

Name: Roger Walker

Interviewed by: Roger Kitchen

Duration: 00:37:50

(00:02:33) Well, my grandmother was English, and my grandfather was Scottish so, I have always had an affinity for what is sometimes called the 'mother country'; that's probably not politically correct these days, but that is how this all kicked off, was my sort of affinity for England. And I had been on several trips to London just to enjoy the architecture at the theatre and stuff. I have always had this dream that I would get to a certain age and retire and be a dodderly old fellow wandering round the East End, wandering round the theatres of London and the galleries and I am sort of rapidly getting to be a dodderly old fellow, it's too late, maybe too late but...[laughs].

So, one day I was here in the New Zealand High Commission, which keeps tabs on what's going on, so it looked like there's this international exhibition in Milton Keynes, and we think you should go and do it and they said we can help you with the finance. It was also tax credits, that the politicians had of the time, and I said anybody who exports anything, doesn't matter if it is intellectual property or timber? So you get 150% tax deduction! So, everything sort of helped.

And then, of course, the generosity of the providers of this scheme where no money had to change hands on the site, and it was only on the point sale really that the Corporation took its [unclear] tip.

So, that's sort of how we got into it and being the last of the English new towns I was quite fascinated to see what had been left of the previous new towns.

(00:04:06) *So, were you over here at the time then, or what? You were in England and the New Zealand High Commission said, "You know, there's this thing going on!" Or?*

They said, "This is coming up!" - Yes! So, like, I think I was back here for two or three months before. But they did a lot of the groundwork to sort of secure an interest in that site. And there was another New Zealand company next door to our house

called 'Lockwood Homes'; I think they were on the northern side and sell solid timber houses which are sort of pricing themselves out of the market now because they are a very high technically. You know, the walls are literally 2" thick timber. So, they were there as well next to us, so it was like a little outpost of [unclear] there. And the High Commission provided all the plants. They had this idea that our house would be a little bit of New Zealand in the English countryside! So, they provided all the flaxes and sort of New Zealand species of plants, which we eagerly took advantage of!

So, they were all growing nicely and then various companies in New Zealand like carpet companies provided the carpet and, in fact, there were so many visitors through the house during the show, at the time of the show, that the carpet actually wore out and had to be replaced but then, it wasn't our cost, it was Kensington Carpets of New Zealand said, "oh we've got a huge mileage out of this project, so we'll re-carpet it for you." So, it was all good!

So, the actual design of the house was it one that you'd got in your back pocket, or did you sit down and address this particularly for this site?

Yes, it had to be particularly for this site, yes. I do have a company in New Zealand called Vintage Homes, which builds kiwi-style houses. I can show you, I've actually got a picture of them here. You see those? They had dormer windows and verandas around the bottom. And that is the sort of traditional kiwi house, if you like. Now, I started that company about fifty years ago now [laughs], because I was fed up with companies advertising in New Zealand, Spanish style houses and California bungalows. There was no mention at all of a New Zealand style; all the styles that were being marketed by the companies were all imported styles. So, that was the beginning of another trend. And then, of course, the major change was the vehicle that built this house and financed this house and financed this house.

But as soon as I got to Milton Keynes I realised that that a veranda is just not appropriate for the climatic conditions. Eldo van Eyck, who is a famous Dutch architect visited New Zealand had a fantastic conference a number of years ago. He described the veranda as 'the in between realm' and so it was between inside and outside and it is quite semantic in New Zealand because you can be outside when it is raining and it is still warm. And so that transition zones, I didn't really think that applied particularly to the UK because it was either too cold to go outside or you would use, like, the veranda to shade the sun because you want every available drop of sun!

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So, we modified that extensively and then the other thing I realised that to make the house stand out as a point of difference it would be good to have three stories high, because the surrounding houses were either one or two stories and it would take Michael Heseltine, when he was the Minister of Building at the time, he came into our house, walked straight up to the top and said, "This is the only house that I can see Milton Keynes railway station from!" [Laughs] And I said, "That's a nod to public transport! Good on you!" [Laughs] So, it ended up being a one-off, yes!

You were there supervising the actual building of it as well?

