

## Episode 303

# What does it take to project manage your house build? – with David Arrenberg

The show notes: [www.houseplanninghelp.com/303](http://www.houseplanninghelp.com/303)

**Ben** 00:00

Intro.

**David** 03:30

Okay, so we're up in Dundee in Scotland, near Ninewells Hospital, which is a big old 60s built hospital. Just beside it, there's an enclave of woodland which surrounds a really old house called Invergarry House, which has been extended over the years. And there's a three storey sort of turrets on the corners type, grand house, and that's split into flats. My mum lives in the top one of those. So that is how we acquired the land really. So, we live in the woodland at the bottom of that.

**Ben** 04:04

And what did you decide to build there?

**David** 04:07

So yeah, I suppose most people have a dream to build a house. And then they go and find the land. But we sort of had the land and decided to build the house. So it was maybe the dream to build the house wasn't there.

But when my dad was alive and lived here in the house, we discussed it and it was a bit of a pipe dream when you're young and he didn't really have the money to do it. So it was all a bit of a sort of discussion, a bit of that'd be nice if we could do that. So once I got married and had a bit more cash, I thought let's do it.

The land belonged to my aunty who moved away from Dundee about 15 years ago, and I maintained the land with my dad. And then since he's died, I maintained it. So she eventually said if you want to build the house, look into it. That's the sort of back story.

**Ben** 05:00

We're going to talk a bit about project management today because we've heard that you've done a very good job on this from Kirsty. So when did this first enter the frame of you were going to be project manager?

**David** 05:14

Well, from the very start. So, I am a project manager now at Scottish Water. I was just a civil engineer previously.

**Ben** 05:22

Oh, no wonder you've done a good job, right! I didn't know that bit. Quite an important part of the puzzle.

**David** 05:30

Yeah, I was only just getting into project management at the start of the build, so. But you know, it's not that complicated a profession, if you like. Being organised, making sure you know the order of things, that's it.

**Ben** 05:44

As a professional then, what skills does a project manager have?

**David** 05:50

Yeah, well, I look at programmes every day. I understand you need space in programmes time, risk time, allowances with money as well. We have a good appreciation of what things might cost, what things might delay. A little bit of contract stuff, although we didn't have a contract with the builder in the end of any particular type. We sort of went freestyled it, because Craigs Eco were a trustworthy bunch. We had a sort of arrangement where you could go to a tribunal if things went wrong, but no official contract. So yeah, understanding the risk really is the big thing.

**Ben** 06:30

Did you get any training, go on any courses or anything beforehand? You know, how did you bridge that from your job to project managing a house?

**David** 06:43

Indeed, well, you know, I've had lots of different types of training. You know what it's like at these big companies, you get contract training and relationships training and things like that, all the stuff that might come into play when you're dealing with people and money and health and safety. And I actually thought this was quite easy compared to a big multifunctional water job. The only key difference was it's your own money rather than large part of the government's money.

So yeah, the sort of logistics of this, I thought was pretty easy. About a giant shed isn't it? A giant insulated shed. I wouldn't be scared of it, even if I wasn't a project manager. You break it down into its parts, and it's not too bad.

**Ben** 07:32

Before anything happened on the project then, what tasks were you doing? You know, how did you get going?

**David** 07:41

Well specifically I got going because, because it's a woodland and a mature woodland at that, where the house was going needed to be cleared. So I was a labourer for about two years while we got finance in place and changed title deeds over and things from my aunty which all took an inordinate amount of time. And a decent bit of money as well, which was quite frustrating.

But I spent that time clearing trees and planning what sort of house we might build, looking at magazines, looking at the internet and trying to think about how you would do this. But really, you were focusing on planning at that point and what we needed to do for that.

**Ben** 08:20

And what did they allow to happen when it comes to getting permission and the go ahead? Was it clear or did you have to go back and forth a bit?

**David** 08:29

Yeah, we looked through the rules, there was a lot of hiccups. We had to be a certain distance away from the big house, Invergarry House, which is A listed. So there was a rule there, I think it was 150 metres you had to be away in order to develop. We're overlooking houses as well, so there's some issues there with overlooking, which is a specific thing.

Working in a woodland, we had to consider the health of the trees. We had to start thinking about the working areas and how we would actually get a driveway down through the woodland without damaging tree roots. And we were given a specialist guy, an arborist, who we had to pay and employ to oversee the whole thing from start to finish. He even needed to help me put together a woodland maintenance plan for the future as part of the planning. So that was probably the most awkward part of the planning. Actually designing the house, popping it down, we didn't have too many problems with that. But yeah, the woodland was certainly the key thing for the council.

