

Episode 171

An eco interior designer in the home with Elina Grigoriou

The show notes: www.houseplanninghelp.com/171

Intro: Interior design is not just for image conscious people who want to keep up with the latest trend. Sustainability in interior design means considering materials but also the people who will use the space so they keep it longer and use fewer resources. In this episode we're talking to Elina Grigoriou whose practice focuses on sustainable interiors. I started by asking her to define interior design.

Elina: Interior design is looking specifically at the spaces that fall within the floor slab, the ceiling slab and the external walls and that's everything inside it.

From the moment you actually step into a building until you come back out of it, everything you touch, everywhere you interact with that space is forming the interior and the way that has been intentionally designed to support your life.

Ben: Often with self-builders, perhaps it hasn't been that intentional. The layout may have been thoroughly gone over. But what would an interior designer bring to a home?

Elina: Firstly, you are working with the existing building so you do have to acknowledge whether the original architecture had assumed a particular user journey from the moment somebody was coming in. What kind of volumes and spatial proportions did they envisage the interiors to have?

Many times, this has not been considered and that's where you can get quite structural. So you either start perhaps reforming spaces, opening up floors or closing up floors to then going all the way to the cutlery and the curtains and tassels, as I call it.

Many times, interiors can be considered curtains and tassels but it isn't. It's actually understanding how is the space affecting me, how is this interior affecting me.

Ben: On a new-build then, what part of the process would an interior designer be best to come in?

Elina: I would say at the earlier stages. I would suggest that you start consulting on the spatial volumes you want when you're forming the architecture. The size, the views. If you are considering what kind of lifestyle you want to have in the building, you are already considering it as a user in the interior.

So, it's that stage. Whenever you start thinking 'my building's going to be placed there and this is how I'm going to be living in there', then that is the point you consider an interior designer.

Ben: How do you get on with architects then?

Elina: I have many very good friends that are architects.

It's two things. One, it's an evolution of the actual specialisms in our society, in this age. I think the whole definition of the interior design profession has risen out of more knowledge being available. But also, the need to actually understand and re-use existing buildings better.

So, whereas new-build, the interior tends to fall off and you've got the whole procurement issue also. There, you've got spec development going on rather than the end-user building and developing. I think in the whole self-build, there's a massive opportunity there to do it right from the beginning for the particular user.

You find especially in commercial and residential developments, a lot of that insight is lost because you are trying to create a vanilla flavour for people with personality. I think the whole self-build ethos does definitely create this opportunity to engage, to make it fit for purpose, really.

Ben: I think one of the concerns I have is money. We all know that's a big factor of self-build. We definitely want an interior designer on our project but at the moment, I suppose it's taking a back seat. From what you're saying, that's not a good thing.

Everyone that you speak to, no matter the discipline, they all want to be in at the beginning but somehow that just doesn't seem practical sometimes.

How can we make this work? Who should I be looking for? Perhaps you can give us a bit of guidance?

Elina: I'm going to throw it back to you. Why do you want an interior designer?

Ben: Well, because I personally feel it makes a space more vibrant and that we would be terrible at doing it ourselves. I don't trust myself that much. I think it'd just be a really important space to work on, to get it as good as you could possibly get because you spend ninety percent of your time indoors. And I work from home too.

Elina: Okay, that's really good. We can look at your workplace area too and see how that's affecting your productivity from home.

I think that understanding what the benefits and the impacts are of the interior are very important. That immediately quantifies whether it's a qualitative or quantitative result, why is the interior important or not.

That can happen, obviously, without us being there from day one but I think the value of having the right people on-board is it's definitely down on personality and having the right mix. You can get someone who really understands the process but isn't perhaps the right fit for the team, for the project. The value they can add, through whether that's a question, whether that's a proposal, whether that's a whole concept, anything, is going to be so paramount to make it harmonised with the client, the team, to make it the best value you can.

I see some people procuring interior design services and the aims are being extremely impersonal. There is this whole thing of 'I must hire an interior designer because I'm supposed to' or 'I should hire an interior designer because The Jones's did.' Interior design has been shoehorned into this image-conscious shoebox which is not at all true.

Using an interior designer is about actually creating a living environment. So, if someone wants to create a home that feels like a home that you can host people, work in and allow it to affect you in a positive way and knowledgeably affect you in a positive way, then that's a great reason to bring them in.

If it is to actually save money and I completely understand the limitations of budgets, timescales sometimes and too many cooks – you can have loads of people on a project and if you have too many people, you end up actually not making the most of each member. So, it is about bringing them in at the right time.

