

Episode 269

Snagging and one year on – with Chris Parsons

The show notes: www.houseplanninghelp.com/269

Ben: Now, one big change has been that you've retired. So, congratulations.

Chris: Thank you very much. Yes, and really enjoying that.

Ben: How has it been to close down an architecture firm? I know you're not quite there yet anyway.

Chris: Yes, slightly more problematic than I'd probably envisaged. We have a number of projects that are still running on, some just through the planning process and some on site.

I think what I didn't realise was I've got no-one left to do any of the work. So, if a drawing needs amending, it's down to me. But I've enjoyed that aspect as well, getting back to doing what I did when I first started.

Ben: And is it a case of once you close the office, everyone goes at the same time, or have you been able to gradually reduce staff?

Chris: We selected an exit day really, so everybody went on the same day. A little bit emotional, obviously, tidying up and clearing up the office. We had a few drinks the day before so, all good.

Everyone's gone on to new positions and everyone seems to be pretty busy. Some went self-employed, some have gone to work for another practice.

Ben: It may be a little too early for this, but what will you miss?

Chris: [Chuckles] What will I miss? Some clients, Ben. No, seriously, what will I miss?

I think the day-to-day cut and thrust of both business and the construction industry. I always enjoyed it. Never had a day when I thought this isn't what I want to do. So, I might miss that a little bit. But I've got some new challenges, obviously, so looking forward to getting stuck into some of those.

Ben: What are you going to do with yourself now?

Chris: We want to do a bit more travel. I enjoy cycling; I took up cycling a few years ago and I spend a lot of time now out on the bike. So, I'm enjoying that. I'm doing a little project in my village to improve the village hall, trying to get some grant funding for that. And I've taken up a board position for a housing association which is also obviously very interesting.

Ben: Yes, that's the thing. You never end up doing nothing when you retire. It's just an opportunity to change a little bit and have a more relaxed, hopefully, ish, life.

Chris: Somebody asked me if I was going to go for a pipe and slippers retirement and it's seriously not me.

Ben: Yes, I don't think it would ever be me either.

This is a good opportunity. It's somehow been a year since I moved into the house. Is it looking different?

Chris: Well, obviously it's looking different because it's now a home rather than a house. Obviously, when we did the handover, it was all nicely finished, but it's still a house at that stage. And it's really nice to come back and see how people have settled into it, how they're using it, how they're enjoying it.

So, that's the main difference for me. I'm now in someone's home rather than the product of what we do for a living.

Ben: I thought this would be a good opportunity to talk about the year, not that massive amounts has come up, and also the snagging which is why you're here today. Let's start with that. What is snagging?

Chris: So, the build contract includes a rectification period, in your case twelve months, whereby any defects of materials or workmanship that crop up in that time, the contractor will come back and put right.

So, today's process is really to try to determine what those defects are, put them on a list, and send them through to the contractor and ask him if he would come back and put those right.

You kept a financial retention on him as part of the contract to make sure he does that, and once he's rectified all those defects, then I will issue a certificate to that effect and you have to pay some more money.

Ben: Yeah, our last bill though. Looking forward to finishing that off.

And that has been one great thing. I don't know whether it's like this all the time but with snagging and little things that come up, it's made so much easier if it's dealt with quickly. And Mark's done that.

Chris: That's good to hear. What we normally say about defects when they occur is if we can leave them until the end of the rectification period, that obviously makes most sense. But there will always be defects that occur that actually prevent you enjoying your property. And if that's the case, then he should come back in a reasonable amount of time, and he obviously has done, to make sure that he puts them right.

So, that's just typical of a good contractor relationship.

Ben: Are these defects all things that as a client I should be able to spot?

Chris: Not necessarily. One of the reasons why I'm here today obviously, is to kind of cast my professional eye over, and if I see something that I think is a defect that you may not have noticed – that's one of the reasons for me coming. But in general, you've lived in and used the house for twelve months. So, those little niggles that I wouldn't see, you will have done.

So, I always ask, as I have done today, for you to prepare your own list so that I can look at those and determine whether they're really defects and also so that I've got the basis then of what I might add to, to give a list through to the contractor.

Ben: Are there any themes with, say, timber frame versus masonry?

Chris: I would suggest that in terms of defects, the difference in those two themes is going to be probably based around shrinkage and how that occurs. And shrinkage is quite an interesting one because it's not technically a defect.

You may have noticed I carefully spoke about a defect of materials and workmanship. Some natural materials and any plastering type process that involves putting in a lot of moisture, will suffer from some shrinkage. Not contractually a defect but most contractors will come and put those right at the same time.

