

Liam and Helen Collins' sizeable contemporary home has given every member of the family their own space

WORDS JANET MCMEEKIN PHOTOS PHIL RABY

# Raise



# the roof

## THE COLLINS FILE

**NAMES** Liam & Helen Collins  
**OCCUPATIONS** Property developer & accommodation business manager  
**LOCATION** Cambridge  
**TYPE OF BUILD** Self build  
**STYLE** Contemporary  
**CONSTRUCTION METHOD** Timber frame  
**PLOT SIZE** 0.25 acres  
**LAND COST** £495,000  
**BOUGHT** 2007  
**HOUSE SIZE** 350m<sup>2</sup> (3,767ft<sup>2</sup>)  
**BUILD COST** £496,000  
**COST PER M<sup>2</sup>** £1,417 (£132 per ft<sup>2</sup>)  
**TOTAL COST** £991,000  
**VAT RECLAIM** £29,000  
**BUILDING WORK COMMENCED** March 2011  
**BUILDING WORK TOOK** 18 months  
**CURRENT VALUE** £1,800,000



After spending three years shoehorned into a ramshackle two-and-a-half bedroom property, all eight members of the Collins family are thoroughly enjoying life in their spacious new contemporary home.

"Living in that house with six children while we were self building was pretty grim, but we managed," says Liam. "In the long-term, the disruption has been well worth it. We now have a tailor-made seven-bedroom home that we all love."

Liam and his wife, Helen, are no strangers to major projects, having tackled their first renovation together in 1994. "The work went very well and I realised it wasn't just a great way to move up the property ladder but also extremely satisfying," says Liam. "My father already had a small construction firm and when my brothers and I were growing up, we'd helped him out, so I already had the basics of the building trade under my belt."

Aiming to expand his knowledge and keen to tackle more renovation projects, Liam enrolled on numerous courses, from bricklaying to plastering. "After deciding to give up teaching, I joined forces with my father in 2000 and started Collins Developments," he says. "We went on to renovate five houses for my own family, plus two properties for Prospero Homes – a firm we established in Cambridge to let out self-catering apartments."

### Opportunity knocks

While he continued to get more experience in the field, Liam always had one eye on the local property market – and in 2006 he spotted a dilapidated house for sale in one of the areas he'd earmarked for the family's next home. He instantly recognised the site's untapped potential. "It was a fabulous quarter-acre plot, which is very unusual



The elegant three-storey design mixes a number of finishes to create a lively facade, with the sloping roofs adding a further dynamic element

