

Home sweet home

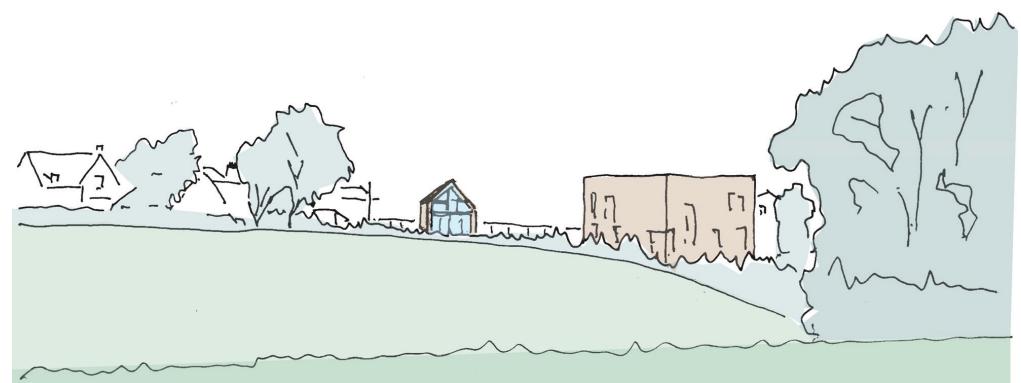
Have you ever been tempted to make your dream of your very own grand design a reality by taking on your own self-build? For many, it's a daunting project, but it can be incredibly rewarding if you take the right approach. In the first in a series of features on an exciting self-build project near Stirling, we look at how best to make a start on your own self-build.

The East Lothian architecture practice, Low Carbon Studio, has just started work on a beautiful new property near Stirling, which will feature a timeless timber frame by Alba Green Oak Frames. Owners Colin and Suzanne Clark are doing a self-build, with a budget of £300,000 for land, fees and construction.

"All architectural design projects are interesting in their own way. "Each client is unique, and each design has its own challenges and rewards," says Colin Campbell of Low Carbon Studio. "This one was no different. In this case, the clients are self-builders with a site already secured, something which is definitely not always the case."

Based near Stirling, the site already has planning approval for a new house, which means that the initial hurdle of establishing if the site was viable had already been overcome. However, the owners' design aspirations were different to the design which had planning approval so Colin's task was to prepare a new house design which would meet their brief, the site constraints and budget.

"Before I start designing any project, it's essential to visit the site and get a feel for the land, views, orientation and topography, as well as gaining an understanding of how the owners feel about their new plot," says Colin. "I first met with Colin and Suzanne on site in October and my first task was to put together a brief."



A brief can sometimes take the form of a scrap book or a simple list of likes and dislikes. It also includes a note of the spaces required and how they will be used. This particular plot has good views out over the landscape towards the south and this was to be an important aspect of the design.

The owners had also been in touch with Alba Green Oak frames, a company outside East Lothian which specialises in the design and build of traditional, structural green oak frames and trusses. Their initial idea was for a house with a Douglas fir frame.

The brief includes the construction budget and an outline of how the project will be financed. Some

lenders will release funds in stages while others require self-build insurance. Clients also need to establish how much project management they are willing and able to take on. If you are up to the challenge, there will be significant savings, but it takes a fair bit of effort to project manage the building of a house, and it can take longer to complete the project.

"As silly as it sounds, it's important that the architect and the client get on with each other," says Colin. "There's a lot at stake when building a new house and I understand the responsibility I have in making someone else's dream home a reality and managing a large pot of money. Once



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I have the brief, have visited the site and have established a rapport and understanding with the owners, the next stage is to prepare some initial ideas and sketch views."

