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Date of Interview: 19th March 2021
Interviewed by: Roger Kitchen
Duration: 00:25:04

00:00:12 *I am talking to?*

Paul Fello.

Paul, can you tell me what you were doing in 1981 jobwise?

In 1981 I was the chief engineer for a division within a national housebuilding company and we, a group of myself and my colleagues came down from the Midlands specifically to go round Homeworld during June/July time. And that really was our only involvement. The company had a couple of sites in Milton Keynes at the time. It transpired that our chairman had a vision of establishing a new region in Milton Keynes and I was offered that position later on in the year. So, that's how we got to look at it really, just as one of the public but with an interest in housing.

But you were also be a person looking for a house in Milton Keynes, you know, when this went ahead?

We were looking for a house because later on in the year I was offered the opportunity to come and set up the new region and because we had a housing development in Milton Keynes, we just took over two of the showhouses for offices initially, but we needed somewhere to live.

So, Carol and I put aside two or three weekends as often as we could to come down to Milton Keynes, stay overnight and look at as many houses as possible. And we were looking in Hanslope, in Whittlebury and the villages around because that was the sort of place that we thought we wanted to live. And then, one afternoon I said, "Let me go and show you this Homeworld exhibition where there is some really weird houses, Carol, you will not believe!" And we drove on to Homeworld which was, I mean, Milton Keynes then you have to imagine was a bit of a desert. There were roads with red and white barrels, with poles across stopping people going and the shopping centre was alive but growing; very few of the shops were occupied; very little development in and around Milton Keynes. I mean, you could

stand in the shopping building or outside the shopping building and see trees and green fields not too far away.

So, we looked at Homeworld and were just driving round out of interest really and there was a for sale board, I think it was for Taylors Estate Agents, were selling the 'Money Programme house!' And I said, "That was a particularly nice house Carol!" And we went inside it and there had been a burst, so the ceilings were down, and the carpets were all screwed up in the corners and rolled up and I said to Carol, "You can't really imagine what it was like when we came round, but there were thousands of people!" And I suppose the carpets were ruined anyway because there were hundreds and thousands of people who went through The Money Programme house.

Anyway, that was about November time. I dealt with David Holliday, who was the MD of Super Homes at the time, Laing's' subsidiary. And we said, "Look! I have got to move into something the first week in January, or I am going to be staying in a hotel and I have got three children; I don't want to leave my wife with them!" And he said, "If you buy this house, I will get everything sorted out for you!" And true to his word, all the ceilings were put back, all the décor was done, all the carpets were laid, and we moved in! And that was how we got to be in The Money Programme house.

And it still had, there was, you mentioned there was still some attention from 'The Money Programme', even when you were in it; there were still...?

Yes! I think one of the reasons why they were keen to have a couple in the house, was 'The Money Programme', there must have been some sort of contractual obligation from Super Homes to allow The Money Programme to commentate on people living in the house and I suppose we were in our thirties, we were a youngish couple with a young family, I was in the industry and so there was a bit of informed conversation, or informed dialogue. Carol is very much into interior design and she likes modern design. So, we were a pretty good couple for them, really, and almost as, in fact, we were filmed moving in! There is film footage of us actually coming down the street in the furniture van and walking in the shopping building and furniture men moving our belongings into the house!

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So, from day one, from the 4th of January we were on film. And then it was filmed on a regular basis for about eighteen months or two years, I think.

Now, the thing was, in terms of the energy conservation and things like that it was very ahead of it's time. But what intrigues

me is you and your wife choosing that to live in, was that a factor in your decision making?

The energy aspects of the house were a factor, it has to be acknowledged but not a primary factor. The accommodation the house had to offer was just right for us. We like open plan, we liked the fact that there were bifold doors, concertina doors that you could shut off areas. We liked the proximity to the station, sorry to the centre, and to the station, I suppose, because Carol didn't drive a car at that time.

