

Lady luck

When the Gregorys' quest to move up the property ladder started, they began searching for an affordable way to build a family home in Bristol. But they had no idea just how easy it would be to find a plot and begin their project *Words Claire Barrett Photography Mark Bolton*

You think your problems are over when you get your foot on the property ladder. Not a bit of it. When children come along, and you realise you need more space, climbing up to the next rung – normally a house, with a garden – is never easy. And as for that dream of building your own, are you kidding? Who's got the money? But one couple did both – and do you know why? It was cheaper.

Based in Bristol, Rob and Lou Gregory – with their then four-month-old baby, Archie (now two), began hunting for undesirable, and therefore cheaper, properties in the popular area of Cliftonwood. It was soon clear that they weren't going to get much for their money. Bristol has become the go-to city for →

below 'I wanted the exterior to look like a modern tree,' says Rob. 'While it needed to be sympathetic to the other houses, I also wanted to show the house was modern, so we took inspiration from nature.'



this picture
Douglas fir pillars stained with ebony oil add character and warmth to the open-plan ground floor. The dining area can be closed off from the living room with a curtain, bidden in a recess in the day, to create a smaller, snier space



urbanites who want a more-relaxed style of life, attracting professionals from the capital looking to swap hectic lifestyles for more manageable ones.

It doesn't come cheap. 'We saw a Sixties house, but at only 75 square metres, it wasn't much more space than our flat, and cost a lot more,' says Rob. With a renovation of a flat under their belt – and with Rob a director at architectural firm Levitate West – it wasn't long before Lou's logical conclusion was, 'Why don't we build a house?' In Lou's mind, it was as simple as that.

Doesn't it always start that way, especially after a night on the sofa watching the latest episode of *Grand Designs*? But while most of us talk about it, Lou's the kind of person who does it – she's full of chutzpah, and although she'd only recently married Rob, had a baby and changed career, she's not the kind of person to get the slippers and pipe ready. Plus when your hubby is an architect, it seems a no-brainer. Rob wasn't convinced. 'You just won't find the land,' he said. 'I will find the land,' she replied defiantly.

Incredibly, the next morning an unsolicited email from an estate agent was waiting in Lou's inbox. 'It was a plot of land for sale,' she grins. What's more, it was going to be auctioned two weeks later. In another twist, it turned out that Rob knew the owner, Toby, a former work colleague. Toby had planning permission to build a modern house for himself, but had recently left with his family for New Zealand. He told me I could have it for the reserve price of £135,000,' says Rob. Although there was huge interest, and Toby's solicitor advised him to go to auction where he'd get a better price, Toby promised it to Rob, if he could find the cash in time.

With such a tight time frame, and with a large sum to find, it wasn't a done deal, especially given that by this time the country was in the grip of the credit crunch. The pair already had one domestic mortgage and two commercial mortgages, but had a decent

above Small but well designed, the kitchen includes a breakfast bar. The glass splashback adds a fantastic shot of colour to an otherwise minimal space; the couple matched it to the exterior of the building
right The huge sliding door and airy windows around the top of the ground-floor space make a huge difference to the amount of natural light downstairs. The Barbie picture is by photographer David Cross



'It's about where you choose to spend the money and where you compromise, spending it in the right places'



above right Made from MDF and plywood, the staircase is a double winder and makes the most efficient use of space behind the utility room
left The sofas were brought from the couple's previous flat
right Tectonic smoked engineered oak floorboards have been treated with ebony hardware oil



£30,000 deposit accumulated by Lou from her successful graphic-design business. 'I Googled self-build mortgages,' says Lou, 'and managed to charm the guy! The first batch of funds (self-build mortgage funds are released in five or six stages) came through in time to enable them to purchase the land. The mortgage advisor had never known anyone to get a mortgage in two weeks,' she says. That was the good news. The bad news was that the finished house had been revalued at £330,000 – £100,000 lower than before the recession, meaning they couldn't raise the full amount needed.

