

Episode 216

Do self builds get any easier for a seasoned pro - with Mark Brinkley

The show notes: www.houseplanninghelp.com/216

Ben: I think where I'd like to start today is, we know about the Bible and all the work that you've done there, but what about the construction work that came before that? What sort of things were you doing?

Mark: I had an interesting path into construction in that I started bumping into friends who made a living out of building in the early Eighties. I thought they're more fun to hang out with than the people I was hanging out with and I said to them, 'have you got any work?' And they said, 'yes, we like to try a bit of everything.' That was the beginning of the Cambridge Building Co-op really.

My very first job was doing up a house quite near here. We were naturally green, although at the time, the nascent green building movement was not really very well organised back then. We started doing up houses in and around Cambridge during the improvement grant boom, which has long since gone, but these terraced houses – we're sitting in a street of Victorian terraced houses at the moment – had only just passed the point of not being demolished for slum clearance, and in the Sixties, that was the trend to take them all down, and it suddenly occurred to people that actually these are quite nice houses, and it was on that inflection point that at the time the government started throwing money at people wanting to put in inside toilets and central heating and kitchens into houses. And that's where we learnt about building.

There was a group of about fifteen of us, whittling down to about ten, then eventually down to about seven. We did all the trades. We'd do the foundations, the drainage – well, there's no point listing the trades. The only one we never tried was plastering because everybody tried it once and said, 'no, too hard.' It's a really incredibly skilful trade to be a good plasterer. But everything else. One day we'd be roofing, the next day we'd be wiring, then a bit of plumbing.

I'm not sure it was to a very high standard, but we enjoyed it and people enjoyed employing us. We were certainly scrupulous about it.

Gradually, that developed and became more professional over the years and I split off with a guy called Robin and we started doing a business called Complete Fabrications. We thought we'd actually start doing developing and building new houses. And in fact, I built a house with him down the end of this street, no more than three-hundred yards away, in 1987/1988. That was my background in building.

I went off and did a carpentry course at the time the government did what they called TOPS courses, which also went out of the window in the 1980s when Thatcher got to grips with the wayward government largess. It was a six month course, full-time, and you went through the whole gamut of what a carpenter would learn on an apprenticeship. And they paid you to do it. I had to drive up to Peterborough every day, but it was really fascinating that they'd even think of doing that.

So, gradually we upskilled and learnt more about the trades and more about the management of it, and that was the background in building. So, very general. Rather than typical builders who come up through a trade starting as an apprentice, we came at it from a completely different angle of, we'll have a go at this, try it and see what happens.

I guess we were sort of gifted amateurs really. We probably weren't as good as builders as we thought we were, but it was certainly a good way of learning.

Ben: When did you do something for yourself, a building that you were going to live in?

Mark: I had a house very near here, another Victorian street about half a mile away. My dad died when I was only twenty-seven and I inherited some money and decided to spend it on doing a green eco-renovation. We clad the walls with polystyrene insulation on the outside. The Vales were about, a couple called Robert and Brenda Vale – I see you nodding.

Ben: They live in New Zealand, don't they?

Mark: They were at the time, probably the leading knights of green architecture in the country, and they had jobs at the University. We said, 'why not come and help us with this house design?' They did a passive solar conservatory with lots of flaps. It was all very 1980s.

People wouldn't dream of doing it now, but at the time it seemed cutting edge. We worked with Robert and Brenda and we did a couple of other projects as well.

So, we did this house up and it looked like nothing else – it still looks like nothing else. It's still there with all this external insulation. You do see quite a bit of it about. It was under the Green Deal, wasn't it? But it was an early version of an early iteration. We were working out the details as we went along. So, there's bloody great bits missing where there's a boiler flu coming through. We could never work out the stench pipes, how we'd get around them. We had to extend the roof. It was a learning experience but fascinating. And we got a reputation for doing wacky buildings.

Ben: Did you build your own home from scratch? Is that something you'd done before?

