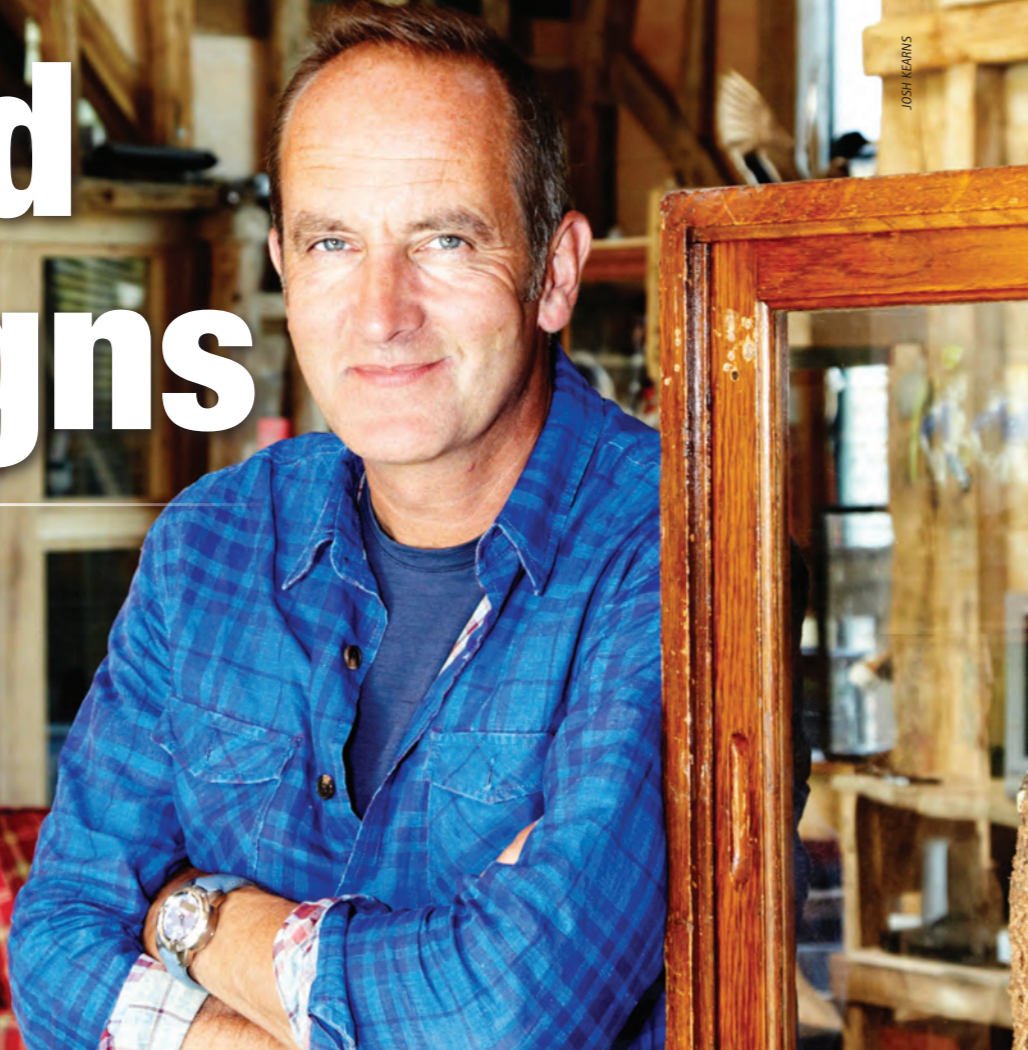


Grand Designs



If GTC member Tony Etwell hadn't become a cameraman, he would have liked to be an architect... so, eleven years working on Channel 4's flagship property programme, Grand Designs, presented by Kevin McCloud, has been the perfect job. Tony's work on the series earned him an Award for Excellence at the recent GTC Awards, just going to prove the point that loving the subject certainly helps in the quest to produce excellent work.

Grand Designs, now into its thirteenth series of six one-hour programmes, features presenter Kevin McCloud following the progress of individuals or families as they strive to create their dream home. The building projects are always technically or logistically challenging (sometimes both) and push boundaries in some way, either by involving new technology and materials, or using traditional craftsmanship and ancient construction techniques. Each project is totally unique and all come with their own different issues and challenges for both crew and contributors.

