

Episode 245

How do you create a healthy home? – with Elinor Olisa

The show notes: www.houseplanninghelp.com/245

Elinor: Our children, two of them, have got severe allergies and it's something that up until the point that we bought the plot of land, we'd been struggling with it. Because they are quite life restricting, the allergies that they have. We don't actually always know when they're going to have a reaction, we don't know all of the things they're allergic to, and then it becomes quite limiting.

A couple of months into the process of buying the plot, we realised we had an opportunity to not only build a house, but to build a house that would have an impact on our children's health.

Ben: Do you mind if we just focus on what are their allergies and what happens, just so that someone else who might be in a similar situation can understand?

Elinor: Sure, yes. The boys suffer from multiple severe anaphylactic allergies. They are food based, they are air based. Some of them we just don't know what they are based. But we discovered quite early on in both of their lives that they were allergic to wheat, dairy, eggs, nuts, soya, all pulses and beans, oats – goodness, we've got the most ridiculous long list of things that the boys are allergic to, which actually makes it much easier for us to say what they can eat. Which thank god, they can eat something.

Ben: How did you test all of that?

Elinor: We were very fortunate that with my eldest son, we found a paediatrician who specialises in children's allergies. She saved his life and then she set us on a path that has made sure that our children grow up healthy and strong and able to deal with these allergies.

But it involves skin-prick tests followed-up by blood tests. And the combination of the two will let you know the severity of the allergy. Because you can't just tell from one or the other.

They're not intolerances. They suffer from life-threatening allergies. It's quite a big distinction and I think it's something that we in general, in society, are becoming a bit more aware of. But we have, over the first few years of both of their lives, it's been a battle explaining to people the fact that it isn't a fad, it isn't just that they get a little bit of tummy-ache, it's that they could die if they are exposed to something.

The allergic reactions can vary. One day you might not have such a strong reaction as the next. It depends on their health at that time, their immune systems at that time. So, it's a constant battle for us to play it safe and to make sure that we educate other people whilst keeping them safe.

Ben: This must have weighed on you quite heavily as a parent.

Elinor: When you have children, everything weighs heavily on you. It doesn't matter what, you worry about them all the time, don't you? It doesn't really matter whether it's the fact they've got a cold or if you're not sure if they should have taken their first steps yet, whatever part it is of their lives that it is you're concerned about. Which school they're going to go to. So, as parents, we do just worry all the time.

Building this house was actually a bit of a – well, I suppose it hit home to us about how much it does impact on our lives, but then also made us realise how the boys do just get on with their lives. We've made it our mission to make sure that they don't feel restricted as far as possible – all children feel sometimes that they're not getting everything that they want, but we try to make sure that they partake in every part of their lives that they want to.

Ben: Obviously, you can create an environment that is safe for them, and we're going to talk about this because it's very interesting, some of the ways that you've brought things into the house which you believe are healthier. But you can only do that in the house. So, what happens when they are out of the house? Do you still have to be very careful about what happens at school?

Elinor: We have to work with everybody that takes care of our children, and at the moment they're an age where they will never be without a responsible adult. For us, it's making sure that whichever environment they're in, whether it's at school, at a friend's house, a grandparent's house, that everybody knows what to do in that situation. And also empowering the boys to take a level of responsibility at their young age for it.

So, they know what they're allergic to, they know what to do, and they know the right questions to ask and things to explain to an adult if they don't quite understand it. I imagine that will get harder as they get older ...

Ben: They won't grow out of this, or you can't tell?

Elinor: We don't know which allergies they might grow out of. They change, they add some of them, some of them get less, some of them get more, extra ones get thrown into the ring. But we do hope that they do.

You asked the question about we can manage them within our home and how we deal with it when they're outside of the home. We feel that when they're in the house, they get a bit of respite. So, they can be free in this house. They can eat what they want, touch what they want, run around and be free within the home because we've made it as safe as we possibly can. We're here watching out for them. And our hope is that the time in the house, particularly when they're sleeping with the benefits of the MVHR unit on, that it will give their bodies a chance to recover somewhat from what's going on in the outside environment which we can't control.

Ben: How does this house contrast with what you had before?