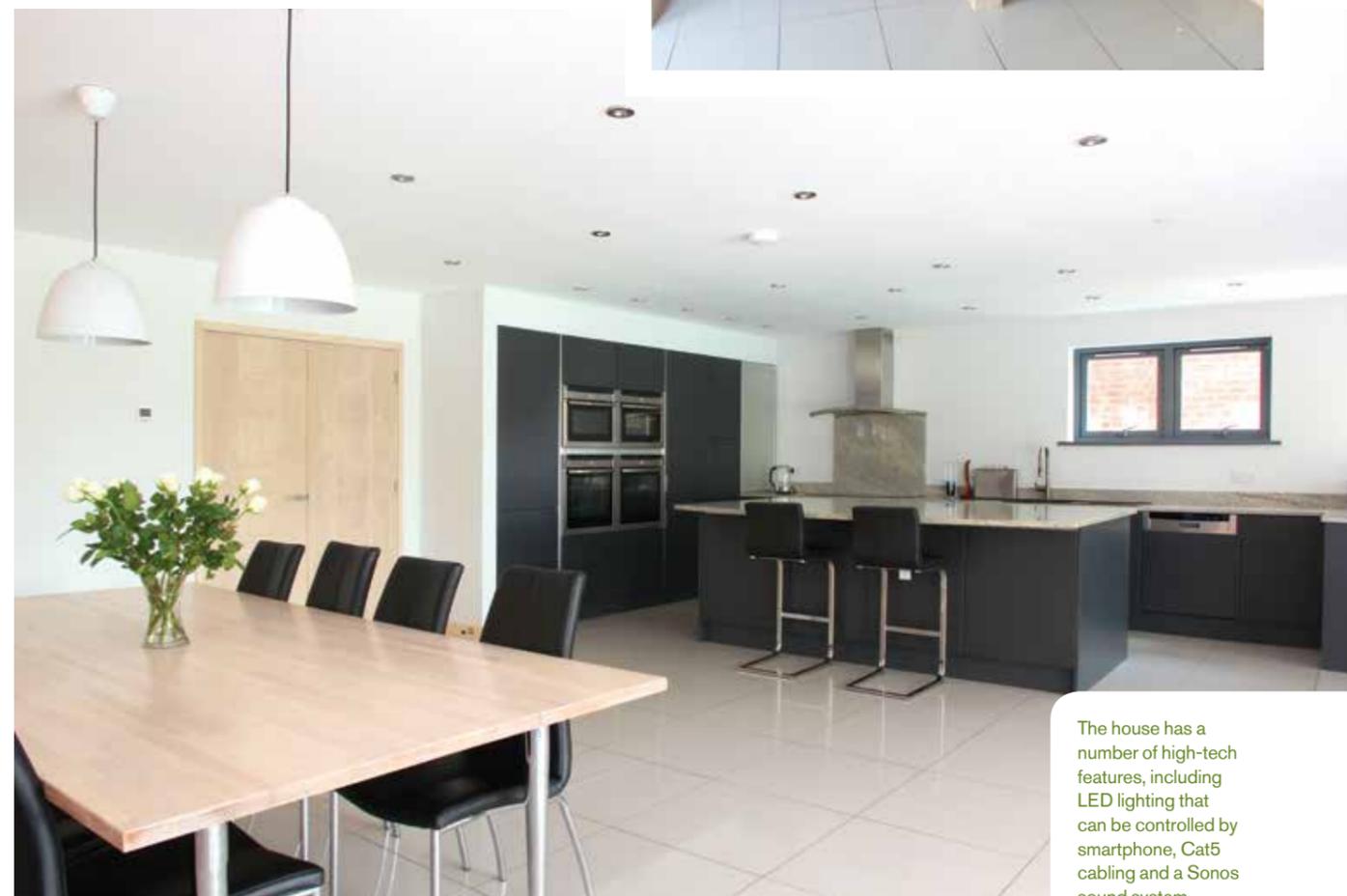
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for the centre of Cambridge,” says Liam. “It also had planning permission for a large extension.”

The couple quickly decided to buy the property, moving in with their six children in April 2007. “At that stage, three of the kids were toddlers, including our youngest Cormac, who was born that January,” says Helen. “We only had one toilet and two double bedrooms to accommodate us all – the other bedroom was more of an airing cupboard and housed the immersion heater. It was never going to be easy living in such a tight squeeze, but we were looking ahead to the bigger picture.”