Mark: No. Then I did a renovation on a Victorian terrace, gutted it and completely pulled it apart. The only time I've built a house from scratch was the one out in the countryside in western Coalville, which was the genesis of the Housebuilder's Bible. That would've been 1992, I think. '91, '92. It was a response to the Lawson bust when the housing market was in a desperate state and Robin and I had been accumulating building plots thinking we were going to become property developers. Suddenly, no-one wanted to buy a house for love nor money and we had to go and live on one of our mistakes. I said, 'I'll go on that one.'

I had three small kids in a small terraced house and we needed more space. So, it was go out there and – forty-five-grand that plot cost. It seemed expensive at the time.

Ben: Wow. They always do, don't they? It makes you worried about tomorrow.

Mark: We built the house out there, and that was the process – and being the client, which is I guess what you're experiencing at the moment, you suddenly realise what a big job being the client is. And all this decision making is phenomenally taxing. There was no guidance on it really. There were lots of text books on how to build a house, but very little on what you should put into a house and what makes a good house. I thought that's a gap in the market – I've probably told you all this before in previous talks.

Ben: I'm not sure you have actually. I don't think we've ever touched on this, or if we have, we haven't had the background that we've had today.

Mark: Yes. Well, your experience of it will change, won't it? And it's interesting revisiting it. Here we are twenty-five years later, and I hadn't built anything. I've done odd bits of building work for people immediately after that in the Nineties, and then I separated from Robin completely and just started doing nothing but writing as the book became more successful.

And I've spent years going around interviewing people, visiting businesses and looking at houses, but actually doing the process, I'd forgotten what a lot of hard work it is and how taxing it is. Even with this whole lifetime's worth of knowledge about what you can and can't put in a house.

Ben: It hasn't changed though, in terms of what goes on. As you say, you forget what it means.

Mark: It's more complicated for sure. The range of options is phenomenally larger than it was back in the Nineties. I suppose that makes it harder, but also having to tax yourself and questions of budget, questions of taste, questions of functionality. What sort of light switches do we want? We've been going through that for the last couple of months. 'I'd like a light switch please.' 'There's thirty-five different kinds of light switches you can choose.' Christ, here we go again.

You actually get fatigued by these ridiculous decisions you've got to make, when actually all you want is a functioning house.

Ben: Do you find any part of it easier or tougher? Where have you felt drained? Because for me as a client, I've gone through this and there have been times where the decisions come thick and fast, but I think going down the contractor route with architect and an interior designer, this is how I wanted it, just a good experience for the first time.

Mark: Well, what's been harder has been coming to grips with the wealth of choices out there. We deliberately chose Mole as an architect because we knew they'd push the boat out and do something a bit different. So, there's been lots of products like metal roofing, for instance, which I've never worked with before, which is a whole different ball game.

Ben: Were you wanting to experiment with it?

Mark: Yes.

Ben: I think this is very much the part of the self-builder, isn't it? If you do it more than once.

Mark: Yes. And the curious louvred cedar cladding that we have on the outside, which everybody comments on, which is almost like the signature of the building. 'What is it?' And I say, 'I don't know.' They had to work it out on site with the carpenters with sawtooth batons

We'd got some great tradesmen. Funnily enough, quite a few of them are children of people I knew when I started building in the Eighties. I was really knocked out by how enthusiastic they all are and how competent they all are, because there was all this talk about building is an old man's game and the younger generation don't want to get their hands dirty and everything. It's blown my preconceptions away. They're really incredibly into it and it's been a joy to work with them really. We can pass on bits of information, but we learn at least as much from them as they learn from us. And they like a challenge. Everybody likes a challenge, and they're really engaged in doing things differently and working out ways of doing it.

So, that's been a delight really, the people we've been working with. But the pressure's on to keep feeding the goat. I'm paying most of these guys on a day rate. So, if I mess around and we can't make our minds up, then the buck stops in our bank account.

Ben: How are you procuring this whole build?

Mark: I'm acting as the builder. I have a service company that has accounts with the various builders' merchants and also reclaims the VAT on a quarterly basis. I'm not going down the DIY self-build route.

I'm basically working with the architects plans. For big subcontracts like the roofing, we'll put it out to competitive tender, but an awful lot of it is actually finding someone who can do it. So, searching around, who can do metal fabrication or bits and pieces, and building a relationship with them, and negotiating usually on a price, occasionally on a day rate. Sometimes the job is so fiddly that it's quicker to work on a day rate. I've never ever felt by anybody that I've been ripped off by doing day rate because they've all done their day's work and they often do nine or ten hours work and charge me for eight.

