

# HPH339

## **Ben Adam-Smith 00:00**

This is House Planning Help episode 339. Hi there, 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 the major roadblocks that may get in our way. Coming up in this session my guest is Mark Brinkley, author of the Housebuilder's Bible. We're going to get an overview of what the book is all about, who it's trying to help and how it does that. But we're going to start with a quick mind reading exercise. So bear with me here. It's the beginning of the episode where I like to share a resource. So say the first thing that comes into your mind... today's resource is? Yeah, of course, it's the Housebuilder's Bible. Well, I had to do that. Do you know, I don't think there's another book that I actually feel comfortable recommending. Part of that, I suppose, is one of its strengths and also challenges for Mark is that it's always up to date, it gets revised every couple of years. And whether that's the costs or the themes, some of those we're going to talk about today. And Mark's been on the podcast a few times before. We've talked about various different aspects. I'm not sure we've talked about the book in the same depth that we're going to today. But you know, better late than never, and a couple of reasons why this book is very relevant. You've got Mark having invested in it for decades now and going through it, trying to refine it as well, it's a life's work really, isn't it? And there will be places where you might even laugh out loud reading the book. It's got a lot of Mark in this and that's why we like it, it's very helpful. Obviously, I'm not going to be recommending something that isn't. So yes. Another thing that's quite strange for me is that we almost built at the same time, because his latest project, we were fairly in sync. So that's where we start things today and I asked Mark how he reflects on the latest house Build.

## **Mark Brinkley 02:07**

It seems like a dream. It's such hard work when you're wrapped up in the middle of it. It's so all enveloping that you can't think beyond the end of your own nose. The to-do list is eternally long and you're pondering how you do this, that and the other, and how are you going to do this and who, where and so and so. Gradually it falls away and you're living in a lovely house, and we've got a photograph, a montage of all the people that worked on it, and we look at it now five years on and it just seems like a dream, really no more than that. There's one or two regrets. Our biggest regret about this house is that we put a gas boiler in. We ahhed and ummed about putting a heat pump in. We actually got a quote for a ground source heat pump with a borehole going down, I think it was 50 metres, which is a mind boggling amount. But it's quite a small garden and we thought, well no let's go with it. And we were so concentrated on fabric first and the Passivhaus ideal that we thought it doesn't really matter. There'll be so little heat going out of the house that it doesn't matter what we use. That's true to an extent but the problem is having gone down the gas boiler route, because of the constrictions of the site, it's going to be very hard to ever fit a heat pump because we've got no room either side. And if we go out the back, we can't get into the plant room. And so we're stuck with it. Interestingly, our decision on that was made in about 2016/2017 and at the time that seemed like quite a sensible thing to do. Now it feels like a real mistake. It's not long ago, really, is it?

**Ben Adam-Smith 03:43**

But Mark, that's exactly the same thing at the top of my list, too. So I think that goes to reflect that this was the thinking, a small amount of gas is all you're going to be using.

**Mark Brinkley 03:43**

Yeah, well and we don't use an awful lot of it but it still irks me. Because part of the point of this whole exercise is to get off fossil fuels, isn't it? And that is a big minus when you're trying to get off fossil fuels.

**Ben Adam-Smith 03:52**

And what about how the layout and how the home has delivered your day to day needs and so forth? How has it been as a home?

**Mark Brinkley 04:19**

It's been an absolutely lovely house to live in. Really surprised how much we love it, really. It's beautifully spacious, particularly the room at the back of the house, which is the kitchen and the living room. It's an interesting design exercise because it was previously a warehouse and it's six metres wide, 20 metres long, and we've kept pretty much to that same footprint with our house. But because there's properties on the side walls, the 20 metre walls are both on boundaries with neighbours. We weren't able to have more than little skylights in the side walls. So we have essentially a long dark tunnel and the design exercise to get around that was to put a big expanse of triple-glazed rooflight over the centre of the kitchen, which is a stunning effect, it really brings the whole place to life. And it's just a lovely space to be in. You're in there on the coldest of days, cooking breakfast in bare feet and with the underfloor heating trickling up. It's just a great feeling. It's a lovely space to be in. The other thing that's well worth mentioning is the ventilation system. It's the unsexiest thing in the world. But it's a lovely feeling when you come in on a cold, wet, winter's day and you just open the door and you walk into a wall of warmth. You must know that as well. And just, ahhh! Life is, the world isn't such a bad place after all!