Elinor: Our previous properties, my first one we lived in a new build, but it was quite damp. Then we moved into Georgian and Victorian properties after that, which again have quite a lot of damp, lots of drafts, lots of historic dust – there's a lot going on in those houses. And we weren't responsible necessarily for all the paints that went on to those walls, for the flooring, for what went into the actual cavities of the walls et cetera. So, we just don't know how that was impacting on them.

We also have learnt more now about how that impacts on all of us, not just on the children. Whatever your kitchen cabinets are made up of, what's in your carpet, all of these things can have an impact on everybody's health.

Ben: So, the house that you were going to design – I know this is the story that I'm investigating as well – but how much of it was, 'we want a new house,' and how much was, 'actually, we really do want to make this about them'?

Elinor: Firstly, we wanted a house, because we weren't doing very well. We weren't progressing very far with our search for a home to own. I think it was all completely bound together, to be honest. It was an incredible journey and something that we felt so privileged to take

this adventure and have this opportunity. It's been a highlight of our lives most definitely. It is like having a fourth child, doing this.

We both run our own businesses and I suppose a business has a purpose and a USP. This house very clearly for us was going to be about the health and the future proofing. What can we do that might be able to show other people that it's actually viable to build a property? It doesn't have to cost millions of pounds. It is something that we can do. And in doing that, we can make choices that will be good for the environment, good for our bodies, good for our wellbeing when we're in them.

Ben: So, you found a piece of land online and it sounds like that process was quite simple. You didn't have much competition, or you put in a good bid? How did that bit work?

Elinor: When we found the plot, it came with the caveat that the people who were selling it did want a family to live on it. That gave us the advantage over developers. I suspect if we were in the race to purchase this plot against developers, we wouldn't have bought it. We wouldn't have been allowed to buy it.

Ben: And the big question then, you want a healthy home. How did you start your research?

Elinor: The first thing we did was find companies who could help us in this. I think there was surprisingly little online about it. We expected there to be a lot more. Because we spend a lot of our time researching products for our children, food, clothing, everything for them – we spend a lot of time looking at and reading the fine labels trying to find out what it's made up of ...

Ben: Sorry, I've got to stop you then. So, clothing. We're trying to find a product that's going to be good. What are we looking at?

Elinor: Probably become slightly obsessive [chuckles]. No, the boys are allergic to wool and that's again probably, we would never have thought of investigating what was in clothing. They also both had issues with their skin because of the allergies that they were having when they were small. So, you want to make sure they're wearing breathable clothing. You become very conscious of is it a natural product, natural fibres, or is it synthetic fibres? How is this going to be when they're wearing it?

We obviously have to avoid wool, although wool is a very natural product we realise – I won't get into the whole vegan debate now. Under different circumstances – but it's reading those fine labels. And I think what we found was people talk now, they want to be

known as ethical, they want to be known as conscious, retailers this is. But it doesn't seem to have transcended that far yet into the interiors market, let alone the building trade.

Gosh, the amount of waste and bad product that gets made in building products, we were very aware of how much we were throwing away, the cost of getting rid of wrapping, packaging, all of this. There has to be a better solution to it. At the moment, there doesn't seem to be. We didn't have time to find one. But I felt that you could go on in this process forever. We had to draw a line about what we were going to do. So, we said we're just going to do our very best to research every single product that comes into this build and do it in the same way that we would for any other item that we were sourcing for the children.

There were interesting conversations. Some people were fantastic, some people were already thinking about what legislation might come in years to come, and other people had no clue, had never been asked it, just didn't know what we were saying. They'd talk to us about the fact that they were eco-friendly because they didn't use too many lorries, and that would be as far as the conversation would go. But actually, we did find that quite a lot of products from Europe do know. They are actually labelled as low VOCs, they are labelled about the fact that they will not impact on your health. But not so much in the UK.

Ben: Who were you finding? Was there anyone that you came across that you thought, 'this is a good starting point. I'll go here, I'll speak to them'?

Elinor: Surprisingly, throughout the build, Instagram became a great source.

Ben: This is one I don't know about. How are you using that?

