Transcript of House Planning Help episode 401

Ben Adam-Smith 0:00

This is House Planning Help - episode 401. Hello, I'm Ben Adam-Smith and normally I begin by saying: "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." However, it's time to give this a rest. The mission is changing, and that's what we're going to talk about today, and the reasons why.

Ben Adam-Smith 0:30

Firstly, I feel that we've answered that question. We've been going for around about 14 years, talking along these lines, and we know what we should be building and why! High performance homes that are well designed and executed that use healthy materials, buildings that actually meet the needs of occupants and hopefully involve them in the process as well. Some buildings don't even cover basics, which seems incredible, but when you get carried away with a wacky vision or something, you can make things more complex than they need to be. So they do need to look great, but we want to keep them fairly simple. We don't want to be building mansions and all these sorts of things, walkable, making a better community, biodiverse spaces that encourage nature and wildlife as well, and so on. If any of this is new to you, maybe go back into the archive. 400 podcasts on varying different topics.

Ben Adam-Smith 1:35

So perhaps we can't do everything that we would like to. Recently, it's interesting because we've chatted to quite a few people who really are pushing things and trying to do as much as they possibly can. Maybe we can't get this close, but we can do a lot of key things that will really be important and make a difference. So I've absolutely loved visiting all sorts of projects, and thank you again to everyone that I've interviewed through the years, all the self builds I've been out to, the retrofits, the homeowners, the green building experts, sharing the learning as we go, and I could quite happily keep doing this, except for the fact that it doesn't really pay the bills. Perhaps when The Hub was up and running, things would be different, but for now it would have to be a hobby, and maybe I'll get a chance to come back to that another time, because, as I say, I do love that.

Ben Adam-Smith 2:24

However, change is afoot, and I've had this niggling feeling for a while that I should be doing more, because having been on this long 14-year journey, I've accumulated all manner of connections, I've built up a lot of knowledge, and I don't really want to waste all of that. If anything, I want to channel things. And even on day one of House Planning Help, I set up the website, and the journey was my apprenticeship, but really what I wanted to be doing was building houses, and building my own was definitely a stepping stone. So you can see where I'm at now.

Ben Adam-Smith 3:01

I tried to make this shift, actually, before to something bigger, but the pandemic was just around the corner, and maybe I didn't allocate enough time to it, and had a young family, and put priorities there. The biggest lesson that I learned last time round from thinking I wanted to change to that direction was that I can't do this by myself, no way, nor would I want to do that. In fact, collaboration is going to be a big part of anything that I do going forwards. It reminds me of the old Helen Keller quote: life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all.

Ben Adam-Smith 3:38

So I'm looking to do something else, and for the last couple of years I've been having conversations, chatting to people. There are plenty of people with technical skills, but perhaps they've got their own agendas, or they're tied up in their own businesses and don't really want to do this, or maybe they're retiring and stepping back, or something just doesn't feel right. Who would be the right person? So this is where it got quite interesting, because I was at Futurebuild, and Sally Godber, who's been on the podcast before, Director at WARM, one of the big people behind Coaction, as well. I just thought it'd be nice to catch up with her, and we had a chat, and it got to the point of the conversation that we were both talking about, we wanted to do something more, leverage our skills in a bigger way, and that's when I got excited. I thought, I'm just going to put it out here.

Ben Adam-Smith 3:38

Sally, do you want to build something?

Ben Adam-Smith 3:40

And it was the speed of the reaction that I liked most of all: "I think I might." So clearly Sally has been thinking about this as well, and that's when we decided, look, we've got to have a chat and just see if there's anything that we can do. Can we collaborate together? So, once Futurebuild was over, we were back to our offices, I got on a call with Sally Godber and Mike Roe. So they're both directors at WARM, a very well known low energy building consultancy, a lot of technical expertise. I'm sure you've heard of them, and as I've already mentioned, a big part of Coaction too. So they're both on this call, and this is just part of the chat to give you the essence of what we're discussing, without it getting boring, without all the tangents. So I've condensed this down to 20 minutes, and I must admit, going into it, I was slightly nervous to put my dreams out there.

