

Method
Brick and block
Build cost
£800,000
Location
York

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Top: Stuart Lawton has built a multi storey home in the heart of York after facing numerous planning battles. Above left: The small plot, in extremely close proximity to the neighbouring dwellings, was problematic from the start

A patient man

Years of planning and compromise have rewarded Stuart Lawton with the home of his dreams in a dazzling city centre location. But the tight site and awkward access were difficult hurdles to overcome

WORDS HEATHER DIXON PHOTOS DAVE BURTON

It cost Stuart Lawton almost £65,000 plus six years of meticulous planning before he was granted permission to build a modern four-storey house next door to one of the oldest buildings in York. Initially, his audacious plan was to turn a former car park into the site of two modern townhouses, but the proposal sparked controversy and opposition among those who thought the development would be inappropriate for the compact city centre site.

It took an unexpected rejection and a major compromise to finally get permission for a single property, the first private house to be built within 100 metres of York's spectacular minster for more than a century. His case was helped by the fact that his landmark home is almost invisible from the ancient streets that surround it, and its rosemary roof tiles blend easily into the historic skyline. But, the high-tech home, with its spacious rooms and minimalist decor, was always going to be a contemporary





building among its historical neighbours and it cost Stuart 'blood, sweat and tears' – as well as a large chunk of his budget – to get his plans off the ground. "I had been looking for a house to buy in the centre of York for a long time, but couldn't find anything I liked. Then I heard about this site and first went to see it in 2000. It was then that I discovered that the car park was held in a trust," says Stuart. "I had worked in finance for 20 years and knew the trust could be broken. After long negotiations, I managed to buy the car park and break the trust in April 2004."

By this time Stuart had spent 18 months engaging a team of experts to support his plans, including an architect, specialists from English Heritage and the York conservation department, a planning consultant and the highways department. "I needed the support of people who knew what they were doing," says Stuart. "The car park was in one of the most beautiful conservation areas in York and all the surrounding properties are grade II Listed (apart from the Dutch House, which is grade II*). I was fully aware that it was never going to be a straight forward planning application."



The Valencian slate fireplace houses an attractive gas fire and a recessed television. Roof lights ensure the room is as bright as possible



The house had to be traditional outside but Stuart fought to have modern Danish windows rather than Georgian-style because he was keen to make the property energy efficient

Off to battle

One of the strengths of Stuart's proposal was that the number of cars on the site would be reduced from 17 (when it was a car park) to three or four private parking spaces. "I thought the best way to get my ideas past planning was to employ specialists in a number of fields so that all potential points of contention were covered," says Stuart. "I didn't want the houses to be pastiche – they would be a modern homes based on modern materials."

To this end, he spent £17,000 on a planning consultant and a further £10,000 on an archaeological dig, going down to a depth of 1.5 metres. He even spent £1,400 on a balsa wood architect's model to show the planning authority all aspects of his proposals. With everyone on board, and the planning officer ultimately recommending approval, Stuart thought consent was a done deal.

"After a three minute discussion the council unanimously rejected my ideas. There was no rhyme or reason to the decision," says Stuart. "My heart sank. I thought all my money had gone down the drain and that I would be left with nothing more than a car park. But I refused to be beaten and decided that I would keep going back until I achieved my goal!"

After meeting with a new conservation officer, Stuart decided to swap two smaller properties for one large, contemporary family home. His plans were passed, an appeal was averted and Stuart could finally justify the tens of thousands of pounds he had spent on planning.

But Stuart's challenges were only just beginning. He was determined to create a top quality home that would justify the initial expense and time already invested, and set out with a flexible budget. His aim was to create a high-tech, high spec four-storey home with a viewing room on the upper floor and an open-plan kitchen diner kitchen opening onto the courtyard on the ground floor. A glass and steel staircase through the centre would form the backbone of the property and create a light tunnel through the house.



With space at a premium in the courtyard, Stuart installed a car turntable so he would always be facing the right way for driving out the gates and into the centre of York

"Light was always going to be an issue," says Stuart. "The house has 14ft high boundary walls on three sides, so the views had to be created inside." However, the boundary walls presented more than just a natural light issue. They bordered on five other properties so Stuart employed a boundary expert to survey each one in turn before building began. This included assessing the historic Dutch House, and a problem was identified with the gable end. The owners strengthened it while Stuart agreed to move the proposed piles for his foundations back by four metres and then build a cantilevered concrete slab to protect the old building from any damage. "The way we did it, the belt and braces approach, meant there would be no issues with the boundary walls after the building was complete," says Stuart.

Favourite feature

"The staircase is the backbone of the house and a real statement piece," says Stuart. "The reinforced glass treads draw light through the centre of the property from top to bottom, and the design sets a high standard for the rest of the interior."



Above: Spacious bedrooms with in-built storage were on Stuart's wish-list when he designed the house

Construction tales

The build began with 28 piles (55ft deep), which were topped with meshed concrete foundations. "I had budgeted £9,000 for these but they ended up costing me six times as much," says Stuart.

After that, he made sure everything was quantified and costed precisely, including the Belgian Hanson bricks, Rosemary roof tiles and Danish powder coated aluminium windows. Every small detail – from the location and quantity of sockets and light fittings to the positioning of the furniture – was itemised and isolated as he worked 'from the inside out' to ensure everything slotted perfectly into place at each stage of the construction. "One of the things I really wanted was an all-singing, all-dancing technical system," says Stuart. "Everything operates at the touch of a button, from the fire in the sitting room and the window blinds to the sound system, which can be filtered into individual rooms throughout the house."

To reduce noise pollution, he installed apartment level rubber membrane sound insulation, specifically sealed within each room, along with over-spec heat insulation in all the walls and floors.