Elinor: There are an awful lot of people who are on this same quest for various reasons or have taken an element of our quest. And through them you can do a lot of learning. Be that from the allergy side, from the home building side, by putting the two together we got quite a lot of resources.

The States are very good. There are websites, there are retailers, there are definitely activists out there trying to make things happen. But essentially, we did end up building our own website and we're now endeavouring to keep that up to date. But at the moment, there isn't one place to go.

A small group of quite large High Street retailers did get together several years ago to try and come up with a set of objectives around healthy products and being transparent to the people who are buying the products, about what's in them so they can make that choice. But it doesn't seem to have gone very far. That had tailed off by the time we even began our build.

Something needs to happen at a higher level that insists you cannot sell a product that has poisonous paint, poisonous glue, poisonous MDF make-up in it. We have to start to ask those questions.

I did say I wasn't going to say anything about this, but the whole vegan and gluten-free health quest that's happening at the moment also worked in our favour because people are actually more aware that you're going to ask questions. We live in a house where every time we go to a restaurant, every time we go to somebody's house, we have to ask them what's in their food. And it's not that we're picky eaters, that aside, we might be picky eaters, but it's actually really important for us to know.

Obviously, lots of things did happen in the press, very sad stories in the press, around the time of us finishing our build, of the impact that improper labelling can have on people with allergies that my children suffer from. We've seen a shift now. It is much more acceptable to ask questions. If we can take that to shift into other parts of our industries, it will benefit everybody.

Ben: Does a lot of this come down to labelling? You sound like you're someone that's very thorough in reading through things. Unfortunately, you've been forced into a bit. I don't know whether some of it is instinctive too. But is that what it comes down to? A lot of specifying, it's just what information is available and knowing which bits to look at?

Elinor: I think it's not instinctive actually. For me, before the boys, before the build, I would definitely have gone for the product that was the cheapest and that looked the best. I wouldn't necessarily care about what was inside it.

Ben: And I'm going to say this again because it's really important, the cheapest and what it looks like. What percentage of the market must that drive?

Elinor: Yes. All of us, you see something that's good and it's a bargain, that's amazing. Let's get it. And you'll probably buy new over old. You probably immediately look to a brand new product over

sourcing something that was second-hand, upcycled or whatever it might be.

Ben: It might come down to price again.

Elinor: Yes, well, I think we are. We had a budget, we were lucky enough to have some money to spend on this, but if money was no object then what you could do was amazing. You could make the most healthy home.

Ben: But sometimes what happens when money is no object is things get bigger and you still have the same struggles.

Elinor: Yes. And the same impacts that you have from that. For us, again, our limited money certainly caused this as well as our hope that we could make less of an impact, feeling thoroughly horrified by the amount of rubbish that our build did produce. We did start to look to second-hand products, and we did look for upcycled things and we did look at what we'd already got and thought, rather than throwing it away, what could we do to it that would make it fit this space.

We could go and buy a second-hand product that was very well-made but made twenty years ago, or we could go and buy something that might cost the same or slightly less, but it would never last that twenty years again.

Ben: When you bring a product into the house, is there any test or anything that you do before it comes in?

Elinor: No, we don't test things coming into the house [laughs]. We've had lots of people thinking we're incredibly control-freakish, and I don't blame you for asking that question. It's also people give you things and you have to look at it and go, 'oh no. I can't give that to my children' for whatever reason. But that might be it's containing nuts, right through to that's not really that healthy for them to have. That said, they have plastic, they have all the stuff that most children have in their lives in that way.

We just try and check before things come in. If we buy a new plant, we check that the plant is going to be either neutral or have benefits, as opposed to potentially being poisonous or having a negative impact on the property.

Ben: So, a plant. That's quite interesting. We haven't mentioned that. What do you need to know about plants? I would have thought all plants good, no?

Elinor: Some plants aren't so good for children and animals, we know that. They can be poisonous. But then some plants just aren't as good. We've put a lot of plants in that will hopefully help the air and will support the MVHR unit in what it's doing. We can't have a lot of fresh flowers, although we do sometimes still have them, just because of the pollen and it does have an impact.

So, we have less flowers, more plants. We know there are studies being done at the moment about the impact that it can have on just a quite relatively small residential space.

