

THE NOT SO ROCKY ROAD

Whilst many property developers of traditional homes are struggling, those with the foresight to plan and build more eco-friendly developments are beating the global economic downturn

We all dream of getting out of the big city every now and then - some more than others. And when you next gaze wearily out of that busy commuter tube window, where do you wish you would rather be?

Did you say Cornwall?

If so, you're in the 71% of professional Londoners who say they would rather be in the Prince of Wales' Duchy than any other county in the UK.

But that's the thing with day-dreams, they're here one minute and gone the next, aren't they?

Well, no, not for some. Some like Simon Blackburn, the entrepreneur behind eco-property development company Living Structures.

For when Simon said farewell to smog-filled cities, he meant it. A relocation to the Cornish village of St Agnes was on the cards, where he has built a small but sensational eco-community of environmentally-friendly luxury super-homes, Rocky Lane.

So how did he do what so many of us dream of but don't follow through with?

When did you first start getting involved in property development?

My wife and I had wanted to build our own home for some time, and were dismayed at what was on offer in the UK.

We had long been fans of the homes



erected on the West Coast of the US during the Fifties and Sixties. These homes were designed by such greats as Ralph Rapson, John Rex, Richard Neutra and, of course Charles Eames, and we had hoped to find an operation in the UK which might offer the same kind of thoughtful modernist design, but to no avail.

My wife is American, and eventually we found a company called Deck House which had been created in the early 1950's by Harvard School of Design graduate Bill Berkes. These homes perfectly suited our taste, so much so that we approached Deck House to represent their company in the UK, which we successfully set up in 1996.



We did that for nine years, and we now employ our own engineers and architects for design and construction, enabling us to manage the entire process in-house.

What attracted you to property development?

The fact that we wanted to create homes which understood and sympathised with their environment, whilst giving one a feeling of well-being. Basically, we wanted to build homes owners could be proud of.



What advice would you give to would-be property developers?

Get experience, understand what you are building, and understand the trades and engineering involved.

The best developers of the kind of houses we produce are noticeable by their presence.

Did you need to drum up investment to get it off the ground and how?

Investment and bank funding in these times is a near impossibility. However, my JV partner Oliver Hookway from The Point Cornwall, a qualified accountant, manages this smoothly.

To make this possible experience in property development is essential these days. Without experience, property development funding just won't happen.

How do you see the future of property development?

Whatever the market is doing in terms of property values, the bottom line is that our country is in desperate need of new homes. For the smaller developer I see no reason for this to abate unless something really drastic happens with the planning process.

Is investing in property a sensible idea in the current climate?

We are constantly receiving sales calls from buyers who feel houses remain a solid investment now and in the long term. We certainly believe this is to be true.

Is the future of property development eco and ethical homes?

Most definitely, but there has to be a financial incentive. Most eco-features just make sense anyway. For example, why would you not want to install heat pumps which utilise the ambient air temp to provide all your water and heating needs? The heat pumps we are installing convert every KW of electricity into 3KW of heating energy.

What attracted you to the Rocky Lane project?

The woodland setting, the topography of the site, the proximity to the beach and the challenge! And the fact that I have been visiting the area since I was a boy and love the place. The Rocky Lane development is not simply about great architecture set in the most stunning landscape. It is also about St. Agnes and its inhabitants.

What is different about Rocky Lane?

The images of the development make it self-evident, what is harder to convey is the feel of the place. It's quite magical and has a quality of life that makes you feel not so much close to nature, as part of it.

What's next for you?

We doubt whether we can find somewhere quite like St. Agnes so maybe something totally different - a London development possibly. And despite the fact that the first phase of Rocky Lane in St Agnes have all sold, there is still availability for phase two.

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