One of the major challenges of the build was delivering materials to the site. The house sits in a courtyard off a narrow single lane road, so there was very little room for vehicle manoeuvre, skips or storage. Most of the waste

What I learned

- ✦ City centre houses with off-road parking are in short supply and access can be difficult. A car turntable makes the best use of a small space by automatically turning a parked vehicle 180° ready for a safe exit
- ✦ Take everything in your stride, and be willing to adapt your plans in order to get what you want. It took rejection and a major compromise (from two homes to one) to finally get permission for my build. However, it was the first private house to be built within 100 metres of York minster for more than a century, so it's no surprise that the planners were wary. Thankfully, as my home takes into account the vernacular, and is almost invisible from the streets that surround it, so it blends easily into the skyscape. I believed in the project and knew I could make it work. My advice to anyone building their own home would be to do their homework and be determined to succeed



was taken away in trailers on a daily basis. With little room for scaffolding, the house was built floor-by-floor until the roof was brought onto site in five separate sections and assembled in situ.

Next, five miles worth of cabling were encased in the internal stud walls and the four-storey, 50-step staircase was assembled. "I agreed to collect the glass treads myself and drove for miles with 900 kilos of glass in the back of a Range Rover – each tread 37ml thick," says Stuart. "But when I got them to the house we discovered that all the etching was on the wrong side, so I had to load them all back up again and get some more delivered."

Weight was also a consideration with the £20,000 sitting room fire and bespoke slate chimney breast, which were so heavy that the floor had to be reinforced with a 3.5m x 1m concrete slab. Stuart's partner, Hilary Pickard, helped to pick the rest of the interior fittings. She wanted clean

lines in the kitchen and bathrooms, along with white tiles and units which would reflect, rather than absorb, precious light. Steel, glass and wood is evident throughout, to give a high quality finish.

"We never thought we would reach the point where we would actually be spending our first night in the house," says Stuart. "When we did, in May 2011, I couldn't believe how calm and quiet it was. Our last house was a 220-year-old stone cottage in a village so it was a complete change of lifestyle to move into the centre of York. I had expected to hear people and traffic, but it was as still and quiet as the countryside.

"When I started out on this project it was like jumping out of an aeroplane with a parachute, knowing that you couldn't get back in the plane if things went wrong. Once I had jumped there was no room for compromise. No going back. Fortunately, I think I landed in one piece."



Build timetable

Stuart first saw the plot in 2000, and eventually acquired it in 2004. He applied for planning permission at the same time, and finally received consent in September 2006, preliminaries started instantly.

Schedule of the build	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
Preliminaries	07	07	07	07	07	07	07	07	06	06	06	06
Foundations									07	07		
External walls & windows										07		
Roof structure & covering				08	08							
Internal walls & doors								08	08	08		
Floors, walls & ceiling finishes	10	10									09	09
Joinery & fittings												
Plumbing & heating	10	10	10	10								
Electrics	10	10	10	10								
Decorating		11	11					10	10	10	10	10

08 Work in progress by year and month

The Lawton file

Owners Stuart Lawton
Occupations Businessman
Location York
Type of build New build
Style Contemporary
Method of construction Brick and block
House size 297m² (3,197ft²)
Land cost £200,000
Build cost £800,000

Cost per m² £2,694 (£250 per ft²)
Total cost £1 million
Date work commenced October 2007
Construction time 9 months
Current value In excess of £1 million

Total build cost breakdown

Elements of the build	Cost %	Cost m ²	Total cost*
Preliminaries and fees	10%	£269	£80,000
Foundations	9%	£252	£75,000
External walls, doors and windows	4%	£118	£35,000
Roof structure and covering	4%	£118	£35,000
Floor, wall and ceiling finishes	7%	£185	£55,000
Joinery and fittings, including kitchen	15%	£404	£120,000
Plumbing and heating	9%	£252	£75,000
Electrics	13%	£337	£100,000
Decorating	2%	£61	£18,000
External works, including turntable	1.5%	£40	£12,000
Staircase	11%	£303	£90,000
Misc	13%	£353	£105,000
Grand total			£800,000

Useful contacts

ARCHITECT **Nick Midgley Design** 01422 255 818 www.nickmidgleydesign.co.uk BUILDER **Andrew Wiseman of JA Wiseman**, 01347 888194 STRUCTURAL ENGINEER **Stuart McCormack at SGM** Structural Design 01484 435876 www.sgmstructuraldesign.com ELECTRICIAN **Mick Harper Ltd** 07850 027220 KITCHEN AND BEDROOM FURNITURE **Benchmark Kitchens Smith Bros** 01904 415 222 www.smithbrothers.co.uk KITCHEN TILES **Ceramique International** 0113 2310218 www.tilesandmosaics.co.uk LIGHTING **CLEVER ASSOCIATES** 01423 861166 www.cleverass.com BATHROOM TILES **Porcelanosa** 0113 244 4223 www.porcelanosa.co.uk TURNTABLE **Spin it** 0800 612 8830 www.carturtables.co.uk WINDOWS **Rational** 01869 248181 www.rational.co.uk UNDERFLOOR HEATING **Go-Gas Plumbers** 07956 656193 PARTY WALL SPECIALIST **Michael Halford** 07801 495039 CONSTRUCTION DESIGN MANAGEMENT CO-ORDINATOR **Thornton Associates York** STAIRCASE **Rhoco Engineering** 01759 318518 www.rhoco.co.uk GARAGE DOORS **JB Doors** 01709 516100 www.jbdoors.co.uk PLASTERING **Townville Interiors** 07980 494698

OUR VERDICT

Stuart has proved that patience really is a virtue, as he waited a long time to get exactly the house he wanted. Location was everything, the property is right in the heart of the city centre and the design has really been dictated by the nature of the plot.