

## Episode 199

# The challenges of building close to your boundaries - with Oliver Smallman

The show notes: [www.houseplanninghelp.com/199](http://www.houseplanninghelp.com/199)

**Intro:** Building on a constrained urban plot can present a number of difficulties. There are the question of access and how to protect neighbouring property. But what if you decide to dig down to make the most of the limited space? Oliver Smallman wanted to make the most of the plot he'd found in Chiswick, London and found he had to jump to a number of hurdles along the way. He spoke to us about building methods, planning and how to get heavy equipment out of a huge hole in the ground! I started by asking him about the house he'd built before this one.

**Oliver:** I did indeed. I had an opportunity to buy some land in Corfu. My wife was living in Corfu at that time and we bought the land and together we co-designed our first house. Probably not the best design I've ever seen in the world, but on the most remarkable view. So, whilst the house might not be the most stunning house, certainly the view is.

It was a tremendous experience. I used a Greek architect, all Greek construction team – just one team for the whole job. I've lived in it for 27 years on and off and it's maintaining itself extremely well, given the changeable weather conditions over in Greece.

**Ben:** Did you think you would do this again?

**Oliver:** Absolutely not. I had no intention of doing it again. But of course, in the 27 years that have passed since that first build, the world has changed greatly in terms of methods of building, ecological ways in which you can build.

I had an opportunity to buy a house here in Chiswick, which had an unusually large garden, in which I felt I could perhaps have an opportunity to build a Passivhaus. I think as you know, I started off on the process of making a planning application to build. There was a double garage on this plot built with an asbestos roof, which had to be removed, of 1960s brick. And the site was having bits and pieces thrown on to it by passers by and was really an eyesore. I thought it would be a very welcome application when I submitted it.

That was probably the biggest assumption of the wrong type that I've ever made because I submitted it and the residents in the area thought I was building a spaceship. And they reacted to it in the most unbelievable way. Negative to the extreme.

Ben: How did you start off that process of getting your initial designs and bringing that all together and then getting this large resistance against what you wanted to do?

Oliver: Well, in terms of design, I actually picked up on an article in a magazine, which showed a house that I really, really liked. And the architect at RDA Architects, it was actually his own house that he'd designed and built. So, I thought, I like what he's done for himself, very much.

So, I went to visit him in Dulwich and he showed me around his house. It was a small house but really very well done. I got in a conversation with him, a lovely man, and together we started to design this Passivhaus that we live in.

Richard being the architect, I have to say, he is the designer of it. He came to look at the plot, he said we could sink it into the ground – it's a very, very constrained site that we're operating on – and originally we were going to do SIP panels but we quickly realised that wasn't going to work below ground and it therefore wasn't going to make the construction method. So, we changed the construction method to a piled site and a concrete build really. And we put in an application which is slightly dissimilar to the house I've ended up with, but not massively so.

As I say, we put in the application and the Council approved it in terms of the planning officers loved it. And then it went to the planning meeting and the local residents turned up with 40 people and ...

Ben: So, it got approved?

Oliver: It's never, ever been not approved by the planning officers. Never, at any stage. It's gone through four applications. At no stage has the planning officer not recommended it for approval. Each time, the councillors have managed to stop it, and it's three councillors in this area.

Ben: What reasons were they saying at that point?

Oliver: The reasons were excessive in size, which is unusual because the majority of the house is underground; not in keeping with the area – well obviously, I wasn't trying to replicate any other house in the

area because this is a Passivhaus so, it is true it's not in keeping with the area ...

Ben: I think it's quite clever, if we fast-forward to the final design, that there is something that does root it to this street, as you look at it. You think this is the right thing. And I know probably we don't want to hear the end just yet, but it's become well established here, hasn't it? And liked.

Oliver: It has. It is liked. We used a slip brick that matched the bricks of the area. So, whilst the house is modern and contemporary, externally, it's very much softened by a lot of greenery, slip bricks that are matching the area and a matching front wall.

And I think it brings the house very quietly into the street. It's not a very obvious house and you certainly could drive past it and not notice it. Which I love. I think probably we've achieved something very good there.

Ben: How big was this area and was it very obvious what was going to be the new house that you were going to divide off from the old house?

Oliver: I can't tell you how big the site is, and I must've measured it a hundred times. It's eight metres wide and eighteen metres long, I think. Or twenty metres long. So, it's a tight site but it clearly could always take a small, two-bedroom/three-bedroom house. That's what was going to be possible on it.

Ben: And under construction, you would also be going very, very close to the boundary walls. Would you have any other properties that you'd be up against?

Oliver: Yes. We're up against the house that I own, that I bought with the garden. So, we had to underpin by that house. And I'm building within three metres of my other neighbour's house. And their concerns were always valid because I was digging a hole around the whole site of four metres deep and we needed to ensure that one, their very nice cherry tree was protected; and two, that of course we ensured that their house didn't fall into the hole.

