

HPH315

Ben Adam-Smith 00:00

This is House Planning Help, Episode 315. Hello, I'm Ben Adam-Smith, and this is the podcast for you if you're interested in self-build or retrofit. I'm exploring what houses we should be building in the 21st century and trying to break down some of the major roadblocks that may get in our way.

Ben Adam-Smith 00:19

Coming up in this session, my guest is Mike Jacob, co-founder and director of Kiss House. And we're going to be exploring the Kiss House approach to delivering high performance, sustainable homes. Lots of really good stuff in here. It's almost trying to optimise the process, trying to source locally, use timber, all of these things coming together for health and comfort. And I think that you'll particularly like this if you're looking to just simplify things. You just want the end result, but you don't want to go round the houses and recreating the wheel one more time, because everyone loves doing that.

Ben Adam-Smith 00:56

Just before we get started, I'm looking to take our digital learning resource and membership, The Hub to the next level. So we're always trying to improve it anyway. But when it comes to getting my input, I help as much as I can. And it's amazing. It's a decade now that I've been involved in this space. But there are definitely times when I will reach out to my network for help. And they're always fantastic, different people. I try not to ask the same person all the time. But yeah, as questions come up, it's sometimes logical to go to certain people either for geographic reasons or because of their particular expertise. However, I wonder if it's time to look for some professionals who actually want to work with us, who want to be regulars that we'll call on, whether you're a builder, an architect, an engineer, and so forth. If you can help people looking to build their own homes, and do a fantastic job of it. We obviously talk a lot about Passivhaus a lot, about plant-based materials, and so forth. So if you've got expertise, and you've got a number of years under your belt, and this sounds interesting, hopefully you know what we do. Our bottom line is really about trying to help people build better homes that are also better for the planet. So if that sounds intriguing to you, please get in touch through the website. We're just experimenting at the moment, houseplanninghelp.com and head to the contact page and drop me a line. Thank you.

Ben Adam-Smith 02:27

Let's get to our featured interview. Mike Jacob is co-founder and director of startup Kiss House. We've had him on the podcast before actually, we'll put a link in the show notes to that episode, where we were talking about project management. Still, in the early days of Kiss House, it's fascinating to me to see how this proposition has developed and how ambitious it is. Mike started out in construction in the 1990s, almost by accident. And perhaps this is the reason why.

Mike Jacob 02:58

I just seemed to be somebody who people felt they could trust when it came to looking after building projects. I just found myself being asked by people that I knew to become a sort of project manager. In the really early days they were weird and wonderful, quirky building projects, like houseboat conversions, or recording studios or pond renovations and things like that. And I just kept saying yes, to whatever came along because I needed to earn some money. And they seemed like interesting things. And I liked the people. And I just got into it like that.

Mike Jacob 03:40

And then pretty much straight away was horrified by what I thought or felt was a corner cutting culture. Lots of compromises, and 'they'll never know' mindsets that I was encountering. And I thought very early on, there must be a better way and kept pursuing it. From those early days, I didn't know what that meant. I just kept moving in a direction that felt like it was towards a better way. And over the years, I started to discover more about the world of Passivhaus and low energy building. And as I was amassing more experience, and qualifications, I got more of a niche education in sustainable architecture at the Centre for Alternative Technology. I worked for a startup in the Passivhaus world before there were any in this country and became chartered and so on and so forth. It just grew very organically, but always fueled by this sense that there must be a better way.

Ben Adam-Smith 04:48

And what about Kiss House? I can hear all the things in the background that you've been talking about the Passivhaus, the looking at sustainability, feeling that you're building things better. Where did Kiss House come from?

Mike Jacob 05:03

Yeah, so Kiss House. It brought itself into being. We were not thinking about starting another business when we started Kiss House. It actually was the last thing on our minds because we were really, really busy doing other things. But it just brought itself into being and demanded attention. And what I mean by that is, I'd spent about a decade delivering really complex, quite problematic, one-off housing projects. The thread that ran through them all was, you know, these were projects that were on the verge of not being built when they came to me, for various reasons. And I was feeling the frustration of always starting from scratch on every project, as were some of my colleagues, and we just started talking about the fact that wouldn't it be nice if we were able to transfer some of these lessons that we're learning into a vehicle that could benefit more people. And wouldn't it be nice if there was a way of scaling up a business that had a repeatable housing product that still felt like it had been individually designed, and gave people, some or all or most of the advantages of commissioning an architect and starting from scratch, but without some or all or most of the risk, and uncertainty and stress that is often associated with that route.

