

Kevin McCloud | The importance of architecture It's a Long Story

Episode transcript:

Kevin McCloud had a childhood where everything was built from scratch, and his home was more like a workshop. So it's no surprise that the built world eventually became the focus of his life and work. Yet in his earlier years Kevin wore many different hats, from working in an Italian vineyard, studying music, designing sets for the Cambridge theatre troupe the Footlights, owning a lighting design shop and designing the famous ceiling of the Harrods Food Hall in London. While this eclectic mix of experience may have been enough for some, Kevin's best known as the host of the British Lifestyle program Grand Designs. A champion for social housing and sustainable development, he continues to explore ways that architecture can benefit our lives.

Edwina Throsby: Kevin McCloud, welcome to the Sydney Opera House.

Kevin McCloud: Thank you, it's a great honour to be here, very exciting.

ET: Have you spent much time here before?

KM: In Australia, yeah I've been several times. I like it here, I like the extraordinary can do attitude that people have. You know, the flip side of that in Australia is there's a tremendous commotionality about everything. And, whereas, in the U.K., you know, our natural state is one of diffidence. You're never going to see a social revolution happen in England in the way that it did in France or even Russia. And so, yet to come here is kind of quite extraordinary because, at its extreme form, Australian life can seem almost brash and very go get. You know? But, it also has this fantastic energy about it which is very appealing.

KM: They'd immigrated by that point, yeah in the early 60s. My parents has the tickets in the 50s to go and then my mother got pregnant with me, so.

ET: So you wrecked it for them.

KM: I did, I put me into their dream yeah.

ET: So, your father was, he was a rocket scientist.

KM: Yeah. Well actually, he said that rocket science was really straightforward. The hard thing was doing what he was doing which was designing test systems for rockets, so he wanted to break them.

ET: Trying to outwit the rocket scientists.

KM: Yeah. So, he, yeah, worked in aerospace and with satellites and engines and of course you can imagine what our household was like, you know. Evening times when he was repairing other people's televisions for them and, you know, designing and building his own stuff, try to get new designs patented and yeah, invented a whole load of stuff.

ET: What sort of stuff?

KM: Well, he actually invented an extraordinary measuring device, a levelometer which was designed to measure, to help surveyors figure out how level bridges were. It used mercury and it was magnetic, and it was the forerunner of everything that you have in your iPhone these

days. It's a little, you know, it told you whether something's level or not, the inclinometer and in the iPhone.

ET: Truly!

KM: Someone's going to sue me for saying that. But that was, yeah, he was, at one point he was going to set up a little inventions business with his mate. That didn't happen, thank goodness, he wouldn't have earned any money at it. But, yeah, he was a great man very gentle man.

ET: Yeah. You've spoken a lot about him, not so much about your mother. What was she like?

KM: She's still around. That's why.

ET: You don't talk about her.

KM: Yeah, that's very much in order to wind her up yeah.

ET: But, was it a happy home?

KM: Oh good Lord, yes. I mean, three boys. I say a happy home, yes it was a happy home. Three boys, usually a motorbike engine on the, you know, in parts on the kitchen table or the gas boiler in bits on the floor. And, my mother kind of taring her hair out, you know. She's living with four males all of whom are kind of building and fixing models and soldering things on her work top, yeah.

ET: Did she work outside the home or did she have her hands?

KM: She also worked, yeah, yeah, she worked in accounts and later on ran a social services care department. Yeah, yeah she had to, you know, engineers weren't very well paid in the 1960s. They're not hugely well paid now. I grew up in a house where everything was made, partly because that was the culture my parents grew up in and because they had no money when they got married. And so, that was just simply what you did. You know, mum sewed and knitted and made clothes for us. And, I even now, kind of, slightly bristle at the idea of being the only boy in my class who had shorts, trousers, you know, made by my mum and a knobbly pullover made by her because everybody else had these beautiful thin pullovers, you know, which were thin of course.

ET: And you were warmer.

KM: Yeah, I was warmer, yeah, yeah.

ET: So, you said before and I'm quoting you here, "My parents weren't particularly strict in a way, though, a very liberal 60s parents. I had sort of escaped, I think, the rigours of their religion when they had left the rural seaside Yorkshire town they'd grew up in. One of my grandfathers was a preacher, you see."