Both things applied to both me and them and we got around that by getting a company that does piling on the coast for piers and things like that. They came in, a very specialist company, and managed to pile the entire site with concrete piles that gave us the security then to dig out and start the construction process.

Ben: Just stepping back once again, how did you get through all of these planning woes?

Oliver: Well, I'm not going to deny that emotionally, it became quite difficult. It got turned down twice. I took it to appeal and I lost the appeal. That was the third thing I did. The appeal was lost on parking, that the house would need parking, and I wasn't providing it because all the houses in the street have on-street parking. So, I was intending for this house to have on-street parking in line with the whole area.

So, what we did on what was effectively the fourth application – well, the third application to the Council was we looked at the appeal comments by the officer then and thought we'd need to reduce the house in size to enable us to park off-street and cover that point which is clearly very pertinent. They wanted it to be a non-permit issued house in London, and London requires permits for most of its cars. So, we reduced the size of it. It probably wasn't necessary, but we brought in the top floor by a metre or so. I don't actually think it made much difference to it.

And then – and we're very grateful for this – the Council came en masse, twelve of them, on a Saturday morning, to have an on-site look at it. Because they'd seen this application go before them on a number of occasions, so they decided to come and have a look at the site. They came to the site one Saturday morning and the opposition party were allowed to make representations on-site. And it's probably because of the way they behaved on that site meeting, I think is the reason I got planning permission. Because they were so rude to the Council officers, who after all had given up a Saturday morning to come and look at the site, that I think the Council officers probably thought, 'you lot are nuts and this guy's doing something perfectly reasonable because we can see it and he's got a very balanced approach to it. And he's made adjustments to the planning application.'

When it went before committee again, the three local councillors who had always objected all objected again, but the six others who'd been part of the attending team all disagreed. So, on a vote of six to three, I got planning permission four years after I commenced the process.

Ben: A quick question on the actual planning application. Can you just keep on making planning applications, so long as you have the funds to pay for the process?

Oliver: Well, each time wasn't a replica of the time before. The first one, we were building to the border; the second one, we had come in as

much as we could, allowing sufficient green space; and the third and final one was where we adopted the parking space which is now outside the front of the house, which I have to say, I think enhances it. So, you could say an error on our part from the outset, although the objections would've been the same, but it would've covered off one point.

To be honest with you, there were other points. I don't recall all of them now.

Ben: Is there a line in how different things have to be, or is it a point about actually trying to absorb what feedback you got last time?

Oliver: Yes, it's about absorbing the feedback and trying to help your neighbours because at the end of the day, you do want to get some type of support, even if it's after the event. So, anything you can do to soften something or make it blend with the community in a meaningful way. You can't just pay lip-service, you've got to look at the road you live in and apply some of the – you know, every other wall in this road is white, so I've got a white wall. Because it would be stupid for me to have a brick wall when that's not the rhythm of the road.

So, if you keep doing those things, the contemporary side, if you think about it, is almost a mindless discussion to have. Because why would you build a replica of a house that was built in 1949 or 1950? You'd be mad. I'm trying to build something that uses very little power and little energy, and I'll be long gone but it'll be a very valuable asset either for my own children or for somebody else.

I'm not saying that all houses should be built like this. People must build houses as they feel fit, and there may well be better solutions in the future. But I've now had the opportunity to live in this house for nearly a year and I absolutely love it. And I actually can't believe how much I love living in here. It's very different.

Ben: We seem to be jumping around in this conversation, so I'm going to do it. You didn't live in here straight off, did you?

Oliver: I did not. For reasons that are not relevant to the building – it was actually to do with a loss in my family – I rented the house to an American couple who are very ecologically minded.

They were looking to rent a Passivhaus so, they went on to Passivhaus sites and eventually they sourced it through the agent. As soon as they knew it was a Passivhaus, they virtually said – because they weren't here, they were in Nashville – 'we'll take it.' They came here, the two of them. The husband was a musician, the

wife worked in telecoms. He setup a little studio here. He said acoustically he loved it. He said it was like being in a recording studio. He loved how quiet it was. He had some type of nasal issue and he said that the air quality and things was the best that he'd ever had either side of the Atlantic. So, the house really, really suited him.

Ben: And you knew all of this stuff. You were still next door. Was it a surprise when you moved over?

Oliver: That's the thing. It was a massive surprise. I'd built the house, never lived in it, watched someone else live in it – obviously you're not asking your tenant, 'are you enjoying living in my house?' That's not what you do. It's their house and they're living in it and they're paying for it.

