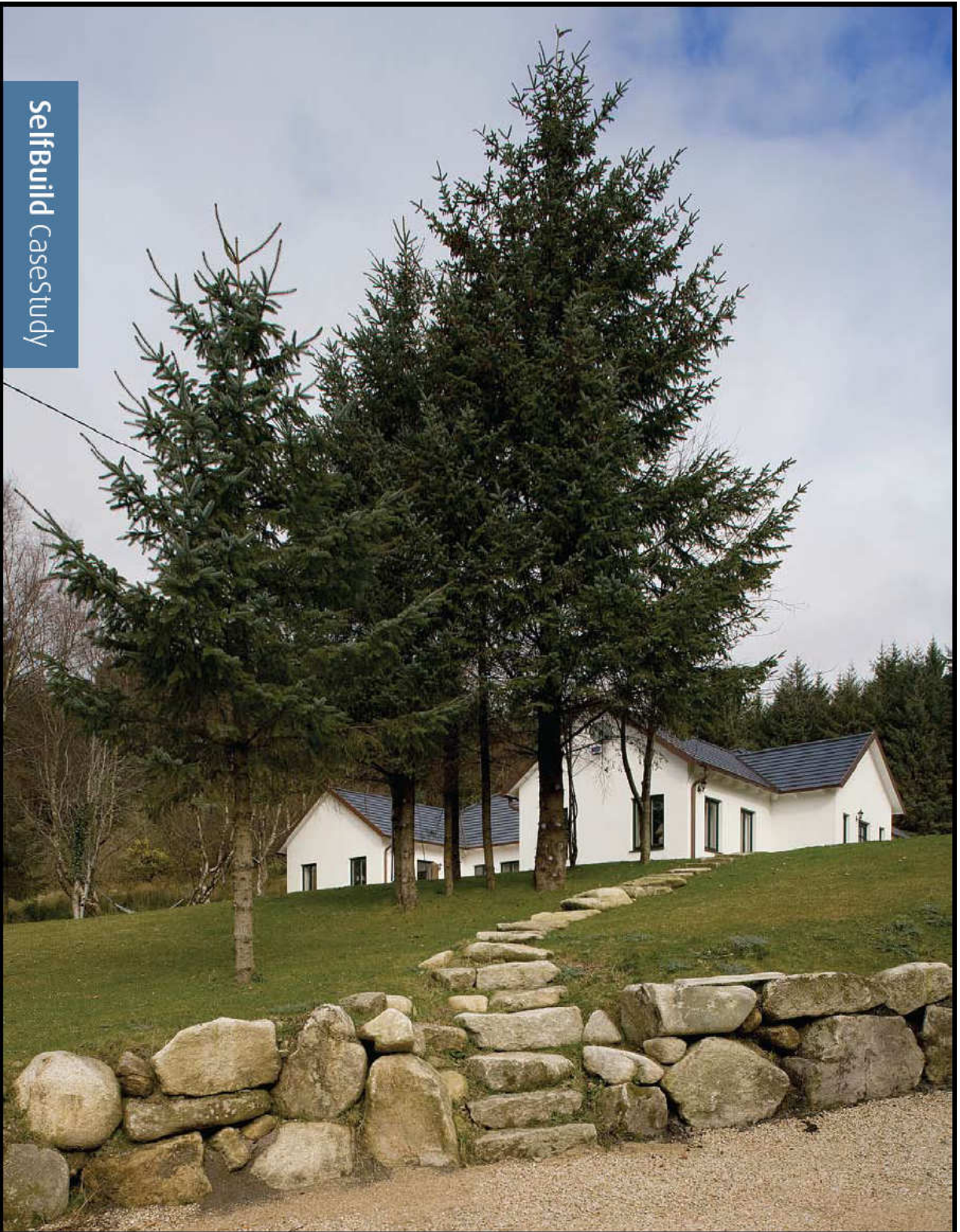


SelfBuild CaseStudy





OUT OF AFRICA

When South African businessman, Brian Jacobs, and his Dublin born wife Orla arrived in Ireland from Zambia in 2001, it was the beginning of a search for their dream location.

Three years later, when they came across a large run down bungalow at the edge of the Glencree Woods in the Wicklow Mountains they just knew they had to have it.

Brian's student architect son Brendan, and a structural engineer were both brought in and they agreed renovation was not an option because the structure did not meet modern building standards.

The next step was applying for planning permission and, after two small set backs, Brian and Orla sought the advice of a specialist local architect. His input resulted in success with approval to build a new house on the site.

"Gaining Planning Permission now is not an easy process, there are a lot of criteria to satisfy, that's why we found bringing in a specialist was very worthwhile. He guided us on things like ridge height and orientation as well as the style of building suitable for such a rural area."

Having seen a pre-constructed timber frame house in Dublin some months earlier and been impressed by the high specification of the building, they sought the help of a local company specialising in importing "turn key" ecological house build packages. ▶



“We looked at all the options including getting in the contractors and doing a conventional build,” said Brian. “But then we came across this company and I have to say we were impressed by not only the finish, but the ‘U’ values they delivered and the attention to detail.”

