

Episode 264

Your forever home lifestyle – with Mark Siddall from LEAP

The show notes: www.houseplanninghelp.com/264

Mark: It's really just deepening my understanding of the buildings I'm designing so that they can deliver the right kind of performance for my clients and future clients. Otherwise I'd feel as though it would be negligent not to, in a sense. You need to close building performance gaps to make sure that our buildings we design perform as expected, and if they don't then we need to learn why that's happened and refine our approaches accordingly.

Ben: When you look at self-builders, do you see gaping holes in knowledge or things that you just want to help them get the hang of more quickly?

Mark: Well, yes. One of the things that we look at is that a lot of value engineering in design, as you've talked to Nick Grant previously about, a lot of the best decisions are made at a very early stage. And these things come before we've even designed, more often than not. They're in the processes whereby somebody might even be selecting a plot of land and the suitability of that plot of land. People often make an emotional decision that that's the right plot for them and I'm sure that they think about a lot of things but coming from an architectural perspective and thinking about buildings and urban design, then there are other layers that might feed into that.

Some of the things I've been reflecting upon more recently which are less building specific in some respects, that's what informing some of my current thinking.

Ben: We're going to go through ten different elements that you've put together for the Forever Home Lifestyle. One question first. Forever Home. Is that something we should necessarily be wanting, desiring?

Mark: I think the term 'Forever Home' means a lot of things to individuals. Everyone takes their own interpretation to it. What I've tried to do is look back across my last ten years of projects that I've been

working on and seeing what people have asked for and what their cumulative thinking is.

So, it's not so much me trying to impose my own view, as looking back at what's been done in the past. And then, as I say, layering on certain perspectives of an architect in practice with the understanding that I have. So, that's what's really informing it.

Also, when we're talking about Forever Home, we can couch in all sorts of different ways. Is it the one house that we're going to live in forever? Absolutely. Or is the home itself a forever home? In which case, it will serve different purposes to different people over different time frames.

In some respects, you can look at this as another way of thinking about a sustainable home and a sustainable lifestyle and the suitability in that context.

But my clients always talk about wanting to build their own Forever Home. So, this is, shall we say, empirical evidence from their experience and their language. That's how people talk about it. Not just how we talk about it in an architectural sense, but this is how people think about it.

Ben: Do you want to lead into the first point? Does this go through in an order that's more relevant at number one, number ten, or just these are points that have come up?

Mark: All of these points inter-relate to one another. You can think of it almost like a Bento Box which has lots of little compartments but all held together in one box. So, they're all related to one another.

In truth, there are times when they overlap and mix together in the same way that if you were picking different elements of food out of a Bento Box, you might choose a few selections before you pop it in your mouth. So, it's that sort of framework.

There are no dictates. These are things to reflect upon and to encourage better decisions to be made, but there are no dictates. It's not my choice. It's not something that I'm imposing. This is looking at how people make decisions and the key things that they can think about. And if they do it through a framework, that's often useful because it helps to focus thinking in key areas so they can get a better outcome.

Ben: How much is your framework actually helping put together a brief for you in your terms? Is that what's happening or is this something slightly different?

Mark: This underpins the work that I do. There's a framework that I have and this ties into that in terms of this informs the nature of the questions that I ask and the brief that we develop for individual projects, understanding requirements.

Now, there are certain things which often, as you'll see, sit outside of the brief that I would take as an architect because the plot will already have been determined or certain other constraints might have been determined, but when we look at the lifestyle that my clients are trying to create, these things become relevant.

So, the purpose of the Forever Home Lifestyle as a framework is trying to help people before they're necessarily even employing an architect when they're looking for a site et cetera.

Ben: It's always interesting when people ask for support, isn't it? Because sometimes you feel that you shouldn't be doing that until you've got land because that's the last thing that an architect would want to be engaged when something might never happen.

Mark: Well, I mean, there's a commercial boundary, shall we say, that we might be engaged with. This is one of the purposes of the framework, that it can help people before anybody gets engaged in any architectural conversations. But at the same time, an architect can add value when helping to select an appropriate plot.

Ben: Does that happen a lot?

Mark: No. It doesn't happen frequently. It's a smaller proportion but it does happen.