**Ben** 09:35

Tell us about the team then that you're bringing on board, because there's always this while I know I'm going to project manage, but the design process, who we're going to have on site, the pot of money, how did you juggle all of these factors?

**David** 09:52

Yeah well, we want to build a Passivhaus or we want to go down that route. We weren't sure whether it was feasible or if we had the money to do it. So we had to get Kirsty on board pretty quickly. Being a good architect, she was also capable in project management, so between us we muddled through.

Yeah. So she got on board pretty early and we started going for outline planning was the initial phase, testing the council to see, you know, is this okay, and what would you need. So that was all part of the stuff I was talking about, about woodland. And that's when we started to find out the issues that might exist.

**Ben** 10:31

And then your budget for this? How did you set that? And did you want to borrow money? Was it easy to secure money?

**David** 10:39

Yes, so again, we were quite fortunate in that we were capable of borrowing money against Jenny's business, she owns half of a dental practice. So, we borrowed about half the money through that, and then got half of the money. And not to put anyone off, I think you could have gone down the borrowing from a company route, but we just managed to avoid it. I had some money from the sale of a flat in Glasgow. Jenny had a little bit of money, and then we muddled together basically. So we didn't have to borrow formally.

**Ben** 11:14

And how did you set that number then?

**David** 11:17

Just by area. I mean, once we spoke to Kirsty after a lot of to-ing and fro-ing between us and her about how much a Passivhaus might cost. Obviously, you have to put a bit of risk in there. So 17 or 1800 quid a square meter. So that allowed us to set the budget based on what we thought we had, or we could accumulate.

We planned for 300 thousand for the build and I think it ended up 315 in total, but that was for everything and that's landscaped as well and includes architect fees and everything. So that's the whole kit and caboodle.

**Ben** 11:58

When you mention architect fees, what package are you getting from Kirsty? Is she coming the whole way or how did you split that? Obviously, you're doing the project management.

**David** 12:09

Yeah, given it was Passivhaus and she had good experience it was sensible to keep her on all the way. So she did the outline planning, and then the detailed design. But even before outline planning, we were doing design drawings, she was showing us models and very interesting process, involving us fully the whole process was all design. She had good ideas, and we took them on board. But she also took on our thoughts. And yeah, we had a very good relationship with Kirsty. So that went all the way through to the end and then we left her after the outline planning and the planning was done once we got that through.

I worked with Craigs Eco which was the contractor after that, and Kirsty just input on a sort of ad hoc basis, where we were struggling with minor details or small issues with the plant room size and stuff.

**Ben** 13:01

When you're working with your contractor, are they handling the whole project? Or are there bits that fall in between, if that makes sense?

**David** 13:12

Yeah, well, I don't know. You've got approaches there, you know, how you contract them or whether you get them to do everything and get all their subcontractors or whether you get more involved. I got a bit more involved in that Craigs Eco were happy to have a sort of open book policy, is what we were calling it anyway. Basically gave me a full bill of quantities for every item broken down really well into every sort of part, plumbing, slab laying, founds, everything. And within reason I could bring in my own people, if I could get it cheaper, basically, he was happy to incorporate that. Although with the risk there being that if I delayed another part of the works with my subcontractor then, you know, that could be liable for some additional costs. So yeah, that was a good way of doing it I thought, because being a local man and Craigs Eco weren't as local to Dundee, I had some good contacts. I subbed in quite a lot.

**Ben** 14:17

How did you actually get that breakdown in the first place? Is that a quantity surveyor?

**David** 14:23

Wojtek, so he was a project co-ordinator, I don't know, what his official title was, but he was the sort of site manager. Site manager is the best description. He did everything. He did all their accounts, all their payments, so quite a small firm in that way.

So he presented it and we went back and forth. I asked for more detail here and there and eventually we agreed on a sort of list. And then I said, you know, I'm gonna bring in my own plumber if that's okay. Okay, that's fine.

**Ben** 14:54

So finding these subcontractors, you want to bring in your own plumber, do you know this plumber? How were you sourcing the plumber?