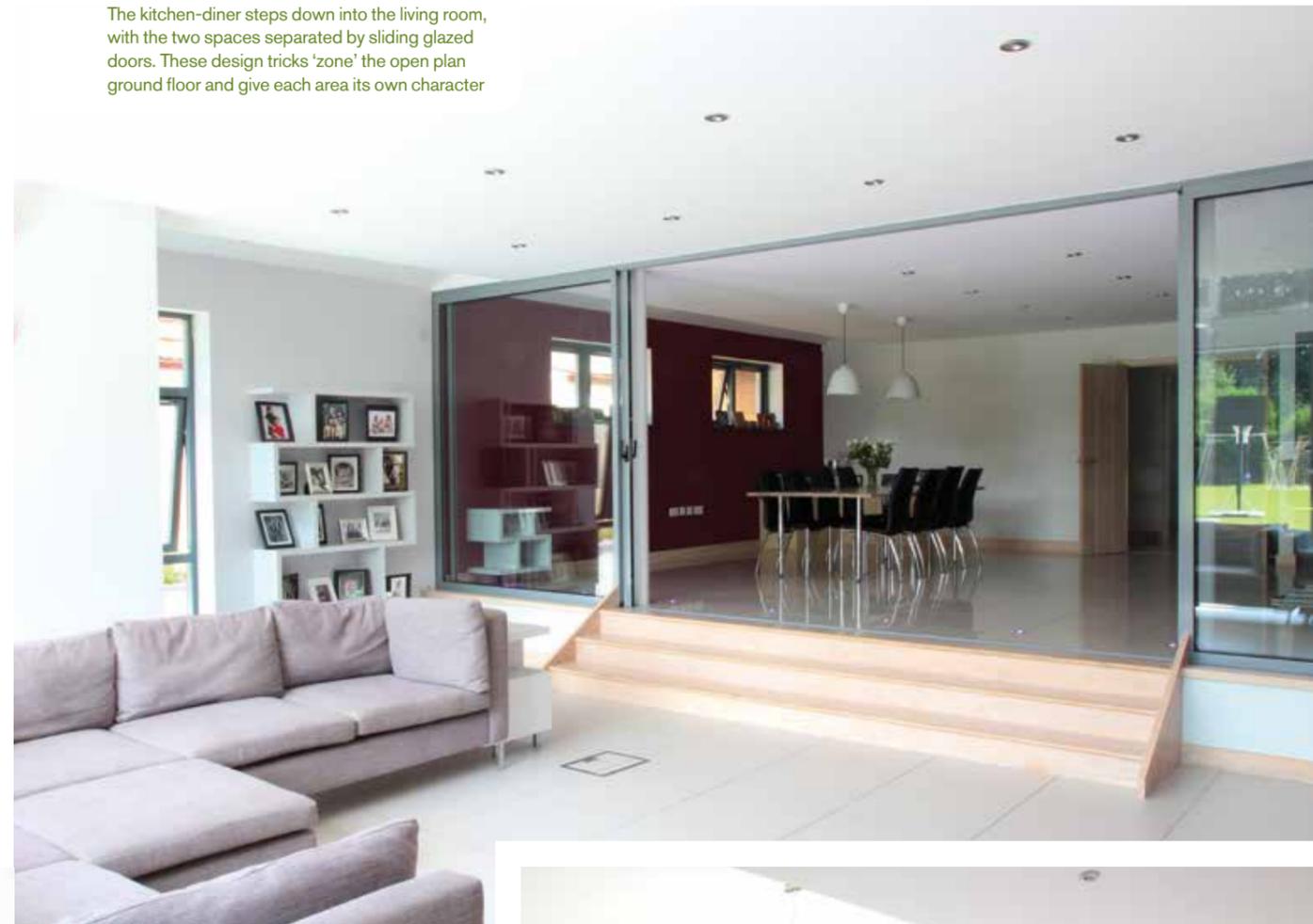
Over time, their original vision started to take on a new dimension. Rather than extend the property, Liam decided a better plan would be to knock it down completely and self build something new. “I’d always fancied developing my own house from scratch that would be packed with wow factor,” he says. “Even when I first viewed this property, I noticed that neighbouring rooflines were high. At the back of my mind I wondered whether there would be a chance of getting consent to create a new three-storey home.

Open treads on the ash staircase enhance the feeling of light and space. The bookcase, skirting and stairs all match to give a pleasing uniform finish



The house has a number of high-tech features, including LED lighting that can be controlled by smartphone, Cat5 cabling and a Sonos sound system

The kitchen-diner steps down into the living room, with the two spaces separated by sliding glazed doors. These design tricks ‘zone’ the open plan ground floor and give each area its own character



“About six months after we moved in, I realised that starting afresh would definitely be the right way forward. It would enable us to create the bespoke residence we yearned for. Given the chance, I was certain we could build a house that would support us for the foreseeable future, as well as being a sound financial investment.”

#### The modern way

Armed with his own sketch of a modern property with natural influences, featuring cedar cladding, handmade red bricks, self-coloured render and plenty of glass, Liam visited Cambridge City Council’s planning department and was thrilled to receive positive feedback for his ideas.