Ben: You'll get their dads to tell them off!

Mark: There's a pride, and it's almost irrelevant. The trouble is, if you do it on a price, you could end up arguing about the extras, this changed and that changed. I want the freedom to come in and make changes.

- Ben: How does that help you in budgeting?
- Mark: Well, I've got a grand budget for the whole thing and I watch it like a hawk. I keep timesheets, I keep tabs on it, a spreadsheet that's now got to about five-hundred, nearly six-hundred lines of data on it.
- We're a little bit over-budget, a little bit over-time. Pretty much if you're on time, you're on budget. That's the old saying. It's pretty true. I'm likely to overspend, we're probably about five percent overspend, something like that, which I'm happy with. We're in the contingency sum.
- Ben: You're doing better than us, then.
- Mark: Start with a generous budget, there's a tip!
- Ben: I've also seen lots of people go over budgets. It was our choice. We could've value-engineered further.
- Mark: It's a difficult one because you think, if you value-engineer too much, you might as well just have bought a developer's house. There's a world of difference between a developer's box and going out and trying something a bit different.
- Ben: I think that's the hardest thing when you create a dream and you then think actually, no, you can't have that anymore. Change this, do that.
- Mark: That's absolutely true. It's so difficult to do that because as you say, you go to the self-build shows and you see all the wares on display and you walk around thinking, 'I'll have that, I'll have that,' but then you think actually, do you really need them? How much of this stuff do you actually need, how much do you want and what do you need to create a beautiful house?
- They're difficult questions. You've got to approach that from not just a budget but from a personal point of view, why are you doing this in the first place. Obviously, a lot of people want to do it because, for instance, this plot had, I think, thirty, forty people chasing it on the week it was on the market. I can guarantee no-one's going to make any money out of it. This was not a money-making venture because it had so many people chasing it. So, in a way, only people really interested in building were going to get involved in something like this.
- Ben: We talked about this last time, the plot. Maybe you could just do the quick recap, so we can talk about how you've moved on with the designs and then building it.

Mark: The design process I found that quite taxing, I must admit. We went through three or four iterations and started bouncing them around with the planners and the conservation officer, and it took on a life of its own almost. Suddenly we'd come up saying, 'that looks alright. I quite fancy that' but without really knowing what we were building in terms of amenity.

A lot of it was done out in the street. It was the street-eye view. Would it look good on the street? Would it look boring? We were looking for the wow factor, I suppose, and that's incredibly difficult to do from a set of plans because you can't really work out what the effect is going to be.

And then we tweaked it, after planning we made one or two little changes to make the house more functional, and since then, we had a full architecture package with about eighty drawings and when they first arrived on my lap I thought it was completely over the top, but we've used every one of them. So, the service has been great.

Ben: How far did you take that in terms of the architect?

Mark: We had the full architect's package. We're not using a warranty on it, we're using the architect's certificates, which I'm hoping we'll get but we have to pass building regs at the end. And we worked with the architects.

The standard routine is for them to come every two weeks, but in fact they've been doing probably slightly less than that because I've been so involved in it and they know I know a bit about building anyway. So, a lot of the details we're working out together.

The whole process of problem solving and overcoming issues is common to people. If they're interested in building they'll do it, whether they're an architect, a builder or a client. You sit down, and you thrash it out, and that sort of level of working, co-operative, communicative working, has worked very well on this job. There's been one or two little glitches and we've said, 'let's get together and try and solve it.'

That's been the way, I suppose, I wanted it. We didn't really have a plan of that's how we'd do it at the beginning, but that's how it's happened. I've sourced all the subcontractors and we've only really had issues once or twice, and that's to do with timekeeping really. The standards have been basically fine. Somebody's getting busy and saying they'll be there next week, but they're there the week

after. That sort of stuff has been quite common, and that's really why we're running a bit late.

But it's still very busy. Cambridge is still, as you've probably seen, very hot. Although it seems to have cooled down in London a bit, all the reports are that this town, everyone's booked up for months in advance. So, we're quite lucky to get hold of good subbies, I think.