Well, yes, there was a few dramas! We...I found a New Zealand builder who said that he would go over and build the house and we agreed a price with them, and he went over several months earlier than I was supposed to go over to...my job was to control the painting and finish off the house, do the finishing touches; but unfortunately, for one reason or another he got way behind and when I arrived the house was well behind it's programme. So, I had to pitch in, and I had to get the staff to get it built. And there were dramas, I was hanging up pictures I remember one day, and I put the nail through one of the water pipes in the walls! [Laughs] and things like that!

But looking back at it, there was a lot of fun! We had to work very long hours because we were behind time and one night three of us were working and it was snowing, and we all had mild hypothermia and about 9 o'clock he said, "We had better go down to the local Indian restaurant and have some curry!" Anyway, at the local Indian restaurant I said "what is the hottest curry you've got sir?" And he said, "We've got a special Vindaloo but it's not for a European persons!" I said, "Is it hot?" and he said, "My word, it's hot!" And I said, "Look, I need it; I've got mild hypothermia!" Anyway, so this plate was delivered and there was a waiter standing behind the manager who'd brought the Vindaloo and I took one mouthful and then sort of breathed fire! And the chap behind stepped forward and said, "You'll be needing the yoghurt, Sir!" [Laughs] So, there were a lot of funny stories!

(00:10:17)

So, to get this, you heard about it, you got involved and Vintage Homes said they wanted to do it, if you like; so, you were over here, so you saw the site personally; you were there seeing the site, you knew what was going to be around it and then you came back to New Zealand...leave...and the builder goes over there to do it and then you go over to help finish it off!

Yes, yes, yes! That was the plan. So, I was to be there for the four weeks leading up to the opening of the show. But the builder had only just managed to close the house in, so there

were no weatherboards on the outside. We had to solve a lot of issues as we went along, like we had hoped that the New Zealand High Commission would have cleared the use of our radiator pipes, which is the primary planning system in New Zealand, would have approved it but it wasn't approved by [unclear] sorry, by TRADA, Timber Restriction Authorities in the UK, so we had to use imported Swedish timber on the outsides.

But we were under such pressure that we just kept rolling along as fast as we could, [laughs], and we got it done on time and everyone was happy! So, I think we built the house in five weeks!

And were you there for the opening ceremony and everything?

Yes, yes! That was something! I went back later towards the end of the show, you know, when the show was closing, the exhibition was closing, but when I was there I got to meet all the other participants but, you know, there were a lot of architects' designs where the architects were involved themselves, in the Bradwell Common, which was our little patch.

Yes, were a lot of individuals, like, there was an American, well you probably know the story...sort of solar house that a wealthy American built...and people really embraced the whole idea and the concept, and the public really did as well.

(00:14:35)

You were almost like commuting! The number of times you were to and fro to Milton Keynes, I had this vision...when I first heard about this I thought what I want to ask about how did he do this design in New Zealand and supervise it from there! You know, I didn't realise that you kind of [laughs].

The builder that was in charge of the actual hole in the hill, sort of, he was from Wellington, so he had built Vintage Homes, so he was very familiar with timber construction. So, without him it wouldn't have been possible.

(00:15:32)

There were issues in New Zealand also with some plots, like, what I found in the UK, when we entered on that path, like about twenty years ago, I think, with new owners. I actually went into the Milton Keynes Development Corporation's office and said, "Look, we have been asked...we did the original house and we have been asked to add on to it but I can't find any regulations about site coverage, position plans, maximum height and all the rules and regulations that we deal with day by day in New Zealand!" And the planner said to me, "That's because we found that the work, that was just getting in the way of actually keeping up the supply of houses!"

So, what we had now as an expert panel of people, a geographer, an architect, a structural engineer, planners, sunlight experts and they say...they usually give the project a tick for a pass, or they say, make these changes and come back to us and if you want a tick, then...it was absolutely refreshing! And this lady receptionist said, "Have you just come in off the street, Mr. Walker?", and I said, "Well, I suppose I have! I haven't got an appointment!", and she said, "Would you like tea or coffee?", and I said, "What do you mean?", and she said, "Under our new rules we have got to get you in front of a planner within twenty minutes of your arriving...and so just sit there and we will bring you your cup of tea!" Now here, you have to make an appointment days in advance!

(00:18:49)

Coming back to Homeworld, the point about the house...all the houses there, was they were meant to be houses for the future and so on...

Yes.

Yours was certainly timber frame, which was futuristic in its time. What other elements were there in the house were different about your house?