Buoyed by this response, he liaised with a chartered architectural technologist, Stephen Brown of Artek Design House, about creating a high-spec home. Working together, they submitted plans for an unusual, light-filled dwelling.

“By this stage I’d realised that a timber frame structural shell would be the way to go. I visited a self build show, taking along my plans, with the aim of sounding out the team on the Potton stand,” says Liam. “When I showed the sales rep my drawings, he said he’d get back to me to see whether they could tackle creating a frame for such a cutting-edge design and, if so, how much it



would cost. Within a fortnight, I got a call giving me the green light at a competitive price.”

Unfortunately, wrangles over planning permission went on for over two years. “It was a difficult time,” says Helen. “We were reluctant to improve the old house in any way because we knew we’d be knocking it down. However, by October 2010, enough was enough. It was starting to get very cold, so when a chance arose to move into a rental property owned by my parents, we jumped at it.”



Installing practical, family-friendly finishes, like the easy-to-clean flooring, was especially important since the couple has six children

On the plus side, the delay meant that the pair had more time to save for their self build and research every aspect of their project extremely thoroughly. The plans eventually went to committee, where the scheme won unanimous approval.

### A family project

Collins Developments moved on site in early 2011 to get works underway. With Liam at the helm, the old house was swiftly demolished, the new foundations dug and the beam and block ground floor laid, ready for Potton to erect the timber frame.

"It was a very complicated design, and sadly the frame arrived two months later than expected," says Liam. "However, I was always able to contact Potton and resolve any issues in a positive manner. Their contracts manager was fantastic and I wouldn't hesitate to work with them again."

Helen took control of the financial side of the project, ensuring that the build came in on budget. "The deal was that if Liam made the work happen, I'd manage the budget," she says. "We took out a mortgage with Santander, which enabled funds to be released in stages as the work progressed. Having done so many projects before, Liam had the experience to devise a realistic budget of £1,500 per m<sup>2</sup> for the whole project. We were able to keep the costs under control as our company would be doing a lot of the work on the house.

"We also borrowed some money from family, which we've now paid back. With Liam's construction contacts we managed to negotiate some very good deals, and Ridgeons – our main building materials supplier – saw us right."

### Smart living

As the scheme forged ahead, Liam was torn between finishing the family's home and working on other developments for his company. "Hoping we'd have enough money coming in from other builds to finance our own was always on my mind and a constant juggling act," he says. "Thankfully, I had a tried and trusted team who I could rely on to bring our scheme to fruition, in the shape of my father, who took on the brickwork, and my own employees. Nevertheless, life became incredibly busy and the decision-making seemed never-ending.

"One of the most difficult parts of the project for me was the wiring. It was hard to know how much to order and exactly where to install it. Trying to future-proof a house when technology is moving at such a pace is tricky. With the timber frame, it was



easy to run wiring but, in hindsight, I over-specified with Category 5 networking cable. I just wish I'd been able to look into the future and see how wifi would evolve!"

The couple were determined to create a home with low running costs and, having researched a variety of eco options, decided to go for a full suite of high-tech products to complement the house's excellent levels of insulation. An efficient Vaillant boiler is the main source for the house's underfloor heating, while solar thermal panels meet a significant portion of the family's hot water requirements. They also went for solar photovoltaic panels to supply electricity, along with an intelligent LED-based lighting system that can be operated from the couple's mobile phones.

"With so many people living in our home, we were keen to keep our energy bills under control and to do our bit to help the environment," Liam adds.

### Space race

The family were able to overcome the inevitable stresses and strains of self building and move into their new home in September 2012. Their finished house features a large hall, study, open plan kitchen-diner, living room, cloakroom and utility on the ground floor. The first floor includes five bedrooms, a family bathroom and laundry, while the second comprises two further bedrooms (one with an ensuite and dressing room), plus another bathroom.

"We have deliberately kept the house as family-friendly and practical as possible, while delivering the open, airy interiors we wanted," says Liam. "The garden is low-maintenance and ideal for the children whether they want to play football, go on the trampoline or just run around."

