



Can you build it? Yes we can

A new concept in kit design gave the Allens the bespoke living space in Aberdeenshire they had long dreamed of

Words **Jenny McBain**
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Dawn and Torq Allen had nurtured a long held ambition to build their own home. However, the very idea seemed like an impossible aspiration – until they read about a stunning and affordable kit house designed by an architect.

“I have always loved buildings,” says Dawn. “In fact my first job was working in the office of a quantity surveyor, so I am familiar with plans and know how to read them. However, I am also all too aware of how build costs can spiral out of control.”

So for decades the couple’s self-building dreams were held in abeyance and they did not progress beyond the enthusiastic perusal of property magazines. That all changed in 2013, when they read an article in *Build It* magazine.

“We came across the Model D concept,” Torq explains. “It’s an architect-designed kit house that is both sustainable and affordable and the home owner, who was featured in the article, is also the owner of the building company that developed the concept.”

The person in question is Bryan Stuart. His firm, Sylvan Stuart, specialises in timber buildings. Not only was Bryan living in the house he hoped would help to plug the gap in affordable housing, he was also using it as a show home for potential customers, so Dawn and Torq went to visit him.

Bryan’s house has three bedrooms, two bathrooms, a utility room, an open plan kitchen/living space and a mezzanine area. It is tall and narrow – which is in keeping with traditional house styles in Aberdeenshire. It has a steep pitched roof and its overhanging eaves are designed to protect the larch cladding from the elements. His house cost around £150,000 to build and the hope was that, over time, economies of scale and refinement in design would lower costs. The Allens felt that the Model D house made building their own home both possible and practical. At the time they were living in an ordinary modern house and were keen on the idea of moving away from what most volume house builders can offer.

“We couldn’t think of another home



Clockwise from top left: the gable end of the Model D house; the living room on the first floor; storage at the top of the stairs; the kitchen and dining area; a sunlit hallway





“The rain slats are great. You can walk round the whole house without getting wet”



From top down: the building covered in larch slats; the bathroom; two bedrooms. Right: the view from the kitchen



builder who lives in his own product,” says Torq. “Suddenly building our own home seemed to be a real possibility and it was perfect timing for us. We wanted to cut down on the amount we spent on running our house and spend our money on living our lives.”

The Allens liked Bryan’s house but were clear from the outset that they would be tweaking the design in order that the finished building would be exactly right for them. It helped that Torq is an engineer by profession so he, like Dawn, is able to look at a two-dimensional plan and think in three dimensions.

“We decided to do away with the mezzanine. It is very beautiful and very dramatic but, to us, it is just not practical,” says Dawn. “We wondered what we would do when we needed to tackle a cobweb in the corner or reach up to the ceiling to change a light bulb.”

Another alteration that made the layout of their house distinct from that of Bryan’s was that the number of bedrooms was reduced from three to two. This left space for a study between the upstairs master bedroom and the upstairs lounge.

As the couple pored over plans and made modifications to the design, they also set out to find the right plot of land. There was no question of moving away from the northeast of Scotland. Dawn says, “The countryside around here is really beautiful and we would not want to live anywhere else.”

An unexpected downturn in the oil industry had an impact on land prices and the couple were able to secure a piece of land for just £50,000. It was sold to them by a farmer who generously threw in a small additional area of ground into the bargain. This allowed room for a slightly larger garden than they had originally planned and a decent-sized garage.

The Model D house is sold as a basic wooden kit and the company’s construction team takes care of the timber side of the build. When it came to employing other tradespeople, Dawn

took responsibility for putting a team in place.

“We were really fortunate in that our neighbour, who has built a couple of houses, was able to recommend good workmen and most of them had worked together before so there was a really good team spirit throughout the construction process,” she explains.

One of the distinctive things about the Model D concept is the rain slat feature that borders the decking area to the sides of the house. As well as keeping the rain off and thereby protecting the timber walls, the slats also modify the amount of sunlight which could otherwise cause the building to overheat.

Torq sees other advantages of this design feature. “The rain slats are great. You can walk round the whole house without getting wet. They are a bit like Venetian blinds; you can see out clearly but people can’t see in. I think they change the house from looking like a simple barn conversion to something more spectacular.”

The Model D concept has come full circle. Dawn and Torq who visited the first one to have been constructed are now happy to show their home to other interested parties. They are truly satisfied customers who appreciate the combined effort of the very many individuals who helped them to realise their ambition to live in a bespoke home.

Due to the considerable size of the garage the couple put in place and the number of modifications they made to the original design, the final build cost came to around £227,000. Almost a year after moving into their new home, Dawn and Torq still cannot believe their good fortune. “It feels like we are permanently on holiday,” says Dawn. “It is just such a wonderful, light-filled space and we get to sit out on the decking when the weather is nice. I am half expecting someone to come along and say, ‘Your time is up, this is our house you need to move out.’”

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