The whole thing becomes a process of you get down in the morning, you have – it's not as formalised as having a site meeting every morning, but you chat through the work ahead, what you need, I quite often go out and get the materials – like the Formica that Will is doing at the moment in the garden, we were looking at worktops in the utility room. We didn't want a big chunk of chipboard from B&Q – bless B&Q, nothing against them, I've been quite a bit to B&Q recently.

So, he was saying, 'I'm doing Formica worktops in my bathroom at the moment. We've got this lovely old 1950s technique with plywood, a bit of Formica, and you get lovely shades of blue.' And we said, 'well, go for it.' And we're looking for that edge.

So, I do a fair amount of running around looking for odd materials and just keeping the site sweet really, and a phenomenal amount of clearing up.

Ben: There always is. Sometimes I don't think it gets cleared up straightaway, does it? It accumulates and then ...

Mark: Well, one of the old sayings is that it's the biggest shopping trip of your life. It's also the biggest cleaning session of your life. Because this is a tight site with no space around it. All of the materials had to be either in the garden or in the house, and if suddenly you want to work in one room, it means moving everything out of that room to somewhere else.

So, constantly stuff is shifting around the house, and we were forever losing dustpans, paint pots and ladders. So, you probably lose, I don't know, an hour a day trying to work out where the paint pot's gone and that sort of stuff, people just wandering around going, 'have you seen ...?'

It's happened three times today. 'Where is that box of screws that was outside this morning?' 'Don't know.' So, the hunt is on for the box of screws.

I guess if you were over-organised, you might be able to overcome that. I'm actually not. I think on a project management scale, if a

hundred percent was a super project manager who never got anything wrong, and nought percent was absolutely hopeless, I think I'd probably be in the sixties or seventies. I'm not bad, but you can see the stress comes in and the wheels start falling off.

Ben: Do you like to have the decisions coming quite close so that you can see them, or are you working way ahead of yourself?

Mark: We've done a huge amount of pre-planning decisions, but an awful lot has been swept aside. Both Mandy and I are terrible prevaricators. We think we'll do this and we'll do that, we'll think about it and then actually put it off until the day before it's needed and then go and do it, that's the one to go for.

I think we're probably quite typical in that respect because actually, it's an education process. You don't know really what you want as a worktop, you know what you don't like, you know what you do like. You don't want to buy more Dekton or quartz in the utility room, you don't want a slab of laminate. So, what are you going to go for? So, playing around, suddenly a solution jumps at you and that's actually what our carpenter's been using at home. That sounds great, and we've got exactly the same colour. So, it's almost like it's rolled at you by chance.

And the timber, we've used a lot of oak in this house and a lot of cedar, a lot of Douglas fir. They're all beautiful timbers, but we decided on the big living room ceiling and so, how are we going to finish that? Originally, the architects had just drawn a plain plastered ceiling and we thought we'd want something a bit more exciting. So, we thought, how about Douglas fir with some limewash, the sort of thing you might see in the tropics? It just happened that we've got a really good wood supplier out in Bottisham who does all sorts of interesting and wonderful timbers. He said, 'I'll get it, plank it up, make it this size,' and we found methods of getting – we experimented on how we were going to get the finish; we had two coats of Osmo. Then how are we going to fix it, we worked it out on site, and then suddenly it looks right.

Then all of a sudden, we had about forty extra metres of Douglas fir so, we've been looking for other places to use it. So, we've done slatted shelves in the airing cupboard, just using the Douglas fir. This morning we were putting cedar on the underneath of the cantilever which you're sitting on ...

Ben: So, you've gone for a cantilever. Now, whose idea was this?

Mark: That comes from the architect, the original design. The original building wasn't cantilevered, it was much the same footprint as this, but we wanted a bit more presence on the street, and also something quite simply to park bikes underneath without getting soaking.

Ben: You're going to have your own bike rack under there?

Mark: It won't be a rack, but there'll be a couple of hooks.

Ben: This is Cambridge.

Mark: This is Cambridge and bikes are important. So, a cantilever just seemed like a nice solution to a way of doing it. It steps the house out.

