

## Episode 300

# The houses I've lived in – with Ben Adam-Smith

The show notes: [www.houseplanninghelp.com/300](http://www.houseplanninghelp.com/300)

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This is House Planning Help Episode 300. Hi there, I'm Ben Adam-Smith and this is the podcast for you if you're interested in self build or retrofits. I'm exploring what houses we should be building in the 21st century, and trying to break down the major roadblocks that may get in our way.

00:18

And coming up, something a little bit different. Yes, that's all I'm going to say today. Because obviously, it is Episode 300. And I'm going to start today with a thank you. Thank you to you for listening and for supporting us. As I frequently say, I just love making these podcasts and hope I can continue for as long as possible. We're almost notching up about nine years of doing this. But thank you to all of our guests who have come on the podcast, our Hub members as well. We always try to help you as much as possible. So that's why I set up The Hub, our community to take things further. And we'll be adding a new in depth video case study in the coming months. In fact, I'm gonna tell you all about that, got a big announcement about it at the end of this particular episode, so something special for Episode 300.

01:06

And I did want to do something slightly different today. We have lots of what I hope is very useful content that we have on the podcast. Today's, slightly more self indulgent, although I think quite interesting! I'm going to reflect on where I've lived through my life, the various houses, apartments, not every single place, I think I have to put a few parameters in place, including that I must have stayed in these places for longer than a year. But it's not something you often get a chance to do to certainly put into one document, these are all the places that I've lived over my 45 long years.

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And as we go through and ideas come into my mind of particular resources, things that we've done in the past, we will of course, link that into the show notes. So this could be a good episode for having the show notes up or maybe even have a quick flick through, so you can see what we're going to talk about because there's a certain visual side to today's episode, along with the resources, obviously, that I will mention.

02:10

I suppose in some ways, this episode is about how at different stages of my life, I have had different needs. And so instantly, that makes me think of a podcast that we have done in the past that we'll link in at this point with Dr. Michaela Benson. And this is quite a good point to mention her as well, because I loved this chat. Because we were so

different. She had had numerous childhood homes. And you know, just loved the experience of moving from one place to the next. Whereas the first house I'm going to talk about is still the longest that I've ever lived in one place: my childhood home. Incredible to think that my parents have lived there for 55 years now, and are still doing things, still making changes around the house, and that's certainly one of the things that I've learned from them. They never stop. Always just thinking how they can make things better.

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But my childhood home, it was just such a good grounding. A house that you really reflect on well, that you love. And I grew up in the countryside, probably took it all for granted. Space to play, whether it's outside, whether it's inside, we had all of our needs met, no worries, safe, warm, well fed. And perhaps interestingly, and maybe true of a lot of great homes, but they come to life most of all, I feel they do, when they're full of people. When you have friends over, when you have family parties, when the grandparents are there, when the cousins come over. That for me will just be those memories. And we still do these occasions, obviously Covid hasn't made that sort of thing quite so easy, but we're hoping that we can do that again.

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And one of the greatest joys for me as a parent is being able to return to my childhood home with my kids and letting them enjoy some of these things. Hopefully remember them, even play with some of my old toys! How are they still there and not in my new house? That's what I want to know!

04:13

So what else did I learn from the years and years spent there? Well, I could see firsthand that having a large house means quite a lot of work. Constantly doing these little jobs, I think is just in some ways maintenance, isn't it, making sure the house is still in good shape. And for quite a few years I used to mow the lawn and a number of our neighbour's lawns. I earned myself some money that way. That was actually good preparation for having a bigger house myself; what needs to be done in the garden and just watching some of those things.

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But I also noticed that my dad was very good with new technology and as you get older, it's not as easy as it is. The world seems to go by very quickly but he's always been good. He's driving electric car at the moment, even maintains a WordPress website for the local history society and stays constantly interested. And that's something that I hope I adopt, right through my life.

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But it was interesting because they extended the house once in the 70s, just before I was born, and then again in the late 90s. So that time I was a lot older and able to experience what does go on when you extend a house. And my cousin is an architect as well and he did this particular extension, so fascinating to see more of that process. I think my cousin is very good with space, and always has been.