I do experience that from time to time. But normally people are approaching me once they've already bought a plot of land and then they're already bound into certain things which they might not necessarily quite have anticipated in quite the same way or they haven't had certain conversations which maybe if they'd spoken to an architect or somebody thinking the way that I think at least, that they might have reached a slightly different conclusion or might have actually helped to reconfirm that they're making the right choice which is fine and appropriate.

Ben: Okay. What's first then?

Mark: Well, I'll run through the ten points, and then we can start to break down what each one means.

The first one is really contentment and character. That's one package of thinking.

There's convenience, control, confidence, community, connection, and then there's making homes futureproof.

Then there are more lifestyle elements which are financial peace, being a faithful custodian, and getting abundant time.

Ben: I thought you were going to go through the entire list being 'C's for a second there.

Mark: The majority of them are. There are seven 'C's and three 'F's.

Ben: Alright, let's rewind. Contentment and character. What do you dig into here?

Mark: This really ties back to that emotional core. We make decisions based on emotion and then justify them with logic. That's what all of the neuroscience tells us and that's how widely I've looked at things as I do.

It's really that one of, if it feels right, it's right. But is it necessarily? There's Daniel Kahneman, an economist. He looked at thinking fast and thinking slow, that we make decisions based on different timeframes and emotional decisions are quite reactive and they're informed by our history. But we're not always necessarily thinking in the long-term.

It's important to make sure that we get the contentment aspect thought about in the right kind of ways, but we need to think about it in different timeframes.

When we start to think about contentment in terms of an actual design and a Forever Home, then it's largely speaking about the character of the design. There are two elements to that in some respects; what's outside and what's inside, and the feel that that has.

Externally, we might be constrained by planning related considerations. Internally, it's much more of what can fit within a budget and various different aspirations that could transfer into elements of style to some extent. Though I think that good design doesn't necessarily need to adhere to style. Specifically, each person has their own preferences and when I'm working with them we develop a palette that we then use to inform the language and the design of that individual house so it suits them.

The sense of wellbeing that comes from being content is incredibly important and it means different things in different contexts. So, 'are you content with your storage system?' for instance, could mean is

it well-ordered or just chaos and frustrating? You would have a different set of feelings that underpin contentment in a living room, a bedroom or whatever.

So, it's an opening into a deeper level of conversation that will allow people to make a more robust appreciation of what they actually want.

Ben: Do you sometimes bring into this the cultural baggage that you might have? So, if we're talking about the character of a home, you may just know what you've had in the past.

Mark: I think as an architect, when you go through university, you learn how to design and you're thinking about things in ways that are not necessarily stylistically bound. I think that there are things that inform my thinking and my approach when we start to look at the overall performance of a house. So, we're thinking about contentment.

If I skip forward and make these links as the blurred boundaries happen, when we start to think about control, there are three elements of control. My phrase is. 'control comes in CANS, not cannots.' CANS stands for Comfort, Air quality, Noise and Sunlight. So, when we're thinking about contentment, would you be happy if your house was uncomfortably hot too frequently, uncharacteristically? And the answer would be no, you wouldn't be content with that.

So, all of these things start to marry in with one another and tie-in to that overall project delivery, shall we say.

Ben: So, if you want to add more on any of these, or do we move on to convenience?

Mark: We can talk about convenience.

Once we've started to think about the emotional constraints, then there's convenience which is the room layout, the accessibility around the house, and the way it compliments and supports our lifestyle.

We can have a room that can be too small, too big; understanding where the storage needs to be for each individual use type or house type to suit an individual family's lifestyle.

In a broader sense, what we'll find is, if it works in one family, things will often translate to working successfully in another family. So, there is that futureproofed element. You're not necessarily making

things that are a monumental thing that can't be changed in the future.

So, there are ways of thinking about the convenience of a house. We've got the flow, this is the circulation spaces; we have the function of the rooms; the furniture and the various different fittings that come with that. So, you've got this little framework that ties into thinking about how convenience can be delivered in a more distinct fashion.

And these things often underpin a lot of architectural design and a lot of architectural thinking, but it's making it more explicit, helping people to think about what their needs are for those individuals.

Ben: Are they sometimes triggered from the property that you're living in, something that you're trying to get away from? We all perhaps have things that are forcing us to put something on the brief because of the pain we're experiencing.

Mark: Definitely. That's one of the things. When I'm going through my brief development process, I actually have a survey. And the survey is, looking at the house you're in right now, what do you like and what do you not like? We're looking at how important is a particular factor and then what its implications are.

