

Episode 217

What to do if your partner wants to build a house!

The show notes: www.houseplanninghelp.com/217

Intro: A lot of people tackle a self build as a couple . . . and it's normally one person who wants it more than the other.

Ben Adam-Smith chats to his wife Kay about what it's been like to build a new home . . . when her dream house is actually a period property.

Ben: What's your ideal home?

Kay: A beautiful old thatched cottage in a beautiful, well-established country garden.

Ben: And why do you have that in your mind, or why is it something desirable?

Kay: Because it's full of character.

Ben: That's it, full of character?

Kay: Yes. I love character and I love a house with soul.

Ben: When I proposed the idea of building a house, what did you think?

Kay: That you wanted to build an eco-house, which immediately made me think of a modern-looking box with metal roofs and wooden panels.

Ben: Did you like the idea of building a house?

Kay: I hadn't really thought about it.

Ben: But were you wanting to go with it or did you ever think about opposing and trying to get me to go into the thatched cottage?

Kay: I was a little disappointed because you used to have the same vision as me. But I knew it was something you wanted to do.

Ben: Did you do this because of me?

Kay: Yes, completely.

Ben: I think over time I've changed what I have wanted in a house and I don't think it was even in 2012 when I perhaps said I wanted to build a new house. It was after a couple of years of research and realising how tricky it would be to make an older property up to the same standard, and life would be so much easier if you're building new. You've got that chance to get everything right.

So, land first of all. It was hard, wasn't it?

Kay: Yes, it was. And it was quite exciting, looking for the land. But then quickly became disillusioned because it was too difficult. Everything that came up had something wrong with it or anything that looked perfect, you were up against developers. It just seemed futile.

Ben: Do you have any tips for getting a good site?

Kay: Just do your research before you go out there. We looked at sites that had leaseholds, the land had leaseholds, and that immediately should just ring the alarm bells. Check out the neighbours around it, see what the other houses are. A lot of times, planning permission would say no because they have bungalows all around it and if you wanted to build a house, they wouldn't let you.

Just do a lot of research before you go out. Check out Google Earth and Street View. They're very useful to get a better idea of what was around it.

Ben: What do you think our strengths are? This can be the whole process, both you and me, when it comes to building a house.

Kay: Our strengths?

Ben: Or do you want me to say what I think your strengths are?

Kay: Well, I like organising, I like doing my sheets and ticking things off, I like to do things in a process, I like to project manage. That's probably my strength, I keep on top of things and I make sure things run smoothly, on time and on budget.

Ben: And that is what your previous jobs have been as well, in project management?

Kay: Yes, that's pretty much exactly it. Keeping it on brand, in budget and on time.

Ben: That is a really valuable thing to bring to the table because I have been very grateful that I haven't had to do all those spreadsheets. In fact, it would've been very interesting to see what would happen if I'd just been on my own in this process when it came to all these decisions. Because I'm quite happy to make the decisions but less happy to do all that stuff of putting them into a spreadsheet, working out ...

Kay: Six-hundred lines of spreadsheet.

Ben: What have you enjoyed most in the process?

Kay: Seeing the house progress.

Ben: Yes, that's quite an easy one. I think you quite enjoyed the interior design too.

Kay: Yes and no. There's too much choice. I know what I like when I see it but I can't put it together in the first place. I've enjoyed working with an interior designer who's sent me things to look at and I've gone, 'absolutely, that is gorgeous, I love it.' I love looking at Pinterest. But without her help, it is too overwhelming.

Ben: But that's the whole point of her expertise. I think what I have loved most of all, whether she loves us for doing this, is those little decisions where you're just not sure and you say, 'Gaby, what do you think of these two things?'

Kay: I think she hates us now!

Ben: Yes, she probably does. But it has been very, very useful.

Kay: Invaluable.

Ben: I'm also enjoying seeing it come together later down the line because it's one thing, we've got all these mood boards and I'm never quite a hundred percent sure. It's not a sketch up of all of those things being put together in the room and you can look at the whole room and think, 'hmm,' it's her ideas of 'this is a nice fabric, a nice cushion,' etc.

