



PHOTOGRAPH: DAVE KING.

Grand Designs presenter Kevin McCloud and his company, Hab, are part of a venture developing a derelict hospital site in Cashes Green near Stroud. While half the homes will be affordable, there's nothing cheap about the principles behind the scheme, as Katie Jarvis discovers

IT'S A STRANGE site, the old hospital at Cashes Green. Like an elderly lady whose friends have passed on, it finds itself a last bastion of a gentler era. The old bricks, shaped and baked down the road in Stonehouse, rub shoulders with modern housing estates made from more ubiquitous materials. Hemming it in are boisterous young families motoring off to school and work, or playing in their compact gardens; but the old hospital's inhabitants are mice, squirrels, birds and rabbits, running free-range in this sprawling anomaly.

It's a nesting place for community memories, too. The older generation, such as Betty Woodward, remembers its first incarnation, as an isolation hospital. In a DVD made by the Save Cashes Green Hospital group, she tells of the time, many decades ago, when as a 12-year-old she nearly lost her life there to diphtheria. "They were lovely days," she says, with no hint of irony.

She feels these old buildings – put up in the early 1900s – should be preserved. Preserved, she feels, as a tribute to a McCloud. "Sister McCloud," she says – one of the nurses who calmed her childish fears and nurtured her back to health. "She was a darling."

Kevin McCloud is talking to a reporter from a local newspaper. Around them, a



PHOTOGRAPH: JOSS BARRATT.

consultation is taking place on the future of the semi-derelict Cashes Green Hospital site. There are boards up on the wall, showing how new housing could be laid out, clustered around a shared garden that preserves its old fruit trees (the endangered Arlingham Schoolboy apple tree, for one). One display shows how the old nurses' home might be incorporated into the project; another talks of local food, culture, wildlife, health and happiness As well as

Kevin himself, the scheme's architect, David Hills, and design director, Isabel Allen, are on hand to talk to the locals who've turned up.

"But you are going to take people's views seriously, are you?" the reporter asks him.

"Every single comment that anyone makes – whether they ring up, email, fill out the forms, come in person, or write a Post-it note – is taken seriously," Kevin replies.

"But," she presses, "sometimes people hold consultations even though the final decision has already been made."

He sighs. "That's a presentation, not a consultation."

After she's gone, he observes (without cynicism or anger; just good old-fashioned perplexity): "It's a curious thing, isn't it, when people don't take you at your word."

Ye-eess.

But it's an equally curious thing when developers of a reasonably large-scale project (78 homes, in this case), including a good wedge of affordable dwellings, talk about beauty, health and happiness... and mean it. When even though it's more cost-effective to flatten the whole caboodle and begin again, said-developer is desperately trying to find ways of preserving as many of the old buildings as possible – because locals value them.

But this is a project spearheaded by ►



COTSWOLD CHARACTER

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PHOTOGRAPH: SHAUN THOMPSON.

The former Cashes Green Hospital site in Stroud.



PHOTOGRAPH: SHAWN THOMPSON

Kevin McCloud, best known as writer and presenter of the Channel 4 series *Grand Designs*, programmes which follow individuals determined to build one-off, unusual homes. It was in 2007 that he decided to turn developer himself, by launching Hab, a company intent on building highly-sustainable homes using innovative technology, aiming at zero-carbon policies...

Now just a minute. Did I mention the word 'developer'?

"We shudder to even use that word," Kevin McCloud says, horror made manifest within a rare split infinitive.

And you can see why. No one writes a paean of praise to a developer... But listen to this. A year or so ago, he teamed up with GreenSquare, a housing, regeneration and social investment agency, to form the partnership Hab Oakus. And last summer, they won the contract to develop the Stroud site in conjunction with Gloucestershire Land for People, which will own and manage the 39 affordable homes. That contract came ready-made; profit on a plate. It already had outline planning consent, and Hab Oakus could have driven in the bulldozers and turned on the cement mixers the next morning, rubbing muddy hands as the pounds rolled in.

But they didn't. Instead, they came and listened to the outraged outcries of locals about pulling down beloved buildings; they unpicked the scheme and began again; and they held consultations, such as this one today. The planning application should now go in early this spring.

So here he is, looking stylishly casual, sitting at one of the functional tables in Cashes Green Youth and Social Club – a building so unused to celebrities that you can almost see it patting its rollers, smoothing down its pinny and giggling apologetically for not looking its best.

And umm. Actually. What is a guy like him doing in a place like this? Shouldn't he be building grand houses for grand people?

"We'd really like to do that. We would!" he says (possibly half-joking; possibly genuinely bemoaning the recession; hard to tell).

"However, I just don't think there are that many interesting challenges left that way. The big questions in the world are to do with how we cope with the projected nine billion people there are going to be in 2050." Nine billion people, of course, who are not all going to be able to build architect-designed, big-budget houses on roomy half-acre plots.

"The thing that upset me – that got me going in the first place – is my frustration with staring out of train windows at one ghastly housing estate after another, all looking the same. That's where the energy

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVE KING



Kevin McCloud with Helen and Chris Seymour-Smith.

of it came from; not from a desire to somehow exploit."

Words, of course, are as cheap as chippies working with mdf. But it speaks volumes that he's here in person, mingling with the crowd. He and his company have laid on smiling ladies who make cups of tea and serve irresistible muffin-sized cup-cakes and rustic bread with organic spread (all free of charge). But it's genuinely nice; not a whiff of the patronising. When one sticky-handed young visitor perches on the end of Kevin's table, unfazed by his celebrity status, he switches from businessman to 'in

loco parentis' with complete naturalness. "Do you want a drink, sweetheart?" he asks her. "I think we've got some squash."

