



Building Tales

There's a lot of renovation going on in my neighbourhood. Instantly recognisable by the porta-loo in the front garden, the scaffolding and the signs indicating the involvement of architect, builders et al.

Wanting a conservatory and a loft conversion I consulted my renovating neighbours about how to do it. Without exception they talked of the importance of a good architect, of thinking clearly in advance exactly what was needed so that a detailed specification could be written, of the virtues of at least three quotes from competing building firms. They discussed, too, the advantages of moving out of the house to give free rein to the builders and enable a timely finish – and avoid the dust. And of a project manager to handle the relationships along the way.

I became more and more depressed. My builders would be available soon and could commit to starting in a month's time or not for another six. I couldn't begin to imagine 'exactly' what I wanted, I knew roughly and had rather thought I could make further decisions along the way. My neighbours breathed in through their teeth. 'That's very expensive' they said. 'Anything you don't include in the specification will cost you a lot more'. I got more depressed. 'How will I know where I want the desk until I have seen the room?' I wondered. I've learned over decades that imagination and reality feel significantly different. What's more I couldn't afford to move out, and didn't want to anyway.

I talked with my builders. 'Oh we know an architect who can do the plans for the Council' –so that was sorted. I didn't mention competitive quotes but did contact a specialist loft company to see what they would charge. I worked out what I could afford and what it was worth to me (which was less than the loft company had wanted) and asked if my builders if could do it for that. Oh yes, they agreed. 'Now look, I don't know exactly what I want and I expect there will be all sorts of things I think of while you are here' I said. 'Can we

agree that you'll do them within the price?' 'What sort of things?' they asked. I listed some (book shelves, fixing the dodgy man hole cover and more) and said I was sure there would be others. I also listed the kind of additional things I realised would warrant extra payment. So we agreed on what wouldn't be included and that everything else would be. And that we'd talk if this looked at all problematic.

They were ready to start before the planning permission had come through but we were all so sure it would that I let them go ahead anyway. It was a risk and my neighbours were horrified but I had a contingency plan (not a great one!) and it felt a risk worth taking.

Living in the house meant I got to know them better than ever. The early morning chats over a cup of tea kept me well abreast of how it was progressing and allowed me to divert them to the less serious but life enhancing tasks (hooks on the back of doors for example) from time to time. And when occasionally, as is the way with builders, they would disappear for a few days onto another job I knew instantly. If it went on long enough for me to get upset I told them so – in an upset sort of way. My neighbours exchanged glances. 'Oh our project manager saved us all that aggro' they sympathised. I did notice that my builders didn't much like aggro either and came back pretty smartly whereas theirs' always gave excellent explanations of why they couldn't. But I said nothing.

And yes it was dusty, but it was also real, this is what building work is and I was part of that process. It felt OK.

So where are we now? All my neighbours have lovely extensions and new lofts and are very pleased with them and with their approach. I can see why: they have been textbook examples of excellent contract and project management, not to mention emotional intelligence. The large cost over-runs are all explained by the changes they made (sorry 'extras') to the specification, so all concerned see that these were justified. I'm delighted for them.

And I'm pleased too. I've got exactly what I want, which is rather different from what I imagined at the beginning, I've developed an even better relationship with my builders, I've learned a lot, and its cost a fraction of the price of my neighbours'.

Couldn't we commission health care my way?

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