

Student flat? Try a flatpack house

The family that has built a home for their daughter in the garden. By Hugh Graham

VIKOR COUCHMAN FOR THE TIMES



“We were thinking about the expense of her living elsewhere in London, and in an area that is not desirable”

Parents used to fear the empty nest. In recent years, however, they fear the opposite: that children will never leave home, with tales of adults in their thirties and forties still living with their parents, particularly in cities such as London, where house prices have become so high that the average home costs ten times the average wage. One London family has found a potential solution to the boomerang generation: they have built their daughter a starter home at the bottom of their garden.

Charles Seifert and his wife, Jenny, live in a five-bedroom Edwardian house where they raised their daughter Olivia, 20. Olivia is due to graduate from Birmingham University this year and plans to return to London to do a master's degree. “You do read all the time about kids moving home post-university and being at home for years,” says Seifert. “That potentially puts pressure on family dynamics. I think it works better to be at a slight distance from each other. We were also thinking about the expense of her living somewhere else in London, and in an area that is not terribly desirable.”

So the Seiferts hired KSKa architects to build them a one-bedroom home that they can see from their kitchen. At 720 sq ft (67 sq m) the Origami House — so named because of its distinctive folded roof — is almost twice the size of many a one-bedroom flat. It has a bedroom, an open-plan living-dining area with a kitchenette, a shower room, storage, skylights, vaulted ceilings and sliding doors on to its own patio. Made of cross-laminated timber (CLT), it is

Olivia and her father Charles Seifert outside the Origami House

essentially a flatpack home: it was manufactured entirely offsite, and the shell was assembled on site in six days, then wrapped in insulation to almost Passivhaus standards and finished with western red cedar cladding. Although Seifert declined to disclose their budget, Matt Keeler, the director of KSKa Architects, says basic starter homes can be built in gardens from £30,000 to £50,000 excluding VAT.

“To invest in a one-bedroom flat in this part of London would cost you £400,000, so to build a starter home for your child in the garden — it is a no-brainer,” says Keeler, who has recently received several similar inquiries.

During the first lockdown Olivia moved into the Origami House with her boyfriend at the time. “It worked well. I don't have to worry about curfews and waking up my parents if I come in late.”

The site layout is arranged so that

Olivia does not have to walk through the main house to access the Origami House. It is not entirely separate: owing to planning restrictions, there is not a full kitchen. Olivia can have a fridge, microwave, kettle and toaster, as well as a sink and dishwasher, but not an oven or hob, so she returns to the family house for dinner.

Planners are wary of urban dwellers turning their garden sheds into Airbnbs. “At first the planning officer said they were going to turn us down,” recalls Keeler. “They said you have to take out the kitchenette — and I said we can live with that. Local authorities are worried about beds in sheds, so they treat annexes as an extension of the main house. Some activities like family meals have to happen in the main dwelling.”

Olivia generally has breakfast, coffee and lunch in the Origami House. “It is sort of a transition between dependence and independence,” Seifert says. “And from the point of view of selling our house in the future, it creates value — we have effectively created a sixth bedroom — and it is a huge differentiator between your house and the one next door. There is flexibility — it could be used by grandparents, teenage kids, visiting relatives.”

Indeed, the Origami House has come in handy during the pandemic. Although no one in the Seifert family had to self-isolate, they nonetheless used the dwelling when Olivia was not in situ to put up a family friend who did not want to be alone during lockdown, and offered it to a relative to recuperate when she was coming out of hospital, safe in the knowledge that they could social distance.

The Origami House is also pleasing to look at from the main house. It replaced a brick eyecore of a garden office built by a previous owner. Most garden offices are flat-roofed, as they can be easily done through permitted development. Keeler, however, was not keen, as they don't last long and are prone to leak. Yet because the house lies in a conservation area, he faced height restrictions: 4m at peak; 3m at eaves. His original pitched-roof design would have obstructed the view from the window of a neighbouring church, so he came up with the funky and jagged asymmetrical design, which has won awards. The use of CLT, which is so strong the dwelling requires no support beams, allowed higher ceilings inside and a striking timber interior.

“I am so lucky,” Olivia says. “Everyone's dream is to eventually move out of the house. This is a happy medium. I could see myself living here for a while if my parents let me.”

i

Need to know

- Any dwelling used for sleeping requires planning permission. However, you can build a garden studio/office under permitted development and later apply for change of use for sleeping. This is often a back-door route to gaining an annex.
- Permission usually restricts occupation of the annex to members, guests and dependents of the household. If you want to let it out, you must apply to planning

for change of use. Kitchens (ie a cooker and a hob) are generally not allowed, although it may vary from council to council.

- Permission restricts a separate sale of the property, but in the future you could always make a case to have the land parcelled off.
- No more than half the land around the original house (before extensions) can be taken up by outbuildings.
- The Origami House is built up

against a boundary wall, so there are no windows at the back. A skylight lets light into the bathroom and bedroom.

- The Origami House's utilities are billed to the main house. The gas supplies run from the main house to a small boiler. It shares broadband with the main house — a cable runs under the lawn.
- Matt Keeler, the director of KSKa architects, says you should budget for £2,000-£2,500 per sq m.



Brief encounter Ask the expert

Q I would like to build an extension to my house, but there's a condition in my title deeds prohibiting it. Are my dreams of an extension over?

A The presence of this condition in your title deeds does not necessarily mean you'll have to abandon your hopes of an extension. The law surrounding title burdens is complex and not all burdens that appear in title deeds are valid and enforceable. A lawyer will be able to examine your title deeds and confirm whether the burden in question has been validly constituted, is still in place and is likely to still be enforceable, as well as who may be able to enforce it.

If it is established that the burden is valid and enforceable it may be possible to discharge it, with a few potential routes available. First you could seek a discharge/waiver from the party benefiting from the burden (the benefited owner). This would require their co-operation and both parties would need to enter into a minute of waiver, which would be registered against your titles.

Secondly, if the burden in question is over 100 years old it can be discharged by a notice of termination without the co-operation of the benefited owner. There is a set procedure to follow, which includes notifying the benefited owners and giving them an opportunity to apply for renewal of the burden. The Lands Tribunal will either endorse your notice of termination or decide whether the burden should be renewed (if any applications for renewal have been received).

Finally, you could apply to the Lands Tribunal to discharge the burden. There is a fixed procedure involved and the benefited owner is given an opportunity to object. The Lands Tribunal will decide whether the burden should be discharged and is required to consider various factors in making its decision. However, there's no guarantee of a successful result. There are time and cost implications involved in each option — a lawyer will be able to guide you and provide more detailed advice. **Kirsten MacRae is an associate in real estate at Brodies LLP**