We marry those two things together and we start to understand, is a dining space important, yes or no? It might not be that important and so therefore it might not be frustrating because you don't actually require it. But then again, you might not have the kitchen-dining area that you want, if you wanted more of an open-plan living thing and that could be a frustration.

So, there are frameworks and surveys that I do to try to tap out what people think of their current home because they've obviously selected to live there; they've made those choices and its informed their understanding. So, if they want to then move to the next level and improve their quality of life, how can we take the best of what they've got and then top it and make it even better?

Ben: Do you think people are always on a path of improving from home to home or do we peak and – I won't say improving, I suppose our needs are changing, aren't they?

Mark: Yes. I think that one might suit one period in our life might change over time. There are things that can start to feel like we're hemmed in. We can anticipate that there's a transition that's required in some form or another. Often these come with major milestones or awakenings in some sense which might be – well, different people

I've worked with, people approaching retirement in some form or another and they're now looking at that vista of the next twenty-five years, which is one of the elements of the framework that we tend to look through.

Richard and Helen from Preston Springs Passivhaus, I've never really asked how old they are but we'll say they're forty-something, they're thinking in the next fifty year timeframe.

It's really setting things up for success and for the future.

Ben: What follows on naturally from here then?

Mark: We've mentioned control in a broad sense. Really, this is the one where with thermal comfort, it's important from the perspective of both the summer and the winter, of course. You'll have experience in your own passivhaus these days that there's an awful lot of control that comes through from that and I think that there's an underpinning.

Again, control ties into an emotional criteria. We're often trying to control the world around us in one degree or another and I think it underpins the human psyche in those respects.

So, having control over your own comfort is incredibly important, whether that's opening windows, closing windows, controlling heating systems, or just letting the house coast along because a Passivhaus can, more or less in tune with what your needs and requirements are with just a little bit of tweaking of the sails, shall we say, as you go through.

Air quality is hugely important in terms of creating a healthy environment, of course, and making sure that we're removing toxins from the air inside a property, controlling humidity and producing that overall health and wellbeing side of things. That's important.

Noise, the thing is, with building regulations, there's no actual requirement for acoustic sound levels from ventilation systems, which really brings into question what are we doing in the construction industry? But luckily that's where Passivhaus ties in and it does have stipulated performance criteria which Jack Harvie-Clark, who you've had on the podcast, we co-authored a paper that looked at over a thousand homes and we managed to determine appropriate noise levels. Coincidentally, independently, we actually managed to verify that Passivhaus delivers the right kind of noise levels within acceptable tolerances, shall we say.

Then when we start to think about sunlight, we also want to be able to control the amount of daylight that we've got. Sunlight can also produce an awful lot of overheating risks. So, it's the level of control that we have over that.

Some of these things sit in that core thinking in terms of making sure that the windows are the right size in the first place. The way I approach it is we size the windows for daylight first and then we might just refine it a little bit further from there. But we're not doing the whole Grand Designs floor to ceiling whole walls of glass. We've been aware of these problems in building construction since at least 1936 with Le Corbusier. These problems have been reported in various different books since then. So, we've got to think carefully about that.

Ben: What do you think about additional shading, so some other plan of if I want to make sure that I can lower the temperature in summer – because the great thing about Passivhaus is it does pretty much look after itself but you also have all that insulation and the airtightness that you want to put to good use.

Mark: A Passivhaus works almost like a thermos flask. You can put a warm drink in it and it will keep it warm – that's your winter scenario – and then in the summer you can keep it cool. You put a cold drink in a thermos flask and it keeps it cool. Passivhaus works in the same way, but the windows are acting as a way of allowing the heat in.

When we start to think about shading, one of the things I'm always thinking about is the opportunity costs and the budgets that we're working within as well. And the larger the windows are, then the more we might need to introduce costly shading systems. Also, there is the scenario whereby if we introduce them now unnecessarily, then you miss the opportunity to be able to install them at a later date when it could be more valuable in the event of climate change of four degrees or whatever. We lose those sorts of control.

Budgets permitting, there are ways of introducing it from day one. But I think a good home design is seeking to reduce overheating risks as much as possible without having to have the bolt-ons of shading or whatever else wherever possible.

Ben: Yes. I guess my point is just to control that temperature a bit more, and your overhang has to be quite big, doesn't it? If it was going to do the job completely in the summer, everything would be looking like a telescope.