**Ben Adam-Smith 05:44**

And what about overheating? That's one element of Passivhaus that people like to keep tabs on? How has that been for your design?

**Mark Brinkley 05:53**

I think we've got it half right. I think we could have done better. The big areas of glass are in the kitchen and at the back of the house where there's big sliding doors going out to the garden. Everything on the south side and at the back is low G, solar, heat resistant glass, which works up to a point but it's not as good as blinds but blinds with an overhead light are virtually impossible to fit anyway. I'm not quite sure how we would have got around that. And there are days when the temperature gets above 30C. Three summers ago, there was a heatwave that lasted the best part of a week or two weeks, wasn't there? And by the end of that we were getting temperatures coming up into the 30s and it was quite uncomfortable and we were thinking hmmm, maybe we got it wrong? But on the other hand I'm not sure if it's that hot for that long, I'm not sure there's any system that can... because it's really the nighttime temperature that's key, isn't it? And if you don't get below 20C at night, no amount of nighttime purging is really going to cool down. So maybe we could have done better, had a brise soleil,

maybe on the back door? But Mole, the architects, were quite onto it. And we didn't make the mistake of having a huge glazed gable. It's a sliding door. So we've cut a lot of the heat out. We didn't put Velux (roof windows) in the sloping roof where we might have done. So it's pretty good. But I have been worried on the really hot days that we're not staying below the magic 25 degree (Celsius) figure that people are looking for. We're getting up to 27C, 28C overnight, you know that sort of figure. How's yours been?

**Ben Adam-Smith 07:29**

Yeah, mine has been good, again, up to a point. And there were a couple of interesting aspects. So one is that it was modelled never to go over 25C if you could do that purge that you're talking about. And I think it works exactly like that. But it does mean that there are always (solar) gains in the house. And I think that that is the bit that, having travelled to more houses and seen different approaches, if you have some way of making sure there are no gains, you're into new territory. And it's very difficult because you're balancing so many different things but the people who've done that, sometimes with things like verandas... you wouldn't have the space here or be able to do that, but I've just seen some very clever control of the overheating and I think that's desirable personally. The Housebuilder's Bible is back out again. You have done another edition, how is your energy for this?

**Mark Brinkley 08:32**

I think when I finish it, I think that's the last one, I'm never doing another one! But it takes me about, the whole process takes about three months to do a new edition, and there comes a point some time after Christmas when I think, what am I going to do the rest of the winter? And I lock myself away in the studio at the end of the garden and once I get into it I really enjoy it. It's an extraordinary process having done 15 editions of the same book. I've only ever written one book but having done 15 editions of it, it really is my baby. I've had people proofread it and bits of editing, but 98% of it is me and it feels like an extension of my personality. I realise it's quite a strange thing to do because it's quite technical. There's a lot of figures and costs and quasi scientific stuff in it. And I realise it's quite hard to explain that without writing it. I find it very hard to think someone could just come in and take it over. I think it's too much of me and whether I'll do a 16th (edition) I don't know. I don't see why not. I still keep going and people still value it. I still try and make it as a great introduction to the whole idea of house-building in general and self build in particular, and I still get some really good feedback from all kinds of unexpected corners and people who say I've really learnt a lot from this, thanks for doing it. So maybe I'll keep doing it but I'm not on the road any more. I don't do the shows any more. You know, I've stepped back from casual journalism. I'm semi retired, but enjoy keeping it up. It's better than Sudoku!

**Ben Adam-Smith 10:08**

Maybe you could explain a bit about how it comes together? What do you decide is important to go in? Are things shuffling round all the time? You know, you're some distance from the mindset of the person who knows nothing.

**Mark Brinkley 10:24**

That's a very good question. It changes subtly. If I go back to the very first edition when it was a very exciting, but very tentative project, what I was trying to do was talk or write or think my way through the process of building a house. What do you need to know from the foundations through to the finish?