Ben: Well, that was something that's happened quite recently. We believe that the shower tray dropped, so in effect we got a leak on the kitchen ceiling. Not a big one, but the plumber was saying that it only takes a very, very tiny amount. And as we looked at it, you

could see that it had just dropped off, so the sealant needed replacing. So, at the moment, we're hoping that's all it is.

Is that a case that now that it's settled, it's unlikely to cause us problems again? Or should we keep an eye on that every year?

Chris: I think you should always keep an eye on silicon sealants around things like shower trays, baths, sinks, et cetera. Because they do tend, over time, whether it's shrinkage or not I'm not a hundred percent sure, but I often find that after five or six years, they get tired anyway and might want replacing.

They're intended to be a flexible seal to accommodate some movement, but there will always be some movement. To start with, we've got the possibility of some settlement because we put a huge, heavy great house on top of the land. That's going to involve a little bit of movement. And then there's shrinkage in the components that we use.

Actually, here we used a space joist where I wouldn't expect necessarily a floor to move that much. But we're talking about millimetres that would create that gap in your silicon seal around your shower tray. So, not an unusual thing for me to see at this stage.

Ben: These cracks that we've talked about, is it just a case of filling them? What is the difference between a crack that will just need a bit of painting over and something that will cause us a lot of distress?

Chris: I guess in each case I've got to have a look at it and try to determine what I think the cause might be.

From what I've seen from a quick cursory glance around, in fact we've got not very many cracks for a property of this age. Just some minor shrinkage cracks. We've got an interesting one around your window reveals where the angle bead has moved and obviously we will deal with that.

Generally, it's just a fill and redecorate. The question is always how much redecoration have you got to do to make sure you can't see the crack?

Ben: And you can't just redecorate in that one little area. It never quite works like that.

Chris: It never quite works. It's nearly always, do we need to do the whole wall and what's the knock-on effect of that?

It might make an interesting podcast with your contractor when he comes back.

Ben: Is that some element of snagging as well, that there are certain things – I know I heard Kay chatting to you just now about how we've got a bit of a sound connection in the MVHR from the ensuite down into the kitchen. And as I see it, that's something to do with the silencer and would involve ripping out the bathroom. I could be completely wrong here, but do you just live with some stuff? It doesn't really cause us any grief at all. We just know about it.

Chris: I'd need to look at exactly what was specified in terms of whether there's any missing sound attenuation. I don't think that there is because I think we would have spotted that during the construction.

It was probably on the extract from your kitchen and the extract from your en-suite. They're probably on the same line. So, there will be a little bit of noise transfer between the two. But I need to look at the drawings and actually try to understand why it's happening.

Ben: And I think as well when I was chatting to one of the guys at Green Building Store who supplied it and probably checked all the designs as well, they're saying it was the beginning of the branch as well. It's probably the shortest run. All of those sorts of things. But I'll be interested to see what comes out of that.

Just reflecting now on our year here, it's a Passivhaus and very little has happened there. But overheating is something that becomes a lot more apparent when you come into hot weather, and particularly hot nights.

We had, I think, one day – this was literally only for two hours – where we went to twenty-eight degrees. Now, in Passivhaus terms, that's barely scraping into the overheating, but do you ever retrofit in any shading solutions? I'm not even thinking for all the windows, but something temporary. You quite often see these sails that some architects like and so forth.

Chris: People I think need to understand that the biggest issue that we have – is that right to say, the biggest issue? Certainly, a major issue that designers need to consider when designing Passivhaus or indeed any low energy housing, is overheating.

It's kind of a thing that people didn't really think about that much until recently. I'm not talking about recently in Passivhaus terms, but recently in housing design. Because the general problem has always been how do we keep a house warm enough. But now, of course, we've solved that. We can solve that very easily. The next

problem is, are we keeping them too warm? So, our designs in Passivhaus in particular requires that we look very closely at overheating and what we can do about it. So, external shading is always considered as part of the design to try to avoid it.

I've never had to retrofit anything. Maybe that's because I've never had anything that's particularly overheated. But I can see that it could be necessary if somebody has a design that is not working in terms of reducing overheating.

Ben: But it's more, I think, control. You can live through these temperatures. I bet other people are far worse off in their houses. I'm getting nit-picking here.

Chris: Well, I think I agree with you. I don't live in a Passivhaus; I wish I did. And we did have a bit of a mini heatwave in the summer, which is probably when you went to twenty-eight degrees, and my house was unbearable. And I was using all the cooling techniques that you should use for a Passivhaus but it still got to thirty, thirty-one degrees for reasonably long periods of time.

Ben: I'm thinking about George on Twitter who will tweet away, 'oh look, it's twenty-one,' when it's thirty-five outside. I think, 'how have you controlled it to that degree?'