Mark: Well, one of the things that we do is when you think about the design anyway, with Passivhaus you've got thicker walls so, you can use the deeper reveals. And they can work quite successfully to provide a degree of shading.

Then if you introduce more shading then you end up with this paradoxical scenario whereby the more cantilevered shading from the window head that you have, the more that comes out, the bigger the window has to be to get the sunlight back in to some extent and it can start to create some complicated scenarios.

Ben: I'm taking us off on a tangent. Continue on here.

Mark: So, then really where we've got, going through our 'C's at the moment, we've got confidence. This really goes back to how confident can a homeowner, a self-builder be about what they're seeking to achieve.

Confidence really comes from several areas, in a sense. It's what you can prove. I think that when we have evidence that we can use to support and justify decision making, it's very reassuring and to be honest, that's one of the reasons why I do the building performance evaluation that I do. It's partly to be reassuring to myself that I am on the right track and I'm doing the right things, but it also helps to reassure my clients that they're getting what they expected, and also future clients that they can get what they expect.

Of course, the way that Passivhaus is structured with its quality assurance systems and processes and the way that the Passivhaus Planning Package – PHPP – works, and every project that I work on whether it's going to be a certified passivhaus or not will go through that process because that's how I can manage my own quality assurance systems.

Ben: That's quite interesting. Who pays for PHPP at that point?

Mark: The PHPP is bound into the work that I do. I don't separate it out. It's not an additional; it's not a negotiable. It's just there. Without it, you won't get the quality control that is necessary for delivering buildings that the performance predicted.

Ben: I think that's a very sensible approach.

Mark: So, what we can do through that is when we're designing we can develop different scenarios. We can look at different design options and start to understand what the implications of that might be.

Often, we have conversations about having larger areas of glazing. There are no absolutes; it's not 'thou shalt not have large areas of glass,' but you should be aware of the consequences of that and you should make informed, intelligent decisions based upon that. So, it's not for me to legislate. I'm a guide through this whole process with experience that can help inform decisions based upon previous experiences that have succeeded, and some that haven't succeeded as well as I might have hoped.

So, there are those lessons that I've learnt that can help inform those decisions, but all conversations are always open and then we'll go through a sensible decision making process to help each project be a successful outcome in its own respect.

Ben: What's next?

Mark: The next one is community and this is where we start to move outside of the house and we're now starting to think more broadly about the broader context.

So community, well what kinds of community? Where are you moving to? Are you actually out in the middle of the sticks all on your lonesome or are you connected more closely to a small hamlet of some kind, or are you actually on the outskirts of a town or village?

These things start to become important for your own social support over time. So, where we start to put that twenty-five and fifty year framework in place. It's how are you going to develop a network of people that you want to be with, that you know, like and trust, that can help you out in the tough times, and likewise you can help them out? But without the right kind of community around you, then those things become very difficult.

Then also we can start to move a few steps further when we start to think about co-housing, community-led housing, and those kind of things that can also compliment various different lifestyles which are obviously a step-change compared to the world that we necessarily know. You just need to look at Lancaster and other co-housing projects which shows how rich and vibrant those communities can be for the right people.

So, community becomes an important framework in that respect.

Then we start to think about connection. This is another framework which sits in the context catalogue.

This is really about how we are thinking about our transport networks. We often talk about connection these days about being on the internet and everything else, but really it's that one of how connected are we to the place where we live and thinking about the amenities.

If you're thinking in twenty-five or fifty years' time, well, I wear glasses. I don't know how my eyes are going to be performing in fifty years' time. So, I want to know that I am living in an area where there are shops and amenities that can support me in my old age without having to worry about that.

These things start to then inform the sort of site that you might choose, and when you're thinking about access to public transport in the broader sense, how close are bus-stops? So, purely from a getting planning permission perspective, you want to make sure that you're fairly close to a bus-stop. That helps to support a planning application in some respects.

But also, you've got the one in terms of how it supports your bigger lifestyle. I think that's the most important thing regardless of planning. And if you're thinking when you're older and more frail and you may no longer be able to drive a car, how are you going to be able to get from A to B? Will you be able to cycle? Will you be able to walk safely? Will you be able to get the public transport that you need?