What's the red tape, what are the stages? And right there and then it sort of hangs together about 90%. But there's a load of stuff that just doesn't fit clearly into the jigsaw and I always end up with a chapter at the back of the book, which I called the Apocrypha, because I thought that was a nice biblical reference of bits that didn't fit in the Bible. And there's lots of loose threads and stuff that just doesn't fit into the flow otherwise. And that's always been a problem. I guess it's the same whatever subject you do. If you think of a house because it's a logical process from foundations through to painting it and finishing off the garden. And mostly it is, except there are lots of, when you get into the options about what you do and the different methods that you can use, then you have to stand back and say, discuss it from a completely different angle. And that still goes on. The main change in the last couple of editions has been looking at the whole heat pump, zero carbon, off fossil fuels house, which I think is now the standard house. Although interestingly, my model house is still built with a gas boiler because you can still put gas boilers in. So that affects the costs, it makes it, I don't know, two or three grand cheaper. On the scale of a new house it's peanuts, but the idea of the model house, which I use as a reference point to show how you could build a simple house on a nice easy site with very few complications to a comfortable but not fancy standard. That's always the starting point. And this is how you can do it better or more expensively, or differently.

**Ben Adam-Smith 12:19**

You mentioned in there about how 90% of the process you can almost map out. What would those stages be?

**Mark Brinkley 12:29**

Everybody's journey starts slightly differently. For a self-builder, it starts probably with the idea. And then, I remember you go through this process, you hadn't got a plot, had you, and you spent ages looking for a plot. And once you've got the plot, then the pieces start falling into place. Up till then it's all fantasy. I might do this, I might do that. So you've got land, you have to start engaging with the planners. At this point there is a huge limitation on what you can build. Some people think they can build absolutely anything. Welcome to the world of planning and it's actually quite restrictive. Although it's not that restrictive. It's amazing what the planners will let you get away with if you do it well. That's the first stage is the conceptualization of it. The second stage is to then get the detailed design drawn and go through the whole red tape, sorting out finance. And then you've got the budget problem of trying to juggle your aspirations with your means. And that's usually a problem for people. Often they've been to the shows, they've read the magazines, they've seen Grand Designs, they want this, that and the other and then they find out the price attached and find out that actually they're building something much humbler. And then you have the project designed and ready to go - you have to find a builder. Again, there are different... the standard route is to go out to tender, get three or four builders to tender for it. That itself is tricky, because sometimes the builders are so busy they can't be bothered to tender or they give you a really, really high price because they don't really want to do it. Other times you're getting low quotes coming in, and you don't know whether the reputation of the builder is quite what it might be. That's another potential pitfall. You obviously don't get into bed with a cowboy builder, because that will end in tears. But how do you spot the cowboy builder? That's a whole chapter in itself, you know, how do you work with a builder constructively and well. There's lots of stuff written about that by all kinds of people, but I've got my own particular take on it. And some people think I'm right. Others think I'm completely wrong. There isn't a correct way of doing it. Then you have to decide how much of

a role you're going to play in the project. Are you going to let the builder get on with it? Maybe you have an architect supervising it and you just stand back and have a weekly visit and decide on the finishes? Or are you going to get actually involved in the project and become a helper or even a project manager, which is the route I chose on this house? And there you're basically hiring subcontractors to come in and you're supervising them, and making sure that what they build is what's on the plans. It obviously helps to know a bit about building to do that. It's not probably something that rookies want to do. And you also need, it's very, very time consuming. Now I did most of this house between editions of my book, and I wasn't doing a great deal of work outside. So I actually took the best part of a year to come in every morning. I was coming on my bicycle, 7.15 in the morning, unlocking the fencing and staying there till lights out in the evening. Not everyone can do that because you only have so much time. They're very different ways of going about it. And you need to make an assessment of what you're capable of, what you've got the time to do, and whether you think you're going to save money. Some people do that, actually, end up costing more because they're so fiddly and pernickety they keep sacking builders because they're not doing things the way they want them and the job tends to spin out to infinity. Again, all you can really do is go through the different threads and stories and just point out the pros and cons of each. There's interesting stuff about the theory, the physics of building, you know how energy efficiency works, how soundproofing works, all this sort of stuff. So the editions have a habit of getting bigger and bigger and bigger, because I'm adding more stuff in. Sometime about five editions ago, I realised it was turning something looking like a telephone directory, that's something you don't see anymore, isn't it, a telephone directory! Then I started paring it down and started throwing bits out. I thought, well, that's irrelevant, and that's not helpful. So that's the shaping, sculpting the book if you like, and that's been a development. I'm still trying to simplify it and get down to the bare bones, and try and make sure each edition is a few pages shorter than the one before.

