

NEW BUILD

The entrance façade features smaller windows for privacy and has a wood store covered by a cantilevered canopy to one side of the cedar front door.

A HOME OF TWO HALVES

Darrell and Carmen Minards have built a striking new cedar-clad family home designed specifically for their lifestyle.



WORDS: Eleanor Wilde
PICTURES: Steve Taylor



RIGHT: Travertine flooring was laid over underfloor heating throughout the open-plan kitchen/dining family area, which was designed with a wall of folding/sliding glass doors and roof glazing.

LEFT: The open-tread oak staircase is lit by a double-height window overlooking the fish pond outside.



Large windows and glazed doors to the south side of the house overlook the garden.



“I had my first taste of self build almost 20 years ago when I built my own house, and learnt a huge amount from the process,” recalls Darrell Minards. “It was a traditional design and I employed a building contractor to organise everything, but this time around I felt confident enough to manage the project myself. One of the biggest lessons I’d learnt was to plan ahead, which helped us to bring this build in ahead of schedule – if not quite on budget!”

Darrell and his wife, Carmen, married four years ago and have three daughters from previous marriages: Melissa (22), Jessica (20) and Natalie (18). They spent six months looking at houses, but felt that every property they viewed would prove to be a compromise.

When a quarter acre plot of land came up for sale in the small Buckinghamshire town of Princes Risborough they viewed it on a rainy day in 2009, but were unsure whether to proceed. The former orchard had already been granted outline planning permission for a dwelling, and a second viewing on a sunnier day convinced them to take the plunge and design a new house specifically for their lifestyle.

“We researched several local architects online and were amazed that many didn’t have a website showing examples of their work,” says Darrell, a marketing director. “Allister Godfrey’s website was particularly impressive though, and included some contemporary designs we really liked. We invited five architects to tender, and Allister prepared beforehand by checking details at the planning office in order to better understand the plot.”

The Minards’ brief was for an eco-friendly contemporary home which wouldn’t feel like a goldfish bowl. “A stark glass box just wasn’t for us, and we clipped pictures from magazines to illustrate our ideas,” Darrell recalls. “The great thing about Allister was that he really wanted to design our dream house and not just a statement of his own capability. He kept saying ‘you’re the ones who are going to live in it.’”

Maximising the value of the plot was a prime concern, and Allister designed a three-storey rectangular structure clad in untreated horizontal cedar boards, reminiscent of barn conversion. A pop-out single-storey element, clad in contrasting vertical cedar, opens onto a terrace through a wall of folding/sliding doors and a similar effect has been



A rectangular fish pool reflects sunlight off the water against the glass.



A fully glazed roof at the rear of the house creates a dramatic dining area.

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contemporary steel reinforced doors



achieved on the entrance façade with another flat-roofed section at ground floor level.

"We love the warm look of cedar, and the fact that it needs virtually no maintenance," explains Carmen, an office manager. "A contemporary barn design seemed perfect for the setting."

Internally, the layout has been cleverly conceived with the specific needs of the family in mind. There are individual bedrooms for the girls, with a guest room for visitors and enough bathrooms to avoid early morning conflict. The principal bedroom suite is positioned alone at one end of the first floor, Natalie's top floor bedroom suite is also totally private and there's a ground floor study in addition to the open-plan living/dining/kitchen and separate sitting room.

"I'm used to writing briefs for my work, and we produced a 10-page document describing how we live during the week and at weekends," Darrell continues. "Allister interpreted this by designing the house in two halves, with the atrium and stairs dividing our bedroom from the girls' rooms and acting as a sound barrier. It was a really clever solution and works perfectly."

An unexpected bonus was that Allister also designed the surrounding garden, including the suntrap patio with its permanent L-shaped seating area for morning coffee, and a rectangular fish pool which has been exactly aligned with the double-height staircase window. Sunlight reflects off the water and against the glass, making a striking feature both inside and outside the house.

"Planning was tricky because we live on the edge of the Chilterns, and houses in our road are predominantly traditional period properties, so we knew ours would stand out, but we also felt strongly that it had sufficient architectural merit to gain approval," explains Darrell.

"Allister referred to the Chilterns building design guide and took photographs of neighbouring houses to help back up our case. His thorough research meant that the only change we needed to make involved reducing the size of our garage and giving it a flat rather than a pitched roof."

Darrell and Carmen had initially budgeted £1,000 per square metre for the build, but Allister correctly advised them it was likely to exceed this figure, and the final build cost was closer to £1,300/m². The couple included solar panels, underfloor heating, a ventilation and heat recovery system and high tech mood lighting, with surround sound music in the sitting room and open-plan kitchen/dining/family room.

They had already sold their previous home, and moved into rented accommodation even before securing the land. Part-way through the build they needed to vacate this rental house, however, which meant that the family had to uproot once again and find another property to rent.

The Minards spent a great deal of time discussing alternative methods of construction with Allister, and all three attended lectures at the National Self Build and Renovation Centre in Swindon, which helped to make up their minds.