It was good for me because my office was a mile away, my temporary office that was. But yes! I have always had an interest in energy and its conservation and the way it's produced, I suppose, more so than its conservation. But yeah, it was a factor, but not the main factor because we wanted a home and there were schools close by which were brilliant for our children. It had everything to offer, as Milton Keynes still does, in my opinion!

But as you lived in it, you know, obviously from 'The Money Programme', I mean, they have the you know, this is going to be 60% less bills and so on, did that, did you take more of an interest in that energy thing as time went on, or was it just a "That's nice! It's warm and it's cheap" kind of thing?

No, no! We were interested right from the start. But we had, it was really Hobson's choice because we had so many people wanting to monitor their particular aspect, or their particular feature, that we were, we had people in the house virtually every day, with monitors and meters and questions and it was fascinating! I absolutely loved it! And the nice thing was, even through we were building up this new region so I was quite busy, my office was literally two miles away so if somebody wanted to see me I could come up, do an interview and go back to work. Or I could come up and answer some questions and go back to work and, it really worked ever so well for us, in fairness!

I am amazed by this, because I would have thought they would have been really annoying, you know, you've got someone else in the house every day [laughs].

It wasn't annoying at all! We didn't find it annoying. Some people were a little bit precious, but the majority of people were very down to earth. There as a chap called Ken who worked for Laing's design and technology department, and he was the nicest bloke! I think he probably designed most of the systems, because as you probably know, was that the essence of the houses was all the heating systems were integrated, so they were all on at the same time. And the most efficient would become the dominant heating source at that moment, and all the

heating sources worked into a huge, big cast iron cube that was built into the utility room, which rendered the utility room about useless and it was a highly insulated steel box. But everything fed into this box, so that you were always taking water for the heating and, well, for heating predominantly, from this big box; whichever heating source, whether it be Fiat TOTEM, the solid fuel burner, a very efficient gas boiler, or the solar panels, whichever was most dominant would be the heating source that you were using at that time! But the 'Brain' decided; which was the right source! Very clever!

And so, you lived there happily, as it were, but you didn't live there happily ever after! If it were, you know, you loved this house, so what prompted you to move if it was so good!

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What prompted me to move? We moved in in 1982, we moved out in 1996, so we were there for twelve years; I am a housing developer now, civil engineer/housing developer, and I wanted to build my own house and I found a plot of land in a village, with, the right size, and I built a big house, and that was it, really! That was the only reason!

And I like to move, and I like new stuff; and I like, I mean, in those fourteen years we were there, technology moves on and whilst it was still ahead of it's time in a lot of ways, it was falling behind other things. So, I like to refresh for want of a better word.

One of the things that interests me is that you are working for Brosley Homes. Now, you got very involved in Energy World, didn't you? The Brosley built, was it two or three houses there?

No, we only built one in Energy World. We were a volume house builder; we were a volume house builder with very, very firm roots in the North and I am not being derogatory because I am from the North, but we didn't much go in for the frills and the fancy, so it was a little bit of an effort for me to convince our Chairman to let me build a house on Energy World and it was a bigger effort to get him to let me build something a bit unusual! So, we actually built one of our standard house types which we stretched and modified, and we put a copper roof on it and did a lot of things inside it. But it was essentially a standard house. But it's a lovely house.

Did you then get involved in Energy Park; did you build further houses in Energy Park?

We didn't! No, and I don't know why we didn't get involved in Energy Park really. I don't think we ever, at the time, there was a sort of an unwritten rule in the CMT, or the Development Corporation, as it was then, that the land got shared around

fairly evenly because Milton Keynes was still a bit of a 'hard sell' for a lot of, to a lot of developers. They all saw it as a bit of a free-for-all, and prices were cut and you know, it was a difficult place to develop. It wasn't a difficult place to develop if you had got the specification right and you marketed everything properly.