My involvement on the programme has been for 11 years now and it has been great for me as I'm fascinated by architecture, design and ecologically efficient building techniques. As well as having a wonderful time working on the show, hopefully I've picked up enough to be able to build my own dream home. For the time being though I'll stick with hand-building a post-and-beam shed at the bottom of my garden. Every man needs his shed!

My good luck and great light

My first day on *Grand Designs* came in June 2002 in Thursley, Surrey. At the time I was just recovering from an 'almost bad debt' of nearly £65,000 and this day on *Grand Designs* couldn't have come at a better time.

And boy, was I lucky! Shafts of sunlight were streaming through gaps opening up in the old threshing barn as 100-year-old clay tiles were ripped off. As the demolition team got stuck into their work, the midday sun pierced through the dusty old woodwormed rafters, like a scene from a Ridley Scott movie. It was a lighting cameraman's dream.

I decided to roll out all my top nuggets of cameracraft, picked up and remembered from my days as a young cameraman starting out at Thames TV. Always eager to learn from the brilliant cameramen there, I had studied the craft of smooth and accurate operating from Ray Gearing (Ray had drummed into me the need for precision and, above all, the importance of practice, practice, practice); from Mike Hobbs (my documentary and drama mentor) I had picked up the golden rule of 'four cutaways per wide shot'; and from the great Albert Almond, my senior cameraman, this gem: "Include your emotion in the pictures to tell the story." I really was pulling out all the stops here!

It turned out to be one of those perfect filming days: the conditions were ideal; the subject matter right up my street; and my rapport with Kevin seemed great. This was a job I really, really wanted.

Mind you, my sparkling new Sony Digibeta with Canon J11x wide-angle lens was now caked in sticky Surrey clay and the matte box had turned a lovely shade of chocolate-brown. Thank heavens I'd taken advice from Visuals at Teddington and invested in that extremely expensive Portabrace camera jacket. As it happened, with this series cropping up, it turned out to be the best £160 I ever spent, what with the weather conditions and environments I would end up shooting in over the coming years.

On location

A single *Grand Designs* show entails a number of filming days on which Kevin McCloud visits the contributors (usually six to eight per programme) and a number of filming days during which the production team follow the ongoing build. The days with Kevin are recorded by an experienced crew and include a combination of actuality with Kevin, interviews with the contributors, and – vital to the look of the programme – beautiful, relevant shots to illustrate aspects of the build being discussed. We also film Kevin's PTCs (pieces to camera), in which he will eloquently communicate his view of the project, often with great humour, revealing in a subtle but candid way exactly what he thinks of the project.

The team on site for the crew days consists of: producer/director (PD); camera operator/DOP, assistant producer, sound recordist and the highly valued general assistant. This is just the right number of personnel to complete the schedule efficiently and within budget without incurring a KBS [please consult a colleague if you are not familiar with this technical term!]. On the first shoot day and for the completion of the project, or sometimes when the unfinished build isn't going to plan, we may also see the series producer out on set.

The all-important PTCs

An important and distinctive aspect of the show is 'Kevin's PTCs'. These are just as much fun for the crew as they are for the viewer. As the build progresses we are always keen to hear whether he thinks the architectural design blends harmoniously into its surroundings or is more reminiscent of a WWII bunker, and whether he considers the family creating the project to be courageous or just plain bonkers.

These PTCs are filmed in a variety of styles that can involve anything from a traditional tripod set-up with a bit of poly for fill and polarizer to control shine on the cheeks and saturate the shot; to a developing shot with dolly and tracks or minijib; a more exploratory handheld walk and talk; or sometimes just plain sitting on a log – whatever feels right for the particular story



Role reversal! Kevin filming me delivering a PTC high up on a wood-framed, circular build. Safety regulations were carefully adhered to, as always, and the builder made sure boards were screwed onto the joists for our safety, allowing us to make it look exciting without danger. Incidentally, the shot was over-exposed and the PTC was pretty rubbish too – so it was soon back to the day job for both of us!

and environment. However, what doesn't vary is that it is always important to be physically close to Kevin as he engages with the viewer – not so close as to be photographically unflattering, of course – but close enough to feel as if you are actually with him.