Ben: So, the form isn't simple as such. So, is that through your design philosophy? Maybe you could explain a little bit about it?

Mark: Well, the cantilever is simply to do with – well, other than the functionality of having a roof over your bike, it's mostly to do with the look on the street. A lot of the rest of the form is actually to cope with not taking light from the neighbours because there are a lot of neighbours around here.

Ben: That's your constraint really, isn't it? A long, thin garden backing on to gardens and houses.

Mark: Yes. And so, we've got lots of obscured glazing on one side and a stepped profile on the other side. Although actually, the old warehouse was just an oblong box with a pitched roof, and we've covered the same footprint but we're a little bit higher.

We probably would've had a pitched roof; we've ended up with a flattened roof because the neighbours on that side said they couldn't see the chimneys of the house on the other side. So, we flattened the roof. And that was bloody complicated.

It wasn't a deliberate decision to have a complicated form. I think actually I wouldn't.

Ben: It sounds like that has come through planning really, isn't it? And consideration, all those things.

Mark: Well, it just evolved. It's interesting how the whole design process evolved as a way of starting out with an idea of making an interesting looking building and then slicing bits off here and there, moving bits around, just to keep the neighbours happy, which we

had to do. You can't come and chuck a house up and kill their view or enjoyment.

So, it's an evolution. We didn't quite know we'd end up with a building like that. When we bought it, we just thought, let's do something. Let's build a house. Without any particular idea of what it would look like.

There were one or two iterations of it that were very, very different. The thing looked like a ziggurat with great big steps in it. It looked like something out of Arabia. That didn't really go down terribly well. It probably was not a good idea!

Ben: What else were you looking to have in this house, your second self-build?

Mark: Well, in terms of features ...

Ben: Or guiding philosophy.

Mark: To keep it fairly simple, to be energy efficient.

We weren't going to have solar panels on the roof, funnily enough. And then I was persuaded – I wasn't persuaded, it was our own decision – that because it was only costing six-grand to put them on and it made far more sense to do that than packing in even more insulation and having even smaller rooms. So, we've got this interesting system in that we have a plant room with masses of gubbins in there, which I'm still getting to grips with what the hell is what, and what it works.

There's a gas boiler in there, but it's really only there as a backup. Hopefully it will be off most of the time, and we hope to get the hot water out of the PV on the roof. We will see how it works.

It's interesting. We only turned it on yesterday, and of course, we're in the middle of what for us is a heat wave. So, we're generating electricity, but we've got no demand. So, who knows? We've got to be in it for a year to have a clue really what it's going to be like.

Ben: And you've just moved in, haven't you?

Mark: We moved in Sunday was our first night in here. The removal van came a week ago and we've still got the living room/kitchen area covered in boxes and furniture and we have no idea where it's all going. We've still got all that Antinox protective coverings on all the floors, so it's not really terribly homely yet.

But that's my experience of building projects. That's how it happens. Most people move in too early. Very rarely do you completely finish. I'm not sure anyone ever completely finishes.

Ben: I'd like it to be as finished as humanly possibly, but you could well be right.

Mark: It'd be great, because it's not great living on a building site and it actually slows the builders up as well with even more moving and faffing about. So, if you can leave it as long as possible, you should do.

Ben: But things mount up, don't they? Rent ...

Mark: Funnily enough, we had a couple of break-ins on this site. In the quite early stages, when we were still at the groundworks level, one bloke came and crawled under the heras fencing and helped himself to some tools. And then some lad came in November, and jimmed open the window on the studio and stole my Makita drill set.

It made me very anxious because we were only living a fifteen minute bike ride away, but every night I'd think I'd want to get there first thing in the morning to make sure the site's alright.

You don't feel that if you're living in a house. If you go off for the day or go on holiday, you don't think every day, 'oh my god, there'll be a break-in.' But psychologically, I was very keen to get in to stop the sort of trauma of, 'oh my god, they're gonna break in to our house.'

So, that was interesting. Funnily enough, they both got caught.

Ben: Well, that's good. Hopefully that discourages them.