**Ben Adam-Smith 16:43**

Do you get feedback in how it is read, because it could be read in a few different ways?

**Mark Brinkley 16:48**

Interesting enough, yes, particularly in the early days. I was getting some very funny feedback from people saying they kept it in the loo, you know, and they'd sit there and read three pages, and wives complaining that their husband took it to bed with them in the evening and ignored them! And it sits in the spot where the Gideon's Bible was, you know. People dip into it. It's a book you can dip into. It was designed to be something that you don't have to read from front to back. And someone was sailing across the Atlantic in a boat on their own. And he wrote to say he'd had that book with him, and it completely changed his mind when he got back to England. He was going to do this job and he says no I'm going to build a house. This is all through someone having given him a copy of the Housebuilder's Bible for his voyage. So there's all these odd stories about people getting into it and thinking oh this is a life-changing experience. That's a great feeling to come back and think that has had some effect. Some people have read it and changed their perspective on life. In a way that's why I started doing it because going right back to the beginning, I was working in a building company in this very street in Cambridge, in Sedgewick Street, down the other end of the street. And we had a little company, building flats. This is actually the second house I built in this very street. So the other one was in 1987. We were buying plots and there was a market crash in the 80s, the famous Lawson bubble, where he got rid of double mortgage tax relief and the house market crashed overnight. And we had three plots

on our books and lots of debt and where the hell we're going to go? And one of the ways was to put my emerging family of three little boys, was to build on one our plots, that was my first self build. It was one of our mistakes, if you like. That process made me realise that really there was a need for a guidebook here because I was struggling, even though I was a professional builder, I built houses, doing it for yourself is very different. A house-builder is building a magnolia box to sell, aren't they, it's all pared down. When you're trying to put your expression, what I want, what I don't want... and that in itself is difficult, because quite often at the beginning of the process, you don't know. You've got to start reading around brochures and finishes and finding out about different designs of houses and different finishes and different floor types. There's a hell of a lot to know about it.

**Ben Adam-Smith 19:10**

What do you actually recommend to people when they are in that stage? They're looking for land, nothing's happening really, they're dreaming. How do they do thorough research?

**Mark Brinkley 19:20**

Well, that's changed and that's much easier now, partly because of the net, things like Pinterest, which are coming up with mood boards - all this sort of stuff didn't exist back in the 90s. And partly there's much more stuff out there commercially. There are these shows you can go to. A really interesting place to go is the National Self Build and Renovation Centre in Swindon which is now, I don't know, about 20 years old and it's got better and better and better. Spend a day there just looking at all the different options. A lot of the self build industry has got some sort of stand or explanatory leaflet of what they're doing. You can pick up a lot going to that. Another good place to go to is the Centre for Alternative Technology in Machynlleth in North Wales. It's always a fascinating place to visit, full of ideas and a bit more radical than the one in Swindon, but it's an eye-opener. There are places like that you can go and see, expand your horizons about what's possible and what's feasible. And so this has built up a self build industry helping people through this process and all I can really do is point people towards that and go and find out. There's obviously TV shows. There's Grand Designs, there's George Clarke's programmes, there's lots of stuff you can casually watch on telly, soak it up. What there isn't is anything that cuts through the advertising stuff. That's what's difficult because you go on the net and you're searching out information and 90% of what you get is actually a sales feed. The nugget of information you want you can go in there and half an hour later, you still haven't got what you wanted to find out. You've found lots of other external stuff but the question you're asking is still unanswered. And that's a really tricky one. So I can help with that a bit. But very often there are so many questions that you can only really have an opinion on it. And is it possible that this product is always going to be the one that works, isn't it?