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So when the house was getting bigger, what I found particularly interesting was that even rooms in the old part of the house were adjusted just slightly, so that the whole

house seemed to be in proportion with itself. Hopefully that makes sense, that comment, but that's something that I think was particularly clever. And there was also a lot of good workmanship that went in there, including some bespoke carpentry and so forth.

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So I'll link into the show notes that episode where my dad featured on the podcast. And as I remember, actually, you know, this is another example of my dad staying interested, but he got an energy assessment of the house by Parity Projects, and there were measures to implement, and he did all of that. It would be lovely to do an airtightness test of the house, because I think little by little over the years, they have been working to make it a more airtight house. And I know that that's something that always fascinates him. And with all my contacts, I really should make it happen. So yeah, that would be a fun one for us to go into. So that is my childhood home, which I will always love and be grateful for that experience.

06:46

So then comes leaving home. And after school, I worked abroad in a few grounding jobs: I washed dishes, you can just wash forever, and you would never be done and vegetable prep, all of those sorts of things, but quite grounding and good for you, I would say. A plongeur, I think is how they refer to it. I did bar work as well, really didn't need much in terms of accommodation, which was a good thing. So I didn't get much from accommodation, it was often basic, cramped with lots of other people as well. But it was just a great time to grow up a bit, enjoy the snowy Alps and the cool waters of the Mediterranean, and just wile away a little time.

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And then I moved on to university, which, again, accommodation changed a little bit. But I did spend two years and you know, pulling up the picture of this, it looks quite grim. I don't remember it being that grim. But I guess your priorities are slightly different at university. You just want a bed, again, it's the same sort of thing: cost, keep costs down, bed, sleep, quiet, not even quiet sometimes. But I think our accommodation was luxurious on the quiet front. Yeah, it was lovely. Being on the coast at Bournemouth.

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And I did my media degree, shared a flat with two others. And you know, this is really my first experience of cooking, cooking is a big part of what I do, one of my main hobbies. And maybe not so much hobby because you have to do it when you've got a family, you have to feed them and it just keeps on going, you've got to keep feeding them. But I don't know whether this was prompted by that work that I did in the kitchens or whether I just like eating good food and that's the only way to get good food is to cook it yourself. But I did notice, and I think my flatmates noticed, everyone cooks pasta when they're at university. Pot Noodle, anything like that, except for me cooking roast dinners, and all sorts of different things from whatever recipe book I could get. In a small flat, you notice that because the smell gets out. So this was the start of my smelly cooking career, which has continued to this very day, although with better ventilation in this house, that's for sure.

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So that was a couple years in the 1930s /1940s block with pebbledash on the front. And then I moved to London after that, following work. I landed a job completely by accident really on the BBC snooker tour that because it came through Bournemouth. And I just

volunteered there and landed myself a job which was quite fun right at the end of my degree. The weird thing I guess for this was that I'm no sports expert. You know, I enjoy it but I'm certainly not passionate about it. And yet here I am taking up a job that someone else would probably kill for you know, they'd love to be doing this. But I learned tons. You know, one of the things, I still like live TV, it's such a great thrill to take over the networks. And to see in those days it was David Vine who was presenting and I learned all sorts of things from him. He was a true professional, it's great and the team as well that put it together, all so very talented.

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So during this period, I was in this shoe box, but in a lovely Victorian building. It was again sort of terraced, a lot of the Victorian buildings seem to be terraces don't they, but this over several floors, but we were just right at the bottom of the building. Often these buildings are subdivided aren't they, and I got a chance to live with my cousin, and another of her friends. And what I really remember about being in this central London location is just everything is there. It's just unbelievable. You can walk to a dozen restaurants, probably even more, within a minute. Also, there's entertainment in all different directions. The tube is a couple of minutes' walk so you can get to anywhere in London. It is definitely a young person's dream to spend a bit of time in a big city - a vibrant city.

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So I thoroughly enjoyed that. And I probably had a car at that time, but really only used it for the supermarket shop and much preferred walking and spent lots of time sitting in the parks and the sunshine. And gradually, I think I must have transferred at some point back into radio. That was where I was very passionate to get back in there, get some music, I love my music so that that did happen slowly as I escaped sport and gave that job back to someone who deserved it!

