



Bristol Living talks to Nick, Managing Director of Urbane Eco Ltd and founder of The Holistic Building Forum...

When did you get interested in sustainable building? Who inspired you?

I attended a talk by Neil May, founder of Natural Building Technologies, and advisor to Prince Charles, and suddenly all the niggles that had been at the back of mind made perfect sense - his ideas about the building needing to breathe and how it affects the health of the occupants, the issues with condensation and mould and how we need to build better - I was a convert! I set up the Holistic Building Forum in Bristol to spread the message, and to my delight Neil came and talked at one of our evenings. Bristol based architect Lucy Pedler, founder of The Green Register, has also been an inspiration, and she gave a talk at the Forum too.

Why is sustainable building important? What difference does it make especially to ordinary householders?

To me it's all about buildings that keep us healthy, and that keep the planet healthy. Making sure that the materials that we use are natural and breathable and the way the fabric is put together is of paramount importance. We specialize in internal and external solid wall insulation.

Traditional building has always used materials like clay, lime, straw and wood, and I now use new generation, high spec products made from wood fibre, hemp and straw to insulate homes, which create a really healthy and highly effective fabric. Many of our customers have expressed delight at how warm and comfortable the ambient atmosphere is in the house after this has been done - as well as drastically reducing their heating bills!

What is your biggest 'bugbear' about the way we build our houses?

It hasn't always been in our thinking that the way we build affects the health of the occupants. Materials we have used in the past were toxic and not environmentally friendly. There's an argument for saying that some still are!

What do you think is the most important thing we can all do to help with saving the planet and also saving money?

It is extraordinary how much carbon our

homes put into the atmosphere, it is over a quarter of all carbon emissions in the UK, more than road transport or industry, and so this is really the most important thing that each one of us can do to help cut our carbon footprint. Insulating your home so that you do not lose the heat you are generating is incredibly effective - but it needs to be done correctly as you don't want to create an over-humid atmosphere which is unhealthy and unpleasant. And think about how your building materials are made - do they have high embodied energy costs in their manufacture, and are they biodegradable or will they fill landfills for thousands of years - we need to take a more long term approach I think.

You were born and bred in Bristol - there are lots of changes going on now regarding sustainability, how do you see yourself helping to transform the city into a low carbon environment?

I want to be involved in the retrofitting of our beautiful housing stock and make sure it is done in the best way, as our city and its occupants deserve.

You have just finished some houses for the Bristol Home Energy Upgrade Scheme, tell us about that

Yes, this was a very innovative bid by Mareiki Schmidt at Bristol City Council who managed to obtain early government DECC money to run a Green Deal pilot scheme here in Bristol. It meant that lots of people got reduced cost boiler upgrades and several people were able to have their homes insulated with External Wall Insulation with generous grants. I intend to carry on doing this, using ECO money to reduce householders costs, as I truly believe this is the best thing both for us to save money, cut our carbon footprint drastically and, if done correctly, have a lovely, healthy and warm home. We are looking for householders and trades people to participate in our Streets Ahead project, so do get in touch.

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Tell us a bit about your background?

I started out in the 70's with a smallholding in Norfolk - I renovated the farmhouse and I grew my own veg and kept chickens! I was inspired by the book Self Sufficiency by John Seymour (my wife gave my old copy to the Amnesty bookshop on Gloucester Road a while ago much to my horror, but I'm glad it went to a good cause!). I had just qualified as a teacher and had a job in Long Stratton teaching English.

Why did you swap teaching for building?

While I was renovating the farmhouse, I discovered a passion for building that I didn't know I had until then; I just loved the sense of seeing what I had created at the end of the day and getting my hands dirty - my education was highly academic. I had attended Bristol Grammar School then Kent University and thought that my path in life was more office-based but when I started to actually create something solid like a building I just loved it.

I love buildings and I'm always impressed by our rich variety of vernacular architecture. And whatever the house, it's our living space and it's very important to us.