I think breaking down the services of an interior designer can be a benefit. So, instead of having them on the full service right at stage one, let's say the RIBA work stages, you could have them dip in a

day or two and just review the current architectural proposals, give you some feedback and maybe just ask you questions.

Ben: What are those stages, if it's not too in-depth?

Elina: The RIBA stages?

Ben: You're not talking architectural stages, I'm assuming?

Elina: Yes, I am.

Ben: Fine.

Elina: Yes, we do. We follow the stages that the RIBA suggest. They're a common language in the industry so, a lot of people do recognise those.

A very, very broad umbrella, you are starting from the feasibilities initially, to concept design, detail design and developing all the packages for tender.

Interior design follows very similar stages. You start from actually understanding the brief, what is the brief; understanding the users, which we specialise in a lot as in designing for wellbeing which is obviously part of a sustainable design; understanding how are users going to behave in the space – if you do not support user behaviour inside an interior, they are going to override any targets you set. The lights is the obvious one. If you don't understand how people actually use lights effectively, they will override any systems and programmes you set for energy efficiency.

So, understanding users and making sure you design for the tasks that they're trying to do is fundamental to sustainable design. And thinking about sustainability and that being a key KPI in our projects is very much the lifecycle thinking.

When we're looking at building lifecycle, a lot of architects will look at twenty, thirty year lifespans or more. And that will inform product and material decisions. But when you're looking at interiors, you're looking between five to ten years for the average interior lifecycles. So, the materials you're going to use, the way you're going to procure them is going to be very different to what you would do with the normal cladding of buildings, concrete and screeding and things like that. Because you have much faster and shorter purchasing cycles. So, the impacts to the environment are much greater and in much smaller touchpoints.

It is more challenging to create a sustainable interior because of also that market being a little bit further back as far as awareness. So, you've got many more fit-out and interior refurbishment sub-contractors who have much less time on a job so, much less capacity to read up on what it means for them to be sustainable. So, it falls very much on ourselves as designers to make sure we've specified things that are sustainable in the first place, talked with our clients to very much understand how they're going to use the space. So, where are the environmental impacts going to happen from the client's own behaviour in the space?

If you're working from home then, actually you're going to have heating on potentially for longer periods, lighting on for longer periods than a traditional working household will. So, understanding that in the brief, right at the beginning, is fundamental to creating a real sustainable interior.

Ben: How do I brief you then? I know we've done podcasts before on briefing an architect. How similar is it?

Elina: You make yourself available for my questions. I would ask you very simple things. How many bedrooms do you want?

Ben: Four.

Elina: Do you entertain at home?

Ben: Yes.

Elina: Do you work out at home?

Ben: No.

Elina: How long do you want to live there?

Ben: Hopefully a long time but you never know.

Elina: Do you want to rent it out?

Ben: No.

Elina: All these questions will slowly, slowly inform how we want the space to be. Then, is it in a particular location? Is it an existing building?

Ben: No, new building in a village.

Elina: Lovely. So, then we're looking at geographical location. Are you going to be there throughout the year? Hot, cold?

Ben: It's going to be a passivhaus.

Elina: But do you like lots of fresh air in your interior, as a family?

Ben: There'll be lots of fresh air.

Elina: Exactly. So, there are tendencies for each user to want to live in a particular way. Do you like a lot of natural daylight coming in? How are you going to clean it?

Ben: With something like that, obviously, that decision on daylight is traditionally an architect's choice. They're going to choose how big the windows are or the openings.

Elina: If it's a new-build, yes. But if it's existing and we're refurbishing, if there isn't a lot of daylight, we will actually try and introduce roof lights or increase the width and look at specs, obviously, that then comply with energy efficiency on that too.

Because you've got more daylight, less artificial light, better circadian rhythms, that comes into wellbeing. But you've got to obviously balance out the whole energy loss from more glazing et cetera.

Going back to part of the briefing, you've got those basic questions and then you've got what I will call design, look and feel. So, what kind of look are you looking for? Something minimalist? Is it about pure mono-block surfaces? Are we looking for a bit of texture? Some lovely crafts inside there? Perhaps lots of details that you either have found yourselves that you love, that are perhaps local affects or from your travels.

Ben: Definitely travels.

Elina: Lovely. So, then you start thinking how does that come in? What creates the interior? Is it the building or is it the stuff? What is it that's actually going to fit on your skin comfortably, that you feel 'I live and breathe this interior because it's me and it's not a foreign skin on to me'?