**Ben Adam-Smith 21:17**

Now I was having a listen back to some of the previous conversations we've had and one line really stuck out to me in the first podcast we recorded, which was: "The cost of building hasn't really changed that much." So this is obviously going back 10 years or so. How do you reflect on it today?

**Mark Brinkley 21:38**

Well, it looks a bit silly now, doesn't it? Because the pandemic changed all that. We've had phenomenal building inflation in the last two years or is it three now, isn't it?

**Ben Adam-Smith 21:49**

I think even before the pandemic prices were really going up.

**Mark Brinkley 21:53**

They were, weren't they and I've actually costed it in the latest edition. I compared it with the house from the 11th edition, which was 2015. And it's gone up 8% a year, which is a hell of a lot. That's an inflation rate of 8% a year in building when the published national inflation rate was well, for a long time was virtually zero. It's gone up obviously the last couple of years. We've had inflation of 10% or so. But it seems to be a lot higher than that. Partly, that's to do with house-building, or at this end of it going up market. I think I'm right in saying this, there are probably fewer self builds now than they were 10 years ago, not drastically, but the amount of money spent on it has gone up quite a lot. So each build is more expensive. Quite why it's hard to put your finger on exactly. In a way self-building has become more fashionable thanks to this TV exposure and the RIBA and people like that, and it's attracting a richer crowd, who are coming in and spec'ing it higher. Things like Passivhaus, renewables, heat pumps, all this stuff costs more than what the developers are building. Let's face it, the homes we were building in the 90s and noughties were pretty basic. The Brits don't spend much on building compared to a lot of other countries. But also materials, I say, as you know, they're just getting more expensive. It was triggered by the collapse in demand when the pandemic was on followed by a complete shortage in all sorts of materials. And people were having delays getting hold of stuff. I think they still are. It's still not clear that everything is as it was before. So that's a market striction and prices shot up. They've started to come down. I sort of track the prices of basic building materials, just like on Travis Perkins website and things like that. I've got little graphs of how it's all going. But they are nothing, they haven't come back nearly where they were. Timber is a good example. Timber more than doubled in price which is a phenomenal amount for a very basic product. It didn't help that a lot of it was coming from Russia and of course that stopped the moment the Russians invaded Ukraine. And it takes a while to readjust the supply lines. So stuff is just a lot more expensive. Having said that, there's still a lot of money out there. There's a hell of a lot of building going on. Here we are in central Cambridge, you will see builders' vans left, right and centre. There's no shortage of demand, even though the prices have shot through the roof. So I think we're seeing some projects delayed or postponed. Some of them will be indefinitely and others will be in trouble where people simply can't finish them. In a way that's always been a problem with self build. People get three quarters of the way through and they've run out of cash and they end up spending their third or fourth year in a caravan. Normally they get there eventually. So there'll be more of that going on. But certainly it's been the main feature of my work on my latest edition, seeing how the price rises have filtered through and what effect it's had on the overall cost of a house. What was interesting to me was that a lot of the basic materials have gone up dramatically, but a lot of the finished materials, things like kitchens and bathrooms and paint and that sort of stuff is unchanged. Now may have been that they had big fat margins originally and that they've allowed the fat to be taken up. But it's not all building materials that have gone up. It's actually quite selective about the price rises that have happened. It's a funny business building. One of the tricks that the manufacturers use... plasterboard is a great example. Plasterboard was introduced in the 1950s, the post-war years, and it was a completely revolutionary product. It came over from America, a sandwich of gypsum plaster between two sheets. Back then you'll find it would have been about, a sheet of plasterboard would have been about five quid, and lo behold in the 1990s it was still five quid,

but what happened? They were making plasterboard with much lighter materials. They were basically, sort of de-inflation. So that had an effect on the soundproofing, you know, because the original plasterboard worked quite well. By the time they'd got an aerated gypsum in there it was like having a sheet of newspaper in terms of soundproofing. So the standards were getting lower. But lo and behold, the headline price is exactly the same. Oh, I'll get plasterboard. Fine, no problem. But it wasn't the same product. So that's a good example of how the building trade coped with inflation, but you get a point, even plasterboard is now double the price. So you know, something had to give eventually.