Mike Jacob 06:50

And so this was just a thought process, after about 10 years of doing these hard projects, and then Kiss House as an idea just popped up almost by chance, because a house that my colleague had designed for a private client, as a bespoke one-off house, touched a nerve. And when it started to get some publicity, people thought that it was a repeatable, configurable house and started to make enquiries. And because of that, we thought, well, maybe this is the vehicle for transferring those lessons learned.

And we started a kitchen table project. We called it Kiss House as a working title for our side projects, just an internal name for a project. And it just grew legs, the name stuck, you know, we felt that we were onto something. And actually, to the extent that we stopped doing everything else that we had been doing and decided to focus exclusively on Kiss House.

Ben Adam-Smith 07:57

What's striking me is that you've made all these discoveries along the way. Do the clients also need to come on a bit of a journey as well to understand what you've done?

Mike Jacob 08:12

At the moment, because we're still in the relatively early days of Kiss House, we seem to be attracting customers. Future Kiss House occupants who get it already and want to come on the journey with us. We don't find ourselves needing to go too much into our backstory with people. There's just something about the proposition that we're offering that some people, they are our early adopter front runner types of customers, want a piece of and we're fairly confident that once we've delivered the first cohort of houses for them, that the others who are sort of waiting in the wings patiently for us to demonstrate that this thing is real will follow on.

Ben Adam-Smith 08:57

Does it help that you've defined contemporary modern housing? And that's almost leading as well?

Mike Jacob 09:04

Yeah, I think the architecture, the aesthetic, the general look and feel of our product is important. We don't have a kind of didactic approach to that, but we did think it was important to have an identity. And the starting point was a contemporary, modernist house that triggered the side projects, the original idea if you like. That was a cuboid, contemporary, minimal piece of architecture. And that felt like a natural space for us. It's the world that we come from. And we're also very inspired by lots of the landmark projects from the 20th century that were attempting to combine contemporary architecture with manufacturing technologists to offer more of a mass customisation approach to housing. And because we're bringing some of that to bear with the Kiss House project, it felt like a natural space for us. There's an intention still, as we develop new housing types to stay within a kind of aesthetic language, which is contemporary in nature.

Ben Adam-Smith 10:15

I say that because I feel that the core product, the quality, the energy efficiency, the sustainability is what a lot of people are looking for, and you've got the architecture there as well. But I've got a friend, for example, who's just enquiring about buying a developer home, and it seems all too easy for them to slip down the mass, poor quality housing, traditional aesthetic of years gone by, but not done as well. And I wonder how to bring that person into this world? Or is it going to come back to land again, and this issue, that really you're catering to people who own that piece of land, and are wanting that home?

Mike Jacob 10:58

Yeah, I mean, we need to, we need to be careful, though, because we're not offering the same level of design input that one would expect if one were starting from scratch, and employing an architect to

design something truly bespoke. But there's a reason for that. And we found over the years that those people who are striving for a unique piece of architecture, whatever the style, very often come unstuck for a whole host of reasons. And also, tension tends to arise when it comes to trying to incorporate a high level of energy efficiency or building performance like Passivhaus, there's always historically in my experience, been great tension around that. And projects, bespoke design projects, very often, either end up leading on the architecture and failing or compromising on the performance or vice versa.

Mike Jacob 11:55

And so we wanted to try and offer something that gave a very good level of design, without compromising at all on the performance. That means we're kind of architect-less if you like, in the way that we're approaching things. We have a simple, stripped back, clean lines aesthetic, with uncompromising performance. And that design can be configured to an extent, but it would never appeal to somebody who wanted something truly, truly unique and bespoke, and one off. That's not the market we're aiming for.