KM: Yeah.

ET: That feels paradoxical a kind of quite strong Methodist upbringing which required church on Sundays, that you said you went to, but then, also a kind of, you know, bending to the prevailing 60s counterculture.

KM: Yeah. You know, my parents weren't hippies. They didn't run around in kaftans and smoke weed. They were very, very correct people. But, at the same time, my father was engaged in

this technological world. And, I think, given where they had come from and when in the 40s and 50s and particularly in this rural East Yorkshire from very, very strict background, I had an amazingly kind of liberal time. I think, my grandfather, for example, never forgave my father for stealing his daughter from him and taking her away. My dad grew up in a household which was much wilder. So, my grandfather from his side, his father, played piano in the pub and also trombone in the Salvation Army band.

ET: Right.

KM: Never really worked and he was always unemployed. And, his kids, my uncle, for example, who came, he was an artist, grew up, you know, and went to art college and became engineers and nurses. There were lots of them and they all did various things, but a complete mixture of disciplines. And, yeah, if anybody had a liberal education it was my father.

ET: That's like, sort of, you know, what was meant to produce a polymath TV presenter really.

KM: Yeah, yeah I suppose so, a jack of all trades. I'm from a family of jacks yeah.

ET: So, you finished school and you took your gap year in a vineyard.

KM: Yeah. Sounds ideal doesn't it?

ET: I know, it really, really does. Was that something that happened by design or accident?

KM: Well, I went off to Italy. I was going to read languages, I did that, you know, I did that for a short while. And so, I needed to brush up on my Italian. I wanted to stay and, you know, coming from the village in Bedfordshire where, in the 1970s, it, you know, we had Top of the Pops on television. We had, you know, three television stations. We had, you know, a bus that gets us to the local town. But, life wasn't that glamorous or exciting. I worked in a pub a lot. And so, to go to Italy and suddenly discover the architecture, the sunshine, the culture, the language, every, I fell in love with the place and found, almost, for myself, a new identity. I could sort of almost make myself into a different human being. And, I got this job working on a farm and it was part paid, but it was also earning room and board and stuff. It allowed me to study because I got a place at the conservatory in Florence to study music, by this point I thought I was going to go off and do music until my dad wrote me a very long letter and said no you're coming home.

ET: He was looking to his father I guess.

KM: I guess, yeah, yeah, you know, there were times in my life where suddenly the Methodist kind of, you know.

ET: The Methodist intervention.

KM: Yeah the Methodist, we call it that, the Methodist intervention kind of made its presence felt. And, I loved working on the farm. At the time, I didn't realise what it was. I was just looking after some vines learning stuff. And, but it was a biodynamic farm making Chainti wine in the Chainti region. And, I look back and realised how extraordinary privileged it was because there were techniques and the aspects to the farm which are really rare. And, you know, I thought that's just how you did it.

ET: That's completely lovely. Well, you had the Methodist intervention and returned to Britain to read modern languages, philosophy, and then art and architecture at Cambridge. What were you trying to get out of university?

KM: Well, for a lot of it, I was trying to leave as quickly as possible. I had a good time there, great time without realising it. I think I was quite arrogant about how having spent the time abroad in the real world making and doing stuff, working on a farm, I saw how, I just felt that you know, sitting and writing essays wasn't the most productive way of using my time. And, all my life, I've had, I suppose, this tension between an academic interest and writing. I remember leaving university thinking, thank God that's the last time I need to write an essay. And since then, I've written I don't know how many books and, you know, articles and still do, and scripts. And, in a way, the tool that I use the most is the word.

ET: You say that you didn't realise you were having a good time. In retrospect, what were you doing that was fun that you didn't realise?

KM: Pretty well everything, you know. I mean I seen a lot of drama, designing sets, designing posters for people. I used to earn a bit of money designing posters because, doing a lot of music.

ET: Because you were part of [the Footlights ensemble](#) weren't you?

KM: Well, I was the designer so I did, yeah, so I did some sets and costumes for them yeah.

ET: And for listeners that might not know, that was for people like Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie, they were all contemporaries.

KM: Yeah, Tony Slattery, Emma Thompson, Jan Ravens, yeah.

