



THE MODERN WAY

The **Spillanes'** innovative take on oak frame has given them a light-filled home that effortlessly balances natural materials, energy efficiency and contemporary living

WORDS RICHARD WEBBER PHOTOS COLIN POOLE

David and Jennifer Spillane have long been admirers of natural products. So when they decided to build their dream home on the Northamptonshire orchard adjacent to their existing house, it was no surprise that they were keen to put a characterful oak frame at the heart of their plans. "We'd visited a number of self build shows and were always drawn to the oak suppliers," says David. "Just being able to smell and touch the timber made us realise what a wonderful material it is."

The couple had a clear vision of what they wanted to achieve. "We weren't interested in traditional framing methods as they tend to create very square-looking internal structures," says David. "So it was with great excitement we discovered that Carpenter Oak had developed a more modern technique using industrial elements such as steel, which could be left exposed inside the house."

It was a landmark moment for the Spillanes' scheme – but they soon learned that moving forward with a self build is about more than having a great idea. Initially, they'd hoped to work with a local architect – but it soon became clear that the practice's knowledge of oak structures was limited and they didn't have enough experience to develop a design that would make effective use of the material. On the basis of a recommendation from Carpenter Oak, the couple switched to Roderick James Architects, who they felt really understood what they were hoping to achieve. A new design was put together and sent through for the local council's approval.

Planning challenge

As anyone who's navigated the somewhat subjective process of seeking approval for a building project from their local authority



will know, getting what you want isn't always easy. It was no different for David and Jennifer, who endured an agonising eight-month wait before consent was finally granted.

For a time, it looked like their application might even be rejected. "It was a very frustrating process," says David. "One of the local authority's objections concerned our use of dry stone walling on the property's exterior. The houses in our street have been built using an eclectic range of materials, so we weren't expecting anyone to object to this. The product is used in various nearby villages and even features in the town's own council offices – so I ended up sending in photos of their own building in support of our design!"

The Spillanes hired a planning consultant to help them weed through the myriad rules and regulations, as well as secure the backing of local influencers. "Our ward councillor took the time

THE SPILLANE FILE

NAMES David & Jennifer Spillane
OCCUPATIONS Company director & homemaker
LOCATION Northamptonshire
TYPE OF PROJECT Self build
STYLE Contemporary
CONSTRUCTION METHOD Oak frame and structural insulated panels (SIPs)
PLOT SIZE 956m²
LAND COST Already owned
BOUGHT March 2010
HOUSE SIZE 200m²
BUILD COST £488,000
COST PER M² £2,440
VAT RECLAIM £9,000
BUILDING WORK COMMENCED February 2014
BUILDING WORK TOOK 47 weeks
CURRENT VALUE £650,000



to come round to have a look at what we wanted to achieve," says David. "Thankfully, he liked our vision and was prepared to stand up to the committee. We're grateful to both of them as we may not have won permission without their support."

The protracted process has taught the couple that it's rarely a good idea to simply submit a planning application in hope, without doing your research first. In particular, they highly recommend attending meetings with the local planning officer before pressing ahead. "This gives you a chance to understand what's involved and check what kind of applications – or elements within them – are likely to be refused or approved," says David. "It's a great way to gain awareness of trends and local feeling."

Design flair

Despite the planners' initial resistance, the dry stone walling has become a striking feature. Sourced from a local quarry, the Northamptonshire limestone took several weeks to lay, but was definitely worth the effort. "It's one of the main aspects of the property that gets commented on – and everyone loves it," says Jennifer, who project managed the build in conjunction with David.

Although traditional materials have been used to clad the exterior, taken together they make a clever contemporary statement. The recessed masonry elements are complemented by red cedar, creating a colourful and texture-rich finish. The Spillanes were anxious to prevent the wood weathering to a grey tone, so they researched numerous products to help maintain its pristine original state. They eventually settled on a sealer from specialist timber



Visible from the raised street, the living roof adds another natural element to the clever blend of cladding options



WE LEARNED...