Ben Adam-Smith 12:30

Is this custom build then? So it's someone who probably could be buying a serviced plot, and then this is just going to make their life a lot easier in getting straight to this quality, the architecture, the performance?

Mike Jacob 12:46

I think so. It's a young market, and we're watching it very closely. We were considering getting involved at the early stages, but pulled out. And we're now looking quite carefully at how we might re-enter custom build, for sure. Partnering with a custom build developer, or being part of a custom build project, you know, we have a place there for sure.

Mike Jacob 13:05

But I think notwithstanding what I just said about bespoke one off design, I think we will continue to offer Kiss Houses to individual customers who want, you know, a single house on a single plot, but just want an easier, more predictable, more comfortable ride. And we really like the idea that we're going to be building a portfolio of individual Kiss Houses that all have commonalities. But we're also looking beyond that in terms of volume, because we've got some interesting dialogue with some developer partners and some local authority entities who are interested in different typologies, but still recognisably Kiss for housing at scale. So we've kind of got three different strategies of market penetration: low volume, custom build, and then high volume.

Ben Adam-Smith 13:54

So let's rewind a little now. Can you explain how you got to the Kiss House? You know, what did it take and how is it evolving?

Mike Jacob 14:03

Well, to begin with, we thought that it was about repeating that original house. We went on quite a journey of discovery, looking at different approaches, you know. If we're going to repeat a house that was never meant to be repeated, then how are we going to do that? How would we make it better?

How would we build it? Where would it be manufactured and so on? And equally, what's the customer experience? Are we talking about building a brand and a product and really, that was a two year piece of work really to get to the point of realising it wasn't about repeating that house at all.

Mike Jacob 14:37

The point we're at now Ben, is we've developed a system and we've developed an architectural language for that system. And so it's about looking at sites, applying our system and the architectural language that that conforms with and having a much more flexible kit of parts approach to housing typologies that are more site specific. So our website currently shows quite a limited range, but we are updating that to reflect what we've been working on for the last 18 months with our design and engineering partner. So yeah, we've got a much more flexible approach to delivering what will still be a recognisable housing product on a wide variety of sites. And of course, having Passivhaus certification running through all of them, we've been working very hard to ensure that we are always, in the vast majority of cases, going to be able to stick to the Passivhaus quality assurance, and offer certified houses on each on each project.

Mike Jacob 15:39

The system, we're taking through the Passivhaus components certification process, we haven't completed that yet, but we're embarking on that. And we are in the process of becoming vertically integrated by joining forces with our manufacturing partners. So we'll have our own manufacturing facility in the UK, we've developed a domestic supply chain, we're bringing as much in house as we possibly can including window manufacturer. And we've decoupled ourselves from as many high risk supply chains as possible. So we're trying to de-risk it, become vertically integrated and offer a one stop shop for this flexible housing product.

Ben Adam-Smith 16:19

Let's start with that window. Did you say you're going to be manufacturing the windows here?

Mike Jacob 16:23

Yeah.

Ben Adam-Smith 16:24

Wow. Triple glazed presumably?

Mike Jacob 16:27

Yeah, timber Passivhaus certified. They'll be market ready by the end of this year. We're just going through some early trials at the moment.

Ben Adam-Smith 16:34

Is that the first one in the UK?

Mike Jacob 16:36

We're told so but I haven't verified that. But we've been told that by the tooling supplier that we're working with.

Ben Adam-Smith 16:43

And why did you choose to do that? I know there's an element of control, but I would have thought that's, that's almost embarking on another whole journey.

Mike Jacob 16:52

I think, you know, we were turned on to the idea by our manufacturing partner. They showed us actually that it wasn't as crazy as it might first sound. And we were then further pushed towards it, because we have got some early stage collaborations with a glass manufacturer who've got some very interesting developments that are going to form the basis of a longer term R&D project, looking at new glazing systems. And so we just thought, why not? It de-risks things, and it improves our kind of overall risk profile.

