

MORE WITH LESS
PIERS TAYLOR

“*How* You Self-build Should Dictate *What* You Self-build”

In the first of a new series looking at value engineering a building project, Piers Taylor suggests that your home’s design should reflect your approach to the project you take — and espouses the benefits of a bit of DIY



Piers Taylor

Piers Taylor is a renowned award winning architect (his practice is Invisible Studio). His own self-build project, ‘Moonshine’, won the AJ Small Project Award. He co-presents the BBC2 Series ‘The House that £100k Built’ with Kieran Long, which demonstrates to self-builders how to do more, with less.

The most important thing to think about when starting a self-build project is not just ‘What am I going to build’, but, instead, ‘How am I going to build?’

What I mean by this is that so often, the loose term ‘self-build’ is used to cover a vast range of different ways of going about the process of building a house — with little in common with one another except for the fact that at the end of it, you will (hopefully!) have a new house for yourself.

At one end of the scale, this could mean briefing your architect, and then disappearing on holiday until you return to a beautifully built house. Your architect can fully design, document the project, tender with several building contractors, and oversee the project on site. This should grant you reasonable confidence that if the scope of work is accurately pinned down and nothing changes, your project will be on time and budget.

At the other end of the scale, you could design your own building, submit your own planning application, prepare your own building regulations and working drawings and physically build every aspect yourself. You’d probably need a few engineer’s calculations at some point, and electrical certification (part P), but other than this, there’s nothing to stop you getting on with it. Where on the scale of self-building are you positioning yourself?

Somewhere in the middle, is, I suspect, the approach that most of you will take — doing some of it yourself, and overseeing groups of subcontractors to do the rest. The important thing is both to be explicitly clear about what your mechanism of delivery of the project is, and, critically, how the design and construction of the project reflects your approach.

If someone else is building it, you can rely on their expertise. If you are building it, you’re relying on yours. Even if you have some subcontractors building bits of it under your management, there’s a great deal you need to know and do — not just your strategy for organization and control, but knowledge and skill — or technique — around materials and methods of construction.



The more carefully defined your strategy for delivery, the more freedom you will have to innovate

Each approach will necessitate a very different type of building, unless you are an extraordinarily adept self-builder. The interesting bit, though, is how this affects design — and the interesting question for self-builders is how much you can do yourself. For me, a project that embraces your skill level is a really exciting and interesting one. One of the things many of us aspire to achieve is perfect tolerances and perfect levels of finish — but as many of us are unlikely ever to become master craftsmen, there is a different way, a way that may encourage you to take on more, not less, of your self-build.

Rural Design's 'Black Shed' on the Isle of Skye is a very good example of a house that was intelligently designed by the architect around the skills of a self-builder. The technologies, materials and finishes were ideal for someone with relatively little constructional experience, but lots of practical common sense and enthusiasm. The building is, effectively, a simple, but beautiful shed. All of the materials used — black corrugated sheet, stirling board, blockwork and so on — are widely available standard materials.

There aren't many 'finishes' to speak of, which is great in a self-build, as it is often these things that catch self-builders out and add layers of unnecessary expense and complexity. There are limited wet trades in the project — generally 'dry' materials that can be screwed, fixed or bolted together are easier to use for self-builders. Where there are finishes in the Black Shed, they are generally self-finished materials. Where there are wet trades, such as the blockwork used to construct the stairs, the detailing doesn't attempt to emulate the skills of a bricklayer, and are relatively crude and 'naively' done in a conventional sense, but all the better for it. The project is a celebration of the skills of a self-builder. It is so exciting to see a project that embraces the skills that many ordinary people have, and turns them into an extraordinary piece of architecture.

It is at this end where some of the real joy of self-build can be discovered — the actual doing it yourself. Merely managing a project isn't exploiting the potential of self-build — at best, you may (possibly, if you're very lucky and resourceful) save money, but there's far more to extract from the self-build process but this, where the building you end up with could be one that anyone could have built, But building it yourself, with your own hands, with your resourcefulness, you enter a very dif-

ferent relationship with your house, the materials you use and the spaces you make — and this is where the real joy of self-build happens.

Working with actual materials, fixing them yourself, being part of and controlling the build is incredibly exciting and empowering. Also — I will of course advise you to strictly keep to your schedule — working on your own house encourages experimentation. There are delicious discoveries that can be made when you exploit the freedom you have if the build is your own, and try things out. When you are in control of what happens, when you have the freedom to add your own mark to materials, finishes and spaces, you will discover the real empowerment that arises in making your own house — hand-built by you.

Without wishing to curb any enthusiasm I might have awakened, regardless of your experience and the process you use, the most important thing is to put in place a mechanism for controlling the three essential aspects of the build: time, money and quality — or — how long it all takes, how much you spend and what you actually build and it's resultant performance. A little bit of up front expert advice that helps you bottom out all of this is probably the best bit of money that you will spend. Ironically, the more carefully defined your strategy for delivery, the more freedom you will have to innovate. ■

