

HOW TO SELF-BUILD

With the Government keen to make bespoke houses a mainstream option, the future's bright for self-building. Follow our tips to turn your dream home into reality

Words *Luke Tebbutt*



▲ This seaside house by Dublin-based A2 Architects (+353 1 872 7393; a2.ie) cost about £300,000. With a concrete base and timber frame, it was built piecemeal over 18 months

Marie-Louise Halpenny

Building a tailor-made home could soon become viable for more of us, thanks to growing Government support; with volume developers unable to meet the demand for new homes, would-be grand designers are being courted to fill the gap. Self-builds currently make up around eight per cent of new homes in the UK (compared with between a third and half

in many other European countries), but the National Custom & Self Build Association is lobbying to make them a mass-market option, and its efforts could bear fruit with the new Right to Build Bill. This will require local authorities to make land available for self-builders, and is expected to come into law this year. So read on for advice about how to get your plans off the ground. →



◀ Using a mixture of concrete, steel and timber for the structure, Stanton Williams (020 7880 6400; stantonwilliams.com) replaced a Fifties dwelling in north London with this three-storey house. It worked out cheaper than a prefabricated system, and took about two years to complete



Locally sourced timber was used for the entire structure of this house in the Scottish Highlands by Raw Architecture Workshop (07825 241 182; rawarchitectureworkshop.com), and the wood was cut to size on-site to ensure accuracy for the unorthodox shape. Completed in 11 months, the 169sqm build cost £305,000.

FINDING A PLOT

While the Right to Build Bill (see box, right, for details) could make land more available, sourcing it still requires a lot of legwork. Listings websites such as Plotfinder (plotfinder.net) and PlotSearch (buildstore.co.uk/findingland) are useful for gauging costs in your preferred area, and identifying the agents that are selling, but you will need to be more proactive to get the best deals – good plots never languish online for long.

A crafty approach is to check local authority planning registers for recent applications and approvals that have been made for outline planning for single houses. There's a fair chance that the owners will be doing this with a

view to selling the land, so get the applicant's details and make a direct enquiry. It's also worth searching an area on foot (you can do an online recce first using Google Maps). Look for vacant land between or behind buildings, large gardens that could be sub-divided, or empty garages and industrial buildings.

'The more problems a site has – such as poor access, overlooking, or an awkward shape – the more likely you are to get a good deal,' says architect Jake Edgley of Edgley Design (020 7033 9522; edgleydesign.co.uk), who spent nearly three years searching and saw 300 plots before finding a site for his self-build in London. 'A lot of opportunities are back-land sites, but the good thing →



Nick Leith-Smith Architecture + Design (020 7351 1030; nickleithsmith.com) replaced a post-war bungalow with this 240sqm, four-bedroom timber-frame house, constructed in just 10 weeks at a cost of £350,000.

THE RIGHT TO BUILD BILL

The new Right to Build Bill has cross-party support and is expected to become law this year. It is driven by a vision that self-building should become as mainstream as buying a house from a developer. It will require local authorities to keep a register of people in the area who want to build their own home, and make plots available for them to buy. Details are still being finalised, but applicants will need to meet eligibility criteria (such as being able to demonstrate a connection with the area where they plan to build) and local authorities will be required to offer a set number of plots over an agreed period – the suggestion is three plots over two and a half years.

Sourcebook Grand guide

about these is that planners are less likely to control what the building will look like.'

Edgley also advises checking EIG (01737 226 150; eigroup.co.uk), which lists property auctions across the UK, and befriending estate agents, who are likely to get first wind when new plots become available. 'Find out which agents are working with developers – they tend to be the ones selling homes off-plan – and get to know them well,' he says.

For a more hands-off approach, try developers that specialise in custom-build houses, which offer serviced plots and designs you can customise. Igloo (07881 810 770; iglooregeneration.co.uk), Solidspace (020 7234 0222; solidspace.co.uk), and Kevin McCloud's Hab Housing (07973 302 332; habhousing.co.uk) are all active in this area.

SETTING A BUDGET

You should have an idea of how much your build will cost before you buy a plot. Neil Dawson from Snook Architects (0151 707 0100; snookarchitects.com) advises budgeting for £1,200-£1,500 per sqm. The Self Build Portal (selfbuildportal.org.uk) has links to a number of online cost calculators, and also lists banks and building societies offering self-build mortgages. Edgley says most developers will want to close a sale on a plot within a couple of weeks. Then once you've bought your land and hired an architect,

it's worth getting a quantity surveyor on board early, advises architect Patrick Bradley (07871 655 544; pb-architects.com), whose shipping-container house featured in the most recent series of *Grand Designs*. 'A quantity surveyor will save you thousands,' he says. 'I worked on a project that came in at £250,000. We then hired a quantity surveyor and the same project, with identical specifications, came in at £200,000.'