11:04

So I did that for a few years, and then I must have got itchy feet because I went traveling again. This is a theme of my life, that I got to go around the world a few times. But on this particular time, this is the one time that I actually stopped in one place for longer than a year, which is why it deserves a mention. And that was in Mozambique.

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It was one of these strange experiences, just sort of happened to me really. I met an Australian guy there who had a little community project and a rest house. And I thought oh, I'm gonna stop and help you, which was a great idea until he got malaria and decided he wanted to come home. And so I was what do I do now? Do I just continue on with my travels? And he said, no, stay here, make yourself at home. So I did. I took his hospitality and stayed on there and had an amazing time as the lone Mzungu, white man of this village.

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And it was a very isolated place because although it did have roads, they were dirt roads and pretty much when the weather got bad, you could not pass them so that there were no vehicles in the village. In fact, often it was this ferry that came past once a week that was the only way in or out and the neighbouring islands and so forth. So it was a really interesting way to spend a year. The villages there, I mean, really, it was mud huts, and cassava. I think at that stage of my life, if ever I was fussy in the past, I would eat

absolutely anything after that because this cassava porridge that they all loved, but was the only thing that they ate. Yeah, as I say my taste buds certainly matured during that time, too. Yeah, I will eat anything. If it tastes like food, I will eat it. I'm grateful now.

12:44

It was also where I had my first experience of hiring builders. And do you know what, I think some of the same challenges exist in Africa, in Kuala Lumpur. Who knows. But that was just so interesting to go back to basics and to really be building with mud blocks. I remember the brick kilns and stamping. It's all a sort of vague memory. There probably is some video footage of this somewhere, stamping these bricks and then shaping them up in these little moulds and firing them, and then getting to build some outbuildings. I think we did something to the toilet block and we changed the roof. You know this is high powered stuff! But just interesting. And again, a lot of the time in Africa was survival. But I think I have a soft spot for Africa. It's just such an interesting place. Although when you travel the world, there are so many interesting places.

13:40

So after a year there, I came on home. And that's when I got back into radio again and hooked up with Kay, who I had dated in the university years, but she became my wife, the love of my life. And so that was nice. We've had kids together since then. I'm now going all over the place in the timeline here.

14:01

But I suppose what I'm leading up to is buying a house. Quite a different set of criteria when you buy a house as opposed to renting and it does seem quite final. I remember some of these radio jobs, you only get a year's contract. And I was nervous because I know what it's like that, you know, you may get three years but then it's going to finish. And I actually ended up spending a good 10/12 years or so based in Hertford and working all around but never on my doorstep. It was always one of those things, why on earth can I not get a job on my doorstep? So I was driving backwards and forwards, never actually probably more than an hour, but yeah, my carbon footprint during those times cannot have been good.

14:42

The house itself well, you may have seen it before. It featured in the documentary that we made: The Future of Housing. There's a picture in the show notes as well. So it's a Victorian terrace, and I learned a lot from living here. It wasn't big, you know we obviously had a budget to stick to. I do remember on my list of criteria other than all the obvious right number of bedrooms, right amount of space for a couple was to try and find a dead end road. This to me I've seen this a few times, it just seems to create quieter places and more engagement.

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And I was absolutely right. The community here was fantastic. I remember some street parties that we had, so we knew everyone on this street. And in fact, if someone who didn't live there came down, you instantly knew. You were sort of, can we help you? What are you after? In a nice way, of course, that was one of the really nice things.

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I think it was about 65 square meters inside. And I remember having a lot of issues with the newer part of the house, not the Victorian bit, it was the little extension, single storey

extension at the back. We had problems with the roof, it kept leaking, there were tiles on it. But the problem with the tiles were that they were the wrong type of tiles, and it was less than 12 degrees slope or something like that. So one of our jobs, we had to replace the roof. I don't think I did a particularly good job, but it was dry after that. And that was a big thing. And I never want to have a leak in a house again. Anyone who's had leaks in the house knows what it's like. It's just not much fun.

