

HPH347

SPEAKERS

Amelia Lee, Ben Adam-Smith

Ben Adam-Smith 00:00

This is House Planning Help episode 347. Hello, I'm Ben Adam-Smith and this is the podcast for you if you're interested in building a home, or retrofitting an existing dwelling. 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 Amelia Lee from Undercover Architect, and we're going to look at some potential pitfalls. Try and avoid these if you can on your own projects. We tend to start the podcast by sharing a resource. And I don't think I have to look far today, let's make that resource Undercover Architect. I think by the time you listen to a few minutes of this, you're going to be subscribing to the podcast straightaway, there is a load of good stuff coming today. So Amelia, of course, she's got her training as an architect, then all the years of practice and then all the years of helping homeowners, specifically, at Undercover Architect her business. So that's why I thought this could be interesting today to compare notes, because sometimes I see the same challenges cropping up time and time again, and they would certainly go on my list. But I'm interested what's on Amelia's list, are they the same things, different things? There's going to be a lot to learn today that is for sure and some great stories, too. She's got some lovely analogies that can really highlight, it's always about the decisions we make isn't it, it always comes back to that. So I started by asking Amelia to tell me a little bit about her background.

Amelia Lee 01:31

I am an architect by profession. About nine and a half years ago, I started my business Undercover Architect, which helps and teaches homeowners online how to get it right when designing, building or renovating their homes. My background as an architect is I've worked in private practice, I co owned an architectural practice for five years, I worked for a large Australian development company as well, I've done postgraduate studies in property economics, and my husband and I we've also renovated three of our own homes. So we had a baby per renovation, all the kids learn to climb ladders before they walked, we lived in these projects whilst we did them. And in the end of 2013, I travelled to Uganda with a not for profit organisation called The Hunger Project. I'd reached a point in my life where my kids were very little, I'd co-owned this architectural practice for almost five years and I'd had a year where I really felt some things needed to change. And I travelled to Uganda part of going was that we had to fundraise \$10,000 and then also cover our own expenses. And I went with a group of women and it was a business leadership and immersion programme. And I think I got a really, well I know I got an incredibly rude awakening about what opportunity looks like on the ground and how privileged my life actually is. I remember meeting a woman who was the similar ages me she was really doing incredible things, The Hunger Project works with people to help them it believes that the power of ending hunger and poverty lies with those most impacted by it. So through education, and they particularly target women, because they say that when they help women, it creates generational change. And so they

were working with these women and I got to meet this woman who was the same age as me, she had children that were similar ages to mine and I had this real kind of moment of the universe could have played out entirely differently. And I could have been standing in her shoes, and she could have been standing in mine. And here she was with fire in her eyes, telling me all these things she was doing to change hers and her family's future. And here was I with all my opportunity and privilege and education, putting all sorts of excuses in front of myself to not change mine. And I came home from that trip and my husband and I would always wanted to move to the Byron Hinterland. That's what our renovation projects had always been about. But we talked ourselves out of it at the point of selling a property, I came home and I said to him, it's never going to be the right time, we've got to stop delaying the dream. So we put that third renovation on the market. And I told my business partners I needed to leave the business and about six months later, we moved to the Byron Hinterland, and we live on an 80 acre property. And I knew that I needed to find a way to still obviously make an income. For me, Undercover Architect, when I looked around was the best way that I could apply what I'd seen working in these villages in Uganda to our own industry, it was how to actually empower people through education to create better outcomes in their projects. As an architect, I always felt I was getting to people too late, or they were just never speaking to me at all. I'd speak to these people, you know, in the school playground at barbecues, and they'd had a horrible experience of their project. And if they just known different information upfront, they could have made different decisions. And yet they were living with this thing that was now going to be around for decades and not be the best home it could be, not be the most functional home, energy efficient, and it had scarred them, you know, had been an incredibly stressful experience. And it wasn't just impacting them, but all of their neighbours were having to live with these choices as well. Undercover Architect started as a blog and I was doing online services with people over Skype, I'd productized a design package service and then I built my first online course at the end of 2014. And we then just slowly grew the business, so it's been a case now of a few years ago, I made the decision to stop offering design services one to one, so I could solely focus on the online education side of things, I felt it was the best way to scale me and my time. And to really help people find great people to work with. I know that they're incredible people in this industry doing really great work. They're just really busy doing it. So they're not great at marketing their services. And I wanted to help homeowners find them, know the right questions to ask, know how to weed out the dodgy operators. And I really felt you know, in Australia, architects only serve about 3% to 5% of the residential market. So most people who were building a new home or doing a renovation might work with a building designer, or drafts person, or go straight to a builder. And I felt that architects were doing a really good job of the 3% to 5%. But what happens to everybody else, you know, undercover architect operates on the mantra of a rising tide floats all boats. And I really felt that if we could elevate the industry overall, that it would improve building and built environment for everyone. And I'd sat across the table from enough builders and developers who said the clients never going to ask for it so we're not going to bother delivering it. I knew the industry could deliver better and I knew that the key to that was empowering the homeowner, because I really believe they unlock what's possible for their future home. And so that's really, in a nutshell, how Undercover Architect began. How have you found Undercover Architects in terms of fulfilment? Ah it's incredibly fulfilling. I receive messages all the time from people who the only contact that they've had with me if they've listened to the every episode of the podcast, and then they talk about their finished home and the choices that they made as a result of it, and I thought they never knew potentially what an architect could do. They never knew what they needed to know. But they just went searching online and found this podcast made a commitment to

