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**HEADLINE:** Am I completely mad? His first attempt at self-build had Neil Lyndon tearing his hair out. Now, he's planning to have another go - using a kit

**BYLINE:** Neil Lyndon

**BODY:**

'Are you sure your heart can stand the strain?' "Do you really want to go through all that stress again?" "Are you totally crazy?" We weren't exactly greeted by boundless approval when we told our friends and family that we had decided to sell our home and build a new house - using a kit.

Given the strength of these reactions, we reassessed our plans. Why were we doing it? What did we hope to achieve? Would it be worth the effort?

The answer to the first question is straightforward. The house I built six years ago - and wrote about in these pages at the time - has simply become too small. An entire tribe of new occupants has taken up residence under its roof and is bursting its seams.

When I decided to build a house in 1999, I was a single man in my mid-fifties who was solely responsible for a teenage son. When John went to Edinburgh University, I felt that I should provide him with a home that would be accessible but not so close to be in his student face. The property I hoped to develop was to be a cool, modernist residence for a bachelor which would also provide regular but impermanent accommodation for my son and a stepson who is not much younger.

The theory was sound. But almost every other element of the project in which I was sleeplessly involved for two years was torture. As my son declared: "It doesn't matter what this house might ultimately be worth - it won't have been worth it."

The architect I hired - on the strength of a

glowing personal recommendation from the

famous Piers Gough - completely messed it up. His plans portrayed a stunningly elegant home, but the quantity surveyor's first costings turned out to be 60 per cent more than I had told the architect I could afford.

In September 2000, on the day that the builder began work, he called to ask if I could rush to the site because "there is a serious discrepancy between the architect's drawings and the dimensions of this plot". The area of an entire bedroom had been

mismeasured. Then the builder told me: "These are the worst working drawings I have seen in 40 years as a builder."

I said: "That's an extremely serious thing for you to say and for me to hear. Are you sure that you truly mean those words?" He solemnly assured me he was not exaggerating. I showed the plans to a friend who is also an architect. He said they were "atrocious".

I sacked my architect, quantity surveyor and structural engineer. The builder and I re-drew the house and had our plans endorsed by a jobbing architect in Dunfermline. The structural engineer then withdrew his authorisation for the building, in consequence of which Building Control cancelled my warrant to build and threatened that I might have to demolish the entire structure which had already been erected. I tore my hair out. Truly.

Scottish winter was descending and limited working hours. A friend had let me her flat in Edinburgh in the expectation that we would be in our new house by Christmas. By the end of February, when we finally had to move out, the house was still uninhabitable. We were homeless. My son went to stay in London. I moved in with my new girlfriend.

Knowing that I was desperate, the builder ploughed on - and the house that he built suited him and his trade better than me, my needs and my tastes. My cool, modernist pad became a bungalow, in Scottish builder's vernacular, complete with loathsome pebbledash. Fittings, finishings and even the colour of the paint on the windows appeared without proper consultation. I could not spare the time to have them corrected. We had to have a roof over our heads.

At last, in mid-March 2001, the builders departed (they vamoosed waving their final cheque, would be more precise) and my son and I moved in. Then I had to face years of effort and expense to make a habitable home and a property that I might one day sell out of the unpromising shambles with which I had been dumped. Six hundred tons of builders' rubble had to be removed from the land. It has cost pounds 20,000 to design, landscape and plant the gardens. A further pounds 50,000, at least, has been spent on the house, including an extension that contains a large office, utility room and double garage.

Much of that investment came from Linda, the girlfriend who became my wife and the mother of our two daughters. Greatly to my daily astonishment, the house I built for the occasional occupation of single men has become a family home permanently full of females. This is a miraculous change but the house is, unmistakably, too small for us, especially if - as we hope - one of our widowed mothers might some day want to live with us in an apartment of their own. Meanwhile, my son has left university and still lives in Edinburgh but I want him to feel that he always has a home with me. My stepson and other friends come regularly to stay. We need more space.

So, despite the sore injuries I sustained last time, which have barely healed, I still fancy the idea of building a new house; and so does Linda. We want a family home that we can afford without a mortgage. We want a place that will be distinctly our own.

After my experiences with architects and builders, we are drawn to the theory of the prefabricated kit house, for which a finished design and a fixed price can be

established in advance. We have toyed with notions of Finnish log houses, of Yankee Barn Homes and the German Huf Haus.

Architect friends (I still have some) in Los Angeles have enthusiastically recommended cool, hip California prefabs that would probably look perfect in the desert but perhaps not quite so fitting on a Fife hillside. At this moment, however, we don't know exactly what we want. Nor do we have a plot on which to build.

Next to the half acre on which I have created an orchard and a poultry stockade is a plot of land that I have always coveted, occupied by Mark, a canny Fifer who trades in cars and heavy plant. To put it bluntly, his place is a scrapyard and his house is a wreck but, if I could combine his property with mine and demolish his house, we could create a plot with some of the most dazzling views in Britain, clear across the Firth of Forth to the Pentlands, the Forth bridges and Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh.

There is an obstacle to this plan, however. Mark values it at almost double the amount I think it would be worth on the open market.

Will he come down? Will we go up? If not, where will we find a plot and what will we build? We have decided that we must move into our new house before August next year, when our older daughter will start school full time. A demanding year lies ahead. Can my heart stand the strain? Am I completely mad?

Follow Neil Lyndon's progress in his regular column, starting next week.

Prices for self-build are unpredictable, partly because they depend on land values, partly because many companies offer a menu of services ranging from project management to a fully bespoke self-build. The Rolls-Royce - or rather, the BMW - of kit houses is the German company Huf Haus, which quotes prices of about pounds 100- pounds 120 per square foot, as opposed to the pounds 65- pounds 75 estimated by Scandia Haus. Innova-House quotes total costs starting at about pounds 180,000. Wooden kit systems are more popular in Northern Europe, where there is a much stronger tradition of building in wood, than in the UK. Importing materials may add to the cost.

Specialist companies provide walling and roofing systems such as SIPs or Structural Insulated Panels, which cost more than the timber frames but can take less time to construct. Architect Bill Dunster's Zedfactory offers a "toolkit" designed to lower emissions and improve energy efficiency.

Planning hurdles are also difficult to predict. Some self-build houses look much more radical than others. Ask your builder if their product has LANTAC (Local Authority National Type Approval Confederation) approval, and check with your local authority's building control department before committing yourself. Kit list

Huf Haus 0870 2000035 [www.huf-haus.de/en](http://www.huf-haus.de/en)

Innova-House 01667 452555 [www.innova-house.co.uk](http://www.innova-house.co.uk)

Living Homes [www.livinghomes.us](http://www.livinghomes.us)

Marmolrad 001 310 689 0089 [www.marmolradziner](http://www.marmolradziner) prefab.com

Oakwrights Ltd 01432 353353 [www.oakwrights.co.uk](http://www.oakwrights.co.uk)

Scandia-Hus 01342 327977 [www.scandia-hus.co.uk](http://www.scandia-hus.co.uk)

Siptec-Hemsec 01234 881280 [www.siptec.com](http://www.siptec.com)

Thomas Mitchell Homes 01592 774401 [www.thomasmitchell](http://www.thomasmitchellhomes.com) homes.com

Weberhaus 01582 794192 [www.weberhaus.co.uk](http://www.weberhaus.co.uk)

Zedfactory 020 8804 1380 [www.zedfactory.com](http://www.zedfactory.com)How to plan your kit house: essential checks and balance sheets