It goes almost without saying that fundamental to the success of the show is Kevin's relationship with the crew and importantly the camera... but perhaps it's best if I leave Kevin to talk about

Kevin McCloud: a relationship with the camera

The one thing I'm searching for in filming is intimacy with the viewer, a one-to-one relationship, not a one-to-three-million. Which means a relationship with the camera and – just as importantly – the cameraman or woman. I mention the camera because for me it's not an unblinking eye or machine, it's the embodiment of the viewer; perhaps female, sometimes male; always someone I want to engage. As for the human being behind it – their personality is crucial in assisting that relationship.

What's ultimately so important is that the photographer can do it without thinking; that the technical stuff is automatic. I enjoy working with camera operators most when the machine becomes an extension of them and their personalities (just as great musicians make the instrument an extension of themselves) rather than an encumbrance or box of tricks to fiddle with. This is where the art lies; not in gauging f-stops or setting ND filters... or ordering a pizza with all those little buttons.

They say the best bit of any camera is the human eye – or at least the human brain. And so it is with filming. Yes, it should look absolutely beautiful (and on *Grand Designs* we film in very old-fashioned ways – we even use the word film) and yes, we should always capture the essence of the process. But if there is no one intelligent looking through the eyepiece to judge the content, listen to the words, catch that unexpected moment and soften the hard glass lens into something more humane, then all the technical training is meaningless, no matter how big your box of filters. Needless to say, Tony is the most humane and sensitive cameraman I've ever known.

that (see the box above). Like me, Kevin is passionate about architecture, design and the importance of creating a great home for the family, but he also has a strong and informed interest in photography and the film-making process. I tend to find that on the best productions everyone is enthusiastic about each other's occupations and interests, resulting not only in a smooth and enjoyable filming process but ultimately in the end product being more engaging to view. Of course, it can be tough when Kevin has been out with his camera and comes back with a photograph beautifully highlighting a particular feature in stunning light and then throws down the challenge to me to reproduce or improve on it! It's a fun competition with no winner though, just teamwork and a good example of Kevin's enthusiasm for our profession.

Trademark shots: the Finals

Grand Designs uses most of its trademark shots in Part Four of the programme or 'The Finals'. Parts One to Three are filmed in a mostly documentary style with the emphasis on actuality, punctuated with cinematic images to enhance the narrative. But after the final commercial break it all changes to what we hope will be 'a classy celebration of the beautifully finished architectural design... if all goes to plan. This is where the dolly and track plus Jimmy Jib (normally supplied and operated by Guy Linton) come into their own to give the programme a lift and that injection of polish we all enjoy bringing to it.

All the tracking shots need to be smooth and precise, so it is vital we use steel track and a solid dolly as the ground is never even. To show off brand new natural stone floors, immaculate polished concrete or newly-laid Douglas Fir timber floorboards, wobbly tracking shots simply won't do. We have found that the easiest and speediest dolly for this is the Egriment Focus Suitcase Dolly with steel track, a box of wedges, a few paganinis when it's very lumpy underneath and a metre-long spirit level. This is light enough to move around and easy to show APs, directors or even the sound recordist how to gently glide you along the rails (the budget sadly doesn't run to a grip). Put your emotion into the move, gently start, build up the speed and ease into a final position remembering to help the editor with a hold at the end. You can also operate the dolly yourself when it is not necessary to pan or tilt... and the kids love it too (see the 'dollies in a dolly' artistically positioned overnight by one very cute small family member)!

The Jimmy Jib is vital to Part Four with the crane used to full effect swooping across gleaming roofs and tracking around glistening features of the newly finished 'ideal home', adding a vital fifth dimension to end the story and celebrate the completed project that has usually taken so much out of its creators. Plus, of course, it offers that

The first 'passive house' in England (meaning virtually no charge for power off the grid as it is so well insulated) captured at the magic 4300K



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Kevin with our perfect hosts Rowena and Ed



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great end shot where the camera swoops into Kevin before pulling back to reveal the whole 'grand design' in all its glory. This is always one of my favourite shots, not least because, very often, late into the gentle evening light, we get the chance to make the gaffer take every lamp out of the van to capture the dark blue light in the sky in combination with warm tungsten from within the building: 4300K colour balance if we get the timing just right (see above).