When I moved in, there were two things that I noticed. First of all, the silence. It's a triple-glazed house built of concrete in the main. And two, definitely the air quality. It's absolutely fantastic. And I suppose there is a three, that draught free just sounds like two little words but it's absolutely incredible to live draught free. So, everywhere is the same temperature. You can lean on the window and it's the same temperature as being in the middle of the room or in your bed. Everything stays static all the time. You haven't got that fluctuation flow that you normally get in houses, where you have to get the draught excluder out.

It's really very lovely to live in. They're very small things and you certainly wouldn't want to be paying millions of pounds to get these things.

Ben: I've been talking about this for five-odd years and I'm really looking forward to having that experience too. It's one thing visiting them but when you're actually living there, I will be able to compare mine to a draughty rental property.

Oliver: Well, I lived in a very draughty house next door, just because they are. They have the sash style windows and, as you know, they shed all your heat.

This house, I now know what it runs on. I pay £38 a month for gas and electricity. It's under £500 a year. And it's doing it easily, without any effort.

Ben: Let's go back to the design of the house. What was on the brief itself, if you can remember?

Oliver: For me, glazing was really the big part of the brief, that I need lots of light because I hate dark houses. So, I was seeking a lot of glazing. That suited the Passivhaus element certainly on the south side of the house.

Beyond that, I was looking for almost a hotel style house because I'd spent most of my business life travelling, or certainly the second part of it, and I liked that style of living. Just being able to get into bed, have your lights over your bed and your light switch is there. It's a little bit "hotely" but it really suits me. It might not suit everybody else, but it is what it is. It's what I wanted.

I wanted to have concrete, which I'd already fallen in love with. That's due to many stations, the many times I've seen it. My daughter went to a university that had boarded concrete. It was built with it.

Ben: So, how did that happen? Let's move on a little bit. You talked about the possibility of having SIPs panels first of all. When did that technical design stage move on to, 'we're going to have to have a different construction method'?

Oliver: That moved on prior to the first application. We already realised that wasn't going to be possible. And we knew we were going to have to pile the sides. So, that went out of the window very early on.

The concrete walls on the interior, boarded and plain and smooth, were always in the plan. And that hasn't changed from outside i.e., the concrete staircase, stairwell and feature wall.

Ben: Was it made here or is this brought to site and slotted in?

Oliver: No, it's made here. We bought very smooth and expensive plywood so, it's a bit of a shame because it's a one-off use and then you're throwing it away, to make the smooth one. And then we bought many widths of very rough boarding to do the concrete stairwell. And we allowed all of the errors of the pouring to remain. So, anything that was, was.

We weren't seeking perfection. We were seeking concrete as a look. And this is a concrete and wood house, basically. It's a wooden floor and concrete walled. In that regard, I got exactly what I did want and I'm absolutely over the moon with it.

Ben: It's quite cleverly contrasted. I think if you had it everywhere, it might not be ...

Oliver: Everywhere, you really would feel like you're in – I can't remember which station I get off at which is the concrete one.

Ben: I know which one you mean. Is it Westminster?

Oliver: Thank you, Westminster. That's where I first saw that concrete. I went and looked at it in other places after that.

Believe it or not, I went to the Concrete Centre and took a course in concrete pouring. Because you can't just say, 'I want concrete' because your constructor is very, very unlikely to be an expert in that area, and there are things that you absolutely have to know about concrete.

So, I would tell anyone who wants to build in concrete, go to the Concrete Centre, sign-up for the course. They do a course for architects, but you can go as a layman, and I did. And I could be a certified concrete contractor now. But you can't just order concrete and pour it. You need to know what you like. And when you know what you like, then you have to know how you're going to achieve that in the mix.

So, you are going to have to know something about it. You can't just phone up a concrete company and they bring you concrete and pour it and then it looks like this. This was because I'd changed the mix of the concrete. I used different product in it. I used a whitener – Portland Whitener – to lighten it because I didn't want the dark grey contract.

Ben: Was there anything else in this process that you took training or really wanted to research to make sure you got right?

Oliver: I did a lot of research on windows, but that's because I was coming from a standing start. If I'd been a bit more knowledgeable, I might have had that information available. I hadn't had triple-glazed windows before. I didn't know which company to go to, but I actually found Internorm, who make a certified set of Passivhaus windows and I liked pretty much everything about them, their service and their product.

I can't compare it to something else because I don't have the something else. But I could thoroughly recommend the company that supplied it, the backup they gave me afterwards, the honesty when they discovered they'd made an error and the way they dealt with that during the construction process.

Ben: Maybe we could talk a little bit about how you work on a site like this? Because you are building a huge, great hole. Was there any land actually that you could use for storage here?

Oliver: Well, the storage was permanently on the move. Everything had to keep on moving around the site, particularly early on. You picked up on the relevant point there. We just didn't have anywhere to store anything, and it was an absolute nightmare.

