



“There’s nothing like getting your hands dirty to really get an understanding of the industry”

Property expert, journalist and TV presenter **Kunle Barker** has always had a passion for renovating property

INTERVIEW





Above: garden view from ITV's Love Your Home © krierphotography

Main photo: Kunle Barker

Kunle Barker has spent the past five months much like the rest of us: baking, homeschooling his two daughters and finding ways to pass the time, like playing 90s hip-hop on his piano. Just before lockdown he was part way through filming a new TV property show for Channel 4 set in Italy.

Kunle's face is a familiar one on the property presenting circuit. He's co-hosted two series of ITV's Love Your Home & Garden alongside Alan Titchmarsh, appeared on Sarah Beeny's Renovate, Don't Relocate, and regularly speaks at events like Grand Designs Live and the Ideal Home Show.

His career in front of the camera began when he was approached by ITV in 2017 to deliver the construction projects for Love Your Home & Garden. "They also offered me a role in front of the camera which was a challenge as I was running and delivering all three builds for the show as well as presenting," he explains. "It was a steep learning curve but I'm really proud of the show and how we've been able to change people's lives for the better."



Above: Kunle with Alan Titchmarsh

Far left: Granada House dining terrace

Near left: Kunle with Kevin McCloud

Behind the scenes Kunle is an established property and construction expert. He runs his own construction and design management company, Illustrious Homes. Over the past 15 years the business has delivered more than 8,000 residential refurbishments, 120 school renovations and three sportscentre refits. He's also recently taken on the role of COO at Melt Property – a development company founded by Evan Maindonald – and is a non-executive director at Studio Anyo, an architectural design studio.

Early interest

Kunle's passion for property was forged from a young age: "I always loved houses and buildings and was fascinated by how they were put together. I was intrigued by the materials that made up a home and the differences in styles. I grew up in an 80s new-build home, which I loved as it seemed very modern compared to some of my friends' houses.

"I went to school in Bedford and there I was exposed to the scale and intricacies of Victorian architecture. I remember walking up to school from the train station along tree-lined roads with huge Victorian mansion houses. Coming from a new-build estate in the countryside the scale and the style of the architecture really impressed me."

He made his first investment back in 1996 when he was still at university studying for an MA in human resource management. "I always liked the idea of renovating properties, building and creating homes is a very creative process for me and something I always wanted to do. So when I saw an opportunity I took a risk and jumped straight in, even though I had no experience," he says.

He bought a five-bedroom house in a student area of Leeds, about 20 minutes walk from the university using a 100% graduate mortgage. He spent part of the summer renovating it, then moved in once it was finished, taking one of the rooms himself and renting out the other four to students.

"Having been a student in the city I knew how poor the quality of most houses were so I decided to kit out the house with all new Ikea furniture, which gave it a unique selling point at the time. I was quite nervous about being able to rent the rooms but in the end the other four rooms rented out in less than an hour," he says.

Scaling up

From this first student let he went on to buy eight more properties, including two more student houses in Leicester. But this time he misjudged the market: "I had thought it was similar to Leeds, but the demand for student accommodation





ITV's Love Your Home and Garden
© BVDS architects

was nowhere near the same. In the end we held onto the stock as buy-to-lets (BTL), but it tied up a lot of capital for quite a few months and was difficult to rent.”

Kunle has always enjoyed getting hands-on with his property projects. He learnt most of his skills on the job, without any formal training. He’s wired and replumbed houses (under the watchful eye of experts), sanded floor boards, laid tiles and fitted kitchens. “There’s nothing like getting your hands dirty to really get an understanding of the industry. It’s a great way to learn about how easy or difficult it is to deliver a project,” he says.

These skills were put to the test when he took on the renovation of a 400-year-old property in the Albayzin district of Granada, Spain. “It’s in a UNESCO world heritage site and was as challenging as it is beautiful,” says Kunle who now uses it as a holiday home to get away with his family.

When it comes to strategies, Kunle admits he’s given them all a go: “When I started we didn’t use all of these different phrases like BTL, HMO, flips etc. All these really refer to is your exit strategy and I’ve always evaluated this at the end of a renovation. Sometimes I planned to flip, but the market conditions weren’t right so I held onto the asset and vice-versa.”

In his opinion, the ideal investment is one that has multiple exits available, all of which have an upside commercially. “To safeguard an investment you need to be able to execute different exit strategies, and the only way to do that is to make sure you fully evaluate the current state of the market and where you think it might go and model different scenarios. Don’t focus too much on a single exit strategy because if you do and the market moves the wrong way you could be stuck with a depreciating asset,” he says.

Like any investor, he’s faced his fair share of challenges along the way, but approaching them in a composed and logical manner has helped him out of some tricky situations. “I think if you can keep calm

and quickly identify solutions you’ll never really have disasters, but it’s important to learn the skill of problem solving,” he says.

A place of his own

It was several years after starting his property journey before Kunle finally bought his own home. With his knowledge of the property market, he knew exactly what he was looking for. He bought a one-bedroom flat in North West London in between Maida Vale and Queens Park for £145,000.

“It was one of the cheapest one-bed flats in the area at the time. I chose it in the end because I liked the layout. It wasn’t the biggest flat I looked at, and it was above a restaurant, so it wasn’t in the best location but the flat itself had the best proportions, aspect and layout,” he says.

His current home – also in North West London – has doubled in value since he bought it, making it his smartest property purchase so far. “I calculated that due to being close to the Tube and a park and with the architectural stock of the area being high quality it wouldn’t be long before prices would increase.

“Nothing happened for two years, then all of a sudden property prices exploded. As predicted young couples and families quickly moved into the area pushing up house prices which are now over 100% more than I paid. But more importantly it’s a really lovely area with families up and down the street which is a real change from when I first moved in,” he says.

New normal

With filming on hold for the time being, Kunle is keeping himself busy focusing his attention on other projects. His passion for sustainable development is being satisfied with his work for Melt Properties and Studio Anyo. He’s working on a new development for Melt that

could potentially be one of the most sustainable hotels in Europe, while Studio Anyo is about to begin work on Orford Mews – one of the UK's first energy positive residential developments delivered with zero waste. He's also been doing some presenting – albeit online – hosting a live Instagram series for Grand Designs Live which he says has been “great fun and very popular”.

Once travel restrictions ease further he's looking forward to getting back to filming his new TV show in Italy. “It's a very inspirational show about ordinary people realising their dreams of owning properties in foreign countries, a welcome bit of post-pandemic escapism.

“I'm really interested in the positive changes to our lives forced on us by lockdown. Our connection to our families, homes and to nature have been strengthened and that's a good thing. We have shopped locally and shown caring and compassion for our neighbours, I for one hope that this continues long after the pandemic,” he says.



One of Kunle's projects © Ben Blossom Photography

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