

Episode 209

Why consideration for others matters when designing a new home – with Marlen and Tony Godwin

The show notes: www.houseplanninghelp.com/209

Tony: Well, the decision to move out of North London and starting to look for houses up here and realising that we couldn't really get what we want. And then we looked at our finances and realised we could have a go at building our own house, finding the land and so on.

Ben: How did you choose your area, or was it because of the land that was available?

Tony: Simply schools, I'm afraid. It's that old chestnut.

Our son was coming up to an age where he was going to change schools. So, we started by looking for schools outside London, and then we found Oakham School. So, that really pinned us into this area. And then we discovered Rutland Water, and that was wonderful.

Ben: Are you keen sailors, water sports and walking?

Tony: I'm a sailor, Marlen's more of a walker.

Ben: Plenty of opportunities here. Marlen, what did you want from a new home other than the obvious of a living room, bedrooms?

Marlen: As a married couple working in the City of London, we'd lived in a terraced house. So, that's what we've known.

The terraced house did get a facelift, turning it into something more environmentally friendly. We did have solar panels on our roof. But we knew that we wanted to have something which also reflected – and Tony's an architect – his input into what could become not just an environmentally friendly home, but also something that showed some of his ethical design, as I call it.

So, in a way here, we've been able to combine both.

Ben: Many architects also don't get a chance to build their own home, which seems crazy. So, was this very exciting?

Tony: Yes, very exciting. And I have to say, it was really Marlen's idea and impetus to start with. I just thought, 'my god, here comes x number of years of hard labour.' But really, with her encouragement –

And I'd said you won't find any land, England's all used up. So, she went on the internet and within five minutes, she'd found about six possible sites within four miles of Oakham, much to my surprise.

So, we went round and started looking at them and working out our finances to see if we could actually take the project on.

Marlen: But this was a difficult site. This was not one of the easier sites. Some of the sites were just flat and on a single level. Here, we knew straightaway that being able to come away from the main road was going to mean building slightly up what is a hill, and of course that means digging and all sorts of shuttering and goodness knows what else, which of course costs money. And there's a lot of very hard stone here. We've got iron stone. So, that is all going to add to cost.

In a way, there were a lot of negatives about this site, but what it would deliver to us was the opportunity not to be just a square box passivhaus. So, we could have that environmental kudos, but we could also have a slightly more designed home, by the face that the terrain was not flat.

Ben: A lot of people struggle with finding that land in the first place. Were you taking on a challenging plot? Is that what it was? Because you can find those out there quite easily.

Tony: Yes, I would say so. Out of the early six, we came down to three. They all had pros and cons. One was part of a larger development, so we might have been the first builders there and then other people would come and then build their houses or not. We would be left in an unfinished state through no design of our own.

But this site, of course, had the main A-road, the A606, and it was very noisy. So, we took that decision quite seriously and I think today the road is still very busy, but luckily, due to having triple-glazed windows, a passivhaus requirement, we do shut out a lot of the noise.

Ben: How did the designs for the house develop?

Tony: Surprisingly easily. That, I think, is sometimes how a difficult site, or the constraints of a site, can actually breed the design very easily, because what you see here today is almost what I sketched in the first days when I was thinking about how to use the site.

We were limited in the space that we had. Obviously, we had the main elevation to south for passivhaus reasons, and also because that's where the view is, but that's also where the road is. So, that then led to putting the bedrooms behind and partially cutaway into the hillside, so those are on the quieter side of the house.

Marlen: But it also dictated the fact that we do upside-down living. So, our living area is at the top so, we can get the views out to the lake. And we have the most magnificent sunrises from the bedroom and sunsets from the living room. So, it kind of combines the day.

Ben: I love upside-down living. The one thing with this house, you've always got to climb up the stairs to go upstairs. Did you fight that out, or was it always that you just thought you like living upstairs?

Tony: I think it just had to be that way, to get the view.

What's interesting is that actually, what you don't see is that we had planning permission for a garage out at the front, a double garage, but that actually started out as our offices. But then we realised very quickly, on the first iteration of the Passivhaus design package, that the form was just far too spread out and we just wouldn't be able to achieve the standard.