And to be honest, plants are one of the easier ones to do the research on. There's a lot of research out there about what plants are good for your home, good for your garden. We looked for plants that would be bee pollinated over tree pollinated in the garden, because obviously tree pollination involves the pollen being in the air and that can be an irritant. Bee pollination, that's great, that's nice, it's much more localised.

That said, having the garden, having the outside, our children go outside, they go to the park, they go to the playground at school, they go to the woods, they do all of those outside things. So, they're going to come in contact with it. We live near a very busy road. There are all sorts of things we cannot possibly control. It's just what we're doing within our little, small environment here.

Ben: You've talked a couple of times about MVHR, which is a ventilation system. At what stage did you discover about indoor environments and how you might like to build this house?

Elinor: We were aware that Passivhaus equals a healthier environment, from an ecological and also environmental perspective. We worked with our project managers who are specialists in this area, and I think had we not worked with them, I'd never heard of an MVHR unit. I've heard of air conditioning and I probably would have assumed that's what it was, which it isn't.

To go back a step, we also did discuss this with the boys' paediatrician, and there have been studies done on children with severe asthma where they are essentially put inside a chamber at night where they only breathe this clean air for that night, and they've had a very high success rate with the children then becoming healthier and their immune systems being stronger and having less asthma and less allergies. That sounds incredibly severe to us, the idea of putting your children in a chamber, but when we heard about the MVHR unit through our project managers, we realised actually, that concept could apply to the whole home.

Our natural instinct is to fling a window open to get some air in and ventilate a house, and it definitely is still there built-in as an instinct. Like, 'oh, it's stuffy. Let's open the window.' But what you realise with the MVHR unit is, if you've got the house sealed and this is working and it's filtering the air coming in and out, you have the freshest air and it's very noticeable. I don't think we would have ever thought of purchasing one, ever thought of putting one in. Now, I'll make sure every home I have has one of these and I'll advocate for people to do it. Because the outside air is actually filthy and where we are, where we live, it's full of pollutants.

Ben: I live in the countryside and was quite surprised at the colour of my filters after three months. I know it's just after building, so I think they have a bit more dust on whichever way round it is, intake, outtake.

Elinor: I know both of ours were filthy. So, definitely not so good here. But a lot of people have said to us, 'why don't you just move to the countryside? Surely you should move to the countryside.' But at the moment, we are tied to living where we are. We need to be near to London for our jobs, for our work, for our family. So, for us, it was doing something that meant that we could have a healthier lifestyle in the home without having to move into the country.

Ben: Have you ever explored that as an option, maybe a holiday for a couple of weeks? Does it make any difference or not really?

Elinor: I think a holiday always makes a difference wherever you go.

Ben: That's a very good point. That's a stupid question I've just asked.

Elinor: No, not at all. I mean, we do try and take them to places and holidays for us are quite tricky because we're always trying to find somewhere. We have to do quite a lot of risk assessment before we go on a holiday. But we do go to the countryside with them, and I think all children just love being outside, don't they? All children benefit from running around in the fresh air. And it sounds like a cliché, but I can assure you that most people, from first hand, would say, 'what a huge benefit that is for children.'

Ben: What did you want to build then? You've got a site now. Maybe you could just outline the constraints?

Elinor: We purchased a back garden plot which comes with several planning restrictions including the fact you can only go up one storey and you are limited by the size of the plot to the square footage that you can take up above ground. So, the design was very clever.

Ben: So, that's planning on day one. You knew that? Or that was when you put in for planning?

Elinor: The plot came with pre-approved planning for a design that took all of those factors into account. It was a beautiful design, absolutely gorgeous home that they had designed, and it accounted for the fact that we needed to go down in order to make this into a family home. We then worked with our project managers who are our design build team, to adapt it a) to our budget, which obviously was the first one, and then b) to fit our lifestyle which was slightly different from the original designs on that.

I think because we already knew roughly what this house was going to look like, we knew what the square footage was going to be, we made internal tweaks and some external tweaks. We changed how the building was going to be made because we needed to do it fast. That's because we had this access issue which was very prevalent in the Grand Designs programme, but we had a very short period of time to access our plot because otherwise we can't get anything up our drive.