Factors that commonly increase costs include lots of bespoke glazing or structural steel; loose ground that requires more robust foundations; changing your mind on-site; and tricky sites with sloping land, difficult access and no connection to services. Bradley advises investing in the fabric of the building – the walls, roof, windows and insulation – and cutting back on fixtures and finishes if necessary (such as the kitchen, bathrooms, flooring and cladding), which can be upgraded later.

WORKING ON SITE

Your build route will also have a big impact on price. The cheapest option is to buy the materials yourself and do a lot of the work, with a few builders to help out. Irish architect Dominic Stevens (+353 71 963 6988; dominicstevensarchitect.net) has published plans and a detailed how-to-build guide online (irishvernacular.com) for a simple timber-framed house he built for €25,000 →



The first floor and roof of this property in Sussex by Wilkinson King Architects (020 7284 1975; wilkinsonking.com) was built with prefabricated panels made from cross-laminated timber, erected in 10 days. The house took 12 months to build in total, and features a crinkled roof that is designed to echo the line of distant hills.

PLANNING PERMISSION

Plots often come with outline planning permission, which establishes in principle what can be built on the land (such as a 100sqm two-storey house, for example). This doesn't necessarily indicate that you can't build something bigger or more adventurous – it just means the seller has applied for the least controversial option. If your plans are more ambitious, it's worth seeking pre-application advice, which is an informal discussion with the local planning department, before you make an application for a detailed design. Alternatively, you could hire a planning consultant – you can find one through the Royal Town Planning Institute (020 3122 0138; rtpi-consultants.co.uk). For details, see planningportal.gov.uk.



This Swedish prefabricated house is a collaboration between designer-architect Jonas Wagell and house-builder Sommarnöjen. It is available in a few layouts and sizes, delivered flat-packed to site for quick construction. Prices are approximately €34,000 (£25,500), excluding VAT and transportation. (+46 720 146 000; minihouse.se)



◀ A concrete frame and brick exterior skin was used for this house by Snook Architects (0151 707 0100; snookarchitects.com), which took 12 months to build at £1,250 per sqm (excluding land, kitchen, external works and fees). Concrete was chosen because of its natural heat storing properties, and was left exposed inside

► It took nine months to build this five-bedroom house in Kent by Matthew Heywood (020 7352 7583; matthewheywood.com), at a cost of £500,000. It has a steel frame and structural insulated panels for the walls, and is clad in black and white timber, which is typical of the area



Smerin Architects (smerin.co.uk) replaced a plywood summerhouse with this home at the edge of a forest in East Sussex. The front section has a steel frame, chosen because it could be transported to the remote plot in short lengths and assembled on site. It took 18 months and cost about £900,000.



(approx £19,000). But be warned: this route can get messy if you don't have experience, particularly with ambitious designs. The next step up is to hire and manage contractors to do the work, while still ordering the materials yourself – though this also requires experience to avoid getting into costly budget over-runs and time delays.

A good halfway option is to hire a main contractor or package supplier to oversee the first part of the build (foundations, frame, walls, windows, roof) and get it to a weathertight stage, then manage subcontractors yourself for the rest (plumbing, electrics, plastering, flooring). The easiest – but most expensive – route is to use a main contractor to manage all construction and supplies.

The Self Build Portal advises that it typically takes about two years to build a home, from finding a site to moving in, with just over half this time spent on getting planning permission and lining up contractors, and six to nine months building on site. **GD**

USEFUL CONTACTS

- **The National Custom & Self Build Association** (01249 890 731; nacsba.org.uk)
- **Self Build Portal** (selfbuildportal.org.uk)
- **Collective Custom Build** (collectivecustombuild.org)
- **EIG** (01737 226 150; eigroup.co.uk)
- **Grand Designs Live** (0844 854 1348; granddesignslive.com)
- **Buildstore** (0345 223 4888; buildstore.co.uk)
- **Royal Institute of British Architects** (020 7580 5533; architecture.com)
- **Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors** (024 7686 8555; ricsfirms.com)