That is where we work together on the design, look and feel. I will start doing questions that will start going into your psychology and I will create what we call a user profile. That's going to basically give us that brief where every question we ask in the design process goes back to that.

When you go away for a weekend and suddenly you come back to me and say 'oh my god, I found this amazing fabric in this exotic

place or local fishing village' and you say 'we must have this in this interior', we will go back to the design, look and feel and I will say 'does that line up with what you said you wanted on day one?' And you will go through the process of 'actually no, I said I wanted that.' This is a great fabric yes, but is it relevant to the interior you're trying to create in your house?

So, it's not about saying no to it but it's actually going through the process of what did we agree we'd try and create. And you've got the ability to evolve that but at least you've got a clean basis of where you started from and why.

The 'why' is very important because saying 'I'm just going to go for plains', I've got to explain to you why actually that would be the right decision for you. Because where you are in your life, your whole psychological basis of what you find pretty – because beauty is very important and the perception of beauty is personal to everybody's own conditions at the time. So, I've got to work with you to understand what you consider beautiful.

Ben: And not just me, you've got to work with my wife as well and we're trying to create a home for a family. So, no idea what my young children might enjoy as well, as they grow up.

Elina: Yes. And they'll be influenced by what they surround themselves with. So, there's a particular colour of blue that I always see and reminds me of the home I grew up because all our shutters in Greece were this particular colour of blue. So, if I ever use that, I have to be able to separate as a designer, my own influences of the symbolism of that colour, and understand actually how does my client think about this and how suitable is it to them.

Ben: I've never really been one to select lots of fashionable clothes. I just get some jeans on, get a shirt on or something like that. So, in this process of going through interiors, am I going to be any good at this?

Elina: There's two different questions I think you've asked me there. One about fashion and two, are you going to be any good at it.

Fashion comes and goes. I don't. I look at it with a nod but really, if I'm trying to design for two human beings, let's say in your case, you are individuals that have been evolving over thirty years, I'm sure.

Ben: Good one. Forty.

Elina: And what you find beautiful is not going to be dictated by fashion, unless you want to be always evolving your interior based on the annual trend. And that can be designed in. But that's very important for us to have understood at the beginning.

Then, whether you're good at something is not the question. It's whether we will be able to work together, for me to guide you to make those decisions. We try to demystify, clarify and in the end, support you to make the decisions that you're going to be happy with. I've got to be able to give you the right information that you need for any concern or worry you've got where you say 'I don't understand that.'

Ben: So, there's a similarity here with an architect as well because they are trying to ask you lots of questions to get that building up in the first place. And it's a process that is iterative. So, in the same way, you're trying to read my mind, understand what I like and don't like and then is it iterative too?

Elina: In our approach, it is. You will get some design companies that don't do it like that. They will have either a house style or will perhaps be more definitive about what good design is and tell you.

I think it's horses for courses. We don't approach it that way because one of the objectives for interiors is to support occupants' wellbeing. You cannot do that unless you know the people, unless you have this conversation.

You also get ownership with that. What that supports is very much the environmental impacts that you're trying to reduce. If you do not get occupier support on the process, the clients tend to not understand the value or the impacts of the interior they're inheriting and owning.

So, for sustainable interiors, it's quite important to get involvement, understanding and for us to be able to explain to them why we're suggesting certain materials, why we're not, why we're designing the layout in a particular way based on how they think they're going to use the space. Because if they don't understand the thinking behind it, they will misuse the space and then create environmental impacts.

Ben: While you're mentioning that, sustainability and wellbeing, all of these elements are important to you. Is that why people search you out? Is that a key driver?

Elina: It is, actually. We've mostly been approached because we have such a strong sustainability theme going on in a lot of our work and

just in our branding and website. For two reasons: we want to make sure that people understand there are sustainable interiors, there is such a thing, but two, we want to attract like-minded people.

We sometimes get recommended to clients where it's not a KPI to have a sustainable space but they're very happy that it comes with the services that we give. Ultimately, we'd like to get to that point that people come to us because it's good design, not just it's not sustainable design and that's the default. But obviously, the industry is a long way off from that at the moment. We do find though, people do seek us out and we get recommended because we are perhaps spreading a more sustainable message on procurement, design, specification or anything.