start listening to it, invested that time themselves, and have really been able to change the trajectory of their project. So to think that, you know, as an architect, it's such a one to one relationship, traditionally, you're sitting across the table, you're standing in the house of the person that you're helping, to see that I've been able to take this expertise and experience and help more people. As I said, I felt like I was just getting to people too late but I felt I had this acknowledge and experience from my own projects from development, from working one to one with clients, of seeing, you know, people have been doing this for three decades, you know, seeing people not only create those projects, but then live in them and knowing what works and what doesn't work long term. To be able to actually help people when they're making this choice, maybe only once or twice in their life, and they're building something that's going to last a long time, to make better choices for themselves and also more sustainable choices. You know, it just, it excites me so much to think of the power that this has to really change the planet, you know, the built environments, a massive impact on the environment, huge waste producer, and I just am so blown away by how savvy and clever Undercover Architect community members become, particularly inside my programme home method, just what they can do when they're given the right information. And I think the industry is it's really selling the homeowner short in terms of what they're capable of when they're given the right information. I've had architects say to me, are you having to dumb it down for the homeowner, like these are clever people who can do incredible things in their everyday lives. But they're just doing this for the first time. You know, anytime we do something for the first time. And they say to me, I feel like a mere mortal, I feel like I'm walking around with a target on my forehead. I feel like the industry is really opaque. There's all these people who make it seem like some black art. And yet, then on the other end of it, we've got reality TV, and we live in houses. So we think we're supposed to know how to do it. And it's just not the case. So I love that it's marrying this opportunity of information meeting the people who need it, and it is incredibly fulfilling to know that it's changing their homes and potentially changing their lives as well.

Ben Adam-Smith 08:45

Do you still find that those that engage with you and learn the lessons, they actually become very knowledgeable yet, somehow there, there's probably a bigger group of people who just never find us.

Amelia Lee 09:00

I know, I had a joke about with my community, the fact that Undercover Architect was always being positioned as being people secret ally. And I know that a lot of my homeowner community may not ever tell their professional team that they've been seeking information and knowledge from this resource. They may be keeping me a secret because a lot of people worry about what their professional team is going to think about them, that they're going to look like one of those needy nagging clients or that those clients that are you know, they're very concerned about the impression and so there's people that don't necessarily share that they with people that they know that they've been getting this knowledge in this way. And I've joked before that beings people secret ally might be a self fulfilling prophecy that it is a really well kept secret. I think too, that it is that thing we are bombarded with what our homes are supposed to be like look like that is all about building real estate value, this kind of statement of who we are to the world and is a very noisy part of the media which makes that all about finishes, fixtures, aspirational images, being the person you apparently want to be, you know, and all of this, the status quo is just, it's not in unnecessary in alignment with I think, where the world is going and where a lot of people really feel anchored in. And so that can mean that for people to actually find the information that

they really need, they have to wade through a lot. I mean, Undercover Architect's got 3 million downloads as a podcast, the websites visited by 10s of 1000s of people every month. But there's millions of people renovating and building worldwide. So yeah, my hope is that it just keeps spreading and spreading. You and I, we just keep doing the work. We keep showing up. That's our commitment and hoping that people tell others about us so that they can get the help that they need.

Ben Adam-Smith 10:44

Well, I thought it was a good opportunity, almost to compare notes. And so I wonder whether you could share some of the challenges that you see again, and again, and again, because they do happen, don't they? I think if people are aware of them, then at least that might send them down a rabbit hole.

Amelia Lee 11:05

Yeah, most definitely happy to do that. One of the things that I've experienced with homeowners is that they're really focused when they think about renovating or building, they're really focused on the construction part of the process. Who am I going to get as a builder? How am I going to navigate that construction phase, that's the phase that seems super stressful, super messy, super expensive. And so they're really concerned about how they're going to get that right. And they don't then think about all of the things that need to happen before that construction phase, or how to set themselves up really well for that construction phase. I teach the undercover architect community that there's actually four phases to any project, their ppre design, design, pre build and build. And the success of your build actually relies on the work that you do in those first three phases. And in fact, if you can spend time, effort, energy money with the right people and the right information in those first three phases, your build process should almost go like a show and tell, it just rolls out as expected, and that every week, you're just turning up on site and seeing the things that you've been planning and dreaming about realised in their finished time. So every construction process will have its hiccups and hurdles, if you're obviously doing a retrofit or renovation, they can definitely come up. But the more work that you can do in those first three phases to uncover what you might have to anticipate or manage your risk about in that build phase, it'll just make that build phase go far more smoothly. And the thing is that during the build phase, that's when you have people on site money is being spent on a daily basis, any changes of mind, any delays, anything that happens during that build phase will cost you dearly. And so you really just want as soon as anybody is mobilised to site, you just want them being able to work as efficiently as possible with all the instructions that they need in order to deliver the outcome that you've been planning for.

Ben Adam-Smith 12:50

Yeah, I think there's a graph that maybe we should pop in here, which shows the effect that the client can have over time and right, the beginning, you know, where you got a piece of paper, you can you can change it massively has a huge impact, and it affects cost as well. And yeah, we'll put that into the show notes, because I think that's relevant here. Now, I'm intrigued, are these four stages, stages that you have, not created, but to make it clear, it's very difficult coming in when you've never done this before, to look at the RIBA plan of works, for example, like what on earth are they talking about? It's almost as if it's aimed more at architects.

Amelia Lee 13:27

Yeah, it's tricky, isn't it? I know that the first time that I sort of packaged up my knowledge into an online course, I really had to distil out what are the steps that we take and, and it was a real epiphany to me that actually, I take the same single steps every time I do a project, because you feel like when you're doing custom projects, every single one is different. And every single experience is different. But yeah, I found that as I extracted it, and distilled it, it was these very similar steps that happen across every different project, but just in the application to the project can vary. And the pre design, design, pre build and build came out of that. We do obviously in the world of architecture have different stages that we take homeowners through things like concept design, schematic design, design, development, documentation, contract, admin, or construction, but they're very kind of industry based terminology, which a homeowner doesn't really understand. And so for me, part of what I was doing was translating that. Also, though, when an architect talks about schematic design, design development, they're not necessarily explaining what all the other people do, what are those? What happens in all the other processes in those phases? And so I wanted to make sure that that was really clear for people as well. So I have seen some architects start now to talk about pre design, because a lot of people think that the beginning of their project is literally we start designing, and yet there's a whole heap of work that can happen before design that helps set up design better. And you can do those steps at any time. So it's, you know, for people to actually understand that there's a stage of work to begin before you design is really valuable as well.

