

THE CEDAR HOUSE

Damian and Gilly Johnson overcame a failed planning appeal and budget restraints to build a contemporary home, designed around their wooded site in a Conservation Area ►

Details Contemporary self-build, Bath, Jul 2009 – Apr 2010
Project Cost £263,800 (£1,335/m²)
Designer CaSA Architects

Words: Clive Fewins Photography: Simon Denison



Shaped by its site Damian and Gilly's new timber frame self-built home sits in the former garden of Damian's mother's home. The large (protected) cedar trees dictated the position of the house, which has been clad in a mix of stone and cedar to reflect the environment



DAMIAN AND GILLY'S
SELF-BUILD
Construction Timber frame
Size 197m²
Build Time Ten months
Build Route Main contractor
Plot Cost Already owned
Build Cost £263,000
Value on Completion
£525,000

Damian Johnson is a rock drummer — and a self-builder. “Really I equate building a house to producing an album,” he says. “An album needs songs, melody lines and chords. A house needs four walls and a roof. It’s all the other bits – the ones you don’t necessarily see – that make an album work, and it’s the same with a house.”

Damian and his wife Gilly completed their four-bed contemporary-style home on the edge of Bath in April 2010, following a ten-month build. Yet, their

self-build ambitions began some six years earlier. In 2004, the couple proposed carving out a plot from the one-acre garden belonging to the listed Georgian house where Damian’s parents had lived since 1969. Unfortunately, Damian’s father passed away before their application for a new home was presented to the planners, and naturally all proceedings were put on hold. But further delays ensued over the sensitivity of the site — which is bordered by another listed stone Georgian house within this Conservation Area. “Basically we made a false start,” says Damian, who

drums with Vegas, a leading Bath-based band, and several other party bands. “We entrusted the project to a large and well-established architectural practice and the scheme got turned down. Gilly and I took the view that, having briefed them, we expected them to produce a scheme that would gain planning permission. This episode cost us about £12,000. “After the application was refused a second time on appeal, Gilly and I realised, when we worked out our finances, that we could not afford to fail. The answer was to get far more involved ourselves.”

Open plan living
The heart of Damian and Gilly’s (ABOVE OPPOSITE) contemporary self-build is the open plan living, kitchen and dining area. The south-facing wall of NorDan windows and sliding doors means this room makes the most of the sun’s heat and natural light. Separate utility and storage rooms enable the family to keep this large space clutter-free



DAMIAN & GILLY'S COSTS

Basic contract including supervision	£207,000
Architect's fees	£18,500
Services	£7,000
Wooden flooring	£2,500
Kitchen	£6,000
Bathroom fittings	£5,000
Tree work	£2,000
Hire charges and miscellaneous	£15,000

Their application had been turned down largely due to the proposed house's proximity to a group of well-established cedar trees. And so the couple decided to consult a tree expert. They also contacted their parish council who had opposed the scheme. "We came to realise that if we moved the proposed house back, and further away from the trees, thus making it less obvious visually from the road, then it

“Get the fabric right and the other elements and upgrades can follow”

design, but with the addition of a large single storey section complete with monopitch roof, housing an open plan kitchen and living space.

By moving the house back to a position formerly occupied by Damian's parents' swimming pool, and reusing sections of the substantial stone walls that had been built around it when it was constructed in 1986,

Above: Built for the site
On the site of Damian's mother's former outdoor swimming pool, the new house incorporates the existing stone walling – a common material in the local vernacular – within its design. The two storey section is topped by a flat roof, meaning the house is less than evident to its Georgian neighbour and the near-by road. Cedar cladding makes reference to the mature cedar trees which now stand within what has become the house's garden

Far left: Manmade and natural materials
Vertical window openings have been punched through the existing stone walls on the western façade, and are finished in zinc. This eradicated the need for quoins. The cedar-clad first floor appears to float on top of the stone walling, with only a strip of zinc providing definition between the two natural materials

Ian thought the Johnsons could make a brave attempt to stick to their £250,000 budget. Opting for a flat-roofed structure for the two storey section would also make the house less obtrusive and far lower than the large listed buildings on either side. Ian also designed in exterior details which would relate the house architecturally to its site – mainly by including some discreet references to the local vernacular – to help win over the planners.

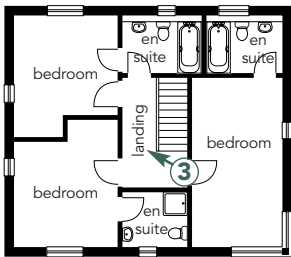
Fortunately the ideas proved a success and the design was approved without debate. And so a delighted Damian and Gilly entrusted the project to local builder Nigel Lloyd, already known to Ian and his colleagues in the practice. Nigel would act as main contractor and supervisor on site, helping the couple to keep to their tight budget.