Ben: Was this from the neighbour who sold the piece of land?

Elinor: It was from the neighbour who sold the piece of land, yes.

Ben: So, when they talked about, 'will we be able to extend access,' was that actually a big deal or ...?

Elinor: It was intensely stressful for us. Just because we would become completely stranded the minute that access went. The plot that we had access over was also for sale at the same time and we didn't know who was going to buy it and whether they'd allow us to continue access.

We built a house in nine months which we now know is actually a really quick period of time to build a house in. Everybody around you thinks that's an incredibly long time to have their lives affected by your build, and we would be the same. Anyone living next to a build wants that build to be finished as quickly as possible. So, in many ways it probably sped up the process because we knew from day one we would only have this limited access. We had to have a pre-fab, the top ground floor part of the house brought in which saved so much time. Made off site, shipped in. We were watertight within two days.

It impacted on our choices that we made, but we don't regret those.

Ben: Build system, I often think that this is a big one for health. So, below ground you're sometimes restricted. You've got your hands tied. What about above ground?

Elinor: Above ground, we went for the SIPs panels. It's a company that specialises in Passivhaus SIPs panels so, we knew that all of the checks were being done with them. They also install and build it. So, they come with a team and put it all up as well. So, you're benefiting from them being experts and this is what they do every day is build this type of property.

We had to go for concrete below ground, but once concrete sets, it's pretty low impact VOC wise.

Ben: I should think for this site, I'm imagining here, you always think of things like strawbale or perhaps timber frame with blown in newspaper might be healthier. But is this meeting constraints as well of, say, finance as well?

Elinor: It's finance and feasibility. So, we weighed up what to insulate the cavities with, and in the end we went for the lowest VOC product that we could get in the knowledge that once it was plastered over, it would be negligible. And obviously, we weren't in the house at that time, living with that. So, it was in for a very short period of time and then put away.

I think if you were building an eco-house, which this isn't an eco-house, this is more a family home which has got eco credentials is how we like to think about it – we have got plastics in here, we have got things in this property that definitely would not be in a home that was a hundred percent an eco-home.

Ben: But eco-house is a very difficult term. It can be a bit wishy-washy at one end or absolutely extreme. So, I think you've got a lot of very positive things going on here.

So, we've got the SIPS up, I guess having that speed for the access. So, how did you negotiate the access? Because if someone's selling a house, it doesn't sound simple.

Elinor: No, well, it started off very straightforward but in hindsight, what we would have done is said from the day that we break ground, we need this much time. But it wasn't set out like that. It was your access will run out on this day in July. And they were really generous, and they did grant us longer access. In a different situation, we could have found ourselves completely screwed at that point paying money we didn't have and all the rest of it. But

essentially, we had someone that did want this house to be built and they were very much on our side with it.

It's a learning process. There is an awful lot of paperwork, lots of contracts, lots of lawyers, lots of things all the time in that setting up period, and you hope that at that time, you make all the right decisions. That was probably one of the ones that we didn't have the time to think about. Like, 'what if it does actually take six months longer than we thought to get planning? What if Brexit happens? What if these things happen that have a knock-on effect on our build?'

So, it was very stressful, but the build was stressful and every day there's something to worry about, and you're probably worrying about so many things that you just roll through it all.

Ben: How did you manage your time? I know as well that probably my business suffered through the process. You're already trying to focus on one thing – or did you prioritise the build for a little while?

Elinor: No, we had to do both. So, I was here in our health and safety hut working, or I would go to work and switch off all stuff to do with the house. And it was really difficult. We would be up very late into the night during this trying to finish off either the house or finish off our work.

It was a very odd feeling the day that we got all of the final certificates through when I realised we'd just freed up this huge bit of time. 'What on earth are we going to do with it now? Let's find another plot.' No, definitely not. I think my business partner would probably sack me.

Ben: So, having a business partner, did that help a little bit?

Elinor: She was very supportive of it and I hope that I managed to get the work done, we kept everything going alongside it. And I think life goes on, doesn't it? We've gone through having multiple children between us, buying, selling, renovating, doing all these things. You manage them both. I run my own business with her. It's part of the lifestyle.