So, you're moving bits of plant around in a circle. It's like a dance. When we were piling it, the piler would be in one corner, the concrete machine would have to be in another one. And this became probably the nightmare, as we got towards the end of the dig-out. Because you end up digging yourself out and you've got nowhere to go. So, you have to build a false platform at one point just to put the digger on, so you could take the last piece of soil out.

Unfortunately, and this is just bad luck, the weather at the time we were doing the dig-out was just appalling, and they closed the landfill sites for soil. We were moving it from here, in the middle of London, down to Reading by truck, and you can imagine how much we took out of here in terms of the cost. A large part of the cost of this was the dig-out. Planning and dig-out was a third of the total cost of the house.

Ben: Was it easy to predict or did you have to have a bit of a floating budget on foundations?

Oliver: Well, I had a floating budget throughout, if I'm honest. I paid a third more than I'd intended. That was the end of the discussion. I thought I could do it for 400,000 and I built it for 600,000 finished.

Ben: Were there opportunities to save money? Going back to my project, I have decided to pay more. I had the option to make some savings.

Oliver: Well, it's always in the second leg. The initial construction element of it, we probably stayed on budget. And then when you get to handles and windows – this is where the money starts to disappear. Because you just know what you want, you know how you want something to look. And whilst one light is probably going to look the same as another and nobody looks at your lights or switches, only you do, of course, if you've got things in your mind that you want, you often find that they cost you much more than you'd anticipated.

So, I pretty much had this vision for the flooring, for example. I wanted to use a Douglas fir. By the time I'd found it, I'd found a brand and a family. The family live abroad with their trees so, you can't just pick them up here at the local store. So, I bought them

from the family who cut them, dried them and then delivered them on a truck. They're long boards, eleven metres long, six-hundred metres [*sic*] wide. It's a skill to get them down on the floor because you have to think about that, sanding them – but it is what I wanted. I'd seen it in the Saatchi Gallery here in London and loved the flooring. The trouble is, once you've fallen in love with it, you're done for. And I paid a crazy amount of money for this flooring.

Is it worth it? The short answer is no. Would I recommend someone to do it? Short answer is no. You can get something very similar, much cheaper, but when you come to that juncture yourself, let's see what decision you make. Because the truth is, you can get an engineered board that will look very similar to this. But what I like is that it wouldn't matter how many years we walked on this floor – 100, 200, 300 – the floor will last. Because it's just a true, untreated wooden floor.

It's not even treated. There's nothing on it. It'll just age and it's thick as thick, as you can imagine. So, you could sand it a thousand times and you'd still have plenty to go. And I like that. The house is very permanent as well. It's very grounded here and it'll be here for hundreds of years. It'll always be a cheap house.

Ben: Has anyone dropped a glass of red wine on the floor?

Oliver: Not yet, but it doesn't bother me. It's got a soap finish to it. So, it has a, sort of, film of soap on it. To be honest, if you dropped something on it, you'd just wipe it up there and then. But I'm not obsessive about it. I do have a shoes-off policy, I'll admit that, but any knocks and bangs or drops or cracks, they don't bother me. It's a floor that is very much alive and is very nice to have. I like it very much.

Ben: As we wrap up, is there anything else we need to know about the construction? Any elements that you think might help other self-builders?

Oliver: It's an ever-changing world. So, I would guide you to the Green Building Store because although I did very little business with them, they have a lot of very good information available and I think they would be very helpful to a green builder.

You can Google anything you like in terms of research, for me the MVHR system, which I think is important to a lot of people, I can thoroughly recommend PAUL, as the manufacturer from Germany. The system's in place, totally silent. I hear nothing at all. And it's doing a fantastic job economically and mechanically. So, that's the

recommendation I would give for the MVHR. I wouldn't go anywhere else.

I would tell you to take care where you're doing the joints on that. Remember, everything needs to be quietened down. Listen to the Green Building Store. They do a nice planning service for the running of ducts and things. It's very cheap, £300, I think, and they supply all of the routing for it, so your builder knows. Because the builder's very unlikely to have done MVHR before. It gives them a nice, clear picture on what they're trying to achieve. And then get it commissioned by Green Building Store, which I did, and they'll come and set it up so it just runs perfectly in your house.

So, most things are quite easily overcome. In terms of advice, the only thing I would say – and I think as you're about to build yourself and you've been looking for land – is in all matters, be they the search for land or the building process or the planning process, do remember that you are going to need to persevere. You should persevere onwards and onwards and onwards because ultimately, we're doing good building and producing good results and it'll benefit the country as a whole if more people do it.

At the moment, it is the independents that are going to do it, because the commercial builders won't take on these types of projects, because it eats into their profits.

Ben: Oliver, it's been great to catch up again and to return here and to see you in here too.

Oliver: I'm very happy to see you. I wish you good luck with your site, your build and, of course, your website.

Ben: Thank you very much.

Oliver: You're welcome.