Sally Godber 5:23

Yeah, would you like to talk about what you're interested in doing, Ben? That's because Mike's got a good understanding of what I'm interested in.

Ben Adam-Smith 5:30

Of course. That sounds very sensible. Yeah. Up until now, a lot of my work has been very media orientated. I've set up a membership, which I ran for about 10 years with self-builders, so that's where the technical side came in, through doing my own project, a bit like Sally did with hers. I live in a Passivhaus, so a lot of the stories that I've told have been about projects that

have been finished, and we've done a few as we've gone through as well, but I think there's a massive gap and interest in the middle of all of this, you know, almost this discussion is interesting, because what is the gap in the market? Why are people not building high quality, leaning into all the simplicity, the value engineering, because they would have much better homes at the end of it, so I suppose from my perspective, what I'm interested in is trying to get myself into some capacity of delivering a project. You know, I'm not getting any younger, so this could only be a team thing, you guys have obviously got a lot more practical skill and working with all sorts of different people than I have, but I think from my perspective I could bring quite high visibility to everything. I would like it to be housing. I don't really care what scale that is, but that sort of fits with everything that I've done up until now. If it's swimming pools, I guess it will be a short conversation! But I completely understand why you might want to go down that route. There's also the practicality side...

Sally Godber 7:07

The idea of us committing to building a swimming pool!

Ben Adam-Smith 7:12

Well I don't know much of your story but I know you've done it at least once.

Sally Godber 7:16

I love your confidence in us and our wallet.

Ben Adam-Smith 7:20

But not just that, you know, I think there are funding options that could be, you know, that I'd like to get involved with, either crowdsourcing. I think the time is right, particularly, we both live in Passivhauses. Have you done a retrofit, Mike?

Mike Roe 7:35

Yes, yeah.

Ben Adam-Smith 7:37

So look, we've all embraced it, haven't we, for a reason. We all know it works, and my ultimate idea would be to generate a business that doesn't just end, it could expand. But what I'm not sure is what that is, whether it interests us all, whether you just want to do a one-off project, whether we'll just come up against finance issues straight away, or maybe it will be land, all of these sorts of things. There's also, I know you talked, Sally, about a slightly bigger scale project, which I'm totally open to, but there's no shame in starting with something smaller just to test the idea, and things like that. That's all I would say on that point. And a lot of what I can do is the research side. You're welcome to be involved, but it might be a waste of your time, because you'll be able to listen back, or you'll be able to throw questions that are important into what I do. So, if it's financing, if it's going to meet other development companies. I was filming yesterday with a development company, I thought, 'Oh, this is interesting. We're filming with the interior designer. Why have you got an interior designer on your books?' You know, all of this

sort of thing. So it's not saying that the content going forwards I see, regardless of what happens today, it's probably changing to more of how would you structure this. What are the challenges of making something happen? What I don't know is, am I trying to do a development, am I trying to be a builder, am I trying to be an architect, all of these sorts of things. So, I think that's the main thoughts from my perspective. And then, how we bring that all together.

Sally Godber 9:17

That sounds amazing. I think you need to stop being so apologetic about your experience, though, Ben, because the research and conversations that you've had over the years and the contacts you've made are really fantastic, and there's a bit of it, which is this is actually the we've got this for Coaction, we've got the start of, we've just done this course for clients. The problems are not just about technical issues or cost, and I think this is where, like, your experience and those conversations and those link-ups with other people is really, I think, there's some great resources there and some great experiences that can feed into this.

Sally Godber 10:02

So over the last year or so, we've been slowly looking at what else could we do, mainly because of a lot of our core activities are becoming, as we talked about, like there's a huge amount of competition for things which we had historically were not our favourite things even to do, but they were the things that were our base load, and we don't do well out of those really competitive tenders and things like that, and we just, we don't want to do projects where you have to be really careful about the spend on everything, we want to do things because we have enough capacity to do a good job of it, and everything else, so there's kind of a bit of it where we, and also just realising that it's a fairly crowded market, and so kind of saying, well, what else? So we've been looking at other things that we could do, and just talking to people generally about various different bits of the market, in both retrofit and new build, and I think housing is something which is so essential and has such a big impact on people, and it's also at a scale, which we can understand, and particularly the kind of scale factor of it, of thinking that we can start with something that is small but potentially has the opportunity to scale up. There's lots there, and the range of financing options that we have as well, in comparison to other building types, are just, you know, there's like a system set up for it, so there's lots, which is really positive, and particularly thinking about our impact and wanting to do things which are actually meaningful.