So, what happened was that the bedrooms folded in to actually where the garage was going to be under the front of the house. But of course, we were just increasing the external surface area of the house. Basically, we sort of folded the offices back into the ground floor, and the garage pushed out. When you get to know and work with Passivhaus, it's entirely logical.

Also, for budgetary reasons, it meant that we could not do the garage immediately. So, that all worked out very well.

Ben: How would you describe the form of the house?

Tony: When we came up here, we drove around a lot of the villages and we looked at the building typologies that you have. Basically, you've got workers' cottages or farm buildings.

Workers' cottages generally have rooms in the roof, which we definitely didn't want; you have a problem with headroom. So, we then went for the farm building typology, where you've got barns

which do have headroom, and also this thing where barns, very often in a group of buildings, you get the original stone barn built in the eighteenth century, say, and then over time, as farming methods changed, buildings were just tacked on. They didn't really care what they looked like.

So, we followed that idea through, and that's why the bedroom wing has a standing seam roof and different boarded finish, as if it would've come on, say, in the 1930s to the old building.

Ben: In terms of planning, what was on this site? Did it have planning permission?

Tony: Yes, it did. A developer had bought the site as a lot together with a cottage. He'd tried to get houses further up the hill which would've overlooked the other people in the village. The village very much didn't like that.

The application was refused, it went to appeal, and the villagers made quite a good case for not doing that sort of development. So, it was lost at appeal. But then he did have permission for a house roughly where the driveway is at the moment, so we knew the site had a permission.

It was set against the backdrop of Rutland having its sustainability list of villages and not wanting to increase car journeys in the area. It only has a church, a pub, but not a shop, any form of schools, so it's fairly low on the list. We were told that it was virtually going to be the last house in the village.

Subsequently, because there's an Anglian Water Conference Centre across the road that was being sold by Anglian Water, there has been another three houses now.

Ben: What came next in the process of making this happen?

Tony: Working out the finances, I think, and persuading ourselves that we could do it.

Ben: Were you still in London at this stage, so you were doing a lot of this remotely together?

Tony: Yes. We started working on it in London, but then Ben's school year was going to start and so, we had to move up here.

Marlen: But before that, we did go in for planning. We got the planning when we were still in London and we came up for the hearing, because we were both very nervous. It was a nail-biting day, but we were

just ecstatic that the Council and the planners liked the design and thought that it would somehow add to what many described the village as mish-mashed buildings really.

Tony: Yes, and I have to say, the planning officer was very helpful. He said, 'where are you building?' 'Whitwell.' 'Oh, in that case, why don't you go and speak to the Parish clerk?'

So, we came here, we met the Parish clerk who had always been very assiduous in planning matters and whenever anything happens in the village, he showed people what was happening, they all talked about it and they put a view back to the Council. So, the design actually was developed in a way in consultation with him.

He didn't like some things. I played around with the design to try and accommodate those things. In the end, I couldn't accommodate them, and we agreed to let the planning system arbitrate between us.

Ben: When you say that you designed that together, is this a conservation area?

Tony: It is.

Ben: What things would you need to do in order to maintain that?

Tony: Well, I think luckily, we were already on the right track, having been around the villages and looking at what was going on.

I don't know, the planning officer, the first set of drawings I showed him, he put a scale rule across the drawings and said, 'oh, six metres width, which is about a barn. Roof pitch forty degrees.' Tick, tick.

Because we wanted to fit in with the village, I think we started off on the right track.

Marlen: Actually, our neighbours, who are in a listed thatched cottage – it's sixteenth century originally, I think – they were delighted because the developer who was going to build on here would have built the house literally so that their windows of their living room would have been looking up on to a stone wall. So, they were thrilled that we were building back.

Everybody felt that we had been considerate to those who were already here, and were clearly part of the village long before we stumbled upon it. I think that in itself, as you said, between the Parish clerk and the fact that we were careful in how we were

plonking this new building in what was a relatively tiny village – there's only fifty residents and not many houses – and the fact that many now say when they walk their dogs down to the water or wherever, they look back and it looks like it's always been here. So, that means we didn't stick out like a sore thumb and I think that's important.