Few people who embark on a self-build renovation or extension project relish the prospect of living with a building site for months, especially in cold, wet weather. With five of their six children still living at home, Orla and Brian were no different, and had a busy interior design and furniture importing business to ▶

run. Brian was also still involved with his construction company in Zambia. The prospect of having the house constructed off-site and erected in just three weeks was an ideal solution.

“What we didn’t anticipate was the length of time all the design specifications we made would take” continued Brian, “There can be no changes made once manufacturing in Germany is underway. The whole process took about ten months and included two visits to Germany to meet with architects and choose finishes.” Meanwhile Brian, who had groundworks construction experience through his company in Africa which designed and built swimming pools, had undertaken to do all the preparatory work with the foundations. “With foundations, and especially when you’re building a timber frame, every measurement has to be exact with no conventional tolerances. It was only once these were surveyed and certified by the German engineers that fabrication of the house began in the factory.” From this point on though, the pace quickened rapidly and within weeks five 40 foot containers arrived with six men and one very large crane, and suddenly a house began to appear. “It was amazing to watch,” recalled Brian. “Every single thing is worked out in advance. Each truck was loaded in sequence and after the initial unloading some of the men went back to Germany and left just three of them to work round the clock. And I mean that almost literally. They worked solidly for two weeks, left on the Thursday to go home for the weekend and then started back on the Monday for another week. They worked in all weathers to an exact schedule and ticked off boxes as the build progressed.”

Again it was the attention to detail and pre-planning that drew the couple’s admiration and kept the project going at an astounding pace. “It was amazing to watch” added Orla, “there just seemed to be a space for everything and with the minimum of handling.”

The walls, 100 x 100mm timber frame with 20mm high density polystyrene on the outside, were craned into place and anchored. A factory fitted mesh and concrete screed had already been applied and all it required now was a suitable render. Brian and Orla had temporarily transferred their electrical connection to a sub board in the existing garage, and with the conduit and ducts already in place, the power to the main house was easily connected.

After fitting the internal doors, the last week of the three-week build saw the builders tackle the under floor heating and install the oil boiler, all of which, once again, came with the house. The Jacobs had been given the option of a geothermal system which, although a considerable initial cost, can be very economical to run. However, their need for heat is only minimal because with a wall ‘U’ value of 0.17W/mK the amount of heat lost through the fabric is greatly reduced. In addition, two large solar panels provide most of the hot water and so they opted for a standard oil based system.

“That was it,” joked Brian. “Three weeks and we had a fully constructed house. The electricity was connected and the heat was on, so, theoretically, we could have just moved in.” For the Jacobs though, this was just the beginning of their part of the project and it was another nine weeks and February 2007 before they were happy to make the move from their old home 30 minutes away in Dalkey.



As well as project managing the build, constructing the foundations with waterproof and radon membranes and completing all the tiling, Brian had also undertaken to install their own kitchen and provide all the internal light fittings and switches – which would normally be done in the factory.

“Being ‘in the business’ so to speak, we were aware of where the profit element is in kitchen manufacturing. Our solution was to employ a local carpenter to make the basic carcass out of 18mm plywood, to which we added a good quality door in cream and topped it off with beautiful black granite.”

“The house came with all the sanitary ware, but because we had chosen to have Brendan do the tiling we couldn’t install the fittings straight away,” he added.

Once again, the Germans’ attention to detail was evident in these final finishes as the wall fittings for everything from the wash hand basin to the toilet pan were already there, leaving Brendan with only the minor task of fixing them in place. ▶



Today, the freshly decorated family room, lounge, dining room, study and five bedrooms of their H-shaped home are bright and inviting with stunning views of Glencree Mountains and the surrounding Wicklow countryside.

More recently, they have removed the gravel from around the former building site, laid two quarry stone patios and landscaped the garden. There are some stunning ideas Brian and Orla have incorporated into their new house, such as the approach to the ►



front patio from the house via a footbridge over a 70cm deep trench pool. The site has now matured and house and garden blend well with the forest behind.

The Jacobs' main reason for choosing to build in Glencree was the spectacular view, quiet setting and abundant wild life. But their unusual choice of self-build was primarily for the speed of build. For anyone thinking about purchasing a pre-constructed timber home, Brian's recommendation is very clear.

"Choose one of their book designs and go for the complete 'turn key' package – that would be my advice," he said. "You can rest easy at night knowing every detail has been taken care of and the bonus is in having a house finished to an extremely high standard."

So, would they do it again?

"I don't regret it. It saved a lot of time and frustration" said Brian. "For us the speed was the main consideration. From start to finish construction took just one month. From experience I know only too well how stressful building is; having the responsibility for it carried by the company made the experience exciting rather than stressful. The result is a house that's comfortable to live in and very efficient at keeping us warm in the winter."

Site size: 4 acres

Cost: €700,000

Project cost: €420,000

House size: 3,000 sq ft/280 m²

Value: €1,700,000

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