ET: Sometimes, I mean, at the time when you were doing that, did you have any kind of in the moment realisation that this was actually a pretty good bunch of people and a pretty good way to be spending your life?

KM: I think, at the time, when you, you know, always with the threat of an essay crisis or an exam looming over you, nevertheless, at the time, to be asked to do stuff or to get involved in stuff or to go to an audition and get a part, whatever it was, or to join a choir and sing, you knew that you were doing it with gifted interesting people. And, that was a little bit daunting and a little bit, you know, yeah, humbling at times. But, it's a very small bubble. It was a tiny town in the middle of nowhere, you know, filled with students. It was a completely artificial world. In addition, sort of laced with all this ridiculous tradition of hall and high table and gowns and oh I don't know, you know. It was sort of hilarious. It was Harry Potter meets, you know, the privileged middle classes. And I was not, although I was from this sort of new middle class, it wasn't an environment which I felt very much at home in, partly because it was very institutional. And, I hadn't gone to a boarding school. So, I didn't understand how any of that worked, yeah. And so, inevitably, as the new boy, you feel very threatened by that. Yeah. I kind of seen enough of the world at that point to realise I wanted to kind of be in that real world and was impatient to get out.

ET: So, you finished at Cambridge, you did get a degree in the end. Didn't you?

KM: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, eventually, having studied—I considered it a bit like the American system, I did about eight subjects before I eventually got out, yeah, and then clearly qualified for nothing at that point.

ET: So, I mean, it was interesting what you were saying just now about you having this tension between the kind of academic and the rigorous and the studios and then the practical.

KM: Yeah, yeah.

ET: Because in a way that's design.

KM: Yeah, yeah it is, yeah, and that's I suppose the natural home for me. Absolutely. Being able to both resolve problems with a pencil and a piece of paper but also being able to communicate them. Yes, it certainly is. I think actually, you know, in the end, drawing and writing is two tools that help thinking.

ET: So, you started working in sort of design areas. What was some of the highlights of that early career, some of the things you're proud of when you look back?

KM: Oh wow, I did retrain as a theatre designer afterwards. I went to work briefly for a man called [Ralph Koltai](#) and did some work for him and did a lot of theatre and education, it was called, basically unpaid, profit share stuff which was loss share. A few bits and bobs. It was all good fun and it was pretty desperate and very hard to make a living.

ET: It's not just bits and bobs for retail stores. It's extremely famous ceiling above the Harrods Food Hall, I just need to bring that in.

KM: Yeah but it was, you know, I worked for Harrod's for a little while. I look back at that period actually and I think it was all very exciting but it was, there was this sort of element of expiration and fun about it. But, my own son, who's now 30 who's an architect, and he has followed a far more serious growing up and correct.

ET: Correct?

KM: Correct path through design.

ET: By whose dictum is it correct?

KM: By my standards it's correct.

ET: Okay.

KM: Because he's, you know, he's trained longer and his discipline is greater and his, therefore, his abilities and his, like any architect, the tools he has are greater and far more sophisticated than any that I had, you know. I mean, you're both physically but also, professionally.

ET: Did he do that off his own bat or did you have to offer various Methodist Interventions along the way?

KM: No, not at all, no, no, you, with your own kids you want to be, you want to encourage them in whatever they do and support them, absolutely and offer the unconditional support and love they all deserve. But, at the same time, to guide my children, into an area in which I enjoy my enthusiasms, would've been very wrong. It's better they find their own way, yeah.

ET: So, how did it come to be that you found yourself on television? How did Grand Designs come about?

KM: Being the jack of all trades, I got asked if I'd go and do some pieces about lighting. And, at that point, the work I was doing was studio design, it morphed into-- I had a design studio. We'd ended up designing a lot of product and lighting and furniture and bits and bobs. And, at one point I owned a shop and selling stuff in that, we sort of specialised in lighting. And, at that point, there were very few lighting designers, actually in the world, very few people specialized in it as

a discipline. And, I didn't really specialise, but, I could talk about it. At least I could try and sell it. So, I went on telly to do just that, and in a few little pieces here and there and for a few programmes, different programmes different series. And, eventually, then, the producer Daisy Goodwin said, look, would you want, do you fancy doing a bit more? So, I did a bit more pieces to camera and managed to find a kind of, I suppose, it was an outlet for my various interests and nerdy hobbies, really, you know, be that collecting pigments or talking about lighting or enjoying, you know, making paint or whatever, decorating.