Chris: Well, obviously each house is individual. Some are easier to keep cool than others. Obviously, the design will have an impact on that. But there are some design constraints that you can't overcome: orientation of your house, for example, we were stuck because of the site constraints. Then you just try to mitigate what will likely cause overheating.

Control, you're absolutely right. People do need to learn to cool their house down. We've probably talked about how you should do that, particularly allowing cool air through the house overnight, trying to open windows both sides of the house to allow that cool air to get through – not so easy in your house, for example, because you don't have so many windows on the back of the house for overlooking reasons.

So, each house has its constraints but there are techniques to try to keep your house cool in those periods. Not everybody understands them. It's not so bad for you; you're an interested occupier. But in the social housing arena, for example, trying to educate tenants that this is something they need to do is more of a challenge for the industry and I think there's still work to be done.

Ben: Mark Brinkley, another example that I saw in that heatwave – admittedly this was, I think, the hottest day the UK has ever had, going to thirty-eight – his night-time temperature was thirty-one.

Having visited his house, I think perhaps one of the other things is that when you have less space upstairs and more downstairs, is that a contributing factor?

Chris: Yes, as I said, each house is individual and it depends on the individual design. I think Mark's house is in Cambridge, isn't it? Obviously, cities are generally warmer than rural areas, for example. So, his external temperature might have been higher than yours.

There are so many individual things that can affect overheating that it's really difficult to comment, but I think the general point is, as designers we need to be looking carefully to try to make sure that our houses can stay cool because we're going to get more and more of those heatwaves. We need to understand that. We need to make sure that people know how to use their houses, but most of all we need to make sure that designers know what they're doing.

This is not true of the Passivhaus fraternity but I'm not convinced that many of our house designers fully appreciate that problem.

Ben: Yes. I've just brought this up because, as I say, nothing much has happened over the course of the year.

The biggest point on snagging was actually to do with the windows. This was a fault at the supplier end that as far as I'm concerned was made easier with the way that they dealt with it.

There was a defect in all of the windows. Maybe you can have a more technical description of that. But it was quite a hard one for me to know what to do because I don't think those windows will recycle. So, effectively I've got those windows replaced and I didn't realise that the process of replacing the glass is quite an extreme process. Nothing was pristine after that.

So, I don't know. I thought I should bring that up to make people aware that there are bigger things, but it was dealt with very well and I've certainly no grumbles with it. But from an environmental point of view, I'm thinking goodness; could have done without that.

Chris: Well, I think it's good to hear that it was dealt with very well. I remember seeing the images of this mark that was inside the sealed unit, which had to be a manufacturing fault. And obviously, it's necessary for the manufacturers to a) know that they've got a

defect in their production process, and for them to make sure that they rectify that within their production facility so that they don't get it again.

So, going back to the manufacturer and asking them to put it right is what we have to do. Yes, there's an environmental cost I'm sure, and there's a cost because there's disruption to you living in your house. I know that they were careful but there may have been some decorative issues that followed, all of which come back to the defect and again, one of the reasons why we've got that rectification period in the contract.

So, yes, it's inconvenient. All defects are inconvenient, but I don't know anyone who can build absolutely perfectly, spot on, day one.

Ben: Yes, I don't think we're complaining too much.

Is there a line then between snagging and actually, this is upkeep of the house? Do you ever have that?

Chris: Yes, I do. This comes down to what we call client management. So, I might see a defect or one that you may have put down as a defect which I don't believe is a contractual defect.

Ben: I do have a couple – two children. They create many defects in the house.

Chris: Yes, exactly. So, I have to be a bit of a politician sometimes at this stage because you might regard something as a defect and I think it's just wear and tear. Most clients are understandable about that. But that's part of my role now, to try to determine if that is a contractual defect; can I really ask the contractor to come back and put that right? Will he likely come back and say, 'no, that's wear and tear'? So, there's a little bit of adjudication almost in terms of putting the list together.

It doesn't happen very often because generally contractors want to maintain their reputations and if there's a good relationship, they will come back and probably go a little bit further than the contract would require, just for the sake of a good relationship and a good reputation. But I don't want to rely on that so, I need to be fair in the list that I produce. And then I leave those other matters to the contractor to resolve as you see fit.

Ben: As I've had a look at this list again today, I haven't added it up but it's probably fifteen things. So, what is the difference between this and a major housebuilder? Sometimes you hear these stories of

ridiculous numbers on there, both on delivery and sometimes down the line.

Chris: Thankfully, I don't do too many rectifications for major housebuilders but I've heard the same stories as yourself.

I think in a lot of cases the stories that you hear are more about the building not having been constructed properly in the first place rather than defects occurring. I think their construction methods are generally pretty good at removing those defects that occur during that rectification period but I do think that some of their construction processes in the first instance are contributory to that reputation that we all know about.