**Ben Adam-Smith 26:33**

Yeah, that's happened to my crisps as well! When I open the packet, I'm always disappointed. There's nothing in there.

**Mark Brinkley 26:40**

There's lots of bars of chocolate, aren't there, that get gently shorter and shorter and shorter, don't they, so hopefully the consumer doesn't notice.

**Ben Adam-Smith 26:47**

Do you think we are seeing the rich getting richer and perhaps still driving that element of the construction industry, not the mass developer market? Is that something that's happening?

**Mark Brinkley 27:00**

You're straying into politics here, Ben.

**Ben Adam-Smith 27:03**

Maybe I'll cut myself off and say what a silly question that was!

**Mark Brinkley 27:07**

I think it's very good question because I think you're probably spot on. People that are making good money are rolling it, but the majority of people are struggling, aren't they? Interestingly enough you've been to Graven Hill, I'm sure, in your travels? You can't escape from that. It's a pyramid actually. The theory was invented by the Egyptians when they were building the pyramids and it's been the same ever since. The fact that you can have a cheap, good house but it won't be quick, or a quick, good house but it won't be cheap. Or you can have a cheap, quick house but it won't be any good! That dynamic, I guess it's going to last probably forever. And interesting aspect of this is the self build market was always divided between what went on in the southern wealthy parts of England and the Celtic fringes in Scotland, Northern Ireland, places like that. Land was more affordable, more available and self-building took place in a much more basic level, people getting onto the housing ladder for the first time with the self build. Maybe their dad was a joiner or something like that but there'd be family in the trade. But to this day, you see lots of quite humble self build projects. In the south of England land prices are so expensive that it really is the preserve of the wealthy. You've either got a very high income or substantial assets to even think about it really. You can't just on an ordinary wage go and get a mortgage and have enough money to do a self build. And in a way that's always been there, but I think it's just got more exaggerated really. What's your experience of it? Do you think that's the case?

**Ben Adam-Smith 27:26**

This is quite... I'm going to pitch my next question and you can talk about Graven Hill as well, because what do you think we do then if we want to build a house, but we know, money is tight? And we still want to go ahead with this but we are going to want to low cost house or, you know, we'd like quality... I know I'm starting to think about your triangle - the cost, quality, time thing. Yeah I think it is. This is why I was going to lead into Graven Hill (a custom and self build community) whether that approach is really making a difference, because they are all homes there that take a bit of the risk out. That's the key thing. When you've not got much money you want to tie down those costs.

**Mark Brinkley 29:23**

Well Graven Hill seems, from my limited view, I've been there three or four times, is dividing it exactly that way. The houses up on the hill, the self builds, are actually very grand houses. They're all completely different, chaotic in the great sort of Dutch self build. You've got completely different styles but they're all quite grand houses, aren't they. Lower down the hill we've got the custom builds and they look much like you'd see on a developer house anywhere in the country. And the process isn't that different except that you're invited to come in and maybe choose the wall tiles and maybe the bathroom fittings and you know, there's some element of customisation but essentially you're going in and buying a house from a developer taking the risk out of it. So in a way, as I see it, Graven Hill is in itself subdivided into two different markets. I don't know if you read it like that?

**Ben Adam-Smith 30:19**

I think I need to go back there, because it's probably a good few years. I was there maybe in the early days a couple of times.

**Mark Brinkley 30:25**

There's the section where Grand Designs did The Street, the original programme with eight houses. And around the back of that there's now some show houses. Dan House (Dan-Wood) are there. That's quite a good company, which is a Polish, which is doing quite a bit of work there. And Build It have done their own exhibition house. Yeah, yeah, you've been yeah? But when you actually go up onto the sites it's self-build in miniature, you know, the higher up the hill you get, the more expensive the houses get.

**Ben Adam-Smith 30:40**

That's one of my visits. So what would be your tips then for keeping costs down?