ET: So, what was the kind of core idea right back then? Was it going we are going to follow these poor bastards through one of the hardest things they're ever going to do and people will come and watch?

KM: Well, you know, in the 1990s, television consisted primarily of entertainment programmes, wildlife programmes, documentaries, that sort of unusual strand of rather exploitative reality shows where people would swap careers and, you know--

ET: Wives.

KM: Yeah, indeed, and weren't fully told of the consequences of what they were doing or indeed what was happening behind the scenes with the cameras. And then, there was makeover. And so, this programme, Grand Designs, was sold to the channel, Channel 4, as the biggest makeover programme you've ever seen. But, Daisy, who also wrote books about poetry and edited a poetry column, was wise enough to realise that, within that, there was a tremendously poetic idea, you know, of human adventure and expression. And so, she instinctively felt that it was going to be bigger. And, in the early days, we really did struggle with our contributors because they automatically thought we were going to just exploit them and just, you know, paint them as idiots. And, it took a fair while, a couple of series really before we were able to convince people that we were going to simply tell their stories. We wanted to be truthful about what we were seeing. And, it took a long while, not because people hadn't seen the programme, but because the culture of television was so cynical at that point.

ET: They would've understood it better if you were going to have a competition.

KM: Absolutely.

ET: Whoever got the grandest line first would.

KM: Yeah. Well actually, my producer and I, because the people who made the programme, John Silver and myself became very good friends. John is a great, great producer. And, we kind of, when you first make a television programme, you don't know what you're doing. You've got a rough idea. You didn't go out there really with a script. You go out with a sort of set of objectives that you sort of discuss a great deal and believe it's the right thing to be doing. If you look at the very first episode we ever made, it was all over the shop. I mean, we were trying to do a little bit of decorating with the guys and I was drawing their house for them and, oh goodness knows what. I mean it was all, it was, we were just simply experimenting. And so, I mean, of course, after the first series, we refined what we believed to be the right thing. But, what was remarkable was, very quickly we landed on the idea we were going to celebrate our subject. We were going to celebrate architecture and celebrate these journeys. And, that meant that we had to choose products that we kind of believed in for start that we didn't dislike.

ET: You didn't want to mock them you wanted to support them.

KM: Absolutely. And, we got such shtick from our colleagues in the industry for that, an amazing amount of criticism from within the television industry.

ET: Because you're missing a trick or what was the criticism around?

KM: Because we weren't being cynical.

ET: Right.

KM: We're were being celebratory. If I'm proud of one thing professionally, it is taking that stance and standing by it and delivering it. And I think time established that we did the right thing.

ET: So, you look back at that first episode and it's all over the place but it's now become, you know, highly formatted to the point.

KM: Ah, I don't like that word.

ET: Sorry. But, it's kind of true, right? I mean, you've got a drinking game.

KM: I didn't invent that drinking game.

ET: Sure. But the fact that there exists one, suggests that there are things that people look for.

KM: Well, no, no you see here, no, no, you see. Here I have to disagree because there isn't a drinking game. There's about seven or eight drinking games. And, they're all different.

ET: Okay.

KM: And, this demonstrates the variation. There cannot be one drinking game because you can't apply it to all the programmes. And, look, yeah, we had the, there are certain knowns, we hope. One is that they finish the house. Two is that they probably do go over budget but so does everybody. Jørn Utzon did here. Three is that it may take longer, but, we're prepared for that and we generally forgive them. And anything else can happen. So, day one, yeah, yeah we see the cad and we see them and we introduce them we need a a lot information at the top of the show, then we watch the people go around the finished house. But, we don't know what's going to happen in the middle.

ET: How many episodes have you had to jettison because the house just doesn't get finished?

KM: Well, actually probably jettison probably only about six.

ET: That's an astonishingly small amount.

KM: Yeah but I've done about 200 now so that's not that many. But, there are quite a few in limbo still after maybe a decade who just can't quite let go, you know.

ET: I'm sure that it's a, you know, having you lot filming is a motivator for people to actually finish.