Kay: But that's how I used to work in the design industry. We used to put mood boards together, and concepts, and I can see it. I can visualise it. I just can't put that mood board together.

Ben: So, this process, let's dig into it a bit because you've done a lot of the work of specifying. What exactly have you been doing, from chatting to her to working out what we've got to buy?

Kay: She would pin things on Pinterest and I would then find the item that she suggested, things that we liked. I would then have to do a Google search for it, I'd find the item, I'd go on to that webpage, I'd copy the description, I'd copy any measurements, I'd copy the price, I'd copy the link, any colours, and I'd put those into the Excel spreadsheet.

Ben: And sometimes as well, on bigger items – perhaps not the small ones – we've checked out what those things are too, haven't we? To feel it, touch it and see what those things are.

Kay: Yes. Things like the bathrooms, the showers, the big-ticket items, yes. And the sofas. I enjoyed that.

Ben: Well, we haven't got them yet. Hopefully we'll be able to afford them at that stage.

Kay: No. But I did enjoy that shop. It was a lovely shop.

Ben: So, you've enjoyed the shopping?

Kay: Yes. And the parcels arriving. It's like Christmas.

Ben: Christmas every single day with different things coming in.

When we went into this process, was there anything that you were concerned about? Because this can be a relationship wrecker, it's sent us crazy on budget ...

Kay: I had a couple of friends whose parents or the friends themselves, their marriages have actually dissolved over building a house. But those people built it themselves, they lived on site or in the house as it was being built, they had to put up with limited, cramped conditions and they were literally building the house themselves. It caused a lot of arguments.

I wasn't concerned, partly because we're strong enough and we've been through quite a lot already, but also, we were living away from the site. Which was why it was very important to me that we rented close but not on site.

That was part of my conditions, particularly having a pre-schooler and being pregnant. I didn't want to live on site in a caravan. I didn't want to have bad living conditions. I wanted to be able to live as normally as possible and build the house on the side. Which obviously not everyone can do.

Ben: What do you think has been the lowest moment and has it really been a low? Or has it just been children?

Kay: No, there haven't been any low moments, I don't think.

Ben: It's funny. I think there are a couple of reasons why and one of them is hiring the full package from the architect and the contractor. So, we know what we're getting for the money that we're paying.

Also, being able to rely on the finance I think has been quite good, knowing that if we'd gone over budget, it would make things more complicated definitely (but we could do it).

Anything else that you can think of that has helped us?

Kay: I think we've just been incredibly lucky and fortunate. Like you say, we've got the finance. I think that puts a lot of stress on people. And we've got a very supportive family who have looked after our children when we've needed to.

Ben: I also think it's been spread out so, it's not as if I felt at any one time everything has to be done. Which sometimes, if you're taking on a project yourself, it doesn't move on unless you do a certain amount.

Kay: There have been points like that, a couple of months ago being a case in point. It felt like decisions were all in our court and we were holding things up.

That's quite stressful when you only have maybe four hours a week to get things done, when one child is at pre-school and the other child's asleep and you've quickly got to get everything done while they're asleep. But that seems to have eased off again. And that is where we've been really lucky that the parents can come down and help sometimes.

Ben: How much have you enjoyed the process?

Kay: 'Enjoyed' is a funny word. It seems a bit surreal. It just feels like a job, to me.

Ben: In terms of time as well. A lot of time. I keep thinking, what must this be like to do? In a lot of ways, we're going the easiest route and it's just sucked up the time.

Kay: Hmm. As I say, I've enjoyed seeing the house progress and I get excited every time I go down and see something else that's being done.

Ben: What have you learnt about building a house?

Kay: In what way?

Ben: I could say that through the process, I've learnt about how to make it energy efficient, I have learnt about how to translate mood boards into specification lists, I've seen all sorts. I could go on and on with what I've learnt.

Is there anything that you had in your mind when I first said to you, 'here's a good idea. Let's build a house,' versus what it's actually been like?

