

Pitch PERFECT

Murray and Lorna Gray

have self built on the exact Isle of Skye spot where they spent their honeymoon two decades ago. The picturesque sloping plot now plays host to a spectacular bespoke family home

WORDS CAROLINE EDNIE PHOTOS NIGEL RIGDEN

Some plot searches are more focused than others; perhaps none more so than that of Murray and Lorna Gray. The couple, who were living in rural Perthshire when they bought this site, actually spent their honeymoon on the spot their new home now occupies on Skye's Waternish peninsula.

"It was never our lifelong plan to return to the area; it just worked out that way – it feels like a circle of fate," says Lorna. "We've had a picture of the views from this area of Skye on our living room wall for the past 20 years. The kids say that all their lives they've been looking at a photo of the setting, and now they get to see the real thing – although the picture's back up in this house!"

An uncommon view

With their children starting to move away to study, the Grays began thinking about changing their lifestyle. "We originally considered taking on a renovation project, which is something we'd done in the past," says Lorna. "Our existing home was a Scandinavian kit build and we'd done quite a lot of work on it when we moved in.

It had great views over Strathearn and the mountains



and we knew we wanted our new house to offer similarly fantastic panoramas." In fact, this became the most important factor in their search for the perfect location. "As we started to look around Scotland, the idea of a new build started to take hold – and we also thought it would be great to try a sea view," says Lorna.

As luck would have it, the pair discovered this plot – which meant so much to them – was up for sale. Before they bought it, Murray and Lorna approached architect Alan Dickson of Skye-based Rural Design to offer his advice. Having spent a number of family holidays



The main entrance is set back from the facade, providing a cosy covered area tucked away from the harsh Skye weather



there, the couple were familiar with other houses on the island that the practice had created in the past.

"The site has cracking views but it is very steep," says Alan. "Nevertheless, I suggested that we could achieve something suitably impressive without worrying too much about the slope. Clearly there would be a bit more cost – but it wasn't going to make the project unviable. It's always

worth looking at whether you can put a bit more budget into the plot: you can change your house, but you can't change the views."

Alan took the Grays' brief for an upside-down house that would take full advantage of the views and looked to create something where the site dictated the building's form. "The slope presented something of a challenge, so I worked on the idea of a narrow plan," he says. "This minimises the amount of potentially costly excavation required and, as it's just one room deep, every room in the house benefits from the views – so it's a win-win situation. It's a simple philosophy that unlocks lots of possibilities."

Follow the slope

The house has been spread over multiple levels, with the lowest accommodating an annex. The entrance is on the first floor, which also hosts two bedrooms, the main bathroom, the garage and a storage area large enough for the family's sea kayak. The main open-

“The height of the roof helps to create a real sense of airiness and space. Plus the views throughout the house are amazing”

plan kitchen, dining and living area is on the top level, along with the master bedroom. "We spent a lot of time creatively planning the cross section of the property to see how everything would work, and the result is a unique home that fits the plot perfectly," says Alan.

The upside-down arrangement also ensures greater privacy from the road that runs along the front of the site. Essentially, the main facade acts as a screen, with window openings strategically cut out to ensure people can't see in. Elevating the main living accommodation and upper level balcony underpins the effect, as passers-by can't look straight into the main spaces.

Rural Design has been building on Skye for over a decade, so Alan is very familiar with what does and doesn't sit well with the local council – and there were no issues gaining planning permission. The scheme went on site in May 2014, with Murray and Lorna taking on a significant amount of the project management in order to keep the scheme within their budget. Having sold their family home to fund this new build, the couple commuted from a small Perthshire flat every weekend and during holidays to supervise progress.

"This is our first self build, so it was quite a leap of faith for us in the beginning," says Lorna. "We were signing pretty big cheques and, at the early stages, it feels like you don't see much of a return. The main construction phase coincided with a wet winter, too, which wasn't ideal – but our builder was great."



Low-set picture windows complete with deep oak cills offer a place to perch and take in the setting



THE GRAY FILE

NAMES Murray & Lorna Gray

OCCUPATIONS Sales director & guesthouse owner

LOCATION Isle of Skye

TYPE OF BUILD Self build

STYLE Contemporary

CONSTRUCTION METHOD

Timber frame

PLOT SIZE 0.6 hectares

LAND COST £70,000

HOUSE SIZE 227m² (main house 183m², annex 44m²)

BUILD COST £320,000

COST PER M² £1,410

TOTAL COST £390,000

BUILDING WORK COMMENCED

May 2014

BUILDING WORK TOOK

Nine months

CURRENT VALUE £500,000



Staying on track

What emerged following nine months of hard work and dedication was Deckhouse; a contemporary timber frame building clad in larch and rendered blockwork, with a sleek slate roof. The structural panels are insulated with 150mm of Rockwool flexi batts, plus 25mm of Quinn Therm internally.

The main family space is arranged over the top two levels, while the annex (named The Lookout) is rented out as a holiday let – a factor that affected how it was integrated into the building; it's stepped down slightly on a lower ground floor. "The annex is like a traditional lean-to, sloping up to the house and helping it fit into the site," says Alan. "It was important for Murray and Lorna that visitors wouldn't feel like they were living on top of the couple – and vice versa. So we created separate entrances and areas of decking with beautiful views. The space's windows project forward, while the side of the building acts like horse's blinkers – creating a visual separate. This maintains privacy so as not to burst that holiday bubble."