The cost cutting started. Toby had hired a firm, Moon Design+Build, to design and build the house for £182,000, an all-in idea to save on stress. Although Rob is an architect, he wasn't itching to design the house. 'It was like buying it off-the-shelf, a design that we improved, but was essentially box-ready,' he says. 'We



right As the home is painted white throughout, Rob and Lou have brought in splashes of colour with furniture and furnishings, such as this bright Orla Kiely bedding in the master bedroom below right All the upstairs rooms are off a central landing below The bathroom is tiled from floor to ceiling in travertine for a luxurious feel. A built-in waterproof TV at one end of the bath is the ultimate indulgence



couldn't afford to delay, especially when we were paying interest on £90,000 we'd stumped up for the land.' Having secured a total mortgage of £227,000, they needed to cut more than £40,000 to reach the sum of £137,000 to enable them to begin building.

'We took out the hot tub in the garden for starters' says Rob. 'But the massive thing was getting rid of the cantilevered first floor, and simplifying the design.' They removed the timber cladding, too, which also saved money. Although the kitchen and bathroom look great, they weren't extravagant. The flat-roof system was a cheap one, and the floor is engineered oak (an oak top layer laid on top of cheaper plywood) rather than solid wood. They immediately cut the landscaping from the budget, choosing to do this later when money wasn't so tight. Hiring an individual decorator rather than a company meant they halved this cost. 'We took whole things out and then added them back in later when we knew we could afford them,' Rob says.

But they were careful about how and what they cut, taking the opportunity to improve the design. 'It's about where you choose to spend the money and where you compromise, spending it in the right places,' says Rob. 'We chose to not do things rather than do everything less well.' They changed the design, making the downstairs more open plan and adding in windows – such as the strip of glazing that runs around the top of the ground floor, and changing the conventional folding sliding doors for a bespoke single sliding one. These changes, plus adding in one south-facing window at the corner of the living room ('a crucial move', says Rob), might have slightly increased their window bill but, as Rob says, 'I knew they'd add character.'

The finished house isn't a compromise. It's a modest three-bedroom home, but is no shrinking violet. With the top half painted a vibrant green (I couldn't paint it pink,' Lou jokes), and the other half earthy brown, it looks a little like a mint humbug. But it somehow works in the context of Clifton, a neighbourhood when the houses are painted in colourful hues.

Inside, the green of the exterior appears in the form of a kitchen splashback, one of the elements added back in once the couple knew they could afford it. There's plenty of built-in storage downstairs, and although the open-plan design creates zones for cooking, eating and dining that flow into each other, it also feels distinct. An Eero Saarinen table and low pendant create the perfect dining set-up, and a cosy nook at the other end with deep, plush sofas makes a great evening retreat.

Upstairs, a soaring, double-height space over the stairwell creates a great sense of drama. The bathroom contains Rob's little treat, a built-in TV, perfect for switching off at the end of the day. The two bedrooms and study are light and airy, and make the most of the views over to Cabot Tower and nearby Brandon Hill park. 'I love the view, and the light,' Lou says. 'It



above left A mirrored copper pendant by Tom Dixon hangs in the double-height stairwell to create a focal point above Archie's bedroom is a colourful space. The funky wall stickers are a low-cost way of adding fun to a child's room left Rob is a journalist and architect, and often works from home. The pictures on the walls are a mix of sketches by famous architects that he has from interviewing them, and Polaroid photos from photobooths





Money matters

Land cost £135,000; preliminary/demolition work £29,459; foundations/groundwork £21,977; structural elements £16,796; roofing £9,462; windows and doors £21,539; plumbing and electrics £12,369; joinery £5,759; kitchen £13,131; bathroom £4,500; flooring £5,310; external work (drainage, wall, gate) £2,785; miscellaneous £11,558; total build cost £174,645; total build cost per sqm £1,663 per sqm; total cost (land plus build) £309,645; current value approx £400,000