Ben Adam-Smith 14:55

Maybe you can just give us a taster of what's within those four categories and perhaps we can link to a resource if people want to go further in depth.

Amelia Lee 15:04

Yeah, most certainly. I've got actually some podcast episodes, which I'll share the links with you on some mistakes that get made in each of those phases. And then inside home method, of course, we teach the steps that are involved in each of those phases. That's the structure of home method. But something like pre design, for example, the very first step that I share is that you need to find out what your local rules are. So you need to find out what planning regulations, what Council requirements are, what your local authority deems you're able to do, based on what you might be planning for your house or your block of land. And the thing is that a lot of people will operate on assumptions, they'll have spoken to their neighbour, their real estate agent might have told them something, it won't be until they've already designed their project, and then they submit it to their local authority that they discovered those rules actually don't apply to their project. There are also some opportunities in some locations, and Australia has this opportunity in some of its councils that you can fast track your planning approval as well. So unless you find out what's involved in fast tracking, you won't know and you might design something that prevents you from being able to do that. So understanding your local rules, it's like playing any game, when you find out the rules first, you can create the greatest strategy in order to be able to be most expeditious and efficient in how you do things. Or you can figure out what you're going to be up against, and what that's going to mean from help and time and money to be spent. Of course, working out your budget is super important at that point and your budget needs to be visited every step of the way, as part of your project, a lot of people set and forget it. But I teach homeowners that each of those four phases, you really need to be checking and managing your budget overall. And

another key part of pre-design is you need to figure out what you're seeking to achieve. So what are your big picture goals? What are you going to create as the framework for why you're doing this project so that you've got somewhere to return to for all of those miniscule decisions, you need to make something like 15,000 decisions, that gives you some way to anchor yourself to and check against to guide the decision making overall so you don't get lost in the process. Of course, design, that phase is about really figuring out how are these spaces, places rooms in your home going to work best for you in terms of the functionality and the livability of your home. A big part of that is, of course, is understanding the site, what is the climate require? What's the orientation of the site, how does the sun move across your property, how you're going to maximise the value of those natural assets, so that you can optimise your design to work with what's available for free, and really improve the energy efficiency of your home. You're also starting to think about other things that you might need inputted into that design process, and efficient ways that you can go about your design. So a lot of people assume that a renovation might involve just an extension, maybe adding a second storey, adding on rooms onto the back, there are lots of different ways that you can renovate a property. Same thing, when you build a home, you can build it with lots of different types of companies, all those opportunities will change the cost of the project, the amount of control and input you have. So really figuring out what the best strategy is going to be for you and not assuming that there's just one way or the other. Then pre build is obviously starting to look at your building approvals, who you're going to work with, how you're gonna navigate all of those contractual things, making sure that you're getting all your documentation right, all of your specifications, your selections, of course, you will have been thinking about that through design, you'll have been hopefully making choices that are in alignment with your personal values, might be around sustainability, and those priorities, of course, your budget. So they sort of feed into their pre build process. And really getting yourself ready for construction, bringing forward as much of your decision making as possible. So that you are just freeing yourself up during construction, not be making decisions under pressure, and that you're documenting it as clearly as possible. Drawings, specifications, those kinds of things are the language with which the construction industry understands how things get done, and so the more you can put into that information is super important. I recommend with homeowners that they're working with an energy efficiency consultant right from the beginning of their project, so that they can use that consultant to test the design through their modelling tools. So if you doing Passivhaus, that's obviously PHPP. But in Australia, we have NatHERS as an energy efficiency assessment tool that's required as part of doing a project. Bring that in at the beginning of your project so that you can be modelling your design and testing ideas and getting data driven feedback about whether they're going to work. A lot of people, though, still do leave it to their pre build phase. So that will be where you get that last check to make sure have you insulated this home successfully. What else do you need to include in order to achieve the energy efficiency targets? And then build of course, is just the stages of construction. So if you starting with demolition or site preparation, and then moving through and most importantly, understanding, is your contract gonna get you into trouble? What does it obligate you to? What are the processes that you need to follow? How are you going to know that things are happening on site as they need to? How are you going to really meet with your builder and then right through construction to knowing that things are done and the builders ready to leave site and you've got your finished home?

Ben Adam-Smith 19:48

Should we move on to budgets next, and you've seen this time and again, so I'm also a little bit intrigued and how you have logged all of this, so can you explain?

Amelia Lee 19:57

So In terms of the budget, the thing for me is that a lot of people will say, Oh, it cost so much more than I expected it to. My experience in working with homeowners over 30 years of doing this is that when they show up at that initial meeting, with their budget ideas, and with their brief or their description of what they want, but their budget is 50, to 75%, of where it needs to be to match the brief or the ideas that they have for their future home. And this is tracked across the course of my career. So even with all the cost increases that we've seen in construction, particularly recently, post COVID, we've still found people's expectations have adjusted but they're still only adjusted to be 50 to 75% of where their budget truly needs to be. The goal here for anybody is to have frank conversations with their team right from the outset. So you can get your expectations managed and adjusted as quickly as possible. What people unfortunately do is they'll either not talk about their budget, they'll imply to their team that their budgets a grey area, and it has a bit of flexibility, when it doesn't really, their team won't know that that budget is for everything, not just for construction. And so their team won't back out, say all of the professional fees, the statutory costs, the landscaping, all of those kinds of things. And then they'll also not use proper practices during their project to make sure that that budget is managed throughout, and that they're getting quality input on what that budget and cost should actually be. And so it's not until they've moved through those three phases. And they're going to tender to sending out their drawings to builders, that they discover that their budget actually isn't enough. So I teach processes inside Undercover Architect where you actually bring the builder on board as part of your early process, you bring them on board as a paid consultant into your design team, they work independently with you and your designer, you're separately contracted to both of them. We call it the pack process or paid as consultant process. So your builder can actually be providing input on cost and buildability from the outset, and that includes at that very first meeting, when you say my budget is x, and I want to do y, the builder and the architect can sit there and say, well, our previous projects, we know that the y that you're asking for, it traditionally will cost this amount per square metre based on these kinds of finishes. Or if you want to do these kinds of finishes, it'll cost this amount. So this is going to dictate the size of your house right from the outset and the kind of level of finish that you can expect. If that's not going to be enough, then you need to figure out do we have to find more money? Or do we have to radically reduce the size of our property before we begin, and so right from the outset, you've got that understanding of what your budget needs to be in order for you to build this project.