The new house now includes three compact en suite bedrooms on the first floor and a ground floor bedroom, into which Damian's mother may eventually move should she wish to sell up next door. "Design wise, we really wanted one massive room on the ground floor, but Ian dissuaded us, and it also seemed sensible to have a spare bedroom downstairs, which I use for drum practice," smiles Damian.

"It really works well. Our two children, aged eight and six, love it. We have included very high levels of insulation and the house passed a rigid airtightness

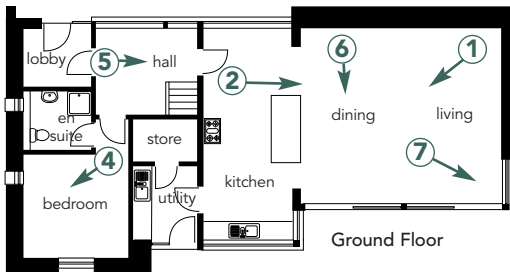
A Home for Life

A large part of the ground floor is given over to the open plan kitchen, dining and living space (with a separate utility and store to tidy away clutter), which resides in the single storey section. There's also an en suite ground floor bedroom, which could be used by Damian's mother in the future — but is currently used for drum practice. Upstairs there are three double bedrooms which are all en suite.



Photographs were taken at numbered positions

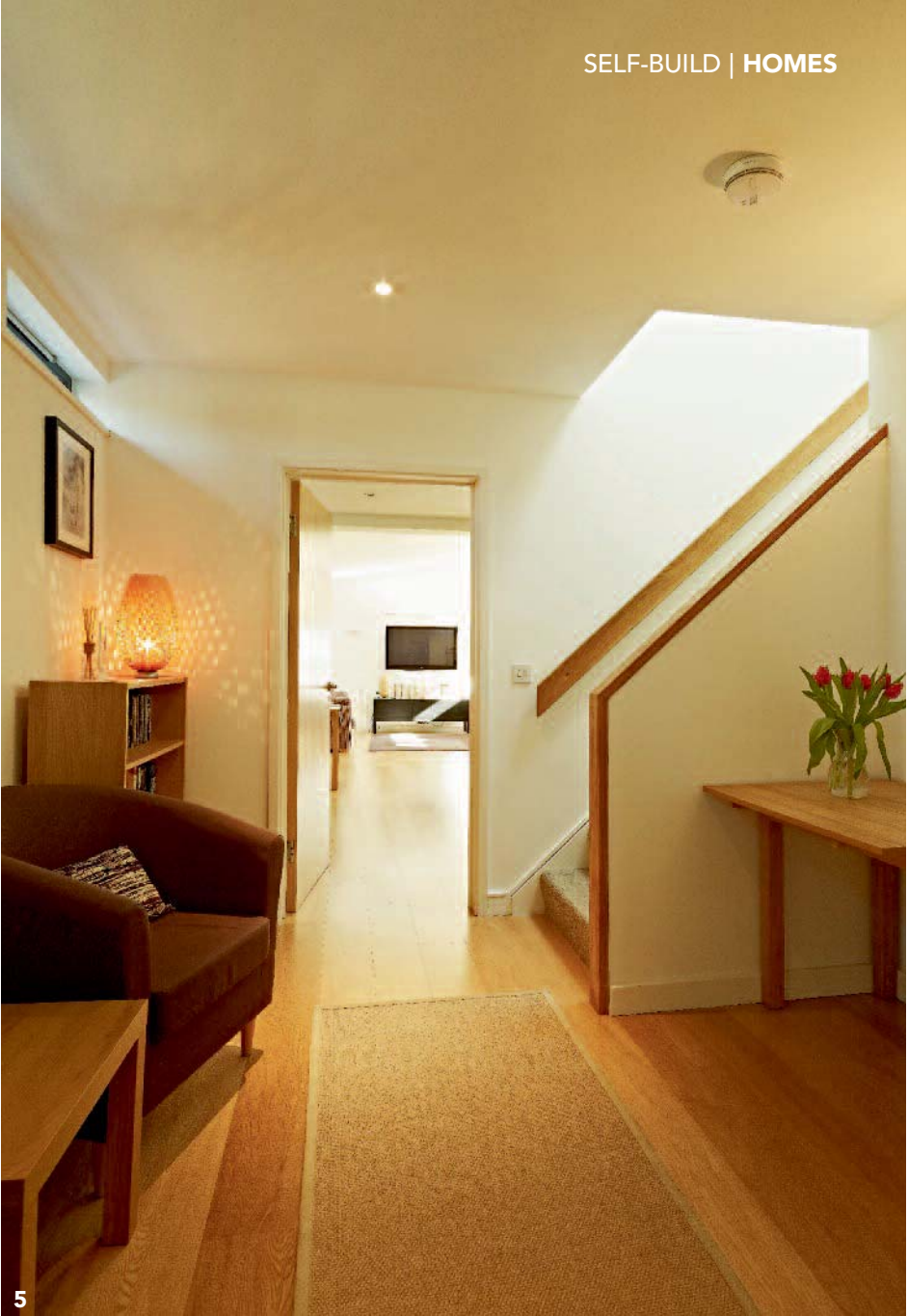
First Floor



Ground Floor



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test,” says Damian. Such a highly insulated structure will also mean comparatively lower running costs in the long term. “The house is amazingly warm compared to the ice block next door where my mother has lived for 40 years. This house was designed to be a property we shall be able to afford to live in, on our limited income, for another 40 years.”

Contemporary Design on a Budget

The couple were fortunate in having a wonderful plot available virtually free, yet they did have limited funds with which to build their home. Their resulting build cost was £263,000 or £1,335/m² — a good figure for a high-spec, contemporary self-build in an expensive city like Bath.

After paying out £12,000 to their first architect without any progress, Damian and Gilly realised that to build a four-bed house on anything like their budget, they would need to make savings in a number of ways. Filling the outdoor swimming pool and building on the site, using the substantial stone walls

Bright, white interiors
A rooflight floods the landing (3) with daylight — with the semi-open balustrade allowing light to filter down to the ground floor hallway below (5). Here, narrow clerestory windows pull in further natural light. The neutral interior scheme continues throughout the house, with timber flooring from Nagle Flooring laid across the entire ground floor — including the guest bedroom (4) — over underfloor heating

already there, proved an imaginative idea from their second architect Ian — one which also created significant savings. “Making the design fit the existing stone walls was tricky but it gave us some interesting angles and effects,” Ian reflects.