**David** 15:02

Scott was Jenny's cousin, so that was easy enough! I mean, this is what we're talking about. The sparky was Jenny's mum's electrician. She runs a quarry over in Cotside Quarry in Carnoustie. Her mum does so, she had masses of contacts for materials and concrete construction, everything. She works with lots and lots of companies. So she was very useful. And we used her sparky. He was a good guy, Kyle. I made sure

that I knew these people would fit in with others and they were good to work with and weren't awkward characters. You never know, when you're trying to get them into a team like Craigs Eco, you don't want them coming in and causing problems. So, be careful with that, I suppose.

**Ben** 15:50

Would they say I need these things on site, I'm going to turn up on this date, and then you'd have to do some shopping, or how would it work?

**David** 15:59

Yeah, so Wojtek again, he did arrange a lot of it. But here, let's say Scott was doing the plumbing, he did everything for the plumbing. So he would arrange materials to turn up on site and do it at the exact time I told him and he's family so he had no choice!

Kyle again, Kyle was in and out a lot. You know, what electricians are like, it's they come one day and you know, the plaster board isn't up correctly, or you have to go away and come back and be flexible a little bit. So he was okay with that.

And the other thing I did, which was quite good, I did a lot of the negotiating for materials. So Wojtek would put his price down for materials. And again, if I could get the materials cheaper, he was happy to substitute them in. So particularly for the, I think the biggest one was the zinc. So if you've seen pictures obviously of the house, it's black, the black stuff is zinc. And there's a lot of it. And I think the first quote I got was something like £105,000 to clad not even all of the house, so that includes the roof.

**Ben** 17:09

That must have been a fun moment.

**David** 17:10

Yeah, Kirsty what's the idea here, with zinc. You told us fair enough it's sustainable, it can be recycled, but right now I don't really care. Let's just get some corrugated iron or something!

Yeah, I think the final quote, once we'd gone round every company, or I'd gone round every company in the UK, we got it for 55. So about half the cost.

**Ben** 17:33

That is just madness then, so what do you think was the difference? Were you paying for something different? Was it the same product? Were they just trying it on?

**David** 17:44

I'm not an absolute expert here. And I'm trying to remember, you do get different products, but the guarantees on them are long. I think it's 20

years anyway. But realistically, I can't see us ever having to do anything with the zinc.

But I have no idea why the first one was 100 odd grand. I think the average was maybe more like 70-75, something like that. So yeah, HL Metals down in Ayrshire. Just I don't know whether they wanted the job more than the other guy.

**Ben 18:16**

Yes.

**David 18:16**

They were a bit closer than some of them, so the journey time wasn't too bad. But I can't give you a definitive answer on that one. Other than to say, distance is probably one of them.

**Ben 18:30**

Were there any challenges in sourcing anything? Or was it similar to that pattern of the cladding that you just keep going until you find something at a price that you consider is a good price?

**David 18:44**

Well, you know, that was one of the first things that I had negotiated, because obviously we needed that ready, and we need it programmed in the company on board. So once you get a saving of that level, you get addicted to it a little bit. So I found myself being quite harsh, going back and forwards between flooring suppliers and stuff. They've just undercut you, can you do any better? And the amount of money you can save is insane. You're not bullying them. You're not big enough to bully them. You're only one house so they're clearly still making profits. But I think in terms of management, that was a key thing, money wise.

**Ben 19:26**

What tips would you have on that front, for negotiating and trying to get the best price? Was it simply a case of I've just gone down the road and he said this?

**David 19:39**

Yeah, well, it's not really project management negotiation like I do in work. That's more just arguing with contractors over the prices is one thing but this is, yeah, just having the balls really. Just say it as it is. Depends on your character I guess, if you're willing to do that. But usually when it's your own money, and maybe you're watching this sort of overall budget. I was monitoring the overall budget like a hawk, you know, anything went up, it went into a spreadsheet, got added in, I looked at the overall total and thought, oh, God, we've got to save somewhere else, and then something would come down. So it was a constant balance. So when you're doing that, and it's your own money, you've got a bit more enthusiasm when it comes to going and asking for discounts.

**Ben** 20:22

So would you say you were almost more motivated because it was your own project, compared to a work one? I obviously, don't want you to get in trouble with your work. But do you know what I mean? You've got that personal involvement?

**David** 20:35

I have no problem saying that. 100% yeah. You're doing it once, it's your house, you're gonna live in it. You don't want to, you know, hinder yourself with a load of debt that you can't afford. So when you say something's your budget, try and stick to it. And hopefully, that'll set you in good stead.

**Ben** 20:55

So a lot of the time did you know this particular item was expensive? Or was it just a case of I can get 20% off all of these things, so I should just work my way down?

