

Want to build your own oak framed house but don't want to be a self-builder?

Interviewer: Do you find some people want to self-build but don't want to build themselves if that makes sense?

Andy: Oh certainly. In fact I would say the vast majority of self-builders have neither the time, the inclination or the wide range of skills to build a house themselves. Designing and building a house on time and budget is a complex process. In my experience most either want to self-manage their project or they want it managed by others.

Interviewer: So why do people want to self-manage something as complicated as a house building project?

Andy: I think there are two reasons. Some people have just always wanted to 'build their own house' and there's probably a level of involvement where it is 'acceptable', if that's the right word, to use the term 'we built this house'. The other reason is financial. People self-manage to save money although I think the financial gains are quite questionable.

Interviewer: In what way?

Andy: When someone self-manages to save money I think they rarely take into account the true cost of the project as compared with an exact like for like build by professionals. For example people put their own time in for free which if it's in their spare time I can understand. That said managing a construction is a full time job and I've known people to give up a job to self-build so that time has come at quite a cost. Self-build projects more often than not take longer with a subsequent impact perhaps on loan or mortgage interest payments or perhaps on payments for a rental property while the house is built. We also know that a lot of trades' people will add a premium to what they charge a self-builder.

Interviewer: Why would they do that?

Andy: If a trades person is working on a professionally run site they'll expect everything to be ready for when they're due to start work. However they tend to expect a self-build site to be run differently - the level of information to be less comprehensive, the site to be less well prepared and they're less likely to get a straight run at their work. For these reasons they tend to quote higher. In addition to this they may well get repeat work from a main contractor and therefore have agreed preferential rates with them.

Interviewer: A few minutes ago you mentioned that there are a wide range of skills and professionals needed for a project. Can you give me some examples?

Andy: Sure, I mentioned it because I think a lot of people embark on self-build projects without understanding the number of different experts you need if you're going to get it right and by right I suppose I mean the house you want delivered on time within your budget. So for example, a build project will normally require input from an architect, engineers – normally one for the sub structure that's below ground and one for the superstructure above ground, a quantity surveyor, a land surveyor, a SAP consultant to name a few. Whilst some people might do some of these things themselves, you simply can't do them all unless you are a qualified engineer, an accredited SAP consultant and so on. In addition to these you're likely to need an arboricultural survey, ground condition survey, percolation test and habitat survey. Depending on the site you may need to engage an archaeological consultant, a planning consultant, highways consultant and the list can go on. Alongside all of this you need someone to look after the cost planning and value engineering to ensure the project will come within budget and give you value for money. That in itself is a specialist skill.

Interviewer: OK, so some people will self-build just because they have an itch they need to scratch, and others because they believe they'll save money and presumably some do it for both those reasons. If I'm neither of those and still want to self-build how much involvement can I have?

Andy: A slightly unhelpful answer is as much or as little as you want. However I think it's quite easy to describe how most people get involved in their project when they work with professionals. They want to be very closely involved in the design, from the number and type of rooms, to the style and the look and feel of the house. But they also want advice and guidance on what's possible, what's appropriate and so on. They want to select fixtures and fittings and determine the specification for the house but again they want the advice where appropriate. They probably won't need help to choose taps but probably will to decide on the most suitable heating system. In fact heating systems are a useful example. Normally people want to decide how they heat their house – gas boiler, air source heat pump, ground source heat pump or whatever but they rarely want to choose a specific make and model because they rely on the professionals to provide the best solution. Heating in itself is a specialist area and normally a specialist would be engaged to design the system to suit the house.

Interviewer: OK, so it sounds as though there is plenty for the client to be involved with even if they've engaged a company to provide a full turnkey service?

Andy: Absolutely. In fact for a working couple for example it can be a push to make the time just for all the decisions they want to be involved in and that's with us filtering information so that they have what they need to make those decisions. Something else we do is to help our clients make decisions in phases, as and when it's appropriate because otherwise it can become overwhelming. They can suffer from a sort of decision paralysis because they just don't know what to prioritise.

For example some decisions just aren't needed before you get planning permission so they can wait for when the detailed specification and construction drawings are being done.

Interviewer: So what are the things to look out for for someone managing a house build themselves?

Andy: Being certain that the design for which they get planning permission will give them everything they want within their budget, ensuring they're getting value for money when they get quotes from builders and tradesman, getting a fixed price and a fair contract before work starts and ensuring the project is completed to the agreed specification on time and on budget.

Interviewer: So what would you say to someone who wants to self-build but doesn't want to be a self-builder?

Andy: There's plenty to do within a full turnkey service to satisfy most people's need for involvement. From working with the architectural team during the design, to choosing materials and finishes, kitchen and bathrooms. Once on site you can enjoy the process of the house coming together and help finesse detail and not worry about whether it will be built to specification, on time and on budget.