Ben: One final thing about this Parish clerk, would the Parish clerk carry quite a lot of weight in the decision if he had objected a lot?

Tony: I think he could've done. Getting the Parish clerk on side was good because he would then take our plans round. And I don't think he leads people. He was very, very neutral in that respect.

Ben: But I'm sensing that you dealt with this well. You had a good chat, whereas some people barge on in. How did you do that? Any tips on how you negotiate and chat and bring yourself into the village?

Marlen: I'm going to answer that. Tony is not an arrogant architect. He hates it when people say he's nice, but the fact is when the local magazine did the interview, the journalist started it with, 'when you meet Tony Godwin, he's a nice architect.' And you think that's detrimental, it makes you sound ...

Tony: Damning.

Marlen: Damning. But I think it just shows that the fact is you've always been considerate in your approach to jobs.

I think the fact is here, you were considerate. You were considerate, because we were in a conservation area and you obviously have to show some consideration for that, but it wasn't a case of 'this is what I want for me.' It wasn't a case of the star architecture that we talk about in London as well. Sometimes you can have these iconic buildings, but if nobody lives in them and properly utilises them, then they sort of fall short of what they're supposed to be doing.

So, I think here, even when we move out because we're too old to live here, which I suppose one day will be the case, we'd like to think that the family who buys it will get the same amount of joy from it. One, because they are minimising their impact on this Earth, which after all, we only have a Planet A, no Planet B. And secondly, the space will allow them to enjoy the natural beauty of this area, being by Rutland Water, being able to be outdoors and do all the things that families do together, and then when they're in the house, to be able to feel, as I always say to people, like you're sitting inside a piece of artwork.

Because although it's minimalist, although it's modern, it kind of lets you breathe. I didn't have that in London in my terraced house, much as I loved it because it was our home. We just could not have recreated that there.

Tony: I don't know, going back to your question about negotiation, my view is that if you go and approach people and you go and talk to them first, in a way you draw their fire. I think it's a very human thing. Even a person who is going to come at you and attack you, they can see you in the flesh. You're not somebody who's sent them something just through the post and so on. And you can explain why you've done things.

Indeed, the Parish clerk and I came to a point where he didn't like the junction that we had between the garage and the main building, which is actually a flat roofed connection, and he wanted us to have the pitched roof carrying on in to the front elevation of the building. But then we wouldn't have been able to have a window looking out actually over Rutland Water.

That's when I said, 'look, Robin, I've looked at it, but it compromises the design. We'll have to let the planning system arbitrate between us.' So, we did that.

Marlen: And also, as you say, with drawings, some people can look at a drawing and actually visualise it, but the layperson doesn't. Obviously, they're not a technical person. And our neighbours on the other side were concerned that this wing, the bedroom wing we're in right now, would somehow overlook on to their back garden, where they happened to have a hot tub. And of course, you can't. You'd have to climb a tree to be physically looking down on where this hot tub is.

It's explaining that and showing it to them before hand, so that they wouldn't have any objections, that was really critical.

Tony: Yes. And I think these days, actually we've got no excuse not to present something in three dimensions actually, and show people.

Ben: It's just time really, isn't it?

Tony: Yes, and money.

Ben: Let's move on to how this developed then. You've got your plans, you've got the green light to go ahead, planning permission, you've thought about your finances. Anything we need to note on getting this built with the funds that you had available, mortgages?

- Marlen: Yes. Appointing a quantity surveyor.
- Ben: Oh, you're moving on to that subject now?
- Marlen: Well, I think it's important because I just couldn't understand it. I didn't know why we needed such a person, and you had to persuade me that it was the best amount of money that we could spend.
- Tony: The professional fees.
- Ben: Because you were the client, as such?
- Marlen: Yes. And I was constantly trying to chop down the amount of money that Tony was very carefully spending on my behalf.
- Tony: To be fair, we had two major hiccups during the design phase. One was the first design which came in, I think, at about eight-hundred-thousand, and we only had half-a-million. So, that was the first hiccup and we had to work our way through that.
- But that was actually where the Passivhaus failure also helped us because we tried to model this house with the offices in another separate wing, and it was the day when our Passivhaus consultant said, 'I wonder what the appetite would be for going back to planning?'
- Well, I can tell you, we didn't have a pleasant week in the Godwin household.
- Marlen: I don't think we spoke.
- Tony: No, we didn't speak. But eventually we decided we had to go back to planning, and we redesigned. And of course, if you start learning about Passivhaus, they say, 'do your first iteration very early on before you go for planning. Before you make any move, make sure that the design is actually going to work. You can't just do anything.'
- Ben: What changed here? You're overbudget on that first design. Are you saying it can't meet Passivhaus too? That sounds like quite a lot you've got to shift.
- Tony: Yes. So, as I said earlier, it was about bringing the studio into the house, reducing the overall square meterage and then not building the garage, which was left outside. And then obviously cutting external works quite viciously. You'll see there's a paddock out the back.