It would have been much harder if it was a nine to five job. I don't know how people manage that. Because my job, I can sit up late at night and finish off what I need to get done, I can work on a Saturday and Sunday and get it done, that allowed for that flexibility. I would advise people to take time off if you're going to try to do this, or have a project manager that you hand everything over

to. I don't know how you can possibly keep your eye on what's going on and be in work nine to five.

Ben: How were you procuring this? You've obviously got John from Enhabit who I know is very competent. But what's the process? You said design and build, did you?

Elinor: Yes, Enhabit did the design and build for us. So, they handled the structure of the building. We worked as a team and we did a lot of the rest of the procuring. So, we procured the parts that needed to be put into the house, the fixtures, the fittings. We had our own electricians, our own plumbers get involved in it as well.

Possibly in hindsight I'd advise people although that saved some money because we didn't have a company to do everything, if you can find a company that does everything, no gaps will occur. And if the gaps do occur, one person is responsible.

Ben: What do you mean by gaps? Gaps in time or ...?

Elinor: More in communication, who's responsible for what, and when should something get done. When you've got people who aren't used to working together, we were incredibly fortunate that actually everybody that worked on this build it was a pleasure to have them on it and they did work together as a team. But occasionally you'd come across an issue of, 'that's not my remit,' 'it's not my remit,' 'it's not my remit.' 'Whose is it? Somebody has to dig that hole and put that pipework in and connect it up.' So, that side of things was more than I'd expected.

I think it's intricacies and it goes all the way through to the fixtures and finishings as well. You probably do want somebody that can manage the whole thing from start to finish.

We wanted to have control and sight of what was being bought. For us, the finished look was very important. We've lived in a new build before where somebody else has made all those decisions. We've done renovations before, which is essentially almost just this part of the process where you're choosing bathrooms, kitchens and flooring, making sure that everything is the right colour. I'm very fortunate in my job to get to go to some absolutely beautiful homes and beautiful buildings, and I wanted to take some of that learning and put it into our property.

We didn't get to do everything that we wanted to do, but we wanted to put the basics in that would last and build on it now over the next couple of years.

Ben: Have you got any of those design ideas? Art is obviously very close to your heart. So, what were you wanting to do with the spaces?

Elinor: It was very exciting when we started looking at the 3D modelling of the home and we could see all of these big, blank, white walls. And I actually can honestly say, we did know what art we were going to hang on the walls long before there were any walls to hang on. But it gave us that chance to say, 'could that wall be a little bit bigger? Could we put a recess in here for this piece?'

Ben: I love that, designing the walls.

Elinor: I know. But it's those finishing touches that I think if you just walked into a white square space, you don't have that opportunity to do it. But we were able to work with interior designers, lighting designers, obviously with the design team, to make sure that we did get these clever little things that hopefully add to the interior experience.

Ben: Just going back to health then. We've obviously talked through the process. Are there any other key concepts or things that you should mention in regards to health?

Elinor: Something that we've never, ever thought about in any of our other homes that we've lived in is lighting. In fact, we sourced through our electrician an absolutely incredible lighting designer, Darren, and he actually is doing research into the benefits of light for health. We were able to start to learn about another whole aspect.

We obviously know that lighting is important, and you want to have a nice, bright light in certain spaces, and slightly different lighting for different moods. But he was actually able to tell us about the actual LEDs that we were going to use. And downstairs we were worried because it was going to be a basement, was there going to be much light? So, we lit that space to give the feeling of daylight.

We're very fortunate that the light well is so effective. It doesn't really feel like a basement. But at night, we can put the lights on, and you don't feel as if you are in a sunken space. In the boys' room in particular, we've got settings that we're able to turn the lights down to, which just calms everything down. It doesn't go from bright white to dark. It's gentle, biodynamic lighting. That's the name of the system.

That's been used throughout the property and we've got two different types of lighting. We've got feature lighting, and then we've also got the general lighting. And it's incredible.