**Mark Brinkley 30:58**

I hate the phrase value engineering but that's really what it amounts to. You have to set your sights realistically, which is a very difficult one, because one of the thrills people have of doing major building work is to put some fancy ideas in place, you know, and it's quite a hard pill to swallow when you find out that you can't afford them. On this very street, there's a green retrofit taking place and they went through absolute hell with, I think they're on their third iteration, each one getting simpler than the one before until they get down to what they can actually afford. And, you can see the disappointment in their eyes, you know, they were hoping to do a wonderful house and then suddenly they are doing a really nice house but it's not quite what they had in mind. And that is basically what you have to come to

terms with. You have to cut your cloth accordingly. And there's no easy way around it, there's no magical way. Oh, you can suddenly go to this builders merchant and get half the price, or you'll find a wonderful plumber who's much cheaper than all the others. Not really. You might save a bit here and there but essentially, you're in control of the budget and you've got to cut your cloth accordingly. That's a very difficult one. The other difficult point, of course, is that you don't know how much it's going to cost when you do these plans. And you can hire... probably one way around this is to hire a quantity surveyor to go through it with a fine tooth comb and try and work out what this is going to cost in real terms but even quantity surveyors don't always get it right. You could say it's common sense but it's not common sense because you're dealing with costs that if you've never built before, you're not familiar with what they should be and what they might be. So really educate yourself and get professional help. I would personally, yes, we hired a quantity surveyor, despite the fact that I write a book that has building costs at the centre of it. Even I get nervous when I see a set of plans and think, how much is it going to cost? You know, can I estimate it to the nearest 100,000 let alone to the nearest 5000. It is common sense but it's complicated. So it's only common sense when you've looked at it in hindsight. Quite often you're looking at a cloudy picture of costs bubbling up. You've no idea what they're going to be.

**Ben Adam-Smith 33:11**

When you mentioned the retrofit project going on, sometimes you think you have a decent amount of money, but then it doesn't go so far. So when do you know that you're in a safe place with money? You've got enough of a budget there? Is it just once you've got the land? Once you've been to your QS? It's just tricky.

**Mark Brinkley 33:34**

Again that's a very good question. I'm not sure there is such a golden point when you really know you're going to be there.

**Ben Adam-Smith 33:43**

Because again, this to me just hints back to people who've already got the money. And sometimes they might go over budget, but they'll get it back because the market has gone up eventually, so long as they can keep going.

**Mark Brinkley 33:57**

I was visiting a project in Somerset, a huge barn conversion they were doing and they were basically halfway through it. And it looked like funds were getting short and they were scratching their head trying to work out how the hell are they going to finish this thing? And I'm sure they'll get there eventually. One way is to extend it out. Instead of taking a year or 18 months it ends up taking five years, something like that and people are going out and working, and bringing in funds.

**Ben Adam-Smith 34:27**

That has a toll though. I've seen that story.

**Mark Brinkley 34:29**

Yeah, I mean, you've been doing your interviewing long enough to know what the pitfalls are. There's no magic bullet here that can say this is the way to do it and you'll never go wrong.

**Ben Adam-Smith 34:41**

Yeah, I think this is a hard sell on to keep costs down. I don't know what else to mention. You need money. That's the answer.

**Mark Brinkley 34:49**

I don't know what to say really. I saw a sheet with six bullet points on of the things you can do to save money. I'd actually often see articles in the magazines, don't you, and you read through them and think, well yeah, that's obvious. Yeah, that's obvious too. That's also obvious. This is common sense! But having said that, is it really going to save me money? Other than being careful in the planning and dare I say, be a bit dull! Oh my God, I can't say that, can I!

**Ben Adam-Smith 34:49**

Okay, a different tack here. Your book, then, are you trying to guide people to a particular approach at the end of this? I'll put my hands up here. My bias is always towards healthy, comfortable, energy-efficient homes. But how have you gone over the years?