BE ON SITE regularly to keep an eye on progress. This way, you can identify and resolve any issues speedily – before too much time and money is wasted. Daily visits are best, but as a minimum be sure to attend at least once a week.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY so organise regular site meetings and be sure to provide written summaries of these, complete with actions and outcomes, to ensure that everyone involved stays on track.

DON'T FORGET this 'Six P' mnemonic: proper planning and preparation prevents poor performance. If you leave things too late, you'll be forced into making bad decisions and compromises. In particular, look around and get good referrals before hiring anyone on your project.

GET TO KNOW your planning officer and ward councillor, as well as the Local Plan for development in your area. All of these – and more – could be significant boons for your planning application.



Left: The Devol kitchen mixes freestanding pieces, including a large central island unit, to fit neatly within the oak frame

coating company, Rystix. The product deepens the wood's natural hues and protects against ageing. "Our main contractor mocked up the different options by fixing panels of cedar onto the house so we could see it in situ," says David. "Each was stained with a different treatment to allow us to assess the finish. It added time and cost to this phase of the build, but it's made all the difference."

The couple's desire to introduce a modern edge to the architecture is also reflected in their choice of a blue zinc roof. This complements the Lindab steel guttering and anthracite grey aluminium windows, while sitting comfortably alongside the blue-grey tones of the stonework. "The zinc's long-term durability was a key selling point for us; and of course we love the look of it," says David. "It feels as though it was made for this kind of building."

Opening up

Internally, the goal was to create a light, airy and inviting living space. Vaulted ceilings, double-height voids and atrium areas all make excellent use of the sunshine streaming through large, triple-glazed windows. Upstairs, a lounge area looks out across an underlying sedum roof, which appears to blend seamlessly with the landscape beyond. "The layout is designed to allow for a modern

lifestyle, with plenty of circulation space and room for entertaining guests," says David. The couple felt the traditional floorplan of their previous home, where individual rooms were demarcated with solid walls, was claustrophobic. So when it came to discussing the design with Roderick James Architects, an open-plan configuration was a top priority. "The new house allows you to cook and entertain in the same space, so nobody misses out on conversation," says Jennifer.

The lack of partitions did throw up some practical considerations, however. "You have to recognise that an open-plan arrangement leaves little scope for rows of kitchen units, other storage options and artwork, as there's simply less wall surface available," says David. "You also need to be careful about where you locate electrical sockets and light fittings, because they might get in the way of precious space for essential furniture."

Living on site

During the build, the Spillanes continued to live on the grounds in their renovated cottage, which has since been rented out. This meant that, on a daily basis, the couple could easily liaise with their contractors – who they appointed only after visiting several projects to check out the standard of work.

"If you want your outcome to be realised, rather than the scheme others interpret for you – or try to get away with delivering – then you have to get involved," says David, who admits managing the work was stressful at times. "Our main contractor was very proactive, and even performed snagging as the project developed. The firm took pride in the build and achieved a great finish. Carpenter Oak was excellent, too, but working with some of the other parties was frustrating. Getting the water supply hooked up was especially long-winded, with prospective connection dates missed several times – even though we'd had to pay for it up front. We do look back and wonder why we got so flustered about things like this, as it didn't help resolve anything. But a self build is such a personal project and you have to keep reminding yourself that if you don't battle for what you want, you'll regret it later when you're stuck with second best."

Juggling delivery dates for products was a particular challenge, and had a significant impact on the build schedule. The blue hue they specified for the zinc roof, for example, was an unusual colour for what was already a non-standard product – resulting in a 12-week lead time. They're quick to point out, though, that it was worth the wait.

Maintaining the books

The Spillanes set a budget of £466,000 for their project, but overspent by just shy of 5%. Most of this was accounted for by



At once structural and decorative, the internal oak frame sits on steel supports and vaults right up through the space to support the roof



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the fact that they didn't allocate enough funds for the hard and soft landscaping. "One of our planning conditions meant that we had to submit a new design to ensure the house would interact well with its surroundings," says David, who originally estimated that £20,000 would cover this outdoor work. "We now realise we should have allowed more like 10%-15% of the total build cost."

