

★
BEST OF BRITAIN SELF-BUILD

Nicholas Worsley's self-built eco home in Worcester, on the market for £750,000

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If you want to make a mark, do it yourself

Building your own home is more than just muddy plots and the constant whirr of a cement mixer, says Clive Fewins. It's about good, sustainable architecture too

More people than ever are building their own homes. Recent estimates indicate that around 18,000 new homes are built in Britain by this method each year and that one in three of all new detached homes is a self-build.

Why are so many people driven to endure hours of agony – even if they do not lay a brick themselves there is tremendous financial and organisational stress involved in a project of this sort – when it is almost certainly a great deal easier to buy a ready-to-move-into standard home on a neat out-of-town estate?

The easy answer is “money”. By building a new home for yourself rather than buying it from someone else you instantly wipe out the developer's profit, which is often up to 30 per cent of the price. In addition, by creating a unique home full of quality finishes, the end product is likely to be much more desirable than its commercially developed neighbours.

However, there is a great deal more to self-build than that. Challenge and satisfaction are two of the other answers that come to mind.

“It really is the ultimate form of control over your own environment,” says Jason Orme, editor of Britain's bestselling self-build magazine, *Homebuilding*

and *Renovating*. “There is something deeply satisfying about exerting your own personal and highly unique influence over exactly how big your living room is going to be, where the lights are positioned, what the stairs look like and most other aspects of your home environment.”

All this presupposes that, as a potential self-builder, you are able to find a plot. “Ask any self-builder the main hurdle to getting the home of their dreams and they will tell you that finding a suitable piece of land is the problem,” says Orme.

A recent example is that of Richard and Libby Brayshaw. For the past 17 years they had lived in a pleasant neo-Georgian house in Weybridge, Surrey, and had very few thoughts of leaving. “We never moved up the property ladder and had previously not considered becoming self-builders,” Richard added.

All that changed very rapidly when Libby's architect father urged them to go and look at a house built by a well-known architect in the modernist style that was on the market and lay very close to where they lived.

“Once we saw it we were absolutely mesmerised and wanted to buy it,” Libby says. “We loved the light and the space and the simplicity. When they were unable to purchase the house

they began the hunt for a plot. It lasted two years and took them as far as the West Country and Yorkshire. They eventually settled on a plot in chalk downland near Alton in Hampshire that they chose for its view, paying £380,000 for it. But first they had to clear the 0.9ha site of the car dump that covered it.

The finished house is a stunning building with three interlinked flat-roofed steel-framed pavilions with gently descending roof heights. Entry is via a sweeping curved drive that rises gradually so that the main living floor can be reached without having to ascend stairs. This in turn means the main open-plan living area has views right through, over open downland to the north and south.

“We did not build the house to make a profit. Our aim was to have somewhere wonderful to live for the next 20 years and we took the view that we might not necessarily get our money back should we decide to sell at any stage,” Richard says. The house is valued at £850,000.

Self-build 21st-century-style is not, as is often assumed, the act of physically building a home for oneself. It is a catch-all term relating to the method of organising the design and construction of a new home for oneself to live in, meeting one's own needs. The key is

that the driving force behind the project has to be the person who is to live in the house. Apart from that, the actual build can be by a local contractor, a package company or on a DIY basis, acting as your own main contractor and hiring in labour.

The self-build approach refuses to follow the mainstream and accept what commercial developers decide is the best layout for a house. As a self-builder, you can create exactly the space and mix of rooms you desire.

This usually means a one-off plot and it would be hard to find anything that fits that definition better than the site purchased by retired barrister Nicholas Worsley on a riverside bluff above the River Severn on the outskirts of Worcester seven years ago.

“We had been in a three-storeyed Georgian house in the centre of Worcester for 31 years but living there was becoming increasingly difficult because my wife Anna was in a wheelchair,” Worsley says. “I have a lifetime's interest in architecture and had often fancied the idea of a self-build.”

“This was the sort of site I never really dreamed of being able to obtain. You really do have to do something creative on a site like this and I realised that in today's climate if you are going to build new than it must be sustainable.”

The 70 metre-long boundary wall of the house is built of cob – a mixture of clay, subsoil, aggregate, straw and water (see article opposite). Parts of this have been left exposed inside the house to create what Worsley calls “an interesting mix of textures”. Worsley chose cob because it is a renewable material, it has good insulation qualities, it is far cheaper to build than a masonry wall and because he thought it would be fun.

Almost every aspect of the house has been designed to minimise damage to the environment. There is a thick layer of recycled newspaper insulation in the deep roof and an array of solar panels on the kitchen roof ensures hot water all the year round whenever the sun is shining. The lavatories, washing machine and garden hose use rainwater carefully collected from the roof.

“I looked at pictures of a lot of eco houses and most of them are very boring architecturally. I like to think this house is the reverse,” Worsley says.

In 2003 the house won a 2003 City of Worcester Award. It was cited as an example of “an outstanding work of modern architecture” and was praised for its “comprehensive commitment to the principles of sustainability.”

Sadly, soon after moving in, Anna died. Worsley has now decided to move to London and the five-bedroomed house

is on the market through Knight Frank for £745,000. “I fully intend to do another self-build,” he says, “though this time it is likely to be an ecologically inclined urban renovation project.”

For energy consultant David Olivier building his own solar house in a rural corner of Herefordshire has been very much a hands-on affair for the past 10 years. He bought the site for £25,000 in 1995 and the build process has been long and hard because he has had to raise funds as he has gone along and also because he has been involved in every stage of the construction.

The house will use no fossil fuel for space heating and Olivier is hopeful that the electricity produced by his £7,000 array of roof-mounted cells will exceed the amount he uses for most of the year and that he will be able to sell it back to his electricity provider.

Olivier says: “I shall use mains electricity but by using solar energy for water heating and electricity generation and limited tree planting in the garden I hope to reduce net carbon dioxide emissions to almost zero.” He is hoping to move into the three-bedroomed detached house, which he estimates will have cost him under £100,000 to build, later this year.

Knight Frank. +44 (0)1905-723438; www.knightfrank.co.uk