Well, it was very high levels of insulation in the walls and ceilings, and I think the design of it was what you could call 'passive solar'. So, because it was tall and thin and the majority of the rooms had windows on more than one side, you could get cross-ventilation. I mean, we stacked the bedrooms one on top of the other and on the upper levels, and that means cross-ventilation. It also means solar gain, from the north and from the south, or whatever! So that the house itself, and also the house having a three-story high stairwell in the middle of it, that's like a heat tube, transfer tube. So, you only have to heat the bottom of the house and the heat will go up, and that's a natural process. So, that's a principle that we had been doing for years, the passive-solar effect.

And in terms of you were there, as you say, when the exhibition was on, how did the public react to your house?

[Laughs] Well, it was very interesting! Mostly people were very excited about it, but I remember there was a woman of a certain age who said, "I could never live here! I could never live here! This is horrible, I could never live here!" And I said, "Madam! Nobody is asking you to live here!" [Laughs]

And anyway, it was generally very positive, and I think that, I don't know what our but, three-quarters of people, of our visitors was, compared with some of the other houses because it wasn't at the expensive end; there were a couple of quite expensive

houses but, you know, with very sophisticated systems, environmental systems, which were quite costly at the time but I think, you know, the reaction was generally positive.

We...you may well be saying, well why didn't we do more and more of them. I'm an architect, but I am not a businessman and we had a chap, who will remain nameless, who was a Scottish timber-frame builder, who said, "Could I be your agent to carry on these buildings, you know, because I really believe in timber!" Anyway, so we just shook hands, but we didn't have a legal document, unfortunately! He changed our designs just enough to skip the copyright regulations and then did his own thing using our designs, which was a shame! Although later I found out that he had sold five of our Milton Keynes inspired houses, if you like, to the Falkland Islands as part of the war, Mrs. Thatcher's war! [Laughs]

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So...But it was unfortunate! Like, if I'd been more business-like, I would have had a contract document for someone to carry on and because, the market is definitely there! I mean, within the house we had, within the house, we had a document which expressed interest, and I think we had something like 500 people said they were interested in further information about the type of design and the costs, and you know, the procedure.

So, there was, I would say, a large amount of interest, which I failed to properly follow up unfortunately!

What effect...your involvement in the exhibition...what effect did it have on your future career? The answer is probably none! [Laughs] Other than creating copyright!

Not much...I mean, there was a bit of publicity from the development. So I'd raised my profile a bit, I suppose. But then, you know, I think other things like myself, we really need to engage with people who like our products, you know. A lot of, especially commercial clients, they've got the control. They can say, do this, do that, "we want a flat roof", "all the bedrooms facing this way". And unfortunately, most architects, do, you know, follow instruction, and they don't upset their clients. We lost a few clients. Because, the last one I think we lost, the client said to me "you're not doing what I asked you to do". And I said "no, but I recognise your, I recognise the imperatives that you're after, in terms of views. And I've talked to the prefabricator of those concrete houses and I've sort of put together a team to get this result." And they said, "no, no, you're listening to my instructions and you're not following them." It's just not the case [laughs].

Then you don't really need an architect, do you, you need, [unclear], I suppose...

(00:30:24)

Any other stories you've got from your experience at Homeworld? You know, looking back on it now after forty years, as we are about to...it was May 1981, what are your reflections on it?

Yes. Well, I am sorry that we didn't get more to do, you know, especially as the opportunity was there! I have had New Zealand friends, as you say, inveterate travellers, who had actually been to the house, knocked on the door and explained that know me personally, they all get taken in and get cups of tea and glasses of whiskey and stuff. So, the owners obviously still love the house! I think it's the same owners.

We, at the time we completed it at, the opening of the show, the rules were that you couldn't put a tenant into a house because that tenant really had sitting rights, as long as they kept paying the rent and not damaging the house, energy in the house. You couldn't obviously ask them to leave because you had sold the house, so we needed to have an empty house or we had to sell it because our bank was saying, "You know, we want our money back now that the house is finished!" And the person that bought the house was very noisy, so I don't know if he was any relation to Voysey, the famous Arts & Crafts architect, but he bought our house for £55,000 [unclear] at the time, and it went through a winter and he on-sold it for £100,000! And everybody said, "Oh! That was the wooden house! We didn't think it would last through winter!" [Laughs]

So, that was the sadness. If we had somehow or other managed to keep the house, even if...it would have given us a platform to do more similar houses, and get them to take off!