Marlen: The landscaping.

Ben: Having gone through the valuation process and just thinking, this is so, so hard because the easiest thing, which you have actually mentioned, is reducing the size. But unfortunately, sometimes you're designing the house that you want, aren't you? And the space that you want.

Tony: Hmm.

Marlen: But also, if you think about it, at the end of the day, this is our only investment. We don't drive fancy cars or do strange things and invest money in portfolios or whatever other people do. That's it. That's all our energy, efforts, our working life is here, where we're standing right now.

So, when we retire, and we may have to sell this in order to do that, then you have to get your money back somehow, however that is.

So, it was a question of going to see local estate agents as well, with the plans, and getting some feedback from them. Because the nearby village, Empingham, which does have a medical centre and a shop and a school, the prices there are much higher than they are here. And yet, we're less than a mile away from each other.

That was the thing. We cannot drive the price of this to what it would have cost us in the first instance. And we thought, if we're going to be negative equity for the next ten years, that's not going to help us at all. So, it was the passive question mark, but also the cost factor of what happens when you resell this house. Can you get the money that you've actually invested in it?

So, that was really what then focused us again.

Tony: I'd forgotten about that, obviously checking the end value.

Ben: Loads of people don't. It just doesn't happen.

Tony: Yes. I always say to Marlen, and indeed I say to clients, 'okay, you're going a little bit over what you can sell it for today, but actually, you've got to pay something to live in a beautiful home that you've created for yourself. That has some value.' Not everybody agrees with me.

But yes, checking that value.

I think you can do another thing, which again our quantity surveyor said, 'don't do that, it never works well,' is that we could've had the

ground floor just as a shell, no ceiling, we'd just leave the services sticking out and then we can carry on later on. That does possibly give you difficulties with your VAT reclaim, although we've postponed ours at the moment. Obviously, we reclaim most of the value because we were building with a main contractor who was registered for VAT. So, he was invoicing us zero-rated VAT. But the garage, which we haven't built yet, we're leaving the door open for that. So, if we get funds and we can go on with that, then we haven't completed our VAT reclaim.

I met somebody recently who I said, 'isn't there a time limit to this?' And this person who is a specialist in reclaiming VAT – and I think it's well worth using one of those people actually, met at the NEC Self-build Exhibition, I think – they said, 'I've got a client who's been waiting ten years to make their reclaim. But beware. Government may change its mind and say no more.'

Ben: That's an interesting one. Just so I understand, the contractor, because they're zero-rating everything, surely you don't have a return to do because it's all going through the contractor. Have I got that wrong?

Tony: No, in that we have purchased some things ourselves. The kitchen we purchased separately – actually, that was alright because the kitchen guy zero-rated what we could zero-rate. But we had various minor things which we purchased, like a rainwater harvesting tank – I paid for that directly.

Marlen: We paid VAT on that, obviously.

Tony: Yes. And we can reclaim that back.

It might only amount to a thousand or two-thousand pounds reclaim, but it's worth having.

Ben: Wouldn't get it in renovation.

Tony: No, not at all.

Ben: Let's talk a little bit about how you chose to build this. Obviously, we're digging away into the side of the hill. So, water is an important consideration.

Tony: Yes. I didn't have many ideas about that to start with, and actually, the idea formed from looking at other projects at Passivhaus conferences and so on. And indeed, there was one which I went to on an RIBA visit actually, by Bere Architects, who you might have

heard of. It had this typology of a retaining wall and then timber frame set within it.