And also, wellbeing. Wellbeing is a massive issue at the moment. People care about how their space is going to affect them. We find actually that a lot of people don't understand that the space had the effect on them that it does and when we start talking about how they behave in an interior, slowly they start realising how the space is informing some of the behaviours they have or stops them behaving in a certain way that they'd like to behave in, and realise that the space is part of the challenge.

So, whether you're sleeping well or eating well. A square table and a round table will have a very different impact on the way two people are going to communicate. Are you sitting opposite each other or around with no sides? You've never seen a diplomacy table that's square, have you? They're all round. There's a particular reason for that. So, if you're having a dinner table with your in-laws, perhaps it's quite a nice idea to have a round table rather than a square, rectangular one.

But again, design trend maybe has been going more rectangular. So, that has perhaps influenced a lot of rectangular furniture. But that will have an effect on how you behave inside that interior.

Then, patterns and shapes. If you're going through a stage of life with a lot of upheaval, it's quite unstable, if you have more patterns around, usually that will relax you. We as human beings find patterns reassuring and we trust things that are repeated. Unfortunately, even if they're not true. So, you do find that actually repetition will bring calmness.

Then again, balance or asymmetry. Which way is your interior going to, the designer can feel itself. That will make your behaviour reflect that. You'll either have more movement, asymmetry, or more calmness and steadiness if you have a balanced style.

So, how you're going to layout your furniture or how you're going to create the innovations with your cupboards, to the whole relationship of the rooms themselves and your whole user journey from coming into the space and going to any particular space will have that kind of effect on you.

That's part of the brief and that's where the design value comes in of us being on board. It's actually to ensure that we can support the life and the decisions and the behaviour that you will have inside an interior space.

Ben: Can we talk about old homes versus new homes? What I mean by that is I'm in my old home and I've got a load of furniture, for example. It would seem to me to be the most ecological thing, to use all of that furniture all over again, minimising the impact. Or could you view it as actually, I'll just pass it on to someone else, they'll be using it? Because really this is a blank canvas project.

Elina: That's exciting. Can I assume you haven't considered reusing or fitting in any existing furniture in your new home?

Ben: I think we would like to but I'm also not ruling it out, if it's a good reason to try something else. Plus, we're creating a bigger house than we have so, we're definitely going to need some new things.

That's why in some respects, this project of creating this great eco-home, it doesn't add up. In many ways, I'm far more ecological in my small, tiny home. That's just one of the down sides of having a bigger house.

Elina: It is. Because it's obviously a passivhaus which I think is fantastic, it'd be interesting to see how that actually looks like over ten years rather than one. And also, how you are going to evolve your own behaviour. I'd be very keen to see your feedback.

There are two things. One, I would have immediately, from day one, asked you to consider which furniture you're going to keep or not. If it is a bigger house, a lot of the furniture you have at the moment is going to look very 'piddly' inside it. So, unless that's a particular design intent then I would question whether you can reuse some of them, to start off with.

Now, maybe some of them can be modified or you create additions which work with what you've got. The big question mark would be the dining table. Is it too big or too small for your dining room? That's usually one thing that catches lots of people out. And also, the size of the soft seating.

Everybody thinks an armchair is an armchair, but it's not. You have very bulky soft seating and quite compact soft seating. That's another thing. You get a lot of people buying a sofa and two armchairs in a showroom, then they take it home and suddenly they haven't got enough space to walk between them. Things look much smaller in different spaces so, I think that's quite important.

Overall, let's assume that you've got similar spaces, trying to reuse it would be ideal. If budget's an issue, reupholstering can be a bit cost-prohibitive sometimes but I always recommend it, especially when some of the armchairs could be heirlooms or just have that right fit for your body. It's very hard to get the right fit sometimes, with soft seating.

But sometimes also, it's right to give it away. It's part of what is one of the unique selling points, I think, definitely of self-build, as in your case, the fact that you are making a space for you. If a piece of furniture has been part of your life for five or ten years and is perhaps emotionally associated with those years, you are suddenly, perhaps, not feeling reflective by that. It's not reflecting what you are and who you are right now.

That takes us back to the brief. What is the brief? What are you designing it for? Does this represent who you are now and for the next ten years? That will also satisfy your comfort, basically, in that interior because you want to feel comfortable in it. If you don't feel comfortable, you will be changing things. So, that will affect your environmental impact. Whether that's leaving lights on longer, you will try to express it in a different way and to fix it, in a way.

So, I think it's actually pre-emptive to and get the furniture that is going to suit you and that could be retained or given away.

