

Second time **AROUND**

Smart thinking and a can-do attitude propelled Stephen Davies and Laura Lewis-Davies into their second self-build



At a glance

NAMES Stephen Davies and Laura Lewis-Davies

AGES Both 38

LOCATION Lewisham, south-east London

PROPERTY Brick and block new-build

BEDROOMS 3 **BATHROOMS** 2

PROJECT STARTED Feb 2014

PROJECT FINISHED June 2015

SIZE OF HOUSE 125sqm

SIZE OF PLOT 200sqm

PLOT COST £204,000

BUILD COST £275,000

The house has been raised to safeguard against flood risk



Finding an affordable self-build plot in urban London isn't always easy, but for Stephen Davies and Laura Lewis-Davies, who completed their first self-build in 2011, the plot for their next project was hiding in plain sight. The large lawned area belonged to a block of flats that backed on to the street they were currently living on – except it wasn't technically a plot and wasn't actually for sale.

This significant detail didn't concern the couple though, who, buoyed by the success of their first build some 50 metres along the street, had been eyeing up the grassy area from their roof terrace. 'We noticed that nobody ever used the outdoor space, not even to hang out their washing,' says Stephen, a director at 31/44 Architects. 'I discovered the flats were owned by a Housing Association and I wrote to them in early 2013 outlining a proposal to buy 40 per cent of the land.'

The couple hadn't intended to jump into another self-build so soon after their first project, but when the Housing Association responded showing a 'cautious interest', the opportunity was too good to resist. Stephen

and Laura trod carefully during negotiations, mindful that the Housing Association held all the cards. Terms were outlined and the Housing Association agreed to sell the land to Stephen and Laura, but only for the true market price. This left them responsible for securing planning permission and then having the plot independently valued. This reverse approach to a self-build left the couple open to substantial financial risk, and they spent about £15,000 upfront in fees, including all of the legal costs for the Housing Association.

The Housing Association also safeguarded its position by insisting on a restrictive covenant. This meant only the house Stephen designed could be built, and the land value would be determined by the size of this proposed property. It was a fair compromise, but Stephen and Laura were aware the deal could fall through at any moment. 'This wasn't a traditional sale so we had to be motivated to move the process along,' Stephen explains.

Fortunately, the council established the plot as an infill site. 'As long as my design met with the local policy guidelines, I was pretty certain we'd get permission,' →

above The grey bricks are double-fired to produce a finish to complement the local London Stock

above right Floor-to-ceiling units help separate living areas while keeping an open-plan feel

right The living room benefits from all-day sun, with doors to the east and west courtyards





says Stephen. So he played around with a few ideas and settled on a monolithic design with a 4.5m concrete lintel band to define the upper storey box from the larger ground floor. The linear form, faced in tonal grey Belgian bricks, is as uncomplicated as the fabric, which is straightforward blockwork with a 200mm insulated cavity and 200mm floor insulation. The rectilinear concept travels through to inside, enhanced by floor-to-ceiling plywood cupboards that anchor the kitchen at either end. This isn't typical open-plan living, though. The kitchen is in the middle of the ground floor so there's a sense of the space opening and closing as you walk through to the living room. Here, doors open out to the east- and west-facing courtyards. The remaining rooms on the ground floor – or the 'rear wing' as Stephen affectionately calls it – house Laura's studio, a bathroom and a guest bedroom. These also connect with outside, whether it's doors to one of the three courtyards or a glimpse of sky through the glass shower-room ceiling.

Birch-faced plywood is a key interior finish that repeats throughout the house, creating integrated storage through clever design details. Connecting the floors is a tailor-made curved oak staircase. Strips of oak form the

drum of the staircase like the bow of a ship; a nod to the nearby river and the old boat factory at the top of the road. Finished in blush-pink oil, painstakingly applied by Laura, the calm tone of the oak works in harmony with the ply. 'We wanted the tonal qualities and texture of the timber to complement the grey tiled floors and white walls,' says Stephen. 'Ply is also an off-the-shelf product and pretty affordable compared to other woods.'

Stephen's design sailed through planning in January 2014 and an independent surveyor valued the land at £204,000. Stephen says they were slightly taken aback at first, having anticipated a price of around £165,000.

For the next year, the couple patiently nudged the sale onwards until they reached completion. Stephen put together a schedule of costs, earmarking £250,000 for the project, with a 10 per cent contingency. They allocated generous sums for the bricks, window package, staircase and joinery as they wanted good-quality finishes. The money didn't come easily, though. The couple needed to live in their first house for as long as possible to stay close to the site, so they drained out the equity, used all of their savings, maxed out credit cards, and borrowed to get started. The tight finances meant →

above The main kitchen workspace is a long run of units topped with a white Corian worktop. The dining table is from Ikea and the pendants are from Heals

above right A roof light in the kitchen floods the room with daylight

right The tailor-made staircase was hand-oiled by Laura





Sliding doors separate the master bedroom from the snug/ spare bedroom



A birch-faced window and mirror surround forms a simple design statement

Stephen and Laura had to multi-task their roles as architect, project manager, client and main contractor, all the while holding down full-time jobs.

The project kicked off in February 2015, with Stephen on site at 7.30am every morning before dashing off to work. Their first house went on the market in spring in the hope they'd find a buyer willing to complete in November. 'We trod a fine line with the timings,' says Stephen. 'We needed time to get our second house finished but we also had to sell the first to release the funds.' Fortunately, everything went to plan and kind neighbours helped the couple ferry their belongings up the road from the old house.