We miss the lights in this home when we go to other properties because you feel it in your eyes. You feel how it affects and how it's harder to see things or just harder to be in a space. And again, we would never have thought of this. We would have just said, 'let's put twelve spotlights here, spots in the ceiling, one pendant here, done.' But we were actually able to look at the tones of the LEDs, the biodynamic lighting, and interestingly enough, then by proxy learn about the impact that lighting has on health.

Ben: I am always intrigued because every consultant that we had on our project, I feel, brought a lot of value. Was that your experience too? What were the main consultants you can think of giving you a real help here?

Elinor: I should have mentioned this at the beginning really. The person that brought the whole thing together was our landscape designer. We've got this huge opportunity with this plot and all this space to have a garden that our children could never have had in any of the homes we'd lived in before. Ellen was involved from the beginning in the design process and making sure that we didn't just turf this bit or just put a square patio in here. Her huge coup was the design of the light well.

We had bought this plot where the design for the light well was a slope. It became very obvious to us when we were left with this caving in, doom piece of mud, that a slope was never going to work or be practical when you have children and a dog. That was definitely going to be an absolute disaster, and a four metre drop. She designed this incredible terraced area for us that wasn't just to bring light in and to retain the soil, but gave us a large amount of extra living room outside. We have two spaces now out there, we've got beautiful flowers, it makes our bedroom feel as if we're connected with the garden.

Ben: So, a few questions as we get towards a close, about how life has been. Firstly, we talked about health throughout this. Is this anecdotal or has it really helped the kids?

Elinor: I think as a family we all feel amazing because we're living in our own home that we built. And the sense of relief, achievement, excitement, all of that – and it was a huge, huge journey we went on together as a family. The boys and our daughter were very involved in it. They visited all the time. So, our first year in the property was certainly us enjoying it. And I think we all felt better because the stress was going, and the stress was relieving.

We were asked the question about the boys' health maybe four months after we'd moved in, and we hadn't really thought about it, I suppose. We'd just been busy moving in, getting ourselves ready. But before, they were having weekly reactions to unknown things. Wherever we were living, they would come to us covered in hives, whatever it might be, having runny noses streaming, sneezing, having the beginnings of an allergic reaction. They are not having those anymore at home. We still have them outside; they still do occur. We've had one or two in the home that have happened, and we think we know why each of those had occurred. So, we know the cause of it. That's fine and that's dealt with.

The fact that everything in this property, we know where it came from, we know that it's safe and good for them, seems to be working. We haven't had their allergy tests redone within this last twelve month period. That will be very interesting to us. But I can honestly say that they have been healthier.

They're not cured. That's not the case. Our son still does have asthma. The night asthma attacks have significantly reduced. We've had a few because he suffers seasonally, but they've been considerably less. He hasn't been in hospital. Considerably less than we were having. We obviously need to get that allergy test done to know if any change has happened there. I don't know. We wouldn't dare risk it just on a trial at home.

But overall, our family is healthier. Everyone is healthier, everyone is happier, everyone sleeps really well. Sleep was a big problem. The waking up with the asthma attacks, just not being able to have a good, solid night's sleep affects everybody. Now, our sons sleep through most of the time. If they don't, it's normal childhood things. It's not panic that you need to get to a hospital things.

I hope long may this last. We didn't think it would happen that quickly. We assumed it would take years. But at home, yes. It's made a huge difference. And if we were to do this again and if we were to give advice to anybody, it would be I think we can all make changes in our existing homes. You don't have to build a house to do this. There are changes you can make in your existing home that can have a significant impact on your overall health.

Ben: Finally, is there a thought that you want to close on? Let's say someone wants to create a healthy home and they've enjoyed this podcast today. Any resources, or maybe you just want to repeat a piece of information? Anything that would close this nicely?

Elinor: The largest piece of learning that I took away from doing this build was to ask questions. It's not to just assume anything. Don't assume that because somebody is selling it, that this is something that is okay for you to take home and have. Do your research, take responsibility for it, and ask questions. Because I think by us as consumers asking questions of retailers, they will become more willing to label things better and to give you more honest answers about the make-up of their products.

Ben: I've really enjoyed my chat today. Thank you very much.

Elinor: Thank you Ben. Thank you for your time.