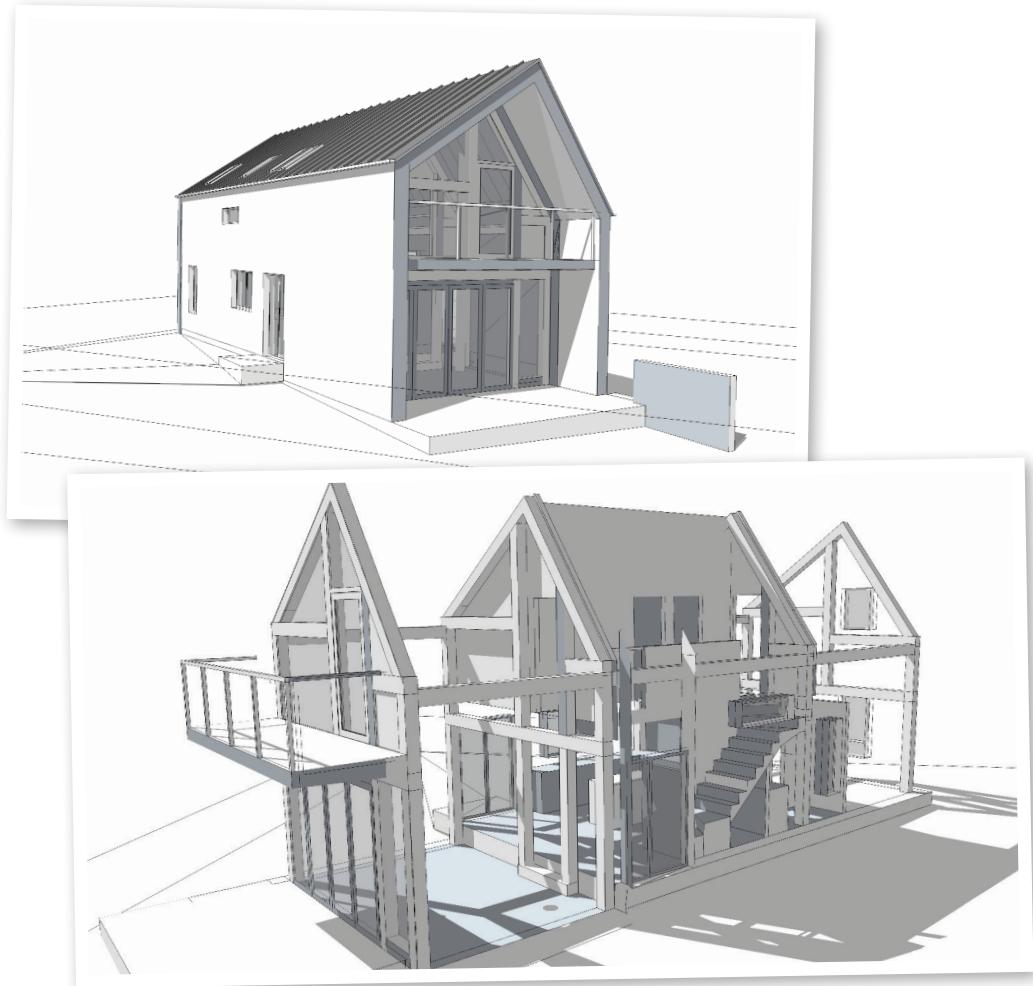
For this property, Colin and Suzanne began with a simple plan layout on the ground floor with an open-plan living room, dining and kitchen, with southerly views out over a deck to the landscape beyond. They also incorporated a utility room, WC and a space which could be used as a bedroom, study or family room.

All the bedrooms are on the upper floor, with the master bedroom and balcony also looking south over the landscape. The main bathroom is also on

the upper floor and it's positioned over the WC and kitchen on the ground floor to simplify drains.

At this stage in a project, it's important to co-ordinate services into and out of the new house and to establish access into the site for cars and site traffic during the construction. While the design of the house is the most important element, the house has to function and when the basics are sorted, the architect can concentrate on the internal and external design of the house.

It's also important to start thinking about materials at this stage; how they will impact on the design and budget, and if they fit into the context of the site. For this project, the profile of the roof was



designed to step down with the site levels and to add some extra height in the roof space, which could be used for storage or a deck for sleeping.

The initial layouts and sketches are used to exchange ideas and to move towards an agreed design but also at this stage the project is still a bit fluid and things can change. It's important for the self-builders to know that they are in control of the design process.

"I always recommend to clients that they take advantage of the pre-application planning advice

service offered by most local authority planning departments," says Colin. "It's free and for a small design fee you can establish what the planners are likely to approve."

The planning approval for this project has just been granted and Colin and Suzanne are waiting for the building warrant approval. The aim is to start on site in the next couple of months and you can follow the progress of the project in the next issue. **TC**