

HOMES CONTEMPORARY SELF-BUILD

# Keeping it Simple

Louisa and Simon Cohn have replaced a derelict property with an award-winning contemporary home that blends in beautifully with its rural setting

Words: **Natasha Brinsmead**  
Photography: **c/o Adrian James Architects**

## PROJECT NOTES

**Project:** Self-build

**Location:**  
Oxfordshire

**Build time:**  
Oct 2011  
– Mar 2014

**Size:** 230m<sup>2</sup>

**Plot cost:**  
£310,000

**Build cost:**  
£500,000  
(£2,174/m<sup>2</sup>)

**Value:**  
£1.1million



#### THE QUICK READ

⇒ Louisa and Simon Cohn have built a striking, contemporary home on an awkward site in the green belt

⇒ A basement level and flat roof have been included to get the very most out of the footprint, which was restricted to the size of a derelict bungalow that stood on the site

⇒ The house is equipped with an impressive number of eco-friendly features, which results in low energy bills for the young family

**W**ith its startlingly simple form, pleasing sense of symmetry and obvious references to the agricultural buildings that lie close by, it is not hard to see why Louisa and Simon Cohn's new home has received numerous architectural and design awards since its completion in 2014.

"We were living in my house – a new three bedroom terrace with little character – in Oxford when we saw the plot," says Louisa. "We were both keen on the idea of building from scratch, and Simon had built before. When we heard that the sale on this plot had fallen through, we just jumped in there."

The plot came with planning permission for a three-bed chalet bungalow — but Louisa and Simon were keen to make some changes to increase the amount of liveable space and introduce their own design ideas.

#### A New Contemporary Design

"We had been keeping a file of what we liked which we just handed over to the architect and then we worked together to achieve a design we were happy with," says Louisa. The architect in question was Adrian James, who is local to the Oxfordshire area, and whose designs had previously caught Louisa and Simon's attention.

Restrictions on the site, which falls within the green belt, meant that the roof height of the new house could be no higher than the neighbouring house, plus the new footprint could be no larger than the run-down bungalow that the new house was to replace. Despite the restrictions, planning approval for their revised plans ⇒

#### Making an Entrance

The front elevation of the house is cantilevered out over the wall. Internally (left), the huge amounts of glazing flood the spaces with light





were approved first time with no amendments — something that was no doubt helped by the number of renewables that have been included in the new house.

The design that Adrian James came up with was for a very stripped down, simple house. “The design was for an easily buildable form focused on creating an extremely efficient envelope,” he explains. “The simple cuboid form meant the house could go right up to the allowable height with occupied space. None of the height was wasted on a pitched roof.” The front elevation of the house was designed to cantilever just a short distance over a concrete wall, to provide a sense of movement and drama, and a basement was included to offer more liveable space. The design also features a flat roof, both as a way of maximising internal space and avoiding dormer windows, which Simon dislikes.

#### The Build

The plot is heavily sloping and this, along with the requirement for a basement, meant that some hefty ground excavation had to take place before the build could begin. “Excavation vehicles were unable to access the area to be dug out because of an awkwardly positioned overhead power line and the fact that the new house sits higher than the driveway,” says Louisa. “The power line had to be submerged into the ground, which meant that the power in the village had to be off for a whole day.”

And just to throw a little more challenge into the project, Louisa and Simon’s son, Miles, now three-and-a-half, was born mid-way through the build. Still, the couple visited the site when they could. “We couldn’t visit the site every day, but we aimed to be on site much more during the second fix stage,” she says.

Once the basement had been dug out and tanked, a flat-packed SIP (structural insulated panel) system was used to construct the basic form of the house, with the couple opting for an airtight membrane within the SIP envelope to increase the energy efficiency of the finished building. The house has some other impressive eco credentials, including a mechanical ventilation heat recovery system, an air-source heat pump and an Ecocent hot water system. “We love the way the house works,” says Louisa. “We don’t have gas here, so everything is electric, but our bills are still no higher than when we lived in the three bedroom terraced house — and grants really helped with the painful upfront costs of some of the eco-friendly features.”