Sally Godber 11:38

I really liked what you were saying about this whole, it's really easy to get obsessed with the, you know, 'oh, we can't do this, because' and we often hear clients say that kind of thing. These are the reasons why we can't do this, or the planners, oh this, or the architect, or whatever, there's always reasons why the things that should be the kind of simple, making it easy, low risk, all of that, why, the blockers they put up, and I guess that doing it for real gives us a level of empathy with them, so that we really understand having to deal with all of the constraints within the project, rather than the very narrow technical stuff, which we're interested in, but also to say within that what is possible, and being able to make some space for it.

Sally Godber 12:33

So, I think all of that stuff that you were saying about what does good look like, and being able to really demonstrate that in a real project is really interesting. We talked about some of the experiences we've had, so we've had some good conversations to date, and there also is some, and some of them are a bit depressing, and some of them there's some quite positive stuff coming out, and that's kind of rumbling on. Retrofit would be something that would be really interesting to us, and I know that's not something that's particularly on your agenda.

Ben Adam-Smith 13:05

No, no, it is on my agenda, but I suppose my perspective was the starting point that if you do something like this, new build is just simpler. And it was really interesting when they had that documentary on the TV, it jumped straight to retrofit, and I think before you go into the challenges of retrofit, you need to do new build. That was my point, but yeah, I'm also open to retrofit.

Mike Roe 13:27

I mean, I feel the same in that if you gave me free rein to do anything and I could do one thing, it probably would be retrofit. At the same time, I think that's not news to anyone, but at the same time, there is obviously a huge need to work out how we do new new builds still that actually sort of comes to fruition, and becomes to reality. I think I'd be personally, I'd be happy to do either, and I think the important thing is working out what's what's possible and going with that, as opposed to being too precious and saying what I really want to do is retrofit of one particular type of housing. I mean, there's so many barriers to doing something, that we want to do something that's practical, which actually will come to achieve something. It seems to me that there's lots of really good technical solutions there, that people have got something that looks pretty good, actually, but they, for whatever reason, they've - they either haven't turned that into something that can be done very much, or, or it seems to be something that's quite restricted, and part of this to me seems interesting is to work out what's the bit that's actually preventing that from being done more of, and I feel personally that there's some other bits in the puzzle, which is not the technical bit.

Ben Adam-Smith 14:49

I've heard numerous times there are planning problems. You know that can put a spanner in the works.

Sally Godber 14:54

It's an interesting time at the moment, because a lot of the Tier One contractors for housing, that's kind of just part of their portfolio of what they do, but they've been doing flats because it's just the planning and everything else is just all lower risk, and it's, it's easier to manage. They've just found housing a bit of a faff, but particularly the most important thing is the margins were very, very small, but because of the difficulty of getting projects through Gateway Two, and particularly the length of time it's taking, so this is the new requirements to do with fire for mid and high-rise buildings, they're looking again at low rise housing in a more favourable way, or they're basically they have the work on their books, but it's not coming through because of the Gateway Two stuff.

Ben Adam-Smith 15:46

Low-rise housing, I mean, is it actually riskier from what you're saying?

Sally Godber 15:51

I think it's just...

Ben Adam-Smith 15:52

Is it something to avoid? It would be something that I would immediately hone in on.

Sally Godber 15:56

I think, because of the technical part of it, because it would suit our skillset best, because there is so much in mid and high rise that is about, particularly about fire, but about other things where you need an awful lot of technical experts, which I don't think you need for low rise. Also, I would really like us to be building something out of timber, and I think that isn't really an option for those other things, unless you're a real specialist. So, I think that we just need to be aware that the reason why the Tier Ones aren't interested in building low-rise housing is because the margins are very, very tight. I think in terms of a project that we can manage, that we understand what the subcontractors are doing and the relationships. I think that it's definitely of a scale that we can easily, and particularly the kind of scalability. Other things we could do in time, but I think it's just the risk associated with it.