Kay: No, it's pretty much gone as I thought it would. Possibly just the stages of how it's built. But even then, that's pretty much how I thought. So, no. It's gone how I thought it would. Probably more smoothly than I thought it would, after watching things like Grand Designs. We haven't – touch wood – come across too many hiccups.

And the other thing is, it's not just a supportive family, I do think we've got a very good builder, we've got very good architects on hand, and a very good interior designer. We have a good team of people.

Ben: I think you've got it spot on there.

What do you think have been the most important decisions that we've made? We've pointed out the architect and builder, having good people. Any other important decisions?

I'll add another one – the land, that perhaps it was a mistake, but it was also our only opportunity that we've got a big piece of land so, we had to build a big house.

Any other important decisions you can think of?

Kay: I think when we were drawing the house up with the architect, the first design they did we loved but it wouldn't pass planning permission. So, we had to make some important decisions and compromises, unfortunately, in did we want the house to step up in three different sizes or did we go with the cat slide roof on the back so that we got to keep one level, but it meant that some of the rooms would lose some of their design. We had to change the pitch of the roof.

So, I think probably the biggest and the most important decisions were to do with the design of the house.

Ben: I think that all of those I'm very happy with and I'm very pleased with the house that we've got.

Is there anything in the process that you regret, any decisions that you think, 'if only I could go back and change that'?

Kay: Checking the back door.

Ben: I knew that was coming! Hinges on the wrong side, yes. That was just something that slipped through with all of us.

Kay: At least we checked the front door.

Ben: Yes. Well, we checked everything, but we must have missed that.

Kay: We missed the front door as well. We almost had the wrong front door ordered. We almost had the exact front door that I absolutely can't stand. And that's a very expensive door.

Ben: That was lucky. Well done for spotting that one. Things like that I would say is a skill, that sometimes when you're really busy, I don't want to go through all these tiny specifications and all the rest of it, and you, late at night, doesn't matter what time it is, would say, 'right, let's go through this now.' And I'd go, 'oh great(!)' That is a skill of not procrastinating, just getting on and doing it.

Would you say that you've changed as a person through this?

Kay: I've got more stressed. But I don't think that's the house build exclusively. I think that's having a baby and a house at the same time. One that doesn't sleep.

Ben: I'll tell you something I've noticed. You would never, ever have done an interview like this before the house build. So, what's changed?

Kay: You forcing me into it!

Ben: I have not forced you. I gave you a choice.

Kay: No, you did. You forced me into it!

Ben: Yeah, right.

It feels like we've gone past the stage where a lot of the decisions have been made. No doubt there'll be little ones creeping out of the woodwork. What are you looking forward to?

Kay: Moving in.

Ben: Obviously. What are you looking forward to?

Kay: Moving in!

Ben: But what aspect of it?

Kay: Just getting into the house that we've been thinking about and drawing and choosing things for. Just being in there, having the space, getting the kids into their room. I want to get the garden done as soon as feasibly possible because I'm an outdoor person and I want my kids to be able to have a beautiful garden space to run around in.

Ben: Is there anything that you're concerned about is we move into a bigger house that has been entirely tailored to us, all that lovely furniture?

Kay: Well, yes. I'm going to be extremely precious, which isn't great with a four year old boy. I'm worried that I might not like it once I'm in, just because when you walk into a house that's already there, you always get a feeling for it and it can look like the perfect house on paper, but you walk in and it doesn't feel right. That is a concern because obviously you can't walk in and get a feel for a new build when it's not there.

Ben: But do you not also think that we've brought this one into being? I know exactly what you're saying and, in many ways, I think I'm going through the same thing, that it's just all so surreal, but I think this one is down to us.

First of all, we've brought it into the world so, we know exactly why it's been built the way it's been built, but I am hoping that we can bring lots of people in. We've got space so, as many relatives and so-forth who want to stay, get them all in ...

Kay: As long as they all take their shoes off. And no red wine.