Ben Adam-Smith 22:31

There seems to be a tendency from what I've seen that people max out. And that can be on various different levels. If you're on a tight budget, you're gonna max out. But also if you've got lots of money, you somehow find you've built a much bigger house than you needed, and you're able to spend that money. And the only time I tend to see just assuming this is someone going through for the first time that not happen is when they've got project management skills within their their job already. So I don't know whether that's something you see.

Amelia Lee 23:04

Yeah, my experiences with homeowners doing their own homes is that they will spend the most amount of money that they can without financially crippling themselves.

Ben Adam-Smith 23:13

You never do that anywhere else in life to you. This is the biggest thing that your going to do, strange. Yeah, we definitely have that too. I was just thinking in terms of professionals that sometimes people almost grab the first professional that they encounter or their neighbour has used, and then they use them as a guide. How do you feel about that?

Amelia Lee 23:18

Yeah, I teach homeowners that one of those early checks that they need to make on their budget is how does it work from a real estate value point of view. Now, that's not to say that you have to think about your your own family home that you might be living in for decades to come, as that real estate asset that everything has to be done for resale. And you're pretending to be a developer. But it is just sanity checking what your budget should be. Because, frankly, you could be spending this money on anything. And if you were spending it in any other part of your life, you would expect an ROI on it. So is that ROI, that it's radically improving our lifestyle, it's going to reduce the ongoing costs of our home in energy costs and maintenance and durability, it's going to free us up in loads of other ways. Because it's going to create an incredible environment that we then have bandwidth for all of the other stuff that we want in our lives. You also need to think about contingencies as well. And your contingency, and the requirement for it is going to depend on how much input and advice you're getting from the right people from the outset. So if you're working with a designer who hasn't done projects like yours, hasn't seen them through construction, doesn't know what they've truly cost at the end, then chances are you're probably going to need a 20 to 30% contingency in your budget for those costs increases the surprises that come along the way. If you are involving a builder from the beginning, and you're working with an architect or designer who's got evidence of lots of projects like yours, that they track the cost the whole way through the project, then you can probably reduce a contingency and if you're doing a retrofit or renovation, then having that builder involved during that pre construction process can assist you with doing due diligence, like looking in roof spaces, testing the wiring, all of those things that people often don't find out until they've pulled off wall linings and discover they have to rewire or replumb their entire house and their budgets completely blown. But yeah, I really encourage people do that sanity check, find out what your current real estate value is, find out what your plans could potentially be worth as a finished home, you can also go and have a look at other properties in your area, you know, best case scenario is you actually find out some great ideas from visiting other homes in your area, or you find out what might impact the future value of your home. Because you're gonna have to consider that when you come to sell. And if you're needing to finance your project as well, this is what a valuer will do as part of looking at how much they'll finance you. So it's better that you understand what values are doing in your area. And you can then create some really great relationships with real estate agents. People say to me also that there's going to be weird me talking to a real estate agents like they understand that their work comes from them treating the people in their communities well. I've done this with my own projects, go and have a conversation with a real estate agent say this is what we're thinking of doing. What do you recommend? Are people going to be concerned? We're not going to include that fourth bedroom? For example? How much of a deal breaker is that going to be for people? What's that going

to do for our values? And unfortunately, the economic system is still built that looks at houses values based on the number of rooms, not the quality of the life in that you get to lead in that home. And so I've unfortunately had some people make a call that they're going to spend the extra 30 or \$40,000, on building that fourth bedroom, because it gives them access to the \$100,000 extra finance that they need to actually make the project a reality. So you know, we are seeing some shifts and changes. We're seeing green loans coming through that kind of stuff. But that's the unfortunate reality. That's the way that our economy looks at money at the moment. I think it's a really, really challenging, I can totally understand it. People feel like their project is starting to get real when they talk to people. And so when they get serious about their project, that's sort of the first thing that they think that they'll do. And then they also get a raft of people over and they'll mine them for free information to really walk them around their house and say, look, what do you think if we do this, and they're using it as a learning exercise to learn more about their project and what might be involved, we have people diving into their community Facebook group saying anyone know a good architect or designer or builder that they've worked with. The thing is, if the people that you're asking have only ever done their project, once you don't know if they know if they got a good outcome, you don't know if they know that they got good service. And when you bring somebody to your house, and you just start mining them for free advice, you're completely under utilising the opportunity to find out who is this person? What are they like? How do they run their business? How professional are they? What are their communicate like? Are you going to be able to handle having this person in your life for the next 12 months to two years? Are you aligned in the goals that you kind of operate your life with? And how are you really going to work together? And getting them to explain how do they best support you navigating something you've never done before? So I really encourage people to meet with quite a few people. But to do that work in predesigned first so that they are much clearer about what are they actually want to achieve? Because that can change who they're having conversations with as well.

Ben Adam-Smith 28:05

Is there anything else any other detail to add in on this one?