KM: Many people use us and they're quite glad that we're there for that reason.

ET: Yeah right. So, the fame that this successful series has brought you is not inconsiderable, I imagine. How has that changed what you can do and how you sort of move around the world?

KM: There are people now who are famous for being famous, celebrities who are celebrities for being celebrities. That's all to do with positioning and placement and endorsement and self-

promotion. And, if you don't do that, then, you're not. So, I believe that you bring it on yourself and you engage as much or as little as you want with your market and with the press and the magazines and all that stuff. In most of my pursuits, I'm kind of quite, antisocial.

ET: Solis all across the countryside, that sort of thing.

KM: Yeah, or with a mate, yeah. I honestly believe, anyway the more of yourself that you put in the public eye, the less, the smaller your private world is, it's that simple.

ET: One of the things that fame has brought you though is a platform from which to champion a variety of causes. Sustainable housing is a big one.

KM: Big one.

ET: You have an agency now called HAB or [Happiness Architecture Beauty](#) which builds mass housing. What are the principles of HAB?

KM: So, HAB.

ET: HAB.

KM: As we call it is a house builder currently in a phase, how do we call it, phase of growth really. Although I have to say development is not easy work, you know, and we've had to really, like most businesses in that area really tumbling up and down, roller coaster ride over the years. We started in 2006. I mean, it's run by people far more able than me. But, I, having started it, sort of still take a really passionate interest in it sort of philosophy and growth and the schemes we build. And, the big idea has to do with first of all yes making, building energy efficient homes that are super insulated with managed ventilation and air tight and at the same time bring some of the values of what you see on television to popular and available housing. So, it's high ceilings and big windows and plenty of light and connection to the outdoors and lots of other things too that we kind of believe in passionately in buildings that we should see architectural experiences, you know, and simple practical solutions to the every day.

ET: Like what?

KM: A porch outside the house, for example, somewhere to park your buggy or bicycle or to lock it up even. To keep the, the house clean, big front door mats, lots of storage, that kind of stuff, you know. Very simple but essential ideas for modern living. Open plan, semi open plan, broken plan layouts, and that's all good and many people are doing that kind of thing. But, I suppose one of the big differentials for us is the public realm, it's the space in between the buildings that I'm really interested in. How trees benefit and promote health, how incidental food growing in a housing scheme can educate kids and actually get people into food growing in a way that reduces their dependency on the food supply chains. How social interaction and sociability and making streets places not just for cars but for bicycles and human beings too can improve collective mental, physical well being of people.

ET: Social cohesion.

KM: Yeah, social cohesion, resilience. And, a lot of the work we've done has been monitored, for example, by in a couple of studies some universities got involved. And, it's really quite powerful to see how, for example, on some of our schemes, the impact and the dependency on the existing social infrastructure, for example, and physical infrastructure, the roads, health service, local social services and psychological support, is really quite surprisingly reduced.

ET: It's a hard one though, because, you know, you are a small group of developers who are behaving with these sorts of principles in a much larger pool of developers that are very profit oriented. And one sees, across the world, development projects which are being put together constantly that don't enshrine any of those sort of values and are very motivated by a profit generation rather than any of these other things. I mean, how do we deal with that as a sort of, you know, as a capitalist society? What has to change before developers look at these bigger issues and start privileging some of these ideas over the bottom line?

KM: So, our objectives remain the same objectives that we espoused in 2006. And, one of them is the change development, haven't done that yet. One was to provide exemplars, we're still doing that. One was to demonstrate that it's possible to actually do our schemes and still make healthy profits and that actually social returns and social profits and social capital are a very important aspect to development. And, it isn't just about throwing up units. Now, yeah, in the wider world, we've got a lot of persuading still to do. But, there are good guys. And, one of the most influential large scale developers is Lendlease based in Australia but also working around the world, working a lot in the U.K. We know them very well and they really are the good guys among the bigger developers. Evan and Civic in the U.K. are doing fantastic work. So, we are seeing some stuff. My office is in Bristol in the west of England. And, yesterday, the City Council announced that they'd voted unanimously to radically reduce the environmental property of the city and to meet the U.N.'s 12 year targets for climate control.

ET: City of Sydney is doing a similar thing.

KM: Yeah. So, this wasn't happening ten years ago.