Ben: Yes, red wine, maybe we'll have to say, 'let's go out to the garden' in the middle of December.

That's a tricky one, that. I think we're going to have to work at it. But it's funny, having been in really, you could, say cramped houses – I've never viewed them like that, but sixty squares metres – to now, two-hundred-and-twenty-six ...

Kay: They've been lovely houses.

Ben: Yes, they've been homes to us.

Kay: They have. They've been really nice. But possibly just not quite enough space once the family starts growing.

That always used to annoy me in the smaller houses, the lack of storage space. It felt like I was forever sorting and tidying things because things get messy very quickly when you've got too much stuff for the space. So, I'm looking forward to the space, definitely. And having things look nice.

Ben: Yes. For me, it's not about the size of it. The size was largely dictated by the land. I'm going to enjoy it but I can be happy, I think, in any house.

It's just about how we're going to live in it, and I think that's not determined yet. We don't know how that's going to go.

Kay: I don't think it's excessively large. I think all the rooms are a pretty decent size and I remember when we designed our master bedroom that the architect said it's quite possibly one of the smallest master bedrooms. Most people want an absolutely huge room and we didn't want massive rooms because you knock around in them. They don't feel very cosy.

Ben: I think for our life stage as well, if we're going to have a big house, this is the time to have it because all of the space except for that one guest room will be used virtually every single day, as far as I can make out.

Kay: And our friends all have children so, if they want to come to stay, we need more than one room. And our parents are still in the stage of their lives where they can come and visit. So, that'll be nice to have the parents come and stay finally. And I'll be forty-two years old, and it'll be the first Christmas we've ever hosted.

Ben: Wow, yes. That will be fun. Well, we've hosted them before, but it's been small, not many people.

Kay: No. We can now host properly and I'm looking forward to paying that back to our parents.

Ben: I know exactly what you mean. We've also got the special ground floor rooms that can be wheelchair accessed and so forth.

Kay: Yes, large showers.

Ben: Everything. We're ready for you if you need it.

Finally then, maybe we could come back to the beginning. Someone else is setting off on this journey, their partner has said they want to build a house. What advice would you give to that person?

Kay: Allow lots of time and allow lots of money and don't allow it to get on top of you. At the end of the day, it's a house.

Ben: And enjoy the journey?

Kay: Yes.

Ben: Because I think I've thoroughly enjoyed this, although I can't see myself doing another self-build until circumstances change. If we had to move somewhere else.

Kay: I'm not planning on moving.

Ben: But we don't know. This is what we've said before. We don't know what's going to happen in the new house. I'm not planning on moving either.

Kay: The amount of time, effort and love that's gone into that house, I'm not planning on moving for quite some time.

As I say, I think we've been very lucky actually. There haven't been any major dramas with it and we've been able to live away from it and it's all progressed really smoothly. But sometimes things get a bit on top of you and it all feels a bit too much, but you've just got to take a step back and think it's not life or death here. It's a house. Alright, my bathroom is a bit too small for my liking, I wish I'd have checked the bath sizes before we agreed the bathroom size.

Ben: I think this is a key point in terms of measuring up. We didn't do that. If we thought of going into other people's homes or to the Potton Show Centre – where they give you a plan of all the dimensions of every single room and then you can decide actually this is a good sized room – then when you get those dimensions back from the architect you can have something to compare against.

Kay: We did. We looked at your parents' house and we measured up all their rooms against ours. There were some concerns, but we were limited. Our house isn't as big as their house. We haven't got the same amount of space. So, you had to make compromises.

All I needed was probably another ten centimetres.

Ben: That can be with the backdoor hinges.

Kay: Yes. But like I said, at the end of the day, it's a house. It's not life or death. It's still going to be a far nicer bathroom than I've ever had before and we're incredibly lucky to have such a beautiful house. So, I think I can live with it. First world problems.

Ben: And this has been your first interview. Has it been really difficult?

Kay: No!

Ben: Lovely. Thank you, darling.

Kay: Love you.

Ben: Love you.