For Jennifer, it was a crucial part of the project. "At the end of the day, we wanted the house to flow into the garden and were keen to create a raised deck for entertaining," she says. "It wouldn't make sense to build a home like this and then have a flat, boring outdoor space. It had to be properly landscaped to really do the place justice – and it costs money to achieve that."

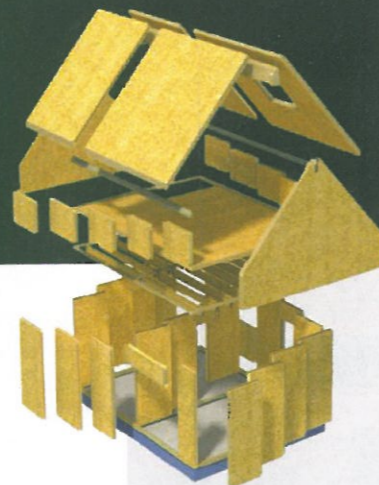
Self building has certainly been a learning curve for David and Jennifer, but they've grown in confidence as a result of overcoming the various challenges along the way. So much so that they're already in the midst of another project, which is being built alongside this house. "We're creating her bigger and better sister, putting into practice all the things we learnt first time around. For example, we don't want to get caught out again with a three-month lead time on the roof covering, so we've already bought it way before it's due to go on," says David. "There's definitely no substitute for experience."

The Spillanes' eclectic taste continues into this ensuite bathroom, where a mishmash of patterned tiles makes a pleasing contrast against the natural oak



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closer look

A unique oak frame...

In response to the couple's brief for a cutting-edge but characterful home, Carpenter Oak came up with the idea of a floating frame, where the material is adeptly kept to a minimum with none of the usual diagonal bracing joists or sole and head plates. The skeleton instead sits inside a shell of structural insulated panels, with the timber elements rising to support the roof and first floor.

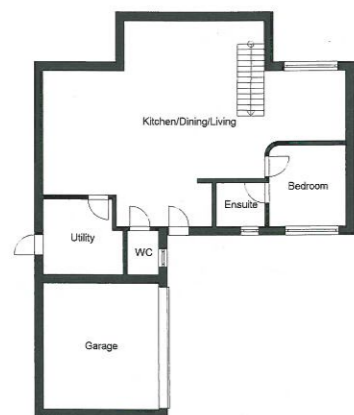
Three principal cross-frames provide an eye-catching internal feature, with the main posts slanting inwards to form strong A-shaped structures. These members end 600mm above floor level, landing on stainless steel feet that provide a wonderfully contemporary juxtaposition against the timber. Traditional mortise and tenon joints are scarcely to be seen. Instead, stainless steel fitch plates are bolted to the adjoining timber – with an industrial effect achieved by keeping the pig nuts and bolt heads exposed. The result is a freestanding frame that sits within the shell of the house, creating unusual angles and beam connections that provide a dramatic finish.



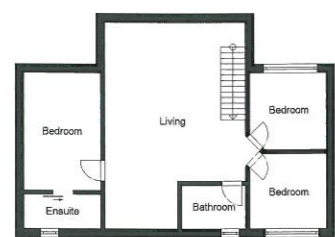
Steel & oak

Floor plans

Ground floor



First floor



TOTAL BUILD COST BREAKDOWN

Elements	Cost m ²	Cost %	Total cost
Fees	£150	6%	£30,000
Site preparation	£150	6%	£30,000
Foundations	£180	7%	£36,000
Drainage & utility trench works	£125	5%	£25,000
External walls & windows	£680	28%	£136,000
Roof structure & covering	£170	7%	£34,000
Internal walls	£40	2%	£8,000
Floor, wall & ceiling finishes	£80	3%	£16,000
Joinery & fittings	£130	5%	£25,000
Plumbing & heating	£260	11%	£52,000
Electrics	£145	6%	£28,000
Decorating	£50	2%	£10,000
External works	£290	12%	£58,000
Grand total			£488,000

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Useful contacts

ARCHITECT **Roderick James Architects** 01803 868000 www.rjarchitects.co.uk OAK FRAME **Carpenter Oak** 01803 732900 www.carpenteroak.com
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Photo credit: Neptune Kitchens by Distinctly Living - Dartmouth



Designed by Roderick James Architects

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