Mike Jacob 17:33

We also, we've got an emerging relationship with a large timber distributor, through whom we can develop new glazing profiles, work with new timber products, and so on. So there's just lots of strands that all come together. We're more in control, we offer better service to our customer. That's always got to be the driver really is every decision we make it's got to be putting our customer first. And so we feel that having a Kiss House window product is a significant step towards improving the customer experience as well.

Ben Adam-Smith 18:04

What about all these materials, then? I know what it's like that you're in some cases because of supply chains all over the place. But how much is coming from the UK?

Mike Jacob 18:16

The vast majority of it actually. Part of our early journey was we were seduced by that zeitgeist of large format, engineered panels from overseas and we developed a way of building using CLT. And then LVL. You know, however we, due to planning delays, we spent most of lockdown engaged with the next generation building system for Kiss House, which is all using domestic timber. We don't use any imported timber now.

Ben Adam-Smith 18:47

Wow. Another wow.

Mike Jacob 18:48

Yeah. And we're actually engaging on a new project to try to galvanize the domestic supply chain. There's lots of timber that we'd like to use, such as ash, and beech for things beyond the structure, to look at flooring and furniture and things like that. So we're trying to just go as broad as we can. You know, we've developed a way of doing our ground floors, which is using a UK manufactured profile. We are working, and have been working for the last couple of years with the Bio Composite Centre at Bangor University in the hope that we can bring to market a UK manufactured natural fibre insulation. The one thing that we currently have as a kind of imported material would be sheet timber, but we use that sparingly and we're trying to find workarounds.

Ben Adam-Smith 19:41

Tell us a little bit more about the production base then. What kit are you using to get all the parts that you need? How developed is it before it even leaves the workshop?

Mike Jacob 19:54

Yeah, so we have an approach to the delivery of our houses, which is not entirely off site. It's certainly not entirely on site. It's somewhere between the two. We have a facility in the South of England where we manufacture, very precisely, components. And the kits of parts that we've developed actually doesn't consist of very many components. It's two different types of columns, cassettes of various shapes and sizes, and panels of various shapes and sizes.

Mike Jacob 20:31

We manufacture digitally and on a semi-automated basis to high levels of precision. And the components that leave the facility are insulated, lined, in some cases with internal lining boards, and external cladding, but in some cases not. It depends. And then what goes to site is lorries loaded up with stillages containing these components, which are then carefully assembled on site without the need for a crane, without the need for scaffolding, and without the need for significant amounts of labour. We've developed a temporary works system, which is a kind of piece of IP that we've developed in-house that allows us to put the houses together quickly and safely. And then a typical house would go together in a few days to an airtight weathertight stage. And then there'll be a fit-out stage, which would be four to six weeks of following works, but clean and tidy following works fitting out internally with the rest of the linings of the building services and commissioning and furniture and so on.

Mike Jacob 21:46

So yeah, we've got a team that is competent, and able to act as main contractor, principle contractor. This is how we'll be delivering the first cohort of projects is as a fully integrated one stop shop.

Ben Adam-Smith 22:04

So from a customer perspective, it sounds like this should be so much easier. Does it work out like that in practice?

Mike Jacob 22:14

We'll find out! We're just gearing up to do it, actually! So I'm not saying we're a mature business, this is what we've been doing. We're a startup, we're growing and this is our model. We're manufacturing what will be the first house, which will be a demonstration house built at the factory, that will be available to be interrogated soon, within the next four to five months. We'll be promoting that and people can come and touch it and have a look around. And then the first live projects we'll be delivering on site as soon as we can get them unblocked in the planning system. We've experienced some horrific delays in planning, which may or may not be directly related to COVID, or could be related to other things. But we have projects which are, according to the Planning Officers, ready to be consented, but for other bureaucratic reasons have not yet got through the system. Once they do, then we'll be delivering those projects in the way that I just outlined. And then we can maybe talk again and see whether it, you know, whether it was successful, but we're very confident that we've got a robust delivery model.

Mike Jacob 23:20

And it's, as you say, it's all about the customer experience. You know, we know, having delivered projects the hard way over many years, how we don't want to do it. And that's why we've tried to come up with something that addresses all of the pain points, or as many of the pain points as we believe are there, so that our customers maybe even enjoy the experience.