The perception that actually giving something is waste – I don't know what condition your objects are in right now – but I'm always surprised at how many people want exactly the item you've got right now and they've got exactly the right place to use it. So, not re-using it should not mean for anyone throwing. It means passing it on.

Ben: How?

Elina: There are a few websites popping up at the moment that you can post things and recycle. Freecycle, Pre-loved and a few university-specific schemes. You're getting industries that are creating their own exchange platforms.

Loop is another one that's coming out soon, that's trying to actually work with smaller entities. Because a lot of the exchange programmes have either area-specific, which makes sense because of the transport, but also relying on bigger companies being able to process things and having somewhere to store it until you want to get rid of it.

But there's more coming out now that are recognising the faster pace of getting rid of something. Because I would assume in, I don't know how long until you'll be moving in, but many times it could be a week to a month that you have to get rid of your stuff before you sell or rent and you need your new stuff in.

So, it depends how you're moving in and how you're phasing out ...

Ben: I hadn't even thought about that. It seems years away.

Elina: That's something you have to consider because that will dictate what can you order if you're ordering new, or if you're re-upholstering. What are you going to sit and eat at if you're refinishing the tops of your dining table? Can you do it once you've moved in?

There are few practical things that we usually build in to the design itself. Sometimes it can be quite specialist treatment or upholstery that you want to do.

It's got better over the years but some of the more environmentally friendly approaches to, for example, upholstery fabrics and the actual fillers inside soft seating is depending on very few manufacturers or craft suppliers around the country which makes it harder, logistically, for you to actually do it.

There are, for example, a couple of companies, one in Cornwall I think, and one in Bedfordshire, that are doing coconut fillers in soft seating. It's brilliant to see alternatives to the chemical foams that a lot of soft seating furniture has been using over the last decades.

Especially with passivhaus, where you've got much higher airtightness and much lower air exchange, any material you're going to put in, any piece of furniture, even your plastic cutlery covers or whatever, is going to be emitting emissions in your space. So, the quality of air inside there is going to be a hundred percent dependent on whatever you're introducing in the interior.

So, making sure you're introducing zero pollutants is ideal.

Ben: Unlikely though.

Elina: Well, when you're reusing furniture, that will fall into two categories. One, items that are quite old. A table or a footstool or something like that, that has no foams in them. Then you'll have the other things, the soft seating, that will have foams in them.

Typically, with foams, from a hygiene point of view, they do get grubby and they're really difficult to make sure that they're of top quality still. But there's more and more repair and reupholstering going on that does consider these. So, I highly recommend that you retain the frames but reupholster.

Ben: We're running out of time. I've got lots more to ask you but maybe we'll finish on a couple of things.

Do you have an example of a house that you've been into, that you could tell us some things about and how it evolved?

Elina: Been to or worked on?

Ben: In the past and preferably a new-build if possible but if not, just some refurbishment.

Elina: New-build, I've only worked on residential developments but I wouldn't say they're of note in any other way.

But for a private residence that we worked on for one of our mentors and really good friend in Chelsea, it was very much an iterative process. The brief was beautiful. As a couple, they would be happy in there. That was her brief. The husband's brief was that he wanted to have lovely conversations with his daughter in the living room.

That's the kind of brief we can respond to and we think is the right kind of objective for a home, if that makes sense. Homes are where people live. It's the relationships that people have and interiors contribute to them in positive or negative ways. We always want to make them positive.

So, in this home, we like to think and the feedback we've got – you can ask our client – is positive. They're very happy. This was a grade two listed building so, we had to work within limitations from English Heritage. And then also, existing furniture and artwork. We had to work around that. But at the same time, create a new stage in this couple's life.

It was a beautiful project for us to work in. Every point or decision we made, environmental impacts were very much part of it. Some of them, the client was very happy to go with, some of them were

limited by budget so, were swapped out. And wellbeing was always the target. Emotional as much as physical. They are the body's health.

So, that was a really good project that I would feel quite happy about.

Ben: Finally, is there anything else in this conversation, just getting an overview of interior design and also trying to make that as sustainable as possible? Anything else that we should add in?

Elina: I think it's understanding the lifecycles. How long you're going to be there and what are you designing for. That is very, very important for many reasons. One, to get it right and get something you're happy with but two, so you don't waste that and change sooner rather than later.

So, making sure you can have the longest lifecycle of a space that makes you happy and makes a positive life is the most sustainable option.

Ben: Elina, thank you very much.

Elina: You're welcome. Thank you.