"We chose timber frame because we wanted a highly insulated, energy-efficient house and a fast build time," Carmen explains. "One snowy weekend was spent driving to various timber frame companies in Hereford, Wales and Cambridgeshire. We selected English Brothers because it's a family-run business offering personal attention, and when we looked around the factory they were equally keen to take on our project."

Darrell and Carmen cleared the site themselves, cutting down trees over a weekend using a hired chainsaw and →

ABOVE: White Corian worktops are teamed with Ikea kitchen cabinets in the open-plan kitchen and the island unit is positioned to look out into the garden.



“Darrell had to sell his car to help pay for some of the finishing touches but theoretically we’ve made a healthy profit.”

A Hypnos bed was chosen for the master bedroom, which has a dressing area and an en suite shower room.

a wheelbarrow. The ground is a mixture of clay and chalk, and the site is surrounded by mature trees. A soil survey was requested by the NHBC building surveyor which resulted in a requirement for extra deep reinforced foundations and this, together with a £9,000 bill for the electricity connection, meant that the couple’s £25,000 contingency fund was spent quickly.

A friend of Darrell’s had recently completed a barn conversion and was able to recommend a number of local trades, including a young and enthusiastic builder who was totally dedicated to the Minards’ project. At first their only on-site storage was a small metal shed, so the new garage was

built before the house to provide additional storage space.

Restricted access meant that it was impossible to bring a skip onto the site and weekends were spent transporting rubbish to the tip in builder’s bags. Access also caused problems when the timber frame was delivered and meticulous measurements were taken before the crane arrived, with only inches to spare.

Once the main shell of the building was completed the Minards were then keen to become more involved. “We knew we were going to struggle to stick to our budget, so if there was something we could do which wouldn’t hold up the build we took it on, including all of the painting,” says Carmen, who



A wood stove in the separate sitting room is fuelled by logs stored beside the entrance door. Oak flooring has been laid in this part of the house.

attended evening classes over 10 weeks to learn how to tile the four bathrooms and cloakroom herself. "Everything happened pretty quickly, partly due to all our forward planning."

Darrell had planned to take on the role of project manager, but at the last minute a new job meant that he was regularly travelling away from home for the first six months of the build, leaving Carmen to handle the project. "I was totally inexperienced and had never done anything like this before," she says, "but I enjoy research, and was happy to shop around for the best prices. Every day before work I would be on site answering questions and talking with the builders."

In November 2010 – eight months after the build started – the family moved into the unfinished house and lived there with no kitchen or heating. Oak flooring was laid the night before their housewarming party, when friends, family, neighbours and people who had worked on the house were invited to experience the finished result.

"We felt proud that we'd contributed so much to the build and had learnt new trades along the way," says Carmen. "Darrell had to sell his car to help pay for some of the finishing touches, but theoretically we've made a healthy profit so it was worth the sacrifice!"





Ground floor



First floor



Second floor

THE BOTTOM LINE

Darrell and Carmen paid £355,000 for their plot of land in 2009 and spent £360,000 building the 280m² new house, which is currently valued at around £900,000.

THE FLOORPLAN

The three-storey house has been carefully designed so that bedrooms and living rooms face south onto the garden, with bathrooms, the larder and utility room facing north towards the road. The top storey is dedicated to a private bedroom suite, and the master suite is positioned to one side of the stairwell on the first floor.

DARRELL & CARMEN'S TOP TIPS

"Plan ahead so that you're always three or four months in advance of the builders, and use the web to compare prices. Also, take measurements carefully. We couldn't reach to measure the large triple-glazed window above our front door and when it arrived it didn't fit. Fortunately we managed to sell it on eBay, along with other leftover materials."

FINAL THOUGHTS

What was the high point of the project? Watching the timber frame going up was a real high point, and when the windows went in it felt like a proper house.

...and the low point?

We had a bit of a scare when an electrician accidentally drilled holes through some structural roof timbers and an engineer needed to confirm that we could continue. There was a heart-stopping week when we thought we might have to replace the whole roof.

What was your best buy?

The travertine on the ground floor cost £2,000 online, and the open-tread oak staircase was made by Brill sawmills. Spending £110 on the tiling evening classes saved £4,000 and decorating the house ourselves saved another £8,000.

...And your biggest extravagance?

We spent £3,000 on our cedar entrance door, which has a steel core, but once we'd seen it we had to have it.



CONTACTS

Architect Allister Godfrey Architects Ltd: 01793 710607; www.allistergodfrey.com

Builder JTC Carpentry & Building Solutions: www.jtc.uk.com

Builders' merchants Blanchfords: www.blanchford.co.uk

Timber frame English Brothers: www.englishbrothers.co.uk

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Folding doors Sunfold: www.sunfold.com

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Stone flooring Stone Superstore: www.stonesuperstore.co.uk

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www.artisan timber and flooring.co.uk



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Allister Godfrey Architects Ltd

+44 (0)1793 710607 | info@allistergodfrey.com | www.allistergodfrey.com