

# The house that Adrian and Andrea built

Your ideal home may be impossible to find. But design it yourself, and the sky's the limit.

**Robert Liebman**  
explains how to achieve  
the ultimate DIY house

Whoever you are and whatever your dreams, your ideal home is almost certainly on the large, light, luxurious side. You'll need a swimming-pool, of course, and a tennis court and stables for the horses – but apart from these extravagant extras, your imaginary house itself is more spacious and comfortable than the norm.

Buying such a home ready-built may be impossible, but by building your own you may get close to the ideal.

Andrea McPherson and Adrian Hirst each owned a house which they had purchased the traditional way. When they set up home together, they decided to sell their respective properties and find a new house. "We looked at old properties to renovate, but they were too costly, both to buy and to update," says Mr Hirst, who works in pharmaceuticals.

Able to finance a self-built home by selling one of their two properties, they started their adventure by confronting the single largest barrier to self-build in Britain: not money, not material, but land. Available, suitably located land on which to build. After an extensive search, they bought a cheap, derelict property from a brewer and knocked it down.

Their new bespoke home had to meet specific requirements. "My son, who is still a student, and my married daughter still needed a family base, and some of our visitors would be wheelchair-users," says Andrea, who is a community worker with the disabled.

Adrian wanted "a workshop for my classic car, and access to peace and quiet. We needed four bedrooms, wide doorways and bathrooms for the disabled, and sound-resistant walls." Tactfully noting that, as a pianist,



DIY on a grand scale: Andrea and Adrian financed a self-built home by selling a property

Page One

Andrea was still in the learning stage, he says that their interior walls are of sound-absorbing breezeblock, not flimsy plasterboard. Light streams into the hall from a window installed in the roof, and the conservatory can be entered from either the dining-room or the living-room.

"We read the self-build magazines and books, and we attended a self-builders' seminar which had been advertised locally by the Association of Self-Build Architects," Adrian explains. They interviewed several architects and selected Julian Owen, who had given the seminar.

With Mr Owen's help, they then chose a builder. "The architect prepared tender documents which we sent to six different builders, and we hired the one recommended by a friend. Ju-

lian Owen also supplied a self-build pack which helped us to start thinking about design and materials."

They rejected underfloor heating and solar panels as too expensive. "Our architect suggested a slate roof, which would have been three times as expensive as concrete. We decided on concrete. The builder also gave us many options. There were many temptations to exceed the budget."

The end result is more land and more house for less money than typical house owners obtain. "We have a new house that looks like an old one, on a quarter-acre of land. I thought it would be a wrench to leave the old house, but it is a joy to leave the leaks behind, the flat roofs, the cracks, the damp," says Andrea.

Construction itself is a relatively

short, intense interlude in an overall process which, Adrian stresses, requires considerable time, energy and patience: "It took us two years to find the land, and one year to design the house. The actual building was 22 weeks."

Was it worth it? "It was a great deal of effort, but we feel privileged, very lucky," says Andrea. "We would definitely do it again. It was perhaps the most challenging and rewarding experience of a lifetime."

For first-time buyers, financing a self-built home can be tricky. As the house does not yet exist, there is no equity to underwrite a typical mortgage. But the new house will come into existence in stages, and some lenders are prepared to offer phased-in loans which parallel the house-building process. Lenders specialising in self-

build mortgages are listed in the self-build magazines *Build It*, *SelfBuild*, and *Individual Homes: Homebuilding & Renovating*. A fact-sheet brochure available from the Association of Self-Build Architects (ASBA) provides a succinct overview of the major considerations. In greater depth, *The House-builder's Bible*, regularly updated by the author, Mark Brinkley, discusses finance and everything else you want or need to know: design, kit homes, project management, inner skin, outer skin, green issues, planning permission, site supervision, materials, and tile weight comparisons. Possible sites are listed by two companies: Plotfinder and Landbank Services provide databases listing available land and renovation sites.

Julian Owen, the architect, says that "architect's fees should be 7-10 per cent for a full hand-holding service, which includes site appraisal, design, construction drawings and site management." He himself is a campaigner to make more brown site land available to private individuals, and admits that "it helps if you have a relative who owns a large garden. Visit all of the estate agents, but also visit local planning offices and speak to utilities, universities, farmers and other landowners. Generate your own good luck."

The cost of the plot of land should be approximately one-third of the total cost. The average self-build budget is approximately £120,000, with £40,000 earmarked for land. Many self-builders do at least some of the work themselves, especially in the garden and external landscaping. Idiot-proof kits – put this nail into this hole; no, not that one, this one – and marvelously designed homes can easily entice those who want to lift more than a pen or a shovel.

*The 'Individual Homes - Home Building & Renovating Show is at the National Exhibition Centre, Birmingham, from 19 to 22 March (for details, call Centaur Exhibitions, 0171-287 0710; 01527 836 600).*

*Julian Owen Associates, Architects, 6 Cumberland Avenue, Beeston, Nottingham NG9 4DH (0115 922 9831). Association of Self-Build Architects (ASBA) (0800 387310) Plotfinder (0891 516526) (50p per minute, approximately three minutes total). Landbank Services (01734 618002).*