Mike Roe 16:56

I mean, I think we need to be realistic about the scale as well, don't we? I mean, we're not going to start by looking at high rise, you know, we need to be sort of realistic. I mean, I think at this stage it's just a matter of being open to the research, isn't it, and seeing what avenues are open and collaborating on that, because I mean, until we've got a better picture of where we feel the pinch points are, what funding is available, what opportunities they are. I think when we've gathered that information, we're in a position to start thinking through how, you know what's possible for us together to do, isn't it? One of the things we don't want to do, I think, is try to learn how to be experts in planning, or whatever else we see the blocker to have something that works. What we actually want to do is have a, I think anyway, is have a really strong group of people who are experts in the areas that other people have struggled with. So we're not, you know, as much as I agree with you that doing research is definitely an important step in this. At the same time, if we try to learn a skill to become, to do everything...

Ben Adam-Smith 18:08

I agree. All I'm thinking is of the story side of it, that, yes, what is the point, if we can hire a planning consultant, or whatever, to do something, or if someone already has a strength in that area, but understanding that barrier, I think, is quite interesting.

Mike Roe 18:25

Oh, completely. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I wasn't suggesting we just want to employ someone to do it, but at the same time we want to have a group that's able to collaboratively try to work through the issues is useful, isn't it?

Sally Godber 18:40

I think that we would want, and it would be interesting also to think about how the connections we have, whether it's clients or particularly Local Authorities, or any of those organisations where they have an interest in saying, you know, how do we, what would this look like if we were the developer for you? Also this whole thing of what it is that we're developing. Who's it for, and what do we do with these buildings afterwards? I think is really interesting one, and particularly for us to have a sustainable business at the end of it, or something that is not, that we don't just spank a load of money. Because we're going to get loads of learning out of this, but we do want it to be something which is sustainable, and that we're able to go on and do phase two, or whatever it is. We talked a little bit about where this might happen, and we talked about that ideally we really need someone that is part of our core team, who is close to the site, and that might not be you, and it might not be us, but it needs to be the core team, so that they can, all of that, you know, just trying to do things over the phone, or by video call. We just need someone that's able to say, actually, we need to stop and rethink this, or whatever it is. We need that regular input, and I think that where it is will determine what we're building. Between you and us, what will hold this together is that we've got a lot of common values, and we really care about our friendship and everything else.

Ben Adam-Smith 20:21

Yes, I agree. And I don't think there's.. there's not.. well, I hope there isn't a bad outcome. Even if this went absolutely nowhere, or I suppose one important thing for me is that if I'm getting involved in this and I don't know what you're thinking about an entity of how it might work, or whatever, but I'd want something like the protection of a limited company. If it was going to be something new, obviously we can talk about how that might work, but you know, I've built up all the family stuff, got stable, got all retirement things, you know, more or less in shape, and I have got money, some money to invest, a lot of it's tied up, which is quite annoying, you know. Because I bought some property with the idea of, oh, that will be useful to hold on to that property until I can build my Passivhaus rental property, and it's very difficult to pull the money out now. I don't think I appreciated how difficult it is, but I can certainly have that as, as an idea.

Sally Godber 21:22

Well, Ben, I think that in this phase now we'll just keep it. It'll all be fairly loose.

Ben Adam-Smith 21:27

That's fine. Yeah.