**David** 21:09

As I say, we had the list at the start. Wojtek had given us a lot of his already agreed prices for things and he had a good idea of what things cost even when he didn't have a guaranteed price. So because you had that start, you could see what things cost. And you know, anyway, in your head, you know a kitchen's gonna cost you, could cost you 40 grand, or you can get a secondhand one for free and install it yourself. So everything has room for adjustment. So yeah, I just attacked the things I thought were movable in terms of price, and would continue to keep the quality up. Yeah, because you don't wanna you don't give up on quality on everything.

**Ben** 21:50

And did everything arrive when you needed it to arrive?

**David** 21:55

I'm thinking back and the big stuff like the crane coming in for, you know, the really important key milestones, if you want to use a project management phrase are the key items, they were all good. The one issue we had was the track down to the Invergarry House, which we use to get down to our house is a lot smaller than it should be really. It's only barely three metres wide. So we had a big issue with things arriving at the very, very top and being 300 metres away, without any method of getting them down. So we did at one point have a nice little forklift going around helping us but you know, there's some hairy moments at six in the morning, when something's arriving, and I'm thinking I'm just gonna have to get this on the car roof one by one, some delivery driver who's driven all the way from Bristol or something needs to get home.

**Ben** 22:53

This was some of the falling between the gaps question that I was asking earlier that yeah, can't get down to the site or storing the things when it suddenly falls back to you or even just cleaning up the site?

**David** 23:07

Well, yeah, cleaning up the site was always a good one for us, because I wasn't directly involved in a lot of the actual construction work, but you can help a lot by keeping everything tidy and clean. And yeah, making sure people can get in and out. I mean, the issue with the track, we did know about it and we used to give them the dimensions and say that, you know, could you use a small truck and things but these things get lost over the phone or over the internet when you're ordering anything. So yeah, articles turnings up.

**Ben** 23:38

Did you have any challenges with any of the trades? A lot of them seem to be quite well known to you. But was there ever a case where you'd have to say that work isn't good enough, or you know, even kick someone off site?

**David** 23:53

I think with everything with the meat of the house was okay, so the plumbing, electrical work, the joinery was absolutely beautiful. The guys that did that were a couple of great lads. Wojtek obviously is of Polish descent. He's second generation now, but he still used Polish guys for some of it. The two guys who did the joinery and they built it, once the foundation slab was down, they just built these panels, straight on top of that based on good drawings and then the crane came in and they slotted into place. I couldn't believe it. We watched it, this big crane just slotted them into place beautifully. They're up ladders, knocked them together. It took about an hour and a half. It was incredible. So yeah, the meat of the house. Everything was great.

The zinc contractor - again, a couple of old boys that were just getting on with it in the freezing cold as well. And just producing these beautiful finishes so all that was good. I think the problems came, as you were asking about problems, with the finishing, and there was maybe a little bit of a two way street there, because we were saving costs by we only did tape and we didn't do full plaster of the whole house. It's getting towards the end so maybe some of the money's running out a little bit. And the main contractor, starting to eat into his potential profits if you get them to do too much for what they have agreed. So yeah, some of the finishes aren't as superb as you maybe would have hoped for.

**Ben** 25:33

Is there anything that you took on board yourself? Or were you quite good at staying in the project management lane?

**David** 25:41

Well, I definitely kept away from doing. You can't go as fast. You can't do as good a job. I had all this stuff, you know, there's three acres of land round here. So I've done all the turfing and the slab laying and more basic jobs. For someone who isn't as skilled as these guys, these guys, when they're painting or, doing the joinery are just three, four times as fast as you.

So for me, we needed a house, I mean, talking about number one child, number one child was born as the foundation was going in. So there was a bit of a need to get a shift on and get it done.

I do appreciate folk that take a lot on themselves, though. But maybe at my age, not quite as skilled as you might be when you get into your 50s and 60s. And maybe you've got a bit more skill like that. My dad was a builder. I did work with him. I know the basics. But no. In the end, I think it was the way to save money was by negotiating prices, not labouring in the end.

**Ben 26:46**

Have you ever thought about how much money you've saved over the whole project, or is it just guesswork?

**David 26:54**

I think I reckon it's probably 50/60 grand that sort of. I don't know, you could come and see the house, and depends if you're talking about the overall, you know how much you think this house would be to buy. If you're talking about doing it as a self build, as opposed to buying this house new. I mean, it's hundreds of thousands of pounds. This house is, I don't know what it'd be valued at. We've got an arbitrary valuation on it for the mortgage, so we could get a mortgage to pay back a little bit of the money that Jenny's dad gave us, and they valued it at £550,000. So we spent £315,000 building it. And that's where the value in it, but I don't know. We're never gonna move anyway so it doesn't matter.