So, I don't think we ever were offered to tender for any sites with the energy block. I think that was the only reason we didn't, to be honest. I built all round it, in Shenley and Loughton, but never actually in the Energy Park.

The other thing that intrigues me is this bit about, John Duggart, in the interview that I did with him was saying that it took, if you like, Building Regulations about twenty years to, if you like, catch up with what was in The Money Programme house, in terms of insulation and that kind of stuff. And the other thing is, it is like the housebuilders seem to have to have their arms twisted to, the improvement in housing in terms of insulation and whatever, has not come from house builders, has it? It has come from the government saying, "Oi! You've got to do that!" Why is that, why have the housebuilders been so reluctant to push forward?

I think the reluctance of house builders is...was profit motivated because everything that's come from the '80s that now exists within the building regs cost money! And there is a real myth, or there was at the time, that housebuilders were making millions of pounds profit! Well, they weren't! [Unclear] maybe now dispute that, or put that theory to one side, and the other volume housebuilders are making lots of money. But in the time, it was hard work, very hard work! Money was expensive; if you remember mortgages went to 15% at one time, people were reluctant to buy, we were part-exchanging, we did all manner of things and it was very much a numbers game!

And developers, certainly Broseley Estates, had a standard range of houses; it was probably a huge range, probably 180 types in the range! But we were encouraged to stick with those houses and the change was brought upon us by the building regs, quite rightly so, because we need to improve the housing stock.

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And now, going forwards, energy improvement or improvements to houses needs to be focussed on the historic housing stock. The little bit we do now in new houses is a drop in the ocean to what we need to do to the inherent housing stock. Loads and loads of money needs to be spent on those. But yes, it is because the margins were so tight, and they didn't want to spend money.

But is it also to do with the taste of the house buyer and what they go for? I mean, it's interesting, one of the people that I interviewed originally, do you know David Lock, you know David? Who...

I do, yes.

He claims that it was his idea that he told David Crewe about them, based on the Letchworth Cottages Exhibition in 1905, where they built these cheap houses to show London, as they gave them train ticket deals, and so on. Anyway, he was saying, he said, "We went round the exhibition and there were these fantastic houses, you know, The Money Programme house, with this Danish suite, there were all these fantastic houses!" He said the biggest queue was outside the Potton house, which was basic, [unclear].

Yes, yes.

And you know, that was what was attracting people, is that part of the reason, that the client hasn't been asking, "How efficient is this house, what is my heating bill going to be?"

I think, I think the fact that the client...I mean, housing design is done to appeal to as many people as possible. So, it is okay if you are a little builder doing three or four a year, you can be a niche developer, you can offer unusual things because whether you sell three houses or four houses that year doesn't really matter. When you are a volume builder and you want to do 15,000 houses, you don't have the time for your sales negotiators to be spending hours with each purchaser; they know what they want!

And I have personal experience actually! The last house I built for myself was, had waste heat recovery, it had rainwater harvesting, it had underfloor heating, it had PV panels; it had most reasonable technology! It had air-source heat pump! People came and loved the house, but they were frightened of the technology! They were frightened of the fact that I didn't pay for any electricity; I actually got paid back £1,200 a year by Southern Electric for pumping all that electricity into the grid!

Now, The Money Programme house pumped electricity back into the grid, but it never worked successfully, so we didn't get any cheques from MEB as it was at the time. So, that aspect of the technology has moved on tremendously! But it frightens people and nowadays, luckily, the house buyer is much more important and understands.

And of course, the climate change aspect of our lives has made people be more informed. I read just yesterday in The Times

people are now concerned about air quality and they are asking sales negotiators, what's the air quality rating for this house? Is it London, is it Aberdeen, is it the Lake District, because there is such a variety? So, it's moved on from Wi-Fi and bus routes to air quality and people are concerned; and they're knowledgeable! So, housing has to address all of those things.

And developers are now more pro-active. They are now looking at exceeding the building regs, not just complying.

