

telegraph.co.uk/gardening
Arundel Castle's grand garden opening

Self-build begins at seventy ...

For some, retirement is the perfect time to fulfil a lifelong ambition by crafting a home of their own. **Anna Tyzack** reports

Bryan Pickard had always wanted to build a house. But it wasn't until the age of 70 that he finally managed it.

"We lived in a Victorian house close to the centre of Shaftesbury, in Dorset, with lovely views and a large garden," says his wife, Kate. "We ran a bed and breakfast business but found the house and garden were becoming too much for us." Having lived in the town for 16 years they were reluctant to leave. "It suits us. We didn't see any point in moving away," she says.

They decided to apply for planning permission to build a smaller house in the vegetable garden, which would still benefit from the views, and to sell off their existing home. But the first application was rejected. "The local conservation officer suggested that we build a contemporary house," she says. Both she and Bryan, a retired accountant, were more than happy to "go modern", and after enlisting the help of architect Phil Easton, of Western Design, their second application was successful.

Box House is certainly not your average granny pad. "We gave the architect a wish list of what we did and didn't want," says Kate. "Bryan is a watercolour artist and I do textile design, so we wanted two workrooms and a gallery space. We also wanted a kitchen/dining room all in one. It was lovely to be able to input into a new design – our Victorian house had four floors and lots of fiddly architraves."

They employed Dorset-based



firm Snibor to build the house, using a local workforce and locally sourced materials. Once work had started, the couple absorbed themselves in the project, visiting the site each evening.

"We were very fortunate that we were in a position to begin building before we'd sold our house," says Kate. "We watched it progress and it became more and more familiar." Bryan worked out a budget, which they stuck to rigidly. "The site manager would tell us that in three weeks' time we'd need the door handles, so we travelled to all sorts of places and found exactly what we were looking for." Kate came up with a selection method: dirt, design and durability. "We didn't want dirt getting into any cracks, and everything had to be nicely designed and built to last."

It took seven months to build Box House, and the result is something quite different from their Victorian house (which they have since sold): "It has plain doors, and no curtains or carpets downstairs.

When we first moved in, it felt like we were on holiday," says Kate.

David and Gwen Hitchens were in their late seventies



Moving on: left, the Pickards and their home, Box House (top). Above, the Hitchens

when they used Snibor to build a new house in Broad Chalke, near Salisbury. They had lived in a thatched farmhouse in the village for 56 years, but the stairs were not helping Gwen's arthritis and bad back.

"The thought of moving away was abhorrent, so we decided to sell up and build a more suitable house on a plot of land 50 metres away. We were known as the crazy couple – you just don't do this kind of thing in your seventies," says David, now 80. "But I said to the architect and builders that we want the house to be as geriatric-friendly as

possible – we don't know what the future holds for us."

Architect Brian Watts and Snibor came up with a design that fitted the bill, with a lift to the second floor, wheelchair-friendly doors, and a downstairs study for David that can double as a bedroom, with a passage through to a wetroom.

"At 9.30 every morning I would be running over to see the Snibor foreman," says David. "It was great to have a hands-on relationship with the architect and builders. We thoroughly enjoyed the whole experience." They moved in to the swanky

Puddles Living (a name found in 200 year-old village records) four months ago, after selling their farmhouse, and according to David, it has given them a new lease of life. What's more, he says, "Gwen's arthritis is now stationary and her back pain has completely disappeared".

Both the Hitchens and the Pickards were fortunate that they already had a plot to build on, and were able to sell their existing houses with relative ease. But commissioning a bespoke, innovatively designed retirement home is a viable option for others looking to downsize.

Snibor estimates that build costs start at about £1,000 per square metre, with projects taking between six and nine months to complete. Companies such as Snibor can help find suitable plots, and guide clients through the planning procedure.

The Box House project, according to Kate Pickard, was "quite exhausting at times". "It's the kind of thing you can't undertake lightly," she says. "It took over our lives for quite a while. But a good working relationship with both architect and builders made it easier. We didn't fall out once."

"When you hit 70, and you are

COMFORT ZONES



£320,000

Bearwater, Hungerford

A two-bedroom house with garage in the popular Bearwater development in Newbury, within easy reach of the town centre. The

development of 27 homes, with concierge, alarm systems and wheelchair access, on the banks of the Durn, has won three national awards. Residents have access to five-acre grounds, including a lake. Humbergs: 01488 682349.



£350,000

King Edward Place, Wheathampstead

One two-bedroom apartment remains in this development in the village of Wheathampstead, five miles from St Albans. There are 24

houses and apartments in a courtyard setting, with views over landscaped gardens. Beechcroft developments offer lift access and a peaceful, community setting for over 55s. (01582) 834 869; www.beechcroft.co.uk

TIPS FOR NEWBUILD RETIREMENT HOMES

- Make sure the design is right for you now, but is also "geriatric-friendly".
- Be organised. Keep on top of the project and the decisions you have to make.
- Control your excesses – stick to your budget when buying fixtures and fittings.
- A good relationship with your architect and builder is essential.



building a house, you want it to go well," says Snibor's Andy Robins. "Six months of hell is quite a long time in that stage of life. We aim to make the whole building process an enjoyable experience rather than a misery."

The key, he says, is to keep clients informed exactly what is happening and when, and to be honest about any delays: "We always have a foreman on site – I wouldn't run a job without proper management."

Box House and Puddles Living have been tailor-made for retired owners but Robins insists that this did not mean compromising on design and appearance. Made of sustainable materials, with the most modern, energy-saving techniques and large windows, the homes set a good example to younger generations.

"We use every room – there's very little we'd change, maybe a couple of electrical sockets," says Kate. "Some people don't have a good word to say about the modern design – but we love it, and it's of its time."

- The Box House is open until tomorrow as part of Dorset Art Weeks 2008. For information, visit www.pick-art.org.uk
- Snibor (01747 825787; www.snibor.co.uk)
- Western Design (01258 455239; www.westerndesignarchitects.co.uk)
- Brian Watts RIBA (01747 851881; brianwatts@philipproctor.co.uk)