**Ben 27:43**

Well, it's always a nice thing, though, isn't it to be in that range, though, where you know, your investment of time has actually equalled some money as well. And while we're talking about investment of time, how much time was going into this? Were you on site the whole time? How did you get that time away from work?

**David 28:02**

Yeah, so the time thing is an interesting one, because your enthusiasm takes over. And you're not quite sure. But you know, every night you're sitting there, but it's not a painful, I didn't find it painful anyway. I found it all quite exciting. So I think per week, if you like, during the build was quite high, you're putting probably 20-30 hours a week extra. Just thinking about things and making phone calls and things. Before that it was planning and it was a bit on and off. You know, you were spending a lot of time waiting for other people doing things, so it wasn't so intense,

but still on your mind of course. You're thinking about these things. And yeah, it was good to be really young. So we're lucky. We're young folk so we're in an enviable position here in sort of mid 30s to do something like this. Not everyone has that opportunity. So stress doesn't really come into it at that age. A lot of energy I think.

**Ben** 29:06

It's a particularly nice thing when you've got kids who are growing up so they get this fantastic base. And I really think when they're young is the easiest time to build. It probably doesn't feel like it.

**David** 29:20

Well, yeah she was zero when we were building it. She was one by the time we went in, or maybe nine months or 10 months. She wasn't a hindrance. Little Ruby was not a hindrance at all. Only for the immediate weeks surrounding her birth obviously. Moderately tired for a little bit of that. But Jenny's a diamond, my wife, so it's not a problem. She took a lot of that on knowing our house was getting built. It's only one baby. You can manage it. Easy.

**Ben** 29:52

Well you've got your hands full now haven't you with another one due soon.

**David** 29:56

Very exciting, yeah. Imminent. Jenny's off work now so she's enjoying a bit of time around the house. This is what we built it for. It's actually currently in its nicest state. There's nothing absolutely pressing today in terms of the landscaping around it. When we finished the build in June 2019, you know, there was no driveway or anything. It was still a sort of a bit of a muddy area around it, no grass or anything. But right now, everything has matured nicely. And it's, you can just enjoy it.

**Ben** 30:30

Well I was going to ask you whether, on reflection, there's anything you would say to people who are thinking of following you, in this path, doing the project management, what might help?

**David** 30:44

Yeah, project management is the name for it but you don't have to be a project manager. It's just being organized. That's all it is, trying to think of every element. You have people to help you. Kirsty helped me, you know, she's been through these processes before. The contractor, you'll speak to them fairly early in it, they've been through the process, so you're not on your own here. You don't have to be an expert, but I would 100% go for it. If you've got the opportunity, you can get a piece of land.

We're living in something you wouldn't even we could never have afforded to buy. Fair enough we were lucky getting a bit of land, but there's opportunities out there, particularly if you're willing to move and

things and be flexible, then you can give yourself a pretty good quality of life, I think in terms of your living conditions, if you're willing to go for it. And as I say, I didn't find it painful at all.

**Ben** 31:38

Were there any areas that were confusing, or that you needed to learn about? Insurances, warranties, VAT, anything that stayed hidden, or was it easy to access everything you needed, and you were fairly confident from the beginning?

**David** 31:55

In one way I'm always confident about things like that, I think, if we had had to go through the sort of process of borrowing money for a self build, that was complex, because we looked into it, and it wasn't straightforward. And basically, you need to be a reasonable level of wealth for them to give you money. It's not so any old Joe Bloggs can just do it off his back, you need a certain bit of backing there. So if we'd been forced down that route, we'd probably have taken a bit longer. The planning was all plain to see and again the council do help you with that, as frustrated as you get. Architects help with the contracts with the builder. A good architect is key. No, I don't think anything was a massive problem if you really want to do it.

**Ben** 32:45

Well, it's a lovely design of house as well. I'm watching Kirsty because I know that she's underway or nearly underway with her own project isn't she so that's quite exciting.

**David** 32:53

Yeah, I'm looking forward to going and having a visit over there and go across the water whenever we like we. It'll be fun.

**Ben** 33:01

Fantastic. David, thank you so much for your time.

**David** 33:04

Thank you for inviting me on to your show. Thanks.