ET: And, I suppose it could also be about something to do with change in consumer behaviour. Because, you know, you have a situation where, on one hand, people want to own their own homes, they want to build their own homes. But, if you go out to the suburbs in Sydney or areas in Britain, certainly the United States, there's a big tendency for the so called McMansion, you know, the kind of suburban home that's built to the edge of the block. There's a school of thought that says well, you know, if people want to do that, that's their, you know, home is the palace. But, is part of the challenge for changing the suburban and urban environment to change of kind of homes that people want to build?

KM: Yeah, I think it is. The experience of architecture's got nothing to do with the size. It's got nothing to do with building to the edge of the block. It's got to do with economy and actual, actually, clever ideas and.

ET: It can have to do with budget though, the access to that sort of design.

KM: It can do. But, you can build small and beautiful, you can build small and with great experiences within the building. It's possible to do it all at scale. And, it's possible to do it in a community where actually if it's stuff that you -- say you can't afford a large plot. What you can get is a kitchen that overlooks a communal play area or a park, you know, or, you have the opportunity to share an allotment or share space. And, sharing in community is one of the things that we've forgotten to do. The average power tool gets used, in its entire life, for four minutes. So, to have it shared on a piece of common ground where a common sand pit or a common trampoline for ten houses to use with a lawnmower that everybody can share or two lawnmowers, right, is going to be cheaper, it's going to be more enjoyable, and it's going to, certainly, going to free up space and free up time and free up, free up money, you know, for people. And so, I'm a great believer in that principle in community of providing opportunities for people to share. Now, the last thing we would do is tell people how to live their lives, you know,

move into one of our schemes. We don't tell people you can't buy a lawnmower. What we do is encourage people to, is to share what they have and to actually find that common ground.

ET: And again, it does feel like, sort of, more broadly socially we're moving towards a more share based economy.

KM: A more share based economy, a more circular local based economy where people do, you know, so, when you see a, in, I'm sure there's a generation where they don't own cars, you know, they join a car club or they rent or they, and there's so many options there. As indeed there are with tenures in housing. So, whereas, for you and I for example we might think of either renting or we buy, now, you can rent to buy, you can take a part ownership with a social landlord, you can privately rent, you can ethically rent.

ET: You can do that in some places.

KM: Well, for us, those, all of those tenure types are very important and getting the diversity of tenure type on a scheme.

ET: Yeah, we're a bit behind here in Australia on that.

KM: I, you know, we keep pushing at that door. I think that's an important, you know, the diversity of offer in any place is essential to the quality of it.

ET: In all of your years of thinking about this, are there any basic tenets of home design advice that you've distilled?

KM: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And, they're really basic ones. They're to do with things like storage, views to the sky, because we can all enjoy that, and the fact that the more stuff we fill our lives with the more there is to go wrong. So, you know, high tech homes, super tech homes, homes that have a lot of facilities and rooms and, the more windows you have, the more there is to clean. It's that kind of old tenets, they're old fashioned ideas, but, happiness really doesn't reside in numbers. It's not about quantity it's about quality. If you can't afford somewhere big, don't worry. It's a false god. It won't bring you happiness. What brings you happiness is, in the end is relationships. It's human beings. If you spend your time washing your windows, polishing your services and, you know, vacuuming all those carpets, you see less of the people around you, you love. It's kind of simple isn't it. Yeah. So yeah, it's, architecture, there's a wonderful quote by a lovely critic, Charles Moore, he said architecture should be an instrument of connexion not of isolation. And, the trouble is in our world, it's usually the opposite.

ET: You build your dream home and then you sit inside it.

KM: Yeah and wonder why you're not happy.

ET: Yeah. This raises an interesting question which is of architectural design is somehow a reflection of your soul, your very being, your essence. I think that that gets expressed by people a lot, you know, this is, I've always imagined that this is the home that I, the kitchen, I've just, this kitchen will be the kitchen in which I will find my true purpose and I will be recognised for the person I truly am.