The couple didn't come across any major problems during the build, but keeping within budget was a challenge. "We were always sure that we would put our money into the structure – we were clear about that," says Lorna. "Our priority was to make certain that we got the best possible design and build quality."

They were very careful when sourcing and costing the interior finishes. "We had to put a lot of thought into keeping the costs down, which forced us to be creative," says Lorna. "For example, we were going to tile all five of the bathrooms, but we had to make savings so they're only partially tiled. I think they look nicer for the variety."

The vaulted ceilings in the first floor living area feature multiple rooflights, creating a wonderfully light and airy space



Lorna decided to opt for a single oven, thinking she'd rarely use a double, and has even foregone the traditional cooker hood – something the couple don't miss. "The flooring and kitchen units are both from Howdens, and they're great," she says. "I'm not really a label person. I didn't source anything fancy; I kept it simple and minimal, which I think has allowed the house to sing."

Fitting in

Maintaining a close working relationship with their builder, Robert MacQueen from RK

Joinery, yielded plenty of benefits. "Robert asked me what I had in mind in terms of creating storage areas. I gave it a lot of thought and came up with a TV surround that doubles up as a log store," says Lorna. "The shelving in the dining area is much deeper than normal and holds so much, which is fantastic. Joinery details such as the oak worktops and window cills really help lift the interiors."



The Lookout enjoys views over the water and direct access to the outside via vast glazed sliding doors

WE LEARNED...

WITH DIFFICULT PLOTS an architect's creativity is vital. We have a sloping site, so we engaged a designer who was able to visualise the building's proportions and how it would sit in the ground at various levels.

WE SAVED MONEY by taking on a lot of the project management ourselves. The architects only made nine site visits – one each month – so we managed the contract, while they made sure that quality was maintained.

SOURCE SUPPLIERS LOCALLY if possible. For example, our bathroom supplier was based nearby – if there were any quick decisions to be made, we could simply nip to their showroom and let the builders know pretty much straight away.

DON'T OVERSPEC the interior finishes. Our budget constraints forced us to be inventive, but we were focused on ensuring the design and fabric of the building were right. With those in place, we could use our remaining funds to be creative with the decorative elements.

closer look

Tailor-made furniture...

Murray and Lorna worked closely with both their architect, Alan Dickson, and the main contractors to conceive unique furniture that informed the



Bespoke shelving

internal layout. "We imagined where the sofas and stoves would go in relation to the views, and then wrapped the living area around them," says Alan. "It all fits like a glove."

Lorna always had a neutral palette in mind for the finishes, but with the help of builder Robert MacQueen was able to go the extra mile on the details. "The oak window sills and kitchen worktop joinery really set off the look and help to soften the decor," she says. "The bespoke TV surround shelving unit and deep storage spaces in the kitchen, which house my pottery and gin collections, are great space saving solutions."

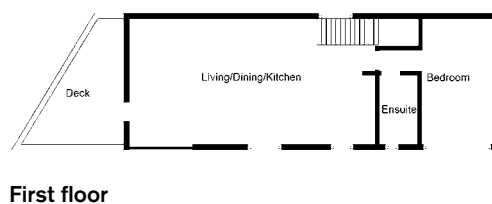
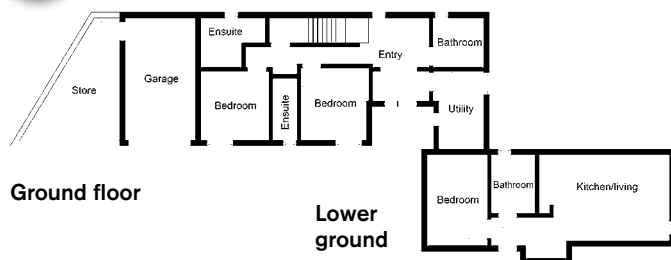


TOTAL BUILD COST BREAKDOWN

Elements	Cost m ²	Cost %	Total cost
Preliminaries	£24	2%	£5,500
Foundations	£97	7%	£22,000
External walls & windows	£357	25%	£81,000
Roof structure & covering	£84	6%	£19,000
Internal walls	£84	6%	£19,000
Floor wall & ceiling finishes	£79	6%	£18,000
Joinery & fittings	£167	12%	£38,000
Tiling	£40	3%	£9,000
MVHR	£29	2%	£6,500
Fencing	£13	< 1%	£3,000
Stoves	£24	2%	£5,500
Kitchen	£65	5%	£14,800
Glass balustrades	£11	< 1%	£2,500
Flooring	£40	3%	£9,000
Plumbing & heating (includes bathroom & kitchen)	£141	10%	£32,000
Electrics	£34	2%	£7,800
Decorating	£44	3%	£10,000
External works	£77	5%	£17,400
Grand total			£320,000



Floor plans



Elecosoft House plans re-created using ARCON 3D Architect Home Designer Software. www.3darchitect.co.uk
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