Mark: One by CCTV camera that we setup, and the other one, we've got one of these surveyors' collapsible ladders – you know these things? I'll give you a demonstration afterwards – you can raise it up and down, and he nicked that. We told the police and they said, 'we've just found this bloke and we've never had a collapsible surveyor's ladder in here before. Is that yours?' We said, 'that's ours,' so we got the bloke.

But that's maybe part of the fun of an urban self-build because Romsey's not a posh area. There's all sorts of things going on around here.

Ben: This was your chance though, wasn't it? You said to me that you just don't get these opportunities in Cambridge. You're very close to the centre.

Mark: Yes. And the whole thing about being an urban build is interesting in itself because it brings different issues, like with traffic management and getting skips in and out, and cranes in and out, and deliveries blocking roads.

Ben: I never thought today, when I was coming here, that you'd have a skip picked up outside.

Mark: And huge excitement. Maybe not.

Ben: Well, it was excitement for me, and then seeing everything that's still going on outside.

What have you learnt then from this project? You said in the setup that you probably know more than anyone. It's putting all that back into practice and then coming out the other side again.

Mark: Well, I think I learned how little I know actually. I do know a lot about it, but without having been doing it continually for twenty years, you get a very different perspective commenting on it, writing it and interviewing people. There's nothing quite like doing it to realise you're at the cutting edge. And also, finding out where the bounds of your knowledge are. How much you know, how much you don't know.

It's sounds a cliché but it's a hell of a lot of work. I've kept a site diary. I tag everybody else's hours, I don't tag my own! Because the thing is, some of it's done at three o'clock in the morning on many a sleepless night. How do you log that? And an awful lot of time is just spent cleaning up and tidying up. How do you log that?

Ben: Are you doing any work at the moment, or is it all on here?

Mark: I'm still contributing odd monthly articles, but that's it. I've just thrown my time at this project for the last eighteen months.

Ben: Are you looking forward to the end?

Mark: Yes, I am. Yeah.

Ben: It's all very personal as well. That's the other thing that you perhaps forget when it's a long time ago that you built your own house. It impacts on you, on your weekends, on hobbies, everything.

Mark: It really does. It takes your life over. Particularly key you're employing people on a day rate. Some days we're spending over a grand a day on labour. You want to be there to make sure it's spent properly, don't you?

It's amazing that it's such a popular thing for people to do now. It's become very fashionable. I know lots of people who think, 'I'd love to build a house, blah, blah, blah,' and you think, 'really? I think I'm nuts.' And I've ridden the back of it with my writing, haven't I? I suppose I'm partly responsible for it.

Ben: It's still a fraction of people that actually make it happen each year.

Mark: It is. It's a tiny number of people, isn't it?

Ben: And we're both on that count this year.

Mark: Yes indeed, right in the middle of it. I suppose what else do you do? I'm heading into my retirement years. What do I do? Book a cruise in the Mediterranean? I don't think of myself doing that somehow.

Ben: Is the Housebuilder's Bible – have we got a few more updates? How might you change it, adapt it? Any ideas for it?

Mark: I suppose in the back of my head, I'm making notes and notes and notes and notes, and there will be another edition but I've no idea quite how it's going to be different.

Interestingly enough, we started using the iPhone Notes facility, a flat database without any structure to it. I've started massive amounts of notes – about three-hundred notes there. That'll probably end up feeding into, 'oh, that's what happened there and that's what happened there.' Because the stuff comes in fast and furious and often at random. And every day you learn something new. The question is, how the hell do you structure that into some sort of shape that people can feed off and learn from? I've learnt masses of stuff on this job that I never knew before.

Building's actually changed quite a lot in twenty-five years. There's a lot more red tape. The planning process is much more time consuming and meeting planning conditions, there were very few back in the Nineties. It was just starting back then. Now, every job is riddled with planning conditions and that was an eye opener.

The actual process of building I don't think has changed at all. It's probably not been changed since Victorian times, the way people get stuck into it and solve problems when it's going well.

So, there'll be more sections on red tape, I'm afraid.

Ben: That sounds like a sales line if ever I've heard one. We'll be queuing at the bookshop.

Mark, always a pleasure to catch up. I'm sure we've got much more to discuss another time, but thank you for having a chat now.

Mark: Okay. Good luck with the rest of yours.