Amelia Lee 28:08

Yeah, I think that people really need to check insurances, and do due diligence on licences and things like that. I think when you're looking for a designer or an architect, you want to know that they've done projects like yours, and you want to know how much they've worked on those projects. Some architects and designers have businesses that are just based on doing design concepts and not seeing things through construction. That might not mean that you don't use them, but it might mean that you actually definitely need to bring in that construction experience in bringing that builder on board during that design phase as well. So that you can get that input on how you're going to make the construction as efficient as possible. Because that's going to have a big impact on the cost of the project and the time that it takes as well. I really think that finding that like mindedness, finding that cohesive communication, and finding somebody you can see is actually listening to you and is interested in what you're seeking to achieve. And really values that you've done some work and some research on getting yourself informed. You know, your listeners, Ben will be people who are, I imagine, researching not only on your podcast, but in lots of other areas of their life. You will meet professionals who will resent that, who will not like the fact that they have an educated client who feels that they're being challenged, question, doubted. Notice the red flags, your gut will tell you and a lot of people think ignore it because

they feel I'm doing this for the first time, I don't want to be one of those clients right from the outset. Ask lots of questions like seriously, the best professionals, they will see the questions that you're asking as a guidepost for how much do they need to fill your expertise gap and where do they need to best support you? And they will, you know, set the rules that there's no such thing as a silly question. And they'll be really open to discussing things with you, because they see it as an opportunity to help build trust in the relationship really early on.

Ben Adam-Smith 29:50

Should we move on to your fourth insight?

Amelia Lee 29:54

Yeah, so one of the problems that I say a lot of people and we've touched on it in some of these other points is, they will dive into their project thinking that the first thing that they need to do is actually figure out how the rooms and spaces that they want are going to be put together in their project, be it working with their existing home to retrofit or renovate it or working with a new build. And often they'll treat the list the way that they want to go about this as a real estate checklist of rooms. In Australia that commonly looks like four bedrooms, two and a half bathrooms, double car garage, two living spaces, possibly a study as well. And they're just trying to them mash all these squares and rectangles together and solve all of these problems of how they think it's going to work. And they might be pinching ideas from other floor plans. And, you know, working that through, and they feel that that's getting started on their project. And then they also get to the point where they realise they can't do that all on their own, or they feel like they've got a confident enough understanding of how they might want things to be able to present it to somebody, and then they bring the architecture/designer/builder to get them around and get things started. You are so much better served if you start thinking frankly, about how do you actually want to live in your future home? How do you want to feel in your future home? And how do you want it to feel for you? What are the big goals that you have? And how does that align with the other parts of your life? So are you somebody who is sustainably minded? What does that look like from a design and construction point of view? Are you somebody who wants to be able to entertain more, I have lots of homeowners who work with me who have kids that are little are growing into teenage years, they want to create a place where they know that their kids feel that they are comfortable to have their friends over all the time. They've got spaces that they can be hanging out with their friends, where they sort of within earshot of the parents, so they don't feel like they're having to helicopter over them. But they know enough what's going on in their lives, that they're not out somewhere getting up to trouble. And so if you start thinking about mentally rehearsing, What could these future scenarios potentially be for yourself? Who's in your family? Now who might be in your family in the future? Are you going to have aged parents moving in with you perhaps? Do you have overseas visitors coming and staying with you for extended periods of time? Do you work from home on a regular basis? What happens in the routines of your life? Where do kids dump their stuff? When they come in? Where do you need to find things as you're leaving? How do you unpack your groceries from the car, start being a design detective in your life, every day, all of these things start to build the details of what your future home can be. And they provide really great Intel for you then to see the world very differently in terms of who you might need to work with what kind of home you might want to create. And I find that inevitably, when people do this, they end up realising that they need less space than they initially thought. They get their rooms working far harder for them, they create much more

functional homes, they start to think about things like energy costs, creating livable spaces that are light filled, where the sun is doing a lot of heating and cooling for them, they even might start to pursue things like passive house because they want to build in that verification process during construction. They just start to put their feelers out for a lot more knowledge and information, because they've thought at a level of interrogation about their everyday lives that most people don't. And it sets you up for the opportunity to build a home that is much more in alignment with you and that then helps you find the right people to support you in that journey as well.

Ben Adam-Smith 33:08

Yeah, let's stay on space for a moment because it is something that always fascinates me. So the first thought I have is that sometimes I find we've mentioned it already build to the neighbourhood. But when you lock yourself in on a piece of land, it almost dictates the size. So do you have any comments on that? First of all?

Amelia Lee 33:28

Yeah, I think that when people look at a block of land, what they'll often do is they'll find out what are their setbacks, and then they'll figure out a footprint that basically maxes those out. Now on some blocks, you know, that are compact, you might need all of that space to actually build a home. I had this great feedback from one of my home method members the other day where she was asking the question, they're doing a knockdown rebuild, and they have decided that they're building a narrow house because their block is Northside. So in the UK, this would be where it south to side. And they've decided that they're actually going to build a long narrow house because that gives them the greatest level of exposure to that best performing orientation along the most amount of house. So in every other house in the street, I imagine they've just built the full width of the frontage made a short White House that then has maximised backyard, but all of that backyard might be facing west and so they're having to deal with setting sun in the afternoon, cooking all of their living spaces, particularly in an Australian summer. When you're thinking about that block, you really want to understand how the sun moves. There's a great app called Sunseeker 3d augmented reality app. It will show you how the sun is moving across your property every day of the year and every hour of the day, so that you can get an understanding regardless of how long you've been living in the property as to what that Sun's doing. You want to allow the sunlight in obviously year round because you want to be using natural light to maximise the light in your home and lower your reliance on artificial lighting. It also is scientifically proven to improve our well being lower anxiety improve our moods, so sunlight is fantastic, but then you obviously want a man budgets hate based on times of the year so and winter, you want to allow that heat in the sun will be lower in the sky at those times of the year. So making sure that you've got your site set up your your floor plan set up to do that. And then in summer, you want to be able to protect the houses interior from that heat of the sun. So using awnings and window hoods, and things like that. But if you've got some coming in from the west or the east, those awning hoods and eaves are not going to work because the sun is going to be lower. So that's where you need to start understanding how to use vertical shade, landscaping, those kinds of things to limit that horizontal sun coming in. So the thing is that when you start to understand how does the sun move across your site, where are your prevailing breezes? Is there any overland flow that you need to be concerned about? What do you need to know about the existing trees? Can you get rid of them? Are you wanting to keep them? What are their root systems do? How much do your neighbours impact your property from an overshadowing point of view