Indeed, Hab Oakus takes its inhabitants seriously; as concerned about the way people live as the houses they live in. Their schemes look outside the patch of land they're developing to consider ways of encouraging cycling, lift-sharing, vegetable-growing and neighbourliness. At Cashes Green, there'll be charging points for electric vehicles, bicycle storage, wildlife corridors, and communal kitchen gardens.

"It's not about development," Kevin explains. "We are trying to join up ideas which, two or three generations ago, people joined up without thinking. The idea of being able to live and work in the same locality; to be able to grow much of your own food; to be able to know people in your street and be able to socialise with people around you. To be able to share resources – be that babysitting or be it food or be it a lift to the shops. People don't do that anymore. We live in very isolated hermetically-sealed boxes, now, be they offices, or cars, or homes.

"We stopped understanding how, just in a very small day-to-day way, we can behave as a society."

But, with the best will in the world, he can't create a community, can he? No outsider can. He can't change suburbs from Skins to High School Musical by planning in a few shared spaces?

"No – you can't make communities," he muses. "Who was it who said the only

people who talk about communities don't belong to one?"

"In fact, we don't use that word very much. We use the words 'neighbourhood' and 'place' and 'people' and 'residents'. We go into existing neighbourhoods and we talk to people who live there and we find out what matters to them; how we might adapt what we do so that what we provide is a resource for existing residents as well as the new ones.

"This building is a classic example," he says, pointing to the community centre we're in, which lies just across the road from the old hospital. "The outline scheme we were given showed a big new community building on the [hospital] site. So when we visited and saw the existing community building, we couldn't understand it. Were they going to demolish this one? Why build a new one 200 yards away?"

"So we've now completely redesigned the scheme to incorporate this building and the shops beside it as the centre of Cashes Green. Now, that isn't creating a community – all that is doing is working with what's there, putting in some new stuff, and hoping people pick it up. And, yes, we can say: 'Do you know what? We'd really like you to garden organically and these are the values of the scheme.' What you can do is to lay fertile ground."

Idealism with a good dose of pragmatism. And it's appealing. Hab itself stands for Happiness, Architecture and Beauty – principles, as he acknowledges, that trace

their heritage to the Cotswolds' own Arts and Crafts movement.

But if all this is realisable, why haven't we realised it before? Why have we so many grotty housing estates made as cheaply as possible? Isolated ghettos in which we enclose the elderly; or flats for young families with stairs for pushchairs and unsuitable outside areas that children will never play in?

"Because it's hard work," he says, tiredly. "Very, very, very, very hard work. We started five years ago and we're only just beginning to build (a project in Swindon). It has taken all that time of writing and refining and researching. We've learned how to do things via trial and error, by meeting people and listening to them, and by belief. Belief that design can solve many of the problems on the planet."

It's funny. Some TV personalities seem diminished by real life; far less bold, lively and quirky than their on-screen personas. With Kevin McCloud, it's the opposite. Meeting him fills in the blanks. You begin to see why he does what he does: as he speaks, the man with the Cambridge degree in history of art and architecture makes an appearance.

So was it something in his childhood that prompted his love of design.

"I don't know that I have a love of design," he contradicts. "I have a belief in its power; I might admire well-made things. I was brought up as a Methodist in a family where everybody made things."

“We are trying to join up ideas which, two or three generations ago, people joined up without thinking. The idea of being able to live and work in the same locality; to be able to grow much of your own food; to be able to know people in your street and be able to socialise with people around you.”

For pleasure?

"Because we'd no money! My mother made our clothes; my father made furniture, repaired the cars, made our toys. I've a brother who's a builder, and another who's a builder and maker. I think maybe that's why; it's a belief in the value of well-made things."

He's clearly driven by intellect, not prurient interest or whim. As he speaks of self-build, you begin to see how his interest in Grand Designs is led by his belief in

sustainability. "All the passive (energy-efficient) houses currently being constructed in Britain are in private ownership," he says. "Now there are developers building passive houses but they wouldn't be doing it if it weren't for self-builders doing it in the first place. Under-floor heating, wind turbines – all pioneered by self-builders."

And he himself has helped pioneer the trend. But he's also indelibly associated in my mind with the stress that managing your own project inevitably brings. "You're running so behind, now, aren't you?" "How much over-budget is this?" "How much longer can you afford to go on?" he presses his TV self-build couples, already teetering on the edge in their efforts to control spiralling costs and inclement weather.

"What's wrong with stress?"

Errm. Quite a lot. How many couples split up, for example?

"Actually, a tiny proportion of our own. Something like three percent against a national average of 30 percent."

What about putting his money where his mouth is? He himself lives with his family in a Tudor farmhouse.

"Well," he points out, "I have rebuilt that house and extended it and designed a modern extension for it."

OK. But he's a wealthy (I assume), influential television presenter. How do the rest of us, who can't live in Hab Oakus houses in Hab Oakus neighbourhoods, lobby for better-built housing?

"I've given up lobbying. Pointless. Our way of doing things is not to lobby but to do it. To build."

But, I iterate – again – if he can do it, then why can't other developers? That's why people don't believe him. Because, bar Poundbury, we haven't seen it done that much. If it is possible, then we've been ridiculously short-changed. If he can do it, it can't be that difficult, can it?

"It's not simple and it is difficult," he says. "It is difficult," he repeats, with a certain weariness.

And instead of ordering the demolition ball, he moves off to talk to members of the public. To explain to them he's doing all he can to save their buildings. Just because they want him to. ■

• For more about Hab Oakus, visit [www.haboakus.co.uk](http://www.haboakus.co.uk)  
• Kevin McCloud will be speaking at Grand Designs Live between April 30 and May 8 at London's Excel Centre. See [www.granddesignslive.com](http://www.granddesignslive.com) or call 0844 209 7349 for tickets.

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