Helen continues: "Two of our daughters, Eibhlean and Orla, prefer to share a bedroom at the moment – but we've included enough for every child to have their own. It's ideal when they want to concentrate on homework or just spend a bit of time on their own. And for me, the upstairs laundry has proved invaluable in a household of six children.

"After living in cramped conditions for such a long time, when we moved into our new home the sense of space was just incredible. Having all this room has definitely enhanced our quality of life, especially for our eldest three – Ciara, Patrick and Luke – who are all now teenagers needing peace and quiet to study."

So, having finished their self build, would they ever wish to repeat the experience? "I've thoroughly enjoyed the whole process and, if another amazing opportunity came along at some stage in the future, I would definitely consider it," says Liam.

### WE LEARNED...

**DON'T BE AFRAID** to express yourself. We've chosen a mixture of materials for the exterior of our property – provided they're selected carefully, they can add extra impact to a home's facade.

**ALWAYS RETAIN** the essence of what you originally had in mind for the project, but remember that a little flexibility can help you get the right result. For example, we had intended to fit wood flooring on the first and second floors, but the light grey Porcelanosa floor tiles we tracked down for the ground floor were so stunning, durable and easy to clean that we decided to use them elsewhere, too.

**CHOOSE THE RIGHT** furnishings to accentuate your home's architectural features. We have used a lot of light-coloured ash for the fittings and furniture, which adds a sense of continuity and contributes to our home's bright and airy feel.

closer look

# Internal glazed doors...

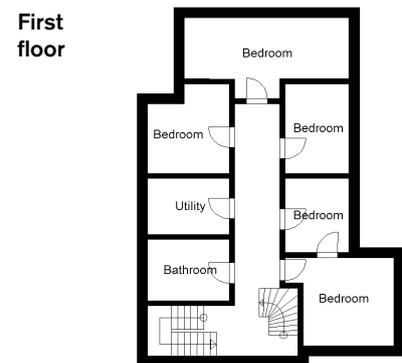
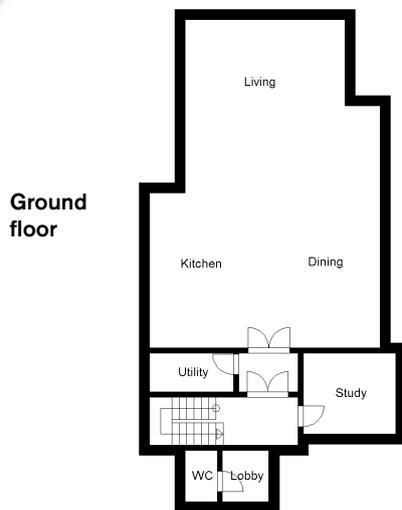
Liam and Helen have used glass sliding doors to separate the kitchen-diner from the living room. "We loved the effect that was created when we fitted the external double-glazed doors, which were from Sunparadise," says Liam. "So inside we used single-glazed sliders from the same collection. We can close them and still keep an eye on the children, or open them up to make the most of the space."



Glass room-divider



## Floor plans



House plans re-created using ARCON 3D Home Design Software. [www.3darchitect.co.uk](http://www.3darchitect.co.uk)  
Tel: 01252 267788 Email: [arconsales@eleco.com](mailto:arconsales@eleco.com)