The jib shots add another facet to the camerawork, not necessarily by moving. Sometimes they can just reach that special angle to show the building off to its best advantage. Even when time in the schedule is tight, it's always worth struggling to get the jib into the perfect position. Everyone mucks in: directors, APs, photographers, soundies, contributors, neighbours... and, of course, Kevin.

The lighting for this end section is also more architectural and even dramatic. We try to put in hard(ish) shadows into the background of the images, using either natural sunlight at the right time of day or perhaps an ARRI 2.5HMI.

Planning for the Finals

In terms of planning it is very important to start thinking about the Finals on the very first day of a new story. This requires quite a commitment to the programme. A *Grand Designs* project may provide just eight days' employment during the build period, and these can be spread out, so when that fantastic breeze of a job in Monte Carlo crops up, it can be a difficult decision if you're in the middle of an ongoing project. Generally though, the decision has to be to remain loyal to the show, being important not only for the look of it but also in providing much-appreciated continuity for the families who are often in a very stressful situation.

Fine planning before the shoot must happen and all the *Grand Design* directors are very good at this. I guess you could say you have a year or so to study the project, learn where the sun rises and falls, its height in the sky, and work out which parts of the new building will look best at what time of the day. How easy will the landscape be to work with when positioning bigger lamps and a jib? Will there be areas of cover to get great shots when it rains? Is there a perfect place and time to get a long shot from across the valley? How can you combine the landscape to emphasise the form of the building?

This process of learning is continuous throughout the build so that by the time you come to your 'Finals exam' you are as prepared as you can be - I keep telling my kids this too (apparently I'm boring

and don't live on the edge) but in this case, as in other areas of life, it really is important.

Living the project

A very significant part of the success of these programmes is the relationship the team forges with the contributors as they navigate towards achieving their dreams. Both Kevin and the rest of the team find themselves 'living the project' and at its best you find yourself wanting to stay after the shoot, drink tea and eat homemade cake (thank you, Rowena). Rowena and Ed were a perfect case in point - this lovely family were building a stunning oak-frame home in Herefordshire with the aid of Pascal, a talented traditional craftsman. For the contributors (and I don't really like using this word for people who often become friends), embarking on a huge and potentially groundbreaking project, often entailing putting their finances on the line, this can be an enormously stressful period of their lives. The very last thing they need at times is a group of film-makers thrusting a big fat Sony PDW800 in their faces. I imagine what you really don't relish in these circumstances is being awakened in your caravan on site, having hardly slept due to your new baby crying all night, hair not brushed, still in pyjamas, to find Kevin popping in (pursued by us lot) to enquire cheerily: "So are you sure the calculations on this Eco-Arch are accurate?"... But it happens.

The Eco-Arch: a good example

In this story, architect Richard Hawkes and his family had designed an amazing 'Eco-Arch' home in Kent. As the project progressed we really did live every moment with them, staying after the shoots for a natter and even sampling Richard's homemade cider. Now, this might just sound like a jolly and an excuse for a free drink, but this bond is a crucial part of the special chemistry of these shows. At this time,

Dollies on the Egripment Focus Suitcase Dolly artistically arranged as a surprise for us overnight by a young family member



ANTHONY ETWELL

our new friends need continuity and as the film-makers we can often provide support, adopting the extra role of being a friendly face and demonstrating real concern for their well-being.

When we returned to the Eco-Arch a year later, the revisit was a fantastic example of the understanding of each other's lives and work that had been established during the time spent together the previous year. After Kevin had applauded their success, enjoyed a barbecue and commended all the good things their new lifestyle had brought to the family, we were wondering how to add that beautiful extra dimension to the film. It was Richard and the local farmer who came up with the idea of lending us a tractor with a high-lift and basket to achieve the all-important top shot. So, up and down and across we went a few times, polarizer at the ready, and achieved some fantastic shots that perfectly analysed the components of Richard's design. Oh, and we also laughed a lot and once we'd finished there was even time for another cider. Once our wonderful editor had cut the shots together without showing the bumps at the beginning and end, the sequence looked almost as good as Guy Linton's 60ft Jimmy Jib shots (I did say **almost**, Guy!)