Ben: Is there anything else that we need to know about snagging or just that it is part of the process? And once these things are dealt with, what happens next?

Chris: I suppose that's the point really, what happens next, because you might still get some shrinkage and some movement. But I'm afraid that's no longer down to the contractor.

You might get other defects which occur which are what we call latent defects. That might be a defect of materials or workmanship that doesn't occur in that first twelve months. It might not occur for five years, for example. That doesn't mean to say that the contractor doesn't have some responsibility to come back and put it right.

So, although we sign off to say yes that's the end of the defects rectification period, the contractor is still liable for latent defects. There's a technical legal limit to it, but basically, it's to the point at which it should reasonably have been discovered.

So, pity the poor contractor because he never really fully walks away from something. If he's built something wrong, something bad, then there's still recourse to go back to him should that occur and be discovered later.

Ben: That's another thing that's very nice about this kind of project. We do maintain that relationship; he knows how he's built the house.

You are retiring now. So, say for example we want to make some changes. We've thought about we should have put another tap on the other side of the house. Now, I don't know whether that would be simple under normal circumstances; I guess it depends where you've located the water main. But am I right in saying it's inside the envelope, inside the house?

Chris: The water supply will be inside the thermal envelope, yes. So, if you want to put an external tap on, you're going to have to just drill a hole through your building fabric. And all I would say is, it's a Passivhaus so, could you please put a grommet on it so you don't get too much air leakage? It's not disastrous, to be honest. People do fret about airtightness. You don't want more holes than we need so, just be careful.

But it's something that is completely down to you to organise. There is no responsibility left for any of the people that were involved in the build contract to deal with your alterations, extensions, or anything else you want to do, other than making sure that you've got all the information you need to be able to do it properly.

Ben: Just before we finish up, there's one more thing that I've thought of and that's the upstairs floorboards. I had this vision of being able to leave my bedroom quietly and head downstairs and I do notice it creaks a little bit. Is this something that could be resolved, or again is this something to be left with? Just, this is how the house has been built?

I remember, I was here when they put it in as well, but I think there's just some sort of foam bit underneath and it wasn't...

Chris: We talked earlier about the natural materials and the likelihood to shrink and move and expand depending upon moisture content, temperature et cetera. That's what you're experiencing.

This particular floor, as you say, might have a foam strip in order to try to absorb some movement and prevent that from happening. I don't know of any floor that doesn't have a little bit of movement over time and it will perhaps close up and open up again during the seasons. So, very, very difficult to actually rule out.

Again, clients like natural materials. They like natural timber, for example; they like timber floors. Probably the bane of my life are natural timber floors. Probably you'd find a lot of architects would say the same because how do you control the movement and how do you make sure that the heating doesn't affect them et cetera? If I had my way, nobody would ever put one down. But there we go.

Ben: So, when you have a carpet, is it the carpet that's absorbing the sound?

Chris: If you put a carpet over a timber floor, yes. It would absorb the sound and obviously prevent a little bit of movement in the timber because it would absorb the impact. And obviously, carpets on

other types of floors, then the other type of floor isn't moving anyway.

You've got two pieces of timber obviously in your floor upstairs because we put a chipboard floor down as a base and then you've had a rather nice oak floor laid on top of that. So, the potential for movement on either of those two never goes away.

It may be the underlying chipboard, although we do a lot of work now to glue and fill those joints and screw the boards down properly to try to prevent that because that was a known problem. We used to nail chipboard flooring down and they always creaked. But we don't do that now. And then you've got your engineered floor on top of that.

Ben: What would be your choice then for flooring material, if you were doing it yourself?

Chris: I carpet everywhere in my house.

Ben: Right. So, you still carpet. Because that's not very environmentally friendly. You have to replace it as well.

I quite like having a hard floor but every so often, when I go and visit someone with a carpet, it's just that sponginess on your feet. That's perhaps the nicest thing about it.

Chris: Yes. Of course, there are two people who live in my house. So, the environmentally friendly aspect of it comes into things, but at the end of the day, like the rest of us, we do what we're told.

Ben: Fair enough.

I just want to say another big thank you to you. It's been fantastic. We definitely chose the right firm to work with on this project and it has been a pleasure.

I'm envisaging here that when you're retired, I will leave you in peace. So, just a big thank you.

Chris: That's very kind of you to say. You don't need to leave me in peace. I'm naturally interested, obviously, in all the work that we've done, particularly the Passivhaus projects that we've done. I'm very proud of all the Passivhaus projects that we've done and yours in particular I think has come out really well, particularly given some of the constraints we had at the start of the project.



So, I hope we stay in touch. I still follow you on Twitter and I still follow all of your little podcasts. So, I'm sure we'll stay in touch.

Ben: Chris, thank you.

Chris: Thank you.