

Self-build is 'like childbirth — you forget the pain when you have what you want'

Mice, broken cranes and missing windows: one couple speaks to Sharon Smith about the trials of creating their dream home

When Sarah and Barry Phillips decided to sell up and move, they never imagined that they would have to hack through undergrowth to reveal their dream plot and spend more than £1 million on building their own home.

The motivation to move was a familiar one. The couple wanted their daughters, Amelie and Jemima, to be closer to their friends, not stuck out in the sticks; and Sarah, an interior designer, “wanted to be able to walk out of my house and be able to get a coffee or go shopping without having to drive everywhere”. The solution is a classic contemporary home in the Kent countryside, but getting there was anything but smooth.

“We viewed houses, but always ended up saying, ‘Well, we’d need to change this and change that and do this and do that,’” she says. After two years of searching, the couple spotted an empty bungalow near Canterbury, Kent, in 2016. “It was so overgrown that we couldn’t walk on it. But we were excited at the thought of having four acres of land,” says Barry, an engineering surveyor with his own company, BJP Site Engineering Services.

The couple returned to the plot two weeks later. Armed



with some tools, they hacked their way through the undergrowth to get a proper look. Enamoured, they made an offer of £500,000, which was accepted, leaving a budget of £800,000 for the rest of the project to be funded by their savings, including the sale of their house, and later supplemented by a self-build mortgage.

Their exhilaration received a check when they looked inside the bungalow that they intended to live in during the build. “The first thing I did was call pest control,” Sarah says. “It was built of wood and rotting away, with rats and mice everywhere. An old lady called Hilda had been born there and had lived in it all her life until she died.” The bungalow was demolished, but out of respect for Hilda they couple kept the old garden gate and nameplate.

The second blow came when the couple put the building project out to tender. “We had a build budget of £800,000 and



The flint wall reflects the local soil. The white brickwork acts as a foil to the larch cladding
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we tried six contractors recommended to us. Three came back, and we couldn’t afford any of them,” Sarah says. They reduced the house footprint from 450 sq m to 375 sq m by clipping off one metre all the way round. But, they still could not afford their preferred contractor’s price of £1 million for a turnkey service.

Sarah admits she is “naturally bossy” and became project manager to save money. “Some of the men would say, ‘Is your husband going to be here today?’, but I’d just firmly tell them that I was in charge.”

The house, now valued at £2 million, was designed with the family in mind. The ground-floor rooms flow into one another in an open-plan layout. “I wanted four bedrooms, all en suite, a big kitchen and a dining room that we could walk directly into from the kitchen,



so we'd use it rather than having it stuck away somewhere," she says.

Cleverly designed storage eradicates clutter so she can "walk from the car into a front lobby space where all of our stuff — shoes, coats, hockey sticks and so on — would be hidden from view." The television in the sitting room is concealed behind slatted walnut sliding screens, while in the kitchen bespoke ceiling-to-floor wall units in walnut hide everything including fridges, ovens and storage shelves. One cupboard is dedicated to everything you need for breakfast, and another for dinner.

The ground floor features polished concrete throughout, with walnut flooring upstairs. There is underfloor heating and air-source heat pumps because the site does not have gas. However, the project did not always flow smoothly. A hiccup with the structural engineers meant a four-month delay to erecting the steel frame. "It was very stressful. We were renting and life was at a standstill," Sarah says. When the day finally arrived in March 2019 for work to start on the frame, the weather turned so windy that progression was further delayed for a week. The windows proved another frustrating episode — the couple had to appoint a specialist to make and fit the cantilevered aluminium frames.

"Their lorry turned up from Somerset one day in September 2019, with just two pieces of glass inside. They had forgotten

What we would do differently

1. Consider how things will be used and if you are allowing for enough room. I would have made the breakfast bar bigger to accommodate six chairs, rather than the four we have, and make the drawers in the island smaller. When the girls have their friends we need more room for them.

2. Use 3d technology to visualise all spaces. In hindsight, this would have helped us to counteract the fact that Jemima's window looks out on to the front pod (Amelie and Jemima's private study). We should have given Jemima a door and a balcony so she could enjoy better views to the

side.

3. Get recommendations of how different products work in application. We used waterproof, polished plaster for all the bathroom walls, rather than tiles. But we're going to replace it all with tiles because it stains terribly and the silicone round the bath will not stick to it.

4. Consider what items are worth the price tag. If I were to do it again I'd go for standard windows, not cantilevered aluminium. Although they're lovely, they're expensive and you have to use a specialist company.



Cleverly designed storage eradicates clutter
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to load the rest of our windows. It was an utter shambles," Barry says. The rest of the load finally arrived, but then the company's

on-site crane kept failing and spraying the windows with hydraulic oil. The problems further delayed the project by two months.

"Self-build is not for the fainthearted, but Sarah and I don't mind taking risks in life and are not worriers. It feels great to have done it. We all enjoy it, including Benji, our one-year-old labrador," Barry says. Sarah adds: "It's like childbirth — you forget the pain when you have what you want. I'd definitely do it all again."

Readers can register for a pair of free tickets worth £24 to the Build It Live show this weekend — the couple will be speaking at the show tomorrow at 11am; use promo code TIMES500 builditlive.co.uk ■