from views into your property? How do you want to look at cutting sight lines, maximising privacy in your specific areas? What sight lines do you want to promote from your property out to the street or into your garden? All of these are part of that site study exercise that helps you understand how to best maximise what your site is doing. And I think this is a thing I know in Australia at the project home industry, where you buy a house off the plan and you plunk it on any site. It really undersells just what happens when you understand how to build a site specific response. Undercover Architect, one of my big, hairy, audacious goals is everybody regardless of where they are building, who they are building with, they build a site specific response because it's how you create climate resilience, climate sensitivity, you improve the energy efficiency of your home, you lower its energy, heating and cooling costs, and most of all, you actually make it a better home to live in for yourself personally. The thing is that most of our housing stock doesn't do this. So most people are living without that experience on a day to day basis. And they just don't understand from a firsthand point of view, the incredible difference it makes the everyday life to live in a house that works for your site.

Ben Adam-Smith 36:58

And a lot of it is centuries old information that just either gets ignored if major developers are coming in and just thinking well, how can I maximise how many properties I have on the site, that can often be their goal to make as much money as possible. Just coming back to space for a second, I'm sure you're aware of Sarah Susanka, but two things that I absolutely love that she says that I find myself telling a lot of people is about planning somewhere that you could use the space, all the space every day. And I think that's really good for newcomers, you can grasp that you can imagine yourself in the house, but is there room that actually is not getting much use. And that almost sends you down the other flexibility, that there's nothing wrong with flexible space. In fact, it makes you feel good that you are using your house to its greatest benefits.

Amelia Lee 37:55

Most definitely, I liken it to basically you go to the supermarket, you load your shopping trolley with all the things that you think that you need to make this recipe. And then you walk out of the supermarket and you actually discard half of it because you don't actually need it. You've paid for all of those things, but you're not actually going to use half of them. Like we wouldn't do that in most other parts of our lives. So I've had this experience. I remember walking into a homeowner's home, they were wanting to renovate their house face to north the street. So in Australia, the sun moves through the north. So they're street side was the side that was facing north. And then it descended down this slope to the southern side. So they had a house that was full of all of these dark spots. And we're walking through the house. And I said to them, Do you struggle with the orientation? You know, all of the sun is on the front of your house? What do you do? And they were like, oh, no, it's not a problem. And then we're walking through the house and they're like, oh, that area we just have as a bit of a dumping ground. We just got storage there. Oh, that area. We don't really go in there because it's damp all the time or that area. It's pretty dark. It's not very nice. We need to do something about that. So where do you spend most of your time in this house are up on the courtyard in the veranda at the front? Why do you think that is I was just really nice and sunny up there most times of the day. And they just never clocked that this is how they were living in their home. Watch how a cat moves around the house, a cat gets it!

Ben Adam-Smith 39:12

Really good analogies, I like this

Amelia Lee 39:15

Seeing how a cat moves around your house is a really great way to see how do you actually need to set up your home. I find a lot of outhouses, they will have been set up based on what plumbing infrastructure might have been so, you know, I used to live in a terraced house in Sydney, which was based on all the terraced houses out of the UK. The rear lane access is where the horse and carriage used to come in to take all of the sewerage away. So you know all of the services are set up where they need to go to make that as expeditiously as possible. Queenslanders is for example, beautiful vernacular in Australia. A lot of the living spaces were out the front on the front veranda because it was all about the connection with the street and the community in the street because people would walk past and have conversations with the neighbours that way and all the plumbing was at the back. We live now in a way where all of our living areas are into these private rear yards and so you know, when you look at a renovation, understanding the orientation first seeing how you can potentially repurpose old rooms for new uses. And then making sure that you can get that light into the spaces the way that you want. And really focusing on the spaces that you spend the most amount of time in. So there's some research out of the states, which did this fantastic diagram of documenting the movement of people through a home across the course of a 24 hour period with red dots across a floor plan. So it literally just tracked their their movement in a house. And I think over 40% of their time in this home was spent in the living kitchen dining area, a little bit of time in the toilet, and then obviously, the nighttime in the bedrooms. If you're wondering about how to spend your money and your project, prioritise it based on where you're going to be spending the most amount of time in your home, which is those living kitchen dining areas, and then look at how that works also for the orientation and the the other conditions on your site to really maximise the livability of those spaces.

Ben Adam-Smith 40:55

That you're selling the work of an architect here, sometimes people think they can do it themselves, don't they that it is very easy to sketch a floor plan down of these are the rooms I want, but you don't get the experience. And perhaps in the UK, we're a little bit better, because I think you said something like 5% of homeowners engage in architect, I'm sure they're engaging some sort of designer. But yeah, there's a lot to gain from good architects.

Amelia Lee 41:23

Yeah, there is I am pretty frank, and it's to the contention of some of my architectural colleagues that I won't tell homeowners that they have to use an architect. Because like any other industry, there are those that are great at what they do, and those that are not great at what they do. And they still get to hang a shingle and charge people for their work. So it's really important that you as a homeowner, figure out who is the right designer for you. In Australia, we have architects, building designers, drafts people, but you don't legally require anybody to design your home. So I know of people who will design their own floorplan and take it straight to a builder. But because of the education that they've done through what they've learned inside Undercover Architects, programmes and other research that they've done, they have actually done a really great job of that. I think what's tricky is when you work with a really great architect, they'll not only be designing with an understanding of the site, of your

lifestyle, they'll also be obviously embedding the things that they know from having worked with loads of other clients on loads of other projects of what's worked and what's not worked. And if they've had loads of experience seeing projects through construction, they'll also be embedding in this buildability. I have lots of people who they'll work with drafts people or building designers or even have a crack at it themselves. And they'll be designing really big spaces that are actually going to be incredibly expensive to structurally make happen. Large areas of glass, they're going to be incredibly expensive to make happen. So and also going to have an impact on their star rating and energy efficiency. So whoever you're working with, you just want to test what is their experience and abilities. And you want to educate yourself before you go into you've got an ability to audit, whether they're doing a decent job for you or not.