Sally Godber 21:27

The thing that we're agreeing to is that there's these common values, and we're doing this as a collective thing, and we might each go off and have separate conversations, but ultimately we're going to share the findings of all of that together. I think that once we get into a point

where we've got an idea of where this is going and what the next bit. I would say one of the things that we've been very successful at, in terms of, because we do a lot of collaboration, and I really like to then have it written down what we're committing to, and we tend to do things like just record timesheets, even if we know that there's no money involved. It just means that further down the line, we're just aware of how much has been put in. It's allowing that recognition of what's gone into the relationship, I guess, is really important to me, particularly when we're working not in the same office. It's really difficult to see all the things that happen behind the scenes, and so I definitely, and I completely agree also about setting up and something that gives us that security, and there is, yeah, interesting stuff in terms of where we get the funding from, as well. I think that's something which we're also very interested in. What I don't know is how easy they are to access, but there's a lot of money, which is from pensions and all of that kind of stuff, where there's a real interest in putting money into something that is long term and also is secure and has got a sustainability aspect to it as well.

Ben Adam-Smith 21:27

This is what always surprises me. My brother's had this before with some of the stuff that he's done in a completely different area, where there's just a pot of money sitting somewhere that nobody knows about, so it'd be lovely to find some of those.

Sally Godber 21:27

Yeah!

Ben Adam-Smith 21:27

All right, I don't want to keep you much longer, but are there any sort of next steps or things that would see us progress?

Sally Godber 22:13

I've got lots of ideas for this. So, what I was going to suggest, if this is okay for you. I don't know, do you use Miro at all, Ben?

Ben Adam-Smith 22:59

I've used it once, but not for a long time.

Sally Godber 22:59

It might be something for Coaction.

Ben Adam-Smith 23:02

Oh, is that what it was!

Sally Godber 23:31

So it's just a whiteboard thing, and we can use something else, but I would like some brain dump space, and I guess that the conversations that we've been having, it'd be great to have somewhere where we can just splat that stuff down, and then maybe if we want to meet up again in two weeks time, then we can come back to it. So one of the areas is about who we talk to and what conversations we're having, and I can go through and say who I think would be good to talk to, and we can also put some quick notes about what other conversations we've had and where they've gone and the outputs of it, and then another, the whole thing about what we, what we build, and then it may be something that we want something else on things like the skills we don't have, or you know, who from the outputs of the conversations, what are the major blockers and things like that, so we might have, we can just have a load of themes, and we can just kind of splat stuff down on it. I think that might be quite a good starter for starting to work out, and then we can have something a bit more structured, but for now, I think having something where it's just a kind of free for all of everything might be good.

Ben Adam-Smith 24:59

So you get the idea. Houseplanninghelp.com/401. Just simple show notes today recapping the course change. If you've got a comment or you'd like to ask a question, or if you've got a pot of money, get in touch on social media! We'll have links in today's show notes. That's actually one aspect I'm both interested and excited about. With the amount of benefits that healthy, comfortable, and energy-efficient homes can deliver it's just a no-brainer, is it not? I'm quite optimistic that this is a powerful sell. We've got some aces up our sleeve here. Also, in the show notes, links to WARM, go across and find out what they do, and Coaction training. If you're a professional, you haven't taken the Coaction training yet, I would definitely encourage you to go and take a look - houseplanninghelp.com/401.

Ben Adam-Smith 25:53

So, what do the changes mean for the podcast? Well, I suppose it might be clear that we're not going to focus on individual projects, self-build and retrofit. I've absolutely loved it, but I think it's now more about how do we get a housing project off the ground. What will that mean? Where are the opportunities? So we're going to follow that, and in some ways maybe everything's up in the air a little, but this is still going to be the mission going forwards, and I've said to Sally and Mike, if you want to drop in on our interviews, then you are part of this. You're more than welcome. And maybe even if they're not there, they might give me some ammo, some questions for where they'd like me to steer the conversation. So it just opens up a whole other area, and hopefully we'll uncover some of these barriers. No doubt it could be a bumpy ride. I don't know. We will, we will find out, but I hope you will stick with me.

Ben Adam-Smith 26:46

What won't change? I can't see me ever moving away from talking about high-performance, healthy homes, all the aspects that we mentioned at the beginning. No matter where we go in the coming podcasts, I want to stick to that. And I strongly believe that is a market to open up.

Ben Adam-Smith 27:02

Thank you so much for listening. Let me know what you think, by the way, of this episode. The House Planning Help Podcast is produced by Regen Media - content that matters.