Further savings were made by omitting the proposed chimney, woodburning stove and exposed ceiling beams in the main ground floor living space. In some rooms, such as the bathrooms, Damian and Gilly also cut costs by opting for lower-spec fittings than they had originally planned. “We didn’t go for anything ultra-fancy,” Damian elaborates. “We followed Ian’s advice that he had applied to the

heating supply, which is a conventional condensing gas boiler. His approach was: ‘Get the fabric right and the other elements and the upgrades can follow later.’” Consequently, no

“The house is amazingly warm compared to the ice block next door”



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6: Defining areas

The open plan space has been zoned into living, dining and kitchen areas by the furniture layout. The kitchen, which cost £6,000 from Magnet, continues the neutral colour scheme — the simple, clean design blends in, rather than distracting from the other areas

7: Shading from the sun

The south-facing windows and sliding doors provide a connection with the garden, while enabling this room to maximise on the sun's heat through passive solar gain. A cedar *brise soleil* provides shading, ensuring that the space does not overheat during the summer months

compromises were made on the high-quality breathing wall timber frame and the high-spec window system.

“In the end, we covered the cost by our mortgage and the £30,000 we had in hand after the sale of our previous house,” says Damian. “We feel we have good value for money. After all, we paid for the project to be managed and supervised, and it is an expensive area round here. It is just the house we wanted in the place we wanted.”

Site-Specific Design

Timber frame was an obvious choice for the new home which resides on a former swimming pool, while a light, adaptable system was also needed to fit in with the existing stone walls that were to form a major feature. “It was important to keep the weight down, and timber frame proved more economic than a masonry structure, and also good on space because it gives you thinner walls than masonry,” Ian explains.

The choice of cedar for the cladding provides reference to the historic cedar trees that were the main cause of failure for the initial planning applications. “Cedar is very durable, does not need to be treated, is long-lasting and relatively cheap,” says Ian. “By using the rainscreen method of cladding, which leaves an air gap between the boards, each board lasts longer because of the air circulation this system produces. It is a method that also ensures that, should it prove necessary, replacing a board or two is relatively easy.”

A cedar *brise soleil* has also been utilised on the south-facing single storey section, angled to prevent the interiors overheating in the summer, but without negating the impact of the winter sun. The zinc monopitch roof is pitched on a slight angle towards the rear south, both to bring in light and heat, and to reduce the impact of the building from the front.

“We felt the project would only succeed if we could somehow connect the building to the site and the historic fabric that was already there,” concludes Damian. “We think we have achieved this.” 🏡