Ben Adam-Smith 23:41

What's been the biggest challenge of this whole journey so far?

Mike Jacob 23:47

The biggest challenge has been perseverance to keep going against the odds. Because it's not been an easy journey to get here. We've known that we're onto something and we should keep going. But there have been some things that have made it hard, like the planning delays that I mentioned, like lockdown. We've effectively lost two years. But we've tried to pivot and look at the bigger picture and keep going so that grit to keep going against the odds and in difficult circumstances has probably been the hardest thing.

Ben Adam-Smith 24:25

Has it been funded by anyone? Have you had input? Or how have you got to this stage really?

Mike Jacob 24:33

Yeah, so we are funded by two committed, long term, patient investors who we knew from our previous existence. So there was a kind of trust and commitment element to the investment. That's brought us to where we are. We're scaling up. We're joining forces with our manufacturer where we're about to embark on a new round of fundraising. So yeah, it's another growth stage for us at the moment.

Ben Adam-Smith 25:06

Well I wish you luck with it, and certainly come back and share what you've learned as you deliver these various projects.

Mike Jacob 25:14

Thanks very much, Ben. Thanks for your time, nice to speak to you again.

Ben Adam-Smith 25:18

Get more online in today's show notes at houseplanninghelp.com/315, where you can review all the main information, again, because we provide a summary, get some visuals as well of the Kiss House, understand the process a little bit more. If you've got a comment, or you'd like to ask a question, you can either do that within the show notes, or we'll provide social media links as well. We'll direct you to the Kiss House website, all of that from houseplanninghelp.com/315.

Ben Adam-Smith 25:51

Like what we do? Well, we always love your support. And it can be on a very simple level, just tell a friend. Next time you hear someone saying, "yeah, I would like to build a house" or "I'd like to renovate,

retrofit an existing property", the learning can start straight away. That's the good thing. There's so much information out there, point them our way that will be much appreciated.

Ben Adam-Smith 26:13

Or you want to commit yourself a bit more, perhaps go a step further, and write us a review of the podcast. Have you been listening to more than a few episodes? Well, then we'd love it. Hopefully you've got an idea what it's all about. And I can give you an example, actually, because another one's just appeared. Hi to Liam, who has posted this in the Apple Store.

Ben Adam-Smith 26:32

"I only found this podcast a few months back. I'm finally up to episode 100. And all I can say is what a find. Ben has produced a brilliant bit of work that is both informative and educational. Always a great selection of speakers. And the delivery and execution of the discussions are perfect. My profession revolves around the field of Passivhaus."

Ben Adam-Smith 26:56

So thank you, Liam, that's awesome. Really appreciate that. What it does is it helps other people understand what the podcast is about and get tempted into downloading that first episode. And then leave it with me. So yeah, if you can do that, and whatever app you're listening to, most of them give you the opportunity to review a couple of sentences, say what you feel, all good.

Ben Adam-Smith 27:17

And finally, we do actually run a resource called The Hub where we try to help you further if you're after it. We try to have more information, so that you can get directly to what it is that you're after. Also see real life builds, we've got our in depth video case studies that try to take you where no one else seems to take you and just show you all of those bits as the decisions are made and the work goes on.

Ben Adam-Smith 27:43

And then we've got our courses to map out certain areas. We're always trying to update that and add to our library and revise previous material. And then our private members only forum is the other thing. Oh, and one more the office hours, that's when you get a chance to chat to me, whatever it might be. As we talked about earlier, we're trying to increase how useful we are. I can give you my input but there are limits. And I'm always happy to recommend someone in my network who might have more knowledge.

Ben Adam-Smith 28:15

But if all that sounds good, you know, come and explore! It's not a handcuffs thing. You can leave when you want, you can come back when you want: houseplanninghelp.com/join. Next time Lloyd Alter returns to the podcast. I always enjoy my chats with him. We'll be looking at his book Living the 1.5 Degree Lifestyle. Thanks for listening. The House Planning Help podcast is produced by Regen Media: content that matters.