Timber frame has good sustainability credentials and you get this double stud where you've got plenty of room to put all of the insulation in. Given that we were thinking about recycled newspaper, of course that sort of works very well.

The challenges of waterproofing and the cost of doing that, one needed a lot of thought to get through that, and indeed, some of the decisions were made almost at the last minute.

That was very difficult because it's interesting, on the continent, you can go there, and you see a piece of polystyrene, for example, sticking to a concrete wall. How does that happen? You start asking people in this country, 'how do you do it?' You've virtually got to go to a chemist or someone who's very good in chemical analysis to work out a glue which won't melt the polystyrene but will stick to the concrete.

That was a challenge that we had. I had a friend who was in Switzerland at the time and he said, 'they're building a house,' and I said, 'go and look at that house that they're building in the village.' He said, 'yes, the polystyrene is sticking to the wall.'

In the end, we actually found a substance that could do it, but then of course, you've got the very difficult junction where you've got the retaining wall, the timber frame in between it, the moisture barrier coming down on the outside of the timber frame and you've got a tanking membrane coming up the retaining wall. Then how do you join that when the two are going to move? A timber frame settles per storey ten millimetres over time.

That one was almost solved the day before the contractor had to build it.

Marlen: That was challenging.

Ben: What other challenges did you have?

Marlen: Challenges, goodness. Educating the builders which are local, which are English and not used to building passive, into what that means. And then making sure that they kept it going through the whole process.

That was tough actually, because you often get the plumber who will come on site and say, 'I've been doing that like that for twenty-five years.' 'But this is not your ordinary house.' 'But I've been doing

it like that for twenty-five years.' So, you then have to start the process all over again.

You find yourself buying a lot of doughnuts on a Friday to keep morale high.

Tony: Yes. That was Marlen's job.

Ben: Good tip.

Tony: Again, when councils are building to Passivhaus, they're almost working with preferred partners. They're not just going out to general tender. They're working with people who have done it before.

We took an average builder in Leicester who does perfectly good buildings, has done for many years. But we were very fortunate in that we had a very good site agent. He took an interest. When we were doing that tanking, he could be seen working down, right at the base of the retaining wall, making sure it was alright. He became an expert almost in origami, of tanking, to make that work, and he sort of worried with me about the details. We worked on that.

So, I think we struck lucky with him and generally, everybody else was very supportive.

Marlen: The other thing is that I don't like skirting. You'll notice it in here because my husband got away with it, but when you walk through the rest of the house, we have a wall coming down to a stainless-steel bead. People find that a very strange detail, but I just find it much easier to clean and Hoover and do all the things I like to do in home.

Ben: Finally, what's it been like to live and work in?

Marlen: Love it, love it, love it, love it.

It's been most uplifting. Even if I have a really horrible day at work – and I do have quite a pressurised job and I deal with clients abroad so, sometimes I have to travel, and obviously Ben has only just gone to university but when he was here, it was also managing him and his school and so on – you just come in here and I might have had a whole day in London and I get to Peterborough and then I get here, and the minute I walk through the door, it's like you're in a completely different world.

Tony: Yes. People have said to me, 'are there any disadvantages to Passivhaus?' I think there is a disadvantage and that is that we'll be increasing the aging population. Also, increasing the population on the planet because it is so healthy in here.

Your humidity's controlled, we hang out the washing in the utility room – we never hang it outside – it will dry overnight. Even a pair of jeans with a thick material, that will dry overnight.

I think there's another disadvantage in that we're getting softer and we're getting less tolerant of other people's drafty old stone houses.

Marlen: With central heating that's on so much that you've got to throw a duvet off because you think it's too hot.

Tony: Yes. And the other thing is that you get used to being in this temperate twenty, twenty-one degrees. You get caught out when you walk out to the post box in a t-shirt. You just didn't realise how cold it was outside.

But no, I'd recommend it to anyone.

Ben: Thank you for going through your build story. It's always interesting. Everyone has different challenges, different takeaways. Really appreciate it.

Tony: Thanks very much.

Marlen: Thank you.