So, I'm looking forward to, I am hoping it's going to, when our Covid thing clears up, I am hoping to make another trip over there, and you know, I would like to meet yourself and just talk to some of the other people about the house; and see the additions which I have never seen! We didn't actually do the work...

You designed the addition, didn't you? You designed the...

...Well, I'd done the sketch design, but I have seen Google photographs and it's...the detailing is not good! I think a local draughtsman must have drawn it up, so we weren't asked to do it, which was a bit unfortunate!

But I am really interested in the fact that, it is like, firstly that, with it being the 40th anniversary, the Homeworld is being acknowledged as a significant development and, you know that's, I am really interested in that! It hasn't just been something that has come and gone! So, I was really pleasantly

surprised when you contacted me! So, I'll come and visit then and look at that side of things, yes!

(00:33:40)

Yeah, because in fact, that, after Homeworld, there was Energyworld, a few years after that, and then there was Futureworld. So there's been three, similar kinds of exhibitions, you know, all of them really based on, say on the Homeworld success, really, I suppose. I mean, it was a really big gamble.

Oh yes, yes, it was very brave. Yeah, we enjoyed it.

The day before we were scheduled to fly home, so just before the end of the show, we had always had trouble finding a car park at the Milton Keynes shopping centre, but there were twelve disabled car parks in a row and so we parked our Morris 1100, which we had bought for £50, and we parked in a disabled car park! And I walked out, and a policeman said, "Excuse me, Sir! You don't appear to be disabled!" and I said, "I'm not disabled but the car is, and the signs seems to say, "Disabled Car Park!" He said, "What do you mean?" So, I opened the glove box and said, "Look! Your colleagues will testify as to the level of disablement of the car...look, bald tyres, lights not working!", and blah, blah, blah! And pulled out all these notices. Anyway, he called a superior and he said, "Come on! Get out of this! There is trouble here!" So, the superior arrived by which we said the same story, and he said, "Well, you're under arrest!" There was quite a big crowd gathering by this stage and John, who was our No.2 carpenter, he said, "Look! This car has given us nothing but grief, hasn't it? So, I am going to get the sledgehammer out of the back and pulverise it!" And I said, "Just make sure that there's no glass goes on to the footpath! Make sure the glass goes inside the car!"

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So then, one of these police, (there were 3 police at this stage), said, "Your car's being vandalised!" and I said, "Yes, but with my permission!" And so, anyway, we were all bundled off into a paddy-wagon...there were about 100 onlookers at this stage, and we went to the Milton Keynes police station and the prosecutor said, "When are you guys going home?" and we said, "Tomorrow!" And he said, "Get out of here!" [Laughs]

So, when I went back the UK, I half expected the car to still be there! I mean, one of the charges was attempted bribery, because I had said to the policeman, "You can have the car!" Anyway, that was fun! [Laughs].

But there was another incident involving the police, which wasn't us personally, but it was a rift at that time...I think it was during the show, possibly, where there was a lot of anti-Pakistani movement, an anti-Pakistani movement, where there were riots in Toxteth, is it, in London? And all sorts of cultural clashes in all

social places in other parts of the country and we were told that a trainload of these...I have forgotten the name...I'll think of the name in a moment, they were coming up from London to smash up the shopping centres because of all the glass over here and anyway, the place was ringed by the police, and nothing arrived! None of these troublemakers arrived! And in the end the police started to disperse! And I said to the sergeant, "What happened?" and he said, "Well, they all came up on the train, but we flipped the siding and we pushed them all down to a dead-end section of track and we arrested the whole train!"
[Laughs]

Skinheads, they were called!

Yes, skinheads! Yes, yes, yes!

They arrested the whole train! And I said, "Oh! That's pretty efficient!" I said, "In New Zealand we have free independent [unclear] who go around by themselves!"

And he said to me, "That must make police work very difficult in your country!"

[Laughs]

So, there was a lot of stories about the cultural contrasts, and stuff. So I enjoyed the whole experience. I would do it all over again! Happily!"

Brilliant! Roger, thank you so much for your time!

(00:37:50)

[Interview Ends]