## TOTAL BUILD COST BREAKDOWN

| Elements                                       | Cost m <sup>2</sup> | Cost %         | Total cost      |
|--|---------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| <b>Fees</b>                                    | <b>£75</b>          | <b>5%</b>      | <b>£26,314</b>  |
| <b>Preliminaries &amp; scaffolding</b>         | <b>£71</b>          | <b>5%</b>      | <b>£24,800</b>  |
| <b>Foundations &amp; substructure</b>          | <b>£63</b>          | <b>4%</b>      | <b>£22,000</b>  |
| <b>Timber frame</b>                            | <b>£211</b>         | <b>15%</b>     | <b>£73,752</b>  |
| <b>Roof structure &amp; covering</b>           | <b>£93</b>          | <b>7%</b>      | <b>£32,596</b>  |
| <b>Windows &amp; external doors</b>            | <b>£122</b>         | <b>8%</b>      | <b>£42,600</b>  |
| <b>Sliding doors (internal &amp; external)</b> | <b>£65</b>          | <b>5%</b>      | <b>£22,772</b>  |
| <b>Bricks &amp; cedar cladding</b>             | <b>£42</b>          | <b>3%</b>      | <b>£14,545</b>  |
| <b>Internal walls</b>                          | <b>£57</b>          | <b>4%</b>      | <b>£19,840</b>  |
| <b>Joinery &amp; fittings</b>                  | <b>£207</b>         | <b>15%</b>     | <b>£72,461</b>  |
| <b>Plumbing &amp; renewables</b>               | <b>£102</b>         | <b>7%</b>      | <b>£35,692</b>  |
| <b>Electrics &amp; intelligent lighting</b>    | <b>£166</b>         | <b>12%</b>     | <b>£58,000</b>  |
| <b>Tiling</b>                                  | <b>£73</b>          | <b>5%</b>      | <b>£25,519</b>  |
| <b>Bathroom fixtures &amp; fittings</b>        | <b>£36</b>          | <b>3%</b>      | <b>£12,745</b>  |
| <b>Security &amp; fire safety</b>              | <b>£5</b>           | <b>&lt; 1%</b> | <b>£1,604</b>   |
| <b>Decoration</b>                              | <b>£31</b>          | <b>2%</b>      | <b>£10,760</b>  |
| <b>Grand total</b>                             |                     |                | <b>£496,000</b> |

## Useful contacts



**TIMBER FRAME** **Potton** 01767 676400 [www.potton.co.uk](http://www.potton.co.uk) **CHARTERED ARCHITECTURAL TECHNOLOGIST** **Artek Design House** 01223 519086 [www.artek-design-house.co.uk](http://www.artek-design-house.co.uk) **BUILDER, QUANTITY SURVEYOR & PROJECT MANAGER** **Collins Developments** 01223 511043 [www.collinsdevelopmentsltd.com](http://www.collinsdevelopmentsltd.com) **ELECTRICIAN** **M&V Electrical** 07801 569371 **LANDSCAPING** **A Lindsay** 07778 629775 **FLOOR TILES** **Porcelanosa** [www.porcelanosa.com](http://www.porcelanosa.com) **BUILDING MATERIALS** **Ridgeons** 01223 466000 [www.ridgeons.co.uk](http://www.ridgeons.co.uk) **GUTTERING** **ABC Roofing** 07789 723138 **HEATING & PLUMBING** **Eco Energy UK** 01763 290336 [www.eco-energyuk.co.uk](http://www.eco-energyuk.co.uk) **BATHROOMS** **Pure Bathrooms** 01223 519210 [www.purebathrooms.co.uk](http://www.purebathrooms.co.uk) **Hometrend Supplies** 01920 871411 [www.hometrendsupplies.co.uk](http://www.hometrendsupplies.co.uk) **Cambridgeshire Bathrooms** 01223 837939 [www.cambridgeshirebathrooms.co.uk](http://www.cambridgeshirebathrooms.co.uk) **LIGHTING DESIGN** **Baulogic** 01223 866966 [www.baulogic.com](http://www.baulogic.com) **SECURITY** **Flex Electrical & Security** 07966 256118 **STAIRS** **David Smith St Ives** 01480 309900 [www.davidsmith.co.uk](http://www.davidsmith.co.uk) **SOUND SYSTEM** **Sonos** 0808 234 6596 [www.sonos.com](http://www.sonos.com) **WINDOWS** **Sashless** 01609 780202 [www.sashless.com](http://www.sashless.com) **BESPOKE FURNITURE** **Ben Haylock** 07734 057520 **CARPENTRY** **John Fox-Teece & Sons** 07788 159328 [www.foxteece.co.uk](http://www.foxteece.co.uk) **SLIDING DOORS** **Sunparadise** 01843 808531 [www.sunparadise.co.uk](http://www.sunparadise.co.uk)