



Kristian Digby: Here's one I built earlier

The TV property presenter thought he knew it all – until he put up a house in his garden

Aug. 3, 2009 - [PRLog](#) -- Being a television property presenter, I thought I'd be fine," Kristian Digby says with a wry laugh. "I felt a sense of superiority. I used to watch Grand Designs and think: 'Of course they are going to screw up — why don't they see it coming?'"

Yet when Digby, host of BBC1's To Buy or Not to Buy, put his money where his mouth was and set about building his own dream home — in the overgrown garden of his first house — he wasn't quite so self-assured.

"When you're actually building, you become blind to the most obvious problems," he says. "Why I assumed I would be fine, I don't know. I'd never done anything remotely like it before — I can't even wire a plug."

Walking around the product of his labours — a supermodern detached two-bedroom property in Stratford, east London — I conclude that it was a good idea after all. The sleek, light-filled house flows beautifully. The ground floor is open-plan, with the kitchen, living room and patio garden melding seamlessly into each other. High-tech additions such as a remote-controlled skylight above the bed, which allows him to stargaze and enjoy a gentle breeze as he nods off, add a luxurious touch. (It closes automatically if it rains.) Still, it has taken five punishing years to get to this point. Digby, 32, bought his first home when he was only 23. The five-bedroom semi in the insalubrious suburb cost him £185,000 — remember, it was only in 2005 that the London won the right to stage the 2012 Olympics, to be held in and around Stratford — but the value to Digby, who was born into a family of property developers, lay not in future capital growth, but in its enormous garden.

Spanning about half an acre, it was most likely the site of another home, bombed during the second world war and never rebuilt. "It almost seemed I had to [build there], because the garden would allow it," he says. "I felt bullied into it, in a way. It would have been a bit of a waste if I hadn't."

Today, he can see his original home, now let out, from an upstairs window in his new designer pad, which must be satisfying. The building process, however, was far from that. Digby admits that, despite starring in property makeover programmes, he had no idea of the stress involved: the sleepless nights, financial panic and the fear that he was making a huge mistake.

The planning process alone cost £6,000 — it was refused twice and he only won on appeal. The problem, he believes, is that he wanted to construct something modern, and he was building in an "infill" space, a process otherwise known as garden-grabbing [see panel, right]. One of the planners' objections was that the new house didn't blend in architecturally with the area, a claim Digby finds laughable.

"Let's be honest, this is Stratford," he says. "It's a mess. You have lots of council flats with brutal architecture, and all the facades of the Victorian terraces are mixed. There's cladding, pebbledash, plastic porches — no continuity. I wanted to ask them, 'Which bit of the road do you want me to conform with?"

The prefab garages, the council flats or the mishmash of terraced houses?”

The day after Digby got the go-ahead for his new home, and against all the odds, London was awarded the 2012 Olympic Games. Stratford would see large-scale regeneration. Everything was finally going his way.

The brief he gave his architect, Ben Paul, of Neu Architects, which has worked on homes for Jasper Conran and the shoe designer Patrick Cox, was challenging: a statement home on a budget of only £150,000. Digby funded the build by taking £50,000 equity out of his old home on the site, raising an additional £100,000 by buying 20 properties at auction and flipping them. Sticking to ex-council properties, renovating some but not all, he sold them on in 2006 and 2007, making a profit of £5,000 or so with each sale.

“The market was moving so fast that sometimes I just put them straight back on the market without doing anything,” he says. “To be honest, it was just a paperwork exercise. I didn’t even see some of the flats I bought.”

Being the right person in the right place at the right time means Digby is now in the enviable position of owning his new property, mortgage-free. Although he has not had it valued professionally, he believes it is worth about £450,000 and the old one roughly £380,000. Saving on a mortgage on his new place has come in handy, considering that it ended up going significantly over budget — the total build cost came to £250,000, including furniture.

The extra £100,000 came out of his earnings, with every extra pound over the original estimate sending him further into despair. “I ended up hating the house for a while,” Digby recalls. “I felt I had failed. Retrospectively, to build a home for £250,000 seems great, but you see a lot of people in magazines claiming to have built five-bedroom houses for £150,000. I really don’t know how they managed it, because I really tried.”

Once he had financially committed to the idea, a team of 10 builders were set to work. The project was managed by a friend, Stephen, on whom Digby relied heavily for much of the time he was away filming.

While it is a truth universally acknowledged that you must never go away while your builders retila a kitchen — let alone build an entire house from scratch — Digby had to work outside London and abroad.

“The thing about building a house is that it’s never one thing that is the most stressful — it’s everything,” he says, looking troubled by the memory. “It’s your plaster not being delivered, which means your plasterer is being paid to stand around, as you’ve got no work for him; it’s dealing with skip permits; it’s suddenly realising that you’re meant to be measuring the outer window, not the inner frame. Everything around you is a decision, and if you’re trying to make those decisions when you’re away, listening to your project manager on the phone trying to explain something to you that you can’t see or understand... Well, it’s tough. It reduced me to tears a couple of times.”

Inevitably, there were several mishaps, including the time the neighbour’s car was buried under a mountain of bricks. (In their wisdom, the builders decided to tear down an external wall by attaching one end of a rope to the wall and the other to their Land Rover).

It’s only recently that Digby has been able to acknowledge to himself that, all in all, £250,000 is pretty good going. “I only allowed myself to go crazy on the two things that were most important to me,” he says — those being his sofa, which cost £6,000, and his Vi-Spring bed, which cost an indulgent £18,000. “The rest cost very little. I paid £80 for my dining table and £30 for these Eiffel chairs, both bought off eBay. And everything else was really, really cheap.”

He is thrilled with his minimalist home, with its clean lines and acres of glass. “How many people get the chance to build something from scratch, take five years to do it, and end up not owing a penny?” he asks. “Maybe I played it better than those people on Grand Designs after all. They are often vague about the money, but you can see it in their eyes: they’re terrified about how much it is costing. They’ve blown £900,000, and it’s broken them. That’s when I feel smug again, as I know my house cost me a fraction of that.”

Source: The Times

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