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Because this of course, this was where I started the House Planning Help podcast! Maybe I'll get one of those little plaques outside the house, the blue plaque saying... No, no, I don't think so. One thing I am going to put into the show notes is a link to a video I made on how using all the space every day, this house just it said it perfectly.

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And another one actually on the location, because the location was still central. We had a lot of things that were right about that property and that location. And perhaps that is the reason that we stayed there for 12,13 years.

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Of course though, we did have at the back of our minds that we wanted to build a house and it started to happen. So it did mean particularly after my son James was born that we were running out of space, and it was starting to get a little bit ridiculous. It's not impossible to live there. We did do it. But it was nice to be able to move into a rental property while our house was being built, and just have a tiny bit more space.

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So renting again, I suppose for this one, we should say that the criteria of what we wanted from a rental property was very different from what we were buying for ourselves. We weren't so fussy, in fact, the location became very important. We wanted somewhere that was close to my son's nursery, and that was close to the building site. That we wouldn't get stuck in traffic if we needed to do multiple trips out there. And it all worked really well.

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This was a 1980 semi detached property. The last one that we bought was a Victorian terrace house. This being a later house, it was interesting, in some ways how I don't know what it was, but I do worry for the health of that property. There was one room that it was either incredibly hot or incredibly cold and it had mould issues. So when we arrived in the house, there was no mould. And I imagine that's because it had been scrubbed off. But when we left, you could just see it, just in the cupboards and all the rest of it really, really weird. And we stored a few boxes in the roof. And there was always a slightly funny smell like there might be woodworm or, and an old water tank and, and all the rest of it. So I don't think it was the healthiest of houses.

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But what it did have going for it was really nice layout. And when you've got young kids, sometimes you just want them to be able to run around, entertain themselves and the garden was just perfect, because in the house before, we couldn't actually really see the garden from the house. So this was the reverse, that the kitchen and the living room just looked on to the garden. We could let them play out there and visually we could see them the whole time.

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There were obviously a few drawbacks of that house, that kitchen. Oh my goodness, I'm sure you couldn't get a much smaller kitchen, and people would walk through it to get out of the house as well. But again, it was about survival. And what was important really was it was a bridge to our new home.

19:16

I will say this though, that out of all the homes that I've lived in, I've always felt the same happiness. It's not move to a bigger house, oh, I'm much happier now. No, I've enjoyed living in all these houses. And I've thought this a few times that if Kay ever kicks me out of the house, and I'm single again, well what I'll do this blog will then become me trying out different houses and going from house to house, spending a year there reporting, you know, finding little bits of mould like I was saying in that last house. But when you build your own house, you don't really want to do that. I'm open to it. But I don't want to do it just yet. Particularly, as I think a lot of benefits with building your own house, as of course you will know because that's what you want to do, listening to this podcast.

20:01

Let's move on to the last one, shall we? If you don't know much about my own build, of course, within the show notes, I will put a link to the full adventures that we had. It was just such a fun project. I don't know where it's getting more fun over time, as everything gets hazy. You do have your good and your bad days but overall, things went really well. And every day I look at the house, and I'm grateful for it. I try to make that a practice of my day to day living here is, I am so grateful. So lucky.

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What with Covid, my goodness, we build a brand new house, we live in it for a year and then the Covid thing kicks off. What more can you ask for. When people were having bad days and so forth. I just said to myself, I cannot have a bad day because I've got all of this, I've got the countryside to go for walks in, got a lovely big house where if we do get annoyed with each other, we can just go and lock ourselves in another room. It's as simple as that. So I think we had a really good lockdown experience. Got to see the kids grow up, got to do some home-schooling. Yeah, okay, perhaps I won't go there again, if I can possibly help it.

21:03

And the other thing, oh I haven't mentioned this, is the family connection. Who could have predicted that I would buy a piece of land with a family connection. And my ancestors, albeit it's not direct, direct, but brother of, they built a house which we can see from our bedroom window, it's up on the hill. I mean, just weird, weird, weird, but such a lovely thing. We named the house after them, we just thought you know that that is definitely going to be what we'll do.