**Mark Brinkley 35:41**

Yeah I think I'm right with you on that. I started my building career in 1980 doing a green retrofit on a house in Cambridge. And it's always been my abiding interest and passion ever since, really, and to me it's common sense. I think a lot of people don't get that. I put quite a lot of emphasis in the last edition about just how lovely it is to have a warm, comfortable, well ventilated house. It beats having a 24-inch TV screen or a £50,000 kitchen any day of the week. And just the pleasure of coming into a lovely warm space in the middle of winter is fantastic. Also having a well ventilated space because British homes, by and large, are not. They are stuffy as hell or they are leaky, and stuff like that, to me, seems common sense. For a lot of people it isn't common sense, they have no idea what you're talking about. They see the surface, they see the beautiful wallpapers or wonderful stair carpets. They spend their whole time going around with mood boards, trying to work out how to get this right and how to get the view down the end of the garden, having huge glazed screens, bringing the outside inside - that's another trap people fall into! And they miss the whole great thing you can get which, and that has come on in leaps and bounds since 1980, since I first got involved in this business, about how to build a comfortable house. That's largely down to Wolfgang (Feist) and the whole Passivhaus movement, which has been a great help. You go back 20 years before that and people were arguing about how you did it. There were passive solar houses and people with tron walls they were building and funny ways of ventilating houses and all sort of experimental stuff, all great, but most of it didn't work. And to reduce it to a few simple physical attributes, you do this, you do that, and you do it well, and it'll work. And that's a great help. And I'm fully behind that. And I try and press people into doing that. Whether they do I don't know. Some people get it, a lot of people have no idea what you're on about. What I always like to think is that you show what is possible and then everyone else will take what they can and go down their route. But if you set the bar, that's always a nice thing to do. Interestingly, I've just been in Perth in Australia and - I was on a family visit - I wasn't investigating the building scene but you can't help noticing. I did have a really interesting conversation with a couple of British architects living

out there. They're far more worried about bushfires than they are about energy saving and you can understand why, much of Australia is a tinderbox these days. And they thought they were very radical in putting double-glazing in their house, that all the fellow architects in their office were doing at the houses and no-one was using anything other than single glazing. Single-glazing?! We stopped using that in the 1970s in this country but they've got a very different climate. So maybe it's not nuts. But it's interesting how people's perceptions of what's good, cutting edge architecture is. And, for them, a lot of it is about building with materials that won't burn... waiting for the embers to come glowing over the road. Well, who knows? Maybe that'll be a British concern in the next 20, 30 years.

**Ben Adam-Smith** 38:55

Well, it's a very good point, isn't it? I'll just quickly chip in one story I remember about Australia. My brother lives out on the other coast near Sydney and I went to visit some friends in what must have been a terribly built house and they had this air conditioning unit because everyone was so boiling. And you had to sit right beside it to get even the slightest bit of benefit, you know, just to cool down your hands or whatever. But to me that just said the fabric of this place, not so good. Let's round things off then today just coming back to the Housebuilder's Bible. I always recommend it as a great book to have as your companion through (your project) but what does it offer for someone who's coming in today, starting their journey? It's a cycle, isn't it really, building a house. So as a newcomer, how do you like to pitch it?

**Mark Brinkley** 39:50

The idea behind the book remains exactly the same today as it did when I started it as 'a project', I call it a project now more than just a book, to be a hand-holding exercise to explain the process and without trying to sell anything. I'm not selling any services, any materials, just good old fashioned, hard earned experience put down on a page. So much of the information out there you can get on the internet these days but it so often comes loaded with actually what they're doing is they're selling a service, they want you to use their service and they've got the best way of doing it since sliced bread was invented. I'm not doing that. I'm simply putting 40 years of distilled knowledge on the house-building scene into a book and you can make what you want with it. You can take a few hints I'm making, but you don't have to. And you can take some of the errors out of the process. But you can, feel free to, you know, I'm not telling you you're right or you're wrong. I'm just simply putting as much helpful information in a book form, which is something I feel comfortable doing whereas I don't feel comfortable doing videos or web pages. I like books, I like writing and I like reading off the page. But there are hundreds of thousands of people out there thinking of this journey who would like to at least know some of the pros and cons without any commercial spin on it. I'm not trying to force you down any route.

**Ben Adam-Smith** 41:20

Mark, it is always good to have a chat with you. I appreciate your time today. Thank you very much.

**Mark Brinkley** 41:25

Thank you, Ben. It has been great talking.

**Ben Adam-Smith** 41:28

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