The house was just about habitable, although it didn't have a kitchen or internal doors and most of the finishing work had yet to be started. Stephen and Laura managed these crucial final stages very carefully, choosing only to work with tradesmen who could deliver a top-notch finish at a price they could afford. It took longer, as it meant waiting for trusted workmen to become available, but the couple are sure the extra time was worth it. 'The project was frustrating at times but our patience has been rewarded,' says Stephen. 'We've delivered our house to the best finish and highest quality we could achieve on our own, and we're really satisfied with it. It's been an exhausting journey but our home really works and that's what's important to us.' **GD**

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Project details

Find out how Stephen and Laura achieved their new-build dream

AT A GLANCE

Names Stephen Davies and Laura Lewis-Davies
Ages Both 38
Location Lewisham, south-east London
Property Brick and block new-build
Bedrooms 3 **Bathrooms** 2
Project started Feb 2014
Project finished June 2015
Size of house 125sqm
Size of plot 200sqm



THE BUDGET

Land cost	£204,000
Total build cost	£275,000
Total cost	£479,000
Estimated current value	£1 million

SUPPLIERS

PROJECT TEAM

Architect 31/44 Architects (020 3735 7820; 3144architects.com)
Structural engineers Blue Engineering (020 7247 3811; blueengineering.co.uk)
Landscaping Landscapes By Jonathan Stollar (07963 664 951; landscapesbyjonstollar.com)

STRUCTURE

Windows Velfac (01223 897 185; velfac.co.uk) **Bricks** BEA Clay Solutions (01487 825 020; beaclaysolutions.com) **Insulation** Knauf & Celotex Insulation (01744 766 600; knaufinsulation.co.uk)
Insulating blocks Marmox Thermoblocks (01634 835 290; marmox.co.uk) **M&E systems** Polypipe Systems (01709 770 000; polypipe.com) **Pre-cast concrete** Cambridge Pre-Cast (01638 711 811; cap-ltd.co.uk)

FIXTURES AND FITTINGS

Front door Jonathon Elwell (01352 711 766; jonathanelwellinteriors.co.uk) **Appliances** Siemens (0344 892 8999; siemens-home.bsh-group.com) **Ironmongery** Buster and Punch (020 7407 0888; busterandpunch.com) **Staircase** James Christopher Joinery (07747 613 913) **Sanitaryware** Crosswater (0345 873 8840; crosswater.co.uk); Catalano (catalano.co.uk)
Flooring Mosa Tiles (020 7490 0484; mosa.com)

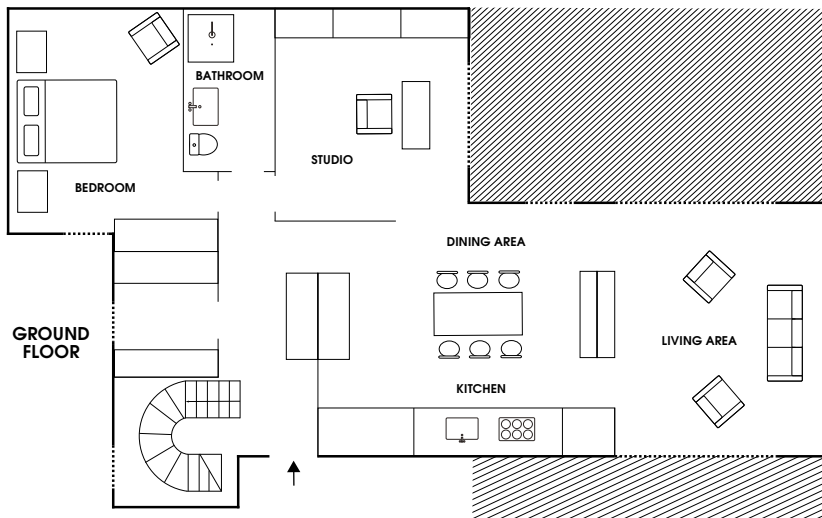
SPOTLIGHT ON

Cabinetry

The kitchen has off-the-shelf Ikea structures. They've been customised with sanded and oiled birch-faced ply doors. Brass knobs complete the look and the hexagon tile splashback is laid with gold grout. The joinery was done by Peter Kouprianoff at Honour Woodwork (07854 713 603).



FLOORPLAN



Style finder

Pastel hues and plywood details are key to Stephen and Laura's clean-cut concept



IN DETAIL

Bespoke stairs

The curved staircase elevates the drama of a double-height area and is an efficient space-saver, measuring only 2mx2m. The drum carcass is made of MDF, which has then been clad in oak with oak treads and risers. The total cost was £8,500, and the work was done by James Christopher Joinery (07747 613 913).

GET THE LOOK

- 1 Functional finish** Artek stool in birch and white, £170, Alvar Aalto at John Lewis (0345 604 9049; johnlewis.com)
- 2 Shine on** Pendant in copper, £190, Pooky (020 7351 3003; pooky.com)
- 3 To the letter** Ampersand sign, £295, Alexander & Pearl (020 8508 0411; alexanderandpearl.co.uk)
- 4 Curved comfort** Bombay tub chair in grey, £129, Modern (0344 482 7660; modern.co.uk)
- 5 Vibrant colours** Zigzag teapot, £189, Missoni Home at Amara (0800 587 7645; amara.com)

MATERIAL FOCUS



Versatile veneer
Birch flexible plywood, £34.99 per 155cm² panel, The Wood Veneer Hub (01525 851 166; thewoodveneerhub.co.uk)



Blush pink
Cupcake eggshell paint, £87.93 for 2.5L, Ecora (020 7148 5265; ecora.co.uk)



Repeat motif
Grey triangles mural wallpaper, from £25 per sqm, Murals Wallpaper (0151 708 5400; muralswallpaper.co.uk)