#### Open Plan Spaces

The ground floor space is open plan, with the exception of a home office, WC and larder. In the kitchen, a palette of grey and white enhances the feeling of light even further in this area, while an engineered oak flooring has been used throughout

## HOMES CONTEMPORARY-STYLE SELF-BUILD



### Rear Elevation

The cedar cladding from Vincent Timber is weathering beautifully, while the first floor sliding doors mirror the openings below

### Delicate Details

The folded plate staircase leads up to the first floor and down to the basement which houses a guest suite/home cinema, utility and plant room



### Investing in the Finish

Materials were chosen for their simplicity as well as their ability to merge with the surrounding countryside. "We looked at various claddings for the exterior," says Louisa. "In the end we chose cedar, although we did really like the idea of a material called Plato. It is oven baked and particularly hard wearing, but it is also phenomenally expensive."

Composite timber and aluminium windows were chosen and have been painted dark green — a refreshing change from the ubiquitous dark grey we have all become accustomed to. On the first floor, the full-height sliding doors in each of the four bedrooms have been designed to mirror those on the ground floor, while glass balustrades act as a barrier.

Internally, the largely open plan layout is brimming with natural light, thanks to the huge glazed openings which form such a definitive part of the design — the largest of which opens out from the kitchen/dining/living space into the garden and required a substantial steel beam to be placed within the frame of the building.

This open plan area is presided over by a super sleek kitchen consisting of a bank of white gloss units and a grey island featuring a Corian worktop with a built-in hob. "I have always wanted a larder," says Louisa, "and this has been hidden away behind a flush door at one end of the kitchen."

The elegant folded plate staircase behind a glass balustrade leads off to the basement, which provides valuable utility and plant space, as well as a guest bedroom/home cinema room. "We went around 20 per cent over our budget, but we didn't compromise on quality," says Louisa. "I'd advise others to never compromise on the structure and finishes — it really does pay to get the best quality you can. Oh, and don't have a baby halfway through!" **H**



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# The Project



**Adrian James**  
Architect

## ARCHITECT'S VIEW

This is a house which is all about the virtues of simplicity: how limitations on size, appearance and budget can be turned to an advantage. It's the KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid) principle epitomised.

The simple cuboid form was kept plain and pure — no popping out bays, changes of material or costly whimsical features. This simplicity is all to the good. In addressing the planning requirements and the need for an efficient, ecological construction, the exterior form of the house is refreshingly simple and sweet.

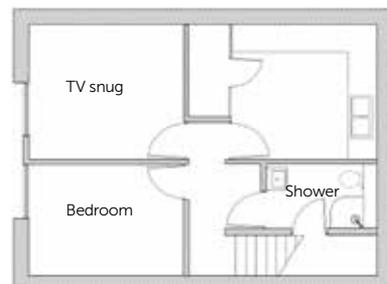
The design was focused on three key exterior elements. Cladding the building in timber gave it warmth and tactility so it felt at ease in its setting, while having one huge opening to the garden transformed the interior into a light-filled indoor/outdoor space. Cantilevering the house over the entrance, just a short distance, enhanced the simple shape of the house and gave it a dynamic quality.

Inside, the focus was again on cutting any clutter or complication. There are as few walls as possible — just one big living space for the young family. The focus is on the ultra-slim folded plate staircase as the functional highlight. **H**

## SUPPLIERS

- Architect** Adrian James Architects .....  
.....adrianjames.com; 01865 203267
- Main contractor** Laumburn Geekie .....  
.....lamburngeekie.co.uk
- SIPs (structural insulated panels)**  
SIPs UK.....01933 353501
- Windows** Allan Brothers .....  
.....allanbrothers.co.uk
- IDSystems.....idsystems.co.uk
- Kitchen** Leicht from InHouse Design .....  
.....inhouseoxford.co.uk
- Bathrooms** UK Bathroom Warehouse .....  
.....ukbathroomwarehouse.com
- Brassware** Grohe.....grohe.co.uk
- Cedar cladding** Vincent Timber .....  
.....0121 772 5511
- Engineered oak flooring** Natural Interiors  
.....natural-interiors.co.uk

## Basement



## Ground Floor



## First Floor