I mean, We've got, we were, in the early days, we've got an old Victorian house. We've got six solar panels on it; that's all we can get on the roof. And, of course, we are getting about £500 a year but, for nothing, as it were. And we've never been able to understand, why don't builders, when the roofs are just, why don't they just put the things on? It isn't going to cost them much when they originally, it's not like retrofitting, is it? But I suppose it comes down to the fact that isn't necessarily going to 'Wow!' the customer.

I think the installation of solar panels, or I prefer PV panels because they work on light rather than sun, so they're in my opinion more efficient and they work 365 days of the year at some level. Gas boilers, as you know, are being phased out. 2025, I think will be the last gas boiler made.

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So, we have to move then to air source, ground source, borehole type technology and I think PV/solar will become a lot more prevalent in housebuilders. I mean, we're looking at a little site now for three houses which we will include PV panels, because they are, they make sense. And you know we are looking at houses that probably will retain at 1.5 million pounds. People expect that level of technology, not just fancy taps and fancy front doors. They want an economic lifestyle.

That's fantastic! Really, really interesting. So I just want to say, looking back, back 1981 and that Homeworld Exhibition, what do you think it's, or what long term effect did it have, or did it have nothing? Or was it just a way to give a bit of puff to Milton Keynes in terms of "Here we are, we're a bit go-ahead, sort of place." What effect do you think it might have had in the long run?

Crikey! The effect that Homeworld had on the house building industry and Milton Keynes; it certainly had an effect, to the effect of putting Milton Keynes even further on the map. Despite Noel Edmund's comment on the concrete cows and everybody ridiculing Milton Keynes, it is, was and still is one of the best places to live in the UK. Schooling is really good, communication is excellent, the standard of building still is very, very high! And that's earmarked or shown up by the fact that in Milton Keynes

they are already demolishing buildings that are only thirty years old and putting in even better buildings up.

But speaking specifically about 'The Money Programme' house, we had a huge conservatory on the front of the house, which had electric fans that drew warm air from the conservatory into the living accommodation. So, you could keep the patio doors closed tight and these fans, which were thermostatically controlled, would cut in and draw the hot air in.

Now, we now have mechanical heat and ventilation systems, which take all the wet, damp air out of bathrooms and kitchens, blow it off through heat-exchangers, took in clean fresh air, over the same heat exchanger, warm it up and blow that back into habitable rooms. So, it is just evolution of that system that is in that house in 1981.

Gas boilers: that had a really, really good gas boiler in it, anyway; it was way ahead of it's time and it had a really clever little Honeywell controlling system; worked ever so well!

The solid fuel burner which was hopper-fed so that the fuel was stored in the garage. But, it had a little hatch, so that you access the fuel from in the house so that you hadn't got to go outside to get the coal. That was a little bit quirky! But most houses these days would love to have a solid fuel burner, if you can accommodate one. It is just something to look at; you need a focal point; very rarely linked to central heating.

Lots of lessons: timber frame. That house was timber framed massive, massive swing against timber frame when that Barratt exposé programme was on Panorama, I think it was. It's got to be the way forwards. Timber frame is the future of housing. Zip panels now are very prevalent. They are of fantastic construction and the zip panel is only timber frame with wood both sides, rather than just wood and stud work on the one side that you put insulation in separately.

So, a lot to be learnt, a lot! And we have taken a lot from it. I mean, the only thing in Homeworld in 'The Money Programme' house that didn't really, wasn't really prevalent was the Fiat Totem engine. Fantastic innovation to put a car engine outside the back of your house but it was massively overrated! It was huge! It would have run six houses, so because of that it never actually cut in; it was in the system because was never cut in! But I do know, or I didn't know, that a golf club in Surrey somewhere is run with six Fiat Totem engines and it's a huge, huge golf club so that has got an application.

Brilliant! Well, thank you so much, we've got there in the end!

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[Interview Ends]