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As I've said before, one of the strange things about moving into the house was how quickly it became home. And I think that is actually true if you go to any house, but more so when you had those plans in your mind and been tweaking them and imagining how you'll go around the house. And it's so rewarding when all of those things actually happen.

21:51

And we'd mentioned earlier on about that phrase of using all the space every day, well, other than one room, we do in this house. It may be a bigger house, but we do use all of the space including my little production cupboard up here that I am broadcasting from these days, with all the clutter.

22:07

This is one of the things I didn't like about the Victorian house, the terrace that we had, was loft duty. Oh my goodness, going upstairs into the loft. And we didn't have a very good ladder so we had to get one out of the garage and go up there. And oh my goodness, I do not miss that in my production cupboard. It is also our loft as well. And it's all within this house. And I would say any sane person do this. Don't create loft space for yourself.

22:36

What else? Well, I am hoping to, like my childhood home was such a solid foundation, that this could be for our kids as well. You know, you never know what's what's coming up, whether we'll have to move or whatever one day, but it's so nice for them to go to school in the village, to just enjoy the house and make it their own. And the other thing is having people to stay that has been nice. I'm not going to say it isn't but when grandparents come to stay they are always welcome and there is a proper room that can accommodate them on the ground floor. So that was good thinking, very pleased we did that.

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A big home is definitely something that you look around at the maintenance. And yeah it's a challenge in the garden, trying to tame the garden and implement all those plans. But again, I look to my parents and the fact that they're still doing garden projects. So maybe this is just it's part of living anywhere isn't it, that you do all these little things.

23:31

So I feel very grateful. I think that's a good place actually, to round off. I probably missed out some things that I wanted to say during this episode. 45 years of living in various different houses, apartments, what have you. Now you know, and you can have a look at the visual story, if you head online to [Houseplanninghelp.com/300](http://Houseplanninghelp.com/300).

23:54

We'll return, normal service will be resumed next time. If you would like to comment, I don't know why you would, but you can within the show notes at [Houseplanninghelp.com/300](http://Houseplanninghelp.com/300), or on social media. Links will be provided within the show notes [Houseplanninghelp.com/300](http://Houseplanninghelp.com/300).

24:15

So just before I check out today, I've added a new video to the Long Barrow story. This is the one we're currently focusing on. And this one looks at the preliminary air test. Paul Jennings is on site and is firing up the fan. But Paul and Alex are actually airtightness experts between them and have authored a paper on best practice measures. So this is quite good. And not only do we have a chapter on the airtightness test itself, but also some really good tips and techniques for when you do all your taping and so forth. And they even show you some examples of when it goes wrong. If you can pull the tape out

and just goes [ripping sound], that means you haven't done your taping very well. So that in the latest video

24:59

There's also a new live training session on biophilia, that's with Martin Brown, so you can watch that. [Houseplanninghelp.com/join](https://houseplanninghelp.com/join).

25:09

And we'll finish on an announcement. I've alluded to the fact that the in depth video case studies are about to switch again. We've got one more episode coming from Long Barrow and then we are moving to Kinver Passivhaus. We've chatted to Guy Hargreaves on the podcast, you can go and explore that a little bit more, but we will then be turning round episodes of this build. It's one of Alan Budden's projects. Alan is the lead at Eco Design Consultants and someone that I shortlisted for my own project. He's very good. And so this is going to be fascinating. I've never seen a retrofit happen before, you know, watched it all the way through. And this is a period property too. So it's just going to be so interesting, really excited to get that into The Hub. As we've done in the past, we will just be turning around one episode a month, maybe one day, we'll get to turn around more. But that is the plan. And yeah, in a month's time, we will start those stories.

26:06

Next time, well, this is good. You see, we're into the three hundreds and starting as we mean to continue. Hattie Hartman, sustainability editor of the Architect's Journal is going to join me. Why you ask? Well, alongside Judit Kimpian, and Sophie Pelsmakers, she has got a new book coming out called Energy | People | Buildings, and it's very good. One of the key things that I love about it is how they've distilled down what's important. It's so difficult. There are so many different things going on. And I think the overall message is the right one. What is that overall message? We'll find out next time. Thanks for listening. The House Planning Help podcast is produced by Regen Media - content that matters.