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Grand Designs: Kit

When I first started working on *Grand Designs*, my gleaming new Sony Digibeta 790 partnered with a Canon J11x wide-angle, complete with Croziel sunshade matte box and trusty Schneider 5x5 polarizer, came out of the VW Transporter. Oh, and a big lump of poly of course.

Unfortunately, Digibeta is now sadly a thing of the past and my mantelpiece decoration may with regret have to go to eBay soon as my wife Denise doesn't have quite the same admiration for 80s art as I do!

Grand Designs moved to HD a few years ago and, as there were many formats being launched at the time, Visuals from Teddington hired me a Sony HDW790 with the new Canon HJ11x. We have now progressed to HDCAM using a Sony HDW800 sporting the lovely Canon HJ14x, brilliant for architectural work. I'm still using a sunshade matte box, now with a Tiffen 5x5 polarizer, a must for controlling shiny faces. (It is important to have the 5x5 otherwise the edges come into view on the wide end of the lens.)

Grip equipment has remained pretty much the same comprising an Egripment Suitcase Focus Dolly with straights and curves, plus Miller Pro or Libec mini-jib. I have three tripods: Baby Legs, Dogs Legs (medium length) and lightweight carbon fibre legs (the Daddy Long Legs). My pan and tilt head is a Sachtler 18P.

Lighting is minimal except for the 'Finals' where the gloss has to shine and the gaffers Dave Walter and Andy Frizell turn up with some bigish HMIs.

These days the 'non-Kevin days' are filmed by the director and assistant producer using a Canon XF305.

An important point is that we are starting to use a DSLR for filming in cars. It is much safer as your head is not squeezed between the headrest and front dashboard. You can sit seat-belted with the camera comfortably in front of you and the camera is not right in Kevin's face for an unflattering wide angle. The DSLR can easily be fixed internally with limpets or clamps too. We are also just beginning to experiment with a quadcopter for yet another extra dimension.

The camera as viewer

On this show, the camera, when working well, becomes the viewer: straining with Kevin as he takes part in lifting a locally grown oak beam into position for Ed and Rowena's home; or sitting beside Kevin listening to why Freddie and Ben (mum and dad to our 'dollies on the dolly' artist) decided to keep some silo towers in the middle of their lounge. We always try to think of the camera as being that viewer with the crew as their eye and guide. Above all, we strive to avoid the get-out clause "We'll cut around that in the edit, it'll be fine". It won't. You'll lose that emotion and the moment will have passed: the viewer will no longer be there, perspiring and lifting that oak beam.

Passion for the job

Without wishing to sound too much like David Beckham, it's a great bonus if you can manage to work in a genre for which you have a genuine passion. Architecture would

Teamwork – everyone lends a hand for another Jib move



The Jib adds some gloss and extra angles to the all-important 'Finals'



have been my first choice after photography, so *Grand Designs* fulfils my interest in building, and I believe that my understanding of construction assists in the making of the programme. Whatever you are interested in, whether it be travel, fashion or even rocket science, a specific knowledge and interest is always going to help bring that something extra that will enhance the beautifully framed shots.

I'm very lucky to have worked on *Grand Designs* for so many years and it's very satisfying to be part of a programme held in such high regard (although you could say of course that any programme becomes as good as the effort you put into it). I would love to take this opportunity to say a huge thank you to the Guild for my Award for Excellence. It was a big surprise, a special moment and an honour to receive it. I just need to work on how to deliver a quality speech... perhaps I should get a few tips from Mr McCloud! The award is sitting proudly next to my Digibeta – much to my lovely wife Denise's disgust (the Award is fine but apparently the Digibeta gathering dust has to go). So, thank you so much to Dick Hibberd, James French, Keith Massey and all the judges for a great day. I hope I can bruise my right shoulder with a 20-bore shotgun next year!



Tony is presented with a GTC Award for Excellence for his work on Grand Designs by GTC Chair Keith Massey at the GTC Awards 2013

Fact File

GTC member Tony Etwell can be contacted on:
tonyetwell@me.com

See more about Tony's work at: www.image4media.com

See more about *Grand Designs* at:
www.channel4.com/programmes/grand-designs