Suppliers

Project team Architect and main contractor Moon Design+Build (0117 973 3284; moondesignandbuild.co.uk); Levitate West (07841 733 625; levitate-uk.com) **Electrics** A&L Electrical (0117 902 1870)

Structure Windows Clifton Joinery (01278 764 411; cliftonjoinery.com) **Timber frame** Split Beech (07500 116 944) **Plaster/render** Jon Drake (0117 979 0575; jondrakeplasteringservice.co.uk)

Features and fittings Floor Chauncey's (0117 971 3131; chauncey.co.uk) **Carpets** Design Flooring (0117 973 2266; designflooringltd.co.uk) **Kitchen** Leicht by Kitchens By Design (0117 962 2599; kitchensbydesignbristol.co.uk) **Crema Pietra AR306 arenastone worksurface** Bristol Marble (0117 965 6565; bristolmarble.com) **Splashback** Opticolour (01225 464 343; opticolour.co.uk) **Extractor hood** Capile by Nailsea Electrical (0117 924 6002; nailseainline.co.uk) **Bathroom tiles** Mandarin Stone (0117 973 1552; mandarinstone.com) **Bathroom sink** Duravit (0845 500 7787; duravit.com) **Mirror/TV/Television** (0870 871 0111; television.tv)

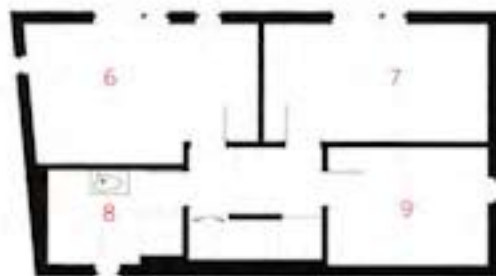
Furniture Bar stools John Lewis (0845 604 9049; johnlewis.com) **Table and chairs** Spacecraft International (020 7253 5800; spacecraftint.com) **Coat stand and occasional table** Habitat (0844 499 1111; habitat.co.uk) **Lounge chair** Spacecraft International (as before) **Floor lamp in lounge** Artemide (020 7291 3853; artemide.com) **Rug** City Cows (07809 619 360; citycows.co.uk) **Sofas** Heal's (0870 024 0780; heals.co.uk) **Map print** The Future Mapping Company (020 7538 0456; futuremaps.co.uk) **Bedding in master bedroom** Orla Kiely (020 7720 1117; orlakiely.com) **Pendant light in bedroom** Habitat (as before) **Floor lamp in study** Habitat (as before) **Desk lamp** Artemide (as before) **Cot and rug** Ikea (0845 358 3363; ikea.co.uk) **Wall stencils** E-globe (e-globe.fr/en) **Copper pendant in stairwell** Tom Dixon for Twentytwentyone (020 7288 1996; twentytwentyone.com)

- 1 Dining
- 2 Living area
- 3 Kitchen
- 4 Utility and WC
- 5 Stairs
- 6 Bedroom
- 7 Study
- 8 Bathroom
- 9 Bedroom

Ground floor



First floor



above The house sits among classic Victorian terraces, and next to the old Jacob's Wells swimming baths, which are now a dance studio. The remains of the chimney survive, providing a dramatic view and reminder of Bristol's industrial heritage

feels as though we're in a remote location, but we're just a 10-minute walk to the city centre.'

Rob and Lou approached their house as a project, and tried not to get too emotionally involved – key if you're to stay on budget. 'We saw it as a dress rehearsal,' says Lou. 'We've seen what's involved and we've now done it on a small scale. But there was a lot of magic in the story, too.' In many ways, inheriting a design and a company ready to build it took away much of the stress – as did securing a plot so quickly – meaning the pressure wasn't on to create the ultimate dream space. Perhaps this very compromise made this project possible. **GD**

Looking for bar stools for your home? See p87 for a selection of sleek, contemporary styles