Then other elements of lifestyle, where we're positioned in our house, it's quite handy. We're very close to a shop. I've got a seven to ten minute cycle to a train station which then takes me nationally. So, those things are always underpinning the thinking that I have, but these are not always things that I see in my clients' projects that have informed the selection of their sites. They have chosen a site that is in a more remote location for the wonderful views and a lot of these things which really capture your heart and emotions, but how well will it serve you in the future?

It might be that you move and that's okay, but...

Ben: That's what I was just going to say. Do people do that though? When you build your own house, there is quite a big connection to it. I can see one of those key points in life, say for example, when the kids leave the house. I will then have a big house. I don't feel like I have a big house now but that case would just flip on its head – but I will have got twenty years out of the house.

Mark: Well, in terms of the size of a house, if we just look into the world that we have right now, we see that there are more elderly people living in larger homes. The family have moved out; a loved one passed away. Life happens. And they stay there because they're emotionally connected to the house at that point.

Ben: And beyond that. I can add another example here that one of my parent's friends, they feel like they've gone past the stage where they can't move out of this big house; they can't even drive. They're isolated from the local community. They have to lean on all sorts of people. But they think the next move out will either be quite a serious move or they'll be going into a nursing home of some description.

Mark: Yes. This is the thing where when we start to have that conversation about your forever home, it's how is it going to serve you? And if you say, 'we'll get to that point and then we'll move out. We'll find somewhere else,' that's okay but to build your own home or to do a radical retrofit and refurbishment of a home which the Forever Home lifestyle also applies to, then you're investing an awful lot of money, an awful lot of emotional energy into that process as I'm sure you're aware, and you're not readily going to give it up. For a lot of understandable reasons.

So, it's the one whereby if we can think forward and anticipate how our lives will change when we make those serious commitments to a house, then we've just got to set up the deck of cards in our favour. We've got to stack the odds so that we can get the most out of the life that we enjoy. People do not want to move when they start to feel vulnerable. It's an emotional thing but you want to stay put. So, therefore helping people to stay put longer is actually a really important thing in this framework and the way of thinking as well.

Ben: We must be getting close to changing to the 'F's.

Mark: Yes. So, thinking about making your home futureproof, again this goes down to the right kinds of space and the right kind of places, and also thinking about how things change over time. You can also tie this into a very low energy house, a passivhaus, then your energy bills are broadly speaking inconsequential. Certainly, once you've paid off your mortgage then you are freed up. So, you have your independence.

And in terms of making that independence step as well is making sure your house is adaptable so that you've got level access now, that way if we need to install handrails in the future, you've got the

right things in the walls to enable that to happen without having to do a lot more complicated retrofits and fixing of problems that should have been designed out in the first place.

So, all of those kinds of things to enable that adaption in the future to suit your changing needs where you might move from a very fine ambulatory scenario to somebody that could be more frail.

Helen, who was one of my clients from Preston Springs, she was an occupational therapist in a former life. She was saying that very few people get through to needing a wheelchair necessarily but a lot of people end up needing a walking frame or something to support them. So, we made sure that the house was designed to have the right kind of level access throughout the house so that the ground floor could be used with bedroom spaces and shower spaces that could allow that adaptive living.

So, it's tilting the house in the right direction to allow that to take place as well which is very important.

Ben: Okay, financial peace?

Mark: Yes, financial peace. This is tying into people's budgets and thinking about how that can work in the right kind of way. And again, the low energy bills, independence of living that you can get from that, that all ties through as well.

That's all very important as a consideration; how we actually stick to a budget. And then also, not wanting to overspend in a particular area as well.

Land prices in the south and south-east of England are very different to those in the north east of England and we've got to make sure that we always design within the budget and to the budget, and that we don't exceed the budget.

If we look back at Preston Springs Passivhaus or Steel Farm which we spoke about a few years ago, then neither of those houses went over budget. We agreed a contractual sum and they were all built within the contingency. At Steel Farm we didn't use the contingency at all. At Preston Springs we knew there were some unknowns that we couldn't properly quantify at that particular point – a one-hundred-and-eighty metre trench that we had to dig to connect to a water main for instance. So, there were certain costs and we used a small proportion of that contingency but we didn't exceed it. So, everything was built within its budget.

Ben: When you've got your plans and you know what the contract sum is, that's one way of hopefully containing going over. But there's what you think on day one. So, how is this dealing with day one? Because sometimes day one, I've hired an architect, I'm on the road now, you've already spent more.