KM: And then six years later they change it. So, it's rubbish. Isn't it. I mean, it's a taste change. My taste is not your taste. Your taste is not your taste, it changes every ten years. And so, you know, we all can admire other people's work. We don't necessarily have to want it or like it. But,

we can sort of admire the quality of the design and the quality of the craftsmanship. And, the more I see, the more confused I am as to what actually I really, I really want. But I say that facetiously because, what I, if I were to design a house tomorrow or ask my son to design a house, it would result from a very iterative process of working together, asking questions about space and storage. And, it's often in response to place, to the outlook and to where the sun tracks, and, where there's a tree to provide shade or something. So, in a way, architecture and design are very pragmatic disciplines. And, they connect to those very primal desires we have, I've always wanted this, I love that. But, you have to ask yourself, what are the things that matter in your life really and what are the experiences and the beliefs you hold dear, not just remember what you saw last week in a magazine that you rather liked. I live in a world surrounded by people who are kind of expressing their tastes all the time and their dreams, of course, yeah. But, I'm just watching that, as are we all. They're not dreams that we necessarily, we all have our own dreams, we have our own private desires. And it's architecture's job to figure out what are the important things, the longer term things, and to organise space and light in the volumes that we live in and to provide the best possible experiences for us to flourish. It's that, it's a very simple set of objectives really.

ET: Does your house reflect your dreams and desires?

KM: Ahhh come on. It's comfortable.

ET: What's it like, your house?

KM: I live in a very modest place and it's very comfortable and very, it's good for the moment. And, who knows, you know, five years time it'll be something. I used to deflect all conversations about where I live because I thought, first of all, preserve the myth. Secondly, it preserves some privacy. Actually now I have come to think of it as entirely relevant because my job is to talk about other people's journeys. It's actually important I don't colour what I do and what we say on television, what we present. It's kind of an important thing to remain in neutral gear and to sort of offer--

ET: Or have a tabular rasa upon which people can--

KM: To provide the questioning voice and to almost represent the viewer position the viewers mind. I mean, you know, nobody asks David Attenborough what his pets are.

ET: They probably did actually. You said something earlier which I'd like to come back to. Because it's not the first time that you've referred to something like this. Which was, when you were in Italy on your gap year you were able to kind of create a personality for yourself. And, you've said, at another point, that you're quite shy and always have been and you discovered performing and TV — and I'm quoting you -- TV was kind of a way to hide your true self.

KM: Ah, you've done too much research.

ET: I have, sorry, it's a fault. But, I'm interested in this idea of self-creation. Do you have a sense of a true you in the same way there might be a true kitchen? Or, is that just sort of a fools errand?

KM: Yeah, no that's a very good, of course we, all of us do present an aspect, a shell of ourselves to the world. And, we go through life admiring others for their confidence not realising that, like us, they're exactly the same, you know, it's kind of. You know, we're all a little brittle on the outside and rather fragile on the inside. I think that old adage about to your own self be true, of course is valuable. Even if your own self is conflicted, ambiguous, confused, contradictory. I'm talking about myself but I think I'm probably talking about every human being on the planet.

So, I think anything that happens with the passing of time is that you become more resolved about how you shouldn't give yourself too hard a time. And as to the opportunity to develop that carapace, that slightly more resilient shell, television's quite a good place to do that. It's a little bit, I know one or two teachers, I've got two cousins who are teachers and I think, I think presenting television's a little bit like teaching, you know. You're in control of the class. You can bang on.

ET: People have to listen to you.

KM: It's not a conversation. I'm just telling you how it is all right. So, I'm often berated for lecturing and hectoring and not have a conversation and not. But, having said that, as I say, I think it probably suits my personality inside. And, it does allow me to, in a way, to retain a quieter self that is off camera, there's a more private self, yes, which is me.

ET: So, your next birthday, you're turning 60.

KM: Yeah.

ET: And, your next year, you'll reach the milestone of 200 episodes of Grand Designs.

KM: Well, you think we should celebrate both at the same time or something?

ET: I was thinking it'd be a lovely party.

KM: Listen. Okay, two things here, a mate of mine said don't celebrate your 60th birthday, wait a few years, it'll be much more fun.

ET: Why?

KM: Much more relaxed, that's what he did.

ET: Okay.

KM: Yeah. Two, Grand Designs will be going to the pub.

[Laughter]

ET: Well, Kevin McCloud, it's been a great pleasure wasting an hour with you.

KM: And for me. Thank you very much.