses people might say, "Oh, but all that wasted space. That could have gone into the bedrooms or whatever," but we were really keen that this wasn't just you come down and it's a bit of a rabbit warren of bedrooms and that's it. This space onto the garden which relates to the garden and we go in and out that door. That's really important.

Also the idea is this is quite flexible. I wanted to have my office here for a bit, but I don't any more. Maybe the kids will take this over for homework. It's just nice to have a space that's not... You know, you can just change over the years with what you need.

Ben: What about storage then? Have you been careful as to where certain things have been tucked away? Were you conscious as you designed the house?

Emily: Yeah, we've got a lot of storage and we're still quite messy. If we did decide to put everything away, there would be a space for everything. I'm much messier than my husband, but yes, the kids have got really big wardrobes. We've got loads of wardrobes in our dressing room and this is all storage for this area. And then we've got a big store, which is in the bit that's basically built into the bank, quite dark at the back there. That's, as you know, plant room, store room, utility, so that deals with that in a bit of the house where you're not really going to use it for anything else.

Ben: And how many sq.m floor area do we have in the whole house?

Emily: 240 I think.

Ben: 240 okay. Well, I've really enjoyed our chat today. Is there a final thought that you'd like to finish on? I sense that you would do something like this again. Would I be right?

Emily: Yes. I don't know that we could afford to do it again. Anyway, we'll see, but yes I would do it again because you always have more ideas and more things you like to do.

Ben: But have you achieved everything that you wanted to with this?

Emily: Definitely. I think the only thing is for me, I just love growing things. I love the garden and actually I run out of space. I've got chickens. I've got no more room to plant trees. So yeah, for me, a move would be about the garden rather than about the house.

Ben: And that would actually be a good point to finish on then. Do you grow any of your own vegetables or is this all about flowers for you?

Emily: Both. I grow lots of vegetables and I love the fruit trees. I'm really a mad keen cook, so yes, gardens and I love flowers. I grow lots of flowers.

Ben: Emily, lovely to catch up with you again. Thank you.

Emily: Thank you.