Ben Adam-Smith 42:52

A lot of our podcast is based around looking for sustainable solutions. And just sorting that out in our mind of what is a sustainable home, because I think we're always learning. But I'm interested in your take on bolt on, Oh, here we go. Again, bolt on technologies. Let's let's do it at the end bolt on sustainability, ah right.

Amelia Lee 43:16

Yeah, I think this is really interesting. A lot of people say, Oh, look, I want a sustainable outcome. But it falls by the wayside pretty quickly, because they'll hit a professional in the industry who says sustainability, it's just going to cost you more. And I actually was listening to one of your episodes where the guest I believe it was Jae said, people are willing to compromise on quality, but they're not willing to compromise on size. And I think this just feeds into where we get our inspiration from when we look at building or renovating. It's generally those glossy magazines and even the architectural awards can be guilty of this, the biggest house wins in terms of those grand spaces and those kinds of things. So I feel that sustainability actually starts and is most heavily impacted in the decisions that you make before you begin about the size of the project that you're going to build. And in how you're going to make it suit its climate and its site. If you can get those two things right, you will be 80% of the way there before you start worrying about have I got solar power, what materials are my choosing? Is it going to be passivhaus you know, all of those kinds of things. And I found that as I started Undercover Architect, I was gobsmacked that so few people understood why it mattered to know where North was, you know that because it's not part of our education. To understand how this impacts design, impacts the livability, impacts the functionality of a home and you'll have real estate agents saying it's a north facing house and it's north to street, which is the equivalent of having a South to street house in the UK. So disrupting that has been one of the key parts of undercover architect really. My first season was what's the most important decision when designing your home, what's important thing to know. And to know that orientation of the site. So if you can get those two things right, then I think then you've got the opportunity to start exploring sustainability further. The bolt on stuff really fascinates me because I think it's what a lot of the greenwashing does in the industry, to kind of the bells and whistles of, hey, you can design whatever you want go and design a 600 square metre house and then, you know, use solar power. Just, oh, it's such a false economy. So, you know, and it's really hard. You know, i actually had a post yesterday, that was from Steve Buczek in the States and their comments on it was, well, it's their house, their freedom, their choice, they can do what they want to do. And yes, that exists. That's very true. But we're all living on a planet. And we know, our choices, impact everyone in everything that we

do. And building a house is no different. And you're embedding those choices for a very long time. So when I look at people making decisions about their projects, they can get very bamboozled by a lot of that information in the industry. And think that sustainability is about those bolt on things. But please don't get distracted from those really foundational choices, which will not only improve the sustainability of your home, but actually improve the way you get to live in it. It'll just feel much better as well. I know that you've got a lot of experience with this as well, how do you see this sort of playing out for homeowners in terms of their levels of confusion and that kind of stuff about it?

Ben Adam-Smith 46:15

I think quite often, I see people who find out or do the research or come across the concepts when they're underway, pretty much. If they want to do this, they're going to have to put everything they've done so far in the bin and start all over again. Some people do, some people don't. And sometimes I try and explain to people, friends, this is a good thing to do, this is the right time you're renovating a house that's you know, falling down, or this is not so good. And still I don't get through 100%. So it's tricky. But there are lots of just amazing projects that I'm lucky enough to visit, that's one of the things that I enjoy most is going round. And sometimes simplicity is a concept that just I love. And if I do it again, I mean, my house is already quite simple. But I think simplicity can take you so far and make so much better use of the budget.

Amelia Lee 47:13

Yeah, I agree. And I think that the bolt on stuff does, it's almost like it's this house of mirrors of this is the complexity that we're going to blow people away with this high tech stuff, and make them believe that this is actually a better choice, and then we can obviously charge the money for it as well. And so yeah, I agree with you that it's that hard thing, isn't it when you meet somebody who has the design, and they're going, Oh, crap, I didn't realise that I could have done all these other things. And I think it's that expectations management piece, isn't it because you don't want to discourage people who do have found this out in the midst of their project to make some better choices before everything's locked and loaded and completed. So you know, wherever you're at, in your project, journey, whatever you can do, you know, once we know more, we can do more. So it's this thing of not beating yourself up about the fact that you didn't know before you began, particularly if you're not willing to go back and start again, and just doing what you can to improve it. And that might mean that you're just choosing low VOC paints, it might mean that you switch out certain materials, it might mean that you consider getting some better as built verification done. So something I talk to homeowners a lot about who might be working with a volume builder, is how are you going to know during construction, that you've actually got what you've designed in, you know, the Passivhaus process builds it in, particularly, obviously, if you're going for certification, but there's lots of things that we can borrow into traditional construction that will enable us to test during construction that we're actually getting what we're paying for. In Australia, the average star rating of a house is one and a half to two stars, the current requirement is seven stars. And so you'll find that we've got a lot of existing building stock that can be dramatically improved in terms of its energy efficiency. But if you're not using methods such as blower door tests, or thermal imaging, cameras, WUFI analysis and things like that, you will be batting at shadows. And there's an incredible amount of opportunity and tools in the industry to get proper data that can inform these decisions. I feel like a lot of homeowners feel like they're, it's really grey, they're just having to guess it choices and everybody's making the best guesstimate they can, but they leave behind that