Mark: Yes, well one of the elements of work that I do I describe as the project priority audit. It's a little bit of work we do before I become employed as an architect. It works well for anybody that's thinking about a project.

One of the things that we do is we look at the budget. What is your budget? And based upon my experience of various different projects, Passivhaus related and AECB building standard related, then we work out some costs based upon as-built cost data. And we quickly start to say what can be reconciled here and are there any red flags before anything goes forwards? And therefore, hard conversations can be had about the size of the house, what the nature of that house is going to be et cetera.

That means that informed decisions can happen before there's a design taking place. And that's really important. That way we understand what we're designing because the budget informs the brief incredibly and we've got to design within those budgetary constraints.

I can provide a bracket somewhere between this and that, at a very formative stage. But how it will actually turn out, there are things that I can do as an architect that can help to stack the odds in our favour of it being more cost effective in terms of the compact form and thinking about things like that, but at the same time, there's that reconciliation and there's always the changing marketplace which means that we always can find that there is going to be some movement and further conversations to have. It's not done once and then never looked at again.

Ben: Number nine; faithful custodian.

Mark: As a custodian, I see myself as an architect and custodian of the built environment. And I think that this is a framework and way of thinking that we can all benefit from, that if we recognise that how we think about the world around us – and this is tying into sustainability in many respects, and for me it's my daughter; I'd always been interested in sustainable architecture and sustainable design since university. Five years ago, I thought I was on dial ten. I was really full on; I'd done passivehouses, I was trying to do the right thing, and then Hannah came and it transformed everything.

And now, I recognise that I was probably on about four or five. There's so much more to think about; so many more ways to approach things. I thought I was doing a good job before but...

Ben: It will keep on going, won't it?

Mark: Oh yes. It's an evolution and that's fine. I'm not berating myself. It's those reflections and that emotional connection and I've got a deeper emotional connection to the world now through Hannah than I might have had previously. That's what I'm recognising.

So, as a custodian, we're thinking about how we can address climate change, how we can reduce carbon emissions, how we can live more sustainably, how we can help repair and remediate damage to the biodiversity. And how we can then start to use the buildings that we design collaboratively; how they can then start to do something restorative to improve the quality of life and at least impact less than may have been the previous case.

I don't think I'll ever design a sustainable building in its true sense. I think I'd be a heretic in my own terms if I said that was going to be the case, but I've definitely done projects I'm proud of and I'll continue to do those as a process of refinement.

Ben: And if we could bring the whole industry along – that's the other thing, isn't it? That you're on the cutting edge.

Mark: It's how do we connect to these things. Sustainability is very broad, it's very general, it's very distant from us. But as soon as we start to think of ourselves as being a custodian, that's me as an architect but my clients are custodians. This is what I've seen. This is why we have such positive and constructive conversations that produce the designs that we do, because they see themselves as custodians as well.

There's different perspectives about what that might mean and how it relates to their lifestyle, and that's all fruitful conversation which helps enrich my understanding and I can then pass that on and enrich somebody else's. But that mindset of being a custodian is really important and I think that's one of the things that the Passivhaus architects, Passivhaus designers, that's embedded in what they're thinking and what they're doing. And I think the more that we can use that way of thinking, of being a custodian, it makes it something that we can all take part of.

We all also understand what a custodian is. And I think that provides a frame of reference in those respects.

Ben: How do we finish up our list then?

Mark: It's basically abundant free time. Now, there are different ways of looking at that I suppose. We have free time right now. How can we think about our lifestyle in those ways? And these final three 'F's are all about the lifestyle. They're not necessarily things that are entirely embedded in the building and the project.

So, in terms of the abundant free time, we can ask how will the house support that and provide a framework for that? So, where there are opportunities to work from home then you're avoiding those commutes and you've got some more free time back. So, there's one simple thing there. But then we can think about it of extending way beyond that.

It's how can your home and your lifestyle give you more free time in terms of supporting your quality of life? Therefore, you're now starting to move into areas of fitness and diet and some of the reading that I've done has really highlighted that if we want to live longer, and I want to be with my daughter as long as possible and I know my clients want to be with their kids and grandkids for as long as possible, then it gets back to diet and the way that we start to think about that.

There's been some interesting research that's been done looking at who lives the longest in the world and why do they live the longest. And it's that one of keeping your mind active, so having a purpose. Being a custodian is a purpose; it's a very clear mission that people can get hold of, for their family as much as anything else.

Then also, thinking about your body. Simple things like exercises that keep your balance. In older age, you can start to lose that and that can start to make you more infirm. So, practicing balancing is an important process that's very simple to do. So doing Pilates, yoga or something like that, that can exercise. And then more cardiovascular work of course as well.

Then in terms of terms of diets, then what the research also found was that we don't really need an awful lot of meat. We actually need something about the size of a packet of playing cards, two portions of 'playing cards' of meat a week, and that is all you need to provide you with the right levels of protein for the people that are living the longest in the world.

Personally, I've gone a step further and I've cut meat out of my diet, but that's an individual choice for a range of other reasons. But the

evidence is showing that you'll live longer if you're living off a low content of meat, pulses and veggies.

Ben: It feels like you should have an extra point on here, one on spirituality. What do you reckon about that at the end? I didn't realise that this was the way it was going, but that's what I'm feeling as we get towards the end here.

Mark: For me, I'm going to put that into the whole contentment side of things. That's the emotional core. Spirituality, whatever we might bring to that in terms of our own interpretations, I think that's part of what makes us content in some form or another. So, I'm not going to get too fluffy on that one.

Ben: No, well it is quite interesting. You have this list here. Has it ever grown or shrunk or changed around over time?

Mark: It has morphed a little bit. Sometimes I've put it down and let it to rest, and then my mind has started to recreate the list and I've found the same things there. I'd say this is fairly well distilled by now. It's been refined through different conversations and thought experiments that I've done on my own.

I think a lot of things fit within this. So, there are subsets of conversations like spirituality et cetera.

Ben: Yes, you saw me coming.

Mark: Yes, but I feel as though these seem to work in terms of at least framing conversations to allow a sensible discussion about how a home could be and how it can serve somebody in the future.

Ben: Do you feel that a lot of people might build a home having not thought about quite a few of these elements?

Mark: I think that a lot of these things crop up in some form or another, but often having a framework allows much greater clarity. That's why this underpins what I do because it allows the clarity of conversation to take place because we can actually hinge around certain key elements as opposed to things just being a bit of a maelstrom and things are mixed in there and that lack of clarity, which in truth can make it harder to design because one thing might come and go. And why did it come and go? Why was it in the brief and now it's been taken out of the brief? But if you actually dig down deeper, it all ties back to contentment or convenience or one of these criteria in some sense.

Ben: Just explain where this sits then in your process and how you might go through this with a client, if we haven't already.

Mark: I mentioned earlier on that I currently run a project priority audit which is basically, somebody might phone up and say, 'I've got a project and I don't know what to do next. Where do we go from here? I'm looking for an architect.' But it's the one whereby are you going to a general practitioner or are you going to a surgeon? There are plenty of GPs out there, plenty of GP architects, and then there are specialists. There are people that deliver very specific outcomes.

So, there's a sifting and sorting process that goes on. Most people who have got in touch with me actually are focused in the right direction complementary to my line of thinking and what my practice specialises in. But where that's not the case, I can always pass them on to the right people. That's fine.

So, we go through the project priority audit, we look at these focus areas and we also look at the planning constraints and the budget. We've talked about that in some respects already. And we start to be able to distil that into an actual brief that will allow an architect to then set out a fee, and they can only do that once they understand what the service requirements are of an individual project. It's not a one-size-fits-all. You can't just write it out from day one.

And the RIBA's approach to fees these days is significantly different to how it used to be, even though some architects still work on this basis. So, it's not based on a percentage fee. That's been banned, effectively. The RIBA don't propose that anymore, and for good reason because the world is a lot more complex and why an architect should get more money for designing a more expensive building just because it's more expensive doesn't really make sense. If it's more complex and there are more challenges associated with it, that would make sense. But when you're designing a Passivhaus, it doesn't have to be any more complicated. It's the thought process behind it that becomes important.

So, we go through the project priority audit and this underpins some of the conversations that we have, and then that allows my clients at that point to decide whether we're a good fit. We've had a chance to work together and have some experience of each other's personalities and whether we gel or not, and if we don't gel, that's fine. It's a long-term relationship that we're going to have. So, we've got to know, like and trust each other.



Ben: Thanks for sharing. I appreciate that. It's always interesting to see different approaches and how you elicit the responses. So, thank you Mark.

Mark: Thank you very much, Ben. It's been great to be back on the podcast.