these tools that often have to come in at construction anyway as part of the approval process. You can bring them in much earlier. So it's like I mentioned before your energy efficiency modelling can be done whilst your home is still in design phase. In Australia, we're still debating whether single glazing or double glazing is what people want to do in their projects. So you can look at that and go okay, well this is the impact that double glazing will make if I do it on the whole house on this part of the house or none of the house. Even tinted glass people still do clear glass in their houses. You know, my recommendation is as a base minimum you do tend to glass so you know you can see you can see the difference that insulation makes people will spend a fortune on insulation, they'll double it up thinking that they're going to get a great outcome, but then they don't check that it's been installed correctly, you have a five millimetre gap in your insulation, it reduces his effectiveness by up to 50%. You stack insulation on top of each other, but you don't do it in a way that it won't sag under its own weight, then you might as well have not paid for it in five years time. So we've got to think the whole way through the process and then if you are of a mind to entertain when you find out and you're at a point in your project, where you could start again, or you could at least rework what you've done changes cheap boss, it's lines on a page. So anything that's just drawn is significantly less costly to change than dealing with an outcome that you regret. And what people don't realise is that once they know they can't unknow that information. And so they can move into their house and be filled with a heck of a lot of regret, that they didn't act on this sooner. And it just can taint the way that they see their home. Now, that's not an excuse to not find this information out. I think a lot of humans walk around going, I'm not going to know something. So just so I could never know it. Like, building stock just has such an impact on our planet. All of our targets for 2030 2050 involve radically changing the way that we build and construct. So knowing this as a homeowner just puts you in a much better position to get a better outcome, whichever part of your project you're in.

Ben Adam-Smith 51:21

Now, this has been a very rich, information packed episode. So I'm not going to take you any further. I'm sure we could learn a lot more from you. But the links will be enough in the show notes to complete that part of it. Is there anything else you want to mention either for yourself or other things that people might get useful information for their projects?

Amelia Lee 51:44

I really want to just feedback to that mindset piece. My experience is that renovating and building, your mindset is super important in how you show up in your project, then the kind of ambassador that you are for your future home. And sustainability still isn't mainstream, unfortunately. And so I find that a lot of homeowners, they will step into their project and they'll meet opposition. And it'll actually be them having to talk people into the outcomes that they want to create in their home. Now that can be a sign that you've brought the wrong person on board. Or it can just mean that that person needs to be educated further. But I really encourage people to not to not outsource the agency. As a homeowner in this process. No one's gonna care as much about this project as you do. I mean, you'll hopefully find professionals who are incredibly like minded and invested and operate with integrity and want to do a really great job for you. At the end of the day, though, it's your home, and so no one's going to care as much about it as you do. And I want you to know that you unlock what is possible for your future home because it's your decisions, your money, your vision, that's the reason this whole project is happening. So it's really important that you get yourself educated and informed before you begin. So that changes

the questions that you ask, you can then know how to navigate your project much more successfully. And you can spot the red flags when they come up, you can spot when you're being told what you want to hear rather than what you need to hear. And you can also be much clearer about the kind of home that you're wanting to create. And what a pathway to that is going to look like. Your future home relies on you being able to bring this all to fruition. And so I really encourage you get yourself in the best position possible. Get your mindset in place that can include obviously, working with what you're going to need to do to have courageous conversations, you know how you're going to handle potential contention, how you're going to be able to openly communicate your needs, your wants and your wishes. What are you going to do when things might get a bit prickly? All of these kinds of things. Most in my community, I have these great conversations with people when they finish their home. And they're like, Yeah, renovating and building my home was one thing, but I had no idea what a personal growth journey it was going to be as well. And that's been the thing and what I love with empowering homeowners to do this well, particularly women who are stepping into a male dominated industry and navigating this, and then with any other industry, it's the same with renovating and building, women are making 80% of the purchasing decisions. And yet they're dealing with mostly men as they do this. I see them get to the end of their project, and they turn around and look at what they've been able to achieve and accomplish and create for their family. And that's like Okay, what else am I capable of? What else can I do? And I just get really excited about what it unlocks for people in terms of readjusting their expectations of themselves as well.

Ben Adam-Smith 54:32

Lovely to catch up and in person. So nice. Thank you very much Amelia!

Amelia Lee 54:36

Thank you so much for having me Ben it's been great to meet you in person and yeah, it's been really lovely to have this chat.

Ben Adam-Smith 54:41

We've been taking the notes so that you don't have to and that was quite a lot of notes today, wasn't it for sure, [houseplanninghelp.com/ 347](https://houseplanninghelp.com/347) check out our summary. We always give you the key points once again so you can go through and think what was that that was said. Also the links, we've got a number of different resources that Amelia shared that you can look up to or point you to home method to the podcast if you haven't subscribed yet. And if you want to ask a question, you can either do that at the bottom of the show notes, just scroll down or on social media, we'll point you to Undercover Architect, to Amelia on socials, [houseplanninghelp.com/ 347](https://houseplanninghelp.com/347). There we go. My call to action today is to check out The Hub. And this is the membership community that I run alongside House Planning Help, where we accelerate your learning if you're looking to create a high performance home, a sustainable home, something that's healthy, comfortable and energy efficient. And we've got our in depth video case study so you can experience everything before you have to do everything yourself. See what you've got coming up. You can network with like minded individuals. We've got our courses, our live training with guest experts. And we've got ask the expert, we just had a session with Es Tresidder continuing today's theme. This is one that comes up a lot questions about following Passivhaus principles rather than building to Passivhaus standard. And following all the quality assurance. What

about if we don't have the money? Can we ease off anywhere? What measures make sense? How can we have a bit of a compromise and listen to where we begin?

Es Tresidder 56:19

Yeah, so I think the first thing I would say is to look at other things, particularly the size of your building, is it as small as you could make it and still be happy with it? And that's the biggest thing you can do in terms of cost saving is to reduce the size of your build. I think there's a tendency in the industry where we tend to prioritise size over quality.

Ben Adam-Smith 56:43

Yes, we're back here again. Maybe we'll solve that one, one day. Check out the full call in The Hub archive houseplanninghelp.com/join for more details. Next time. Alex Stewart from low tox life is my guest and we're going to be talking about mould. An incredible story slightly scary story, but everything you could possibly want to know about mould and how to address it coming next time. Thank you so much for listening. The House Planning Help podcast is produced by Regen Media: content that matters.