



# THE SUNDAY TIMES

September 15, 2019 The Sunday Times

## Home Design

**H**e's one of the world's most successful musical entrepreneurs, worth £820m according to The Sunday Times Rich List.

So why would Andrew Lloyd Webber choose to self-build a flatpack house that arrived on the back of a lorry?

The musical maestro is a big fan of Le Corbusier, the father of modernist architecture: the latest addition to his Hampshire estate, a modern five-bedroom house, was inspired by one of the architect's most famous structures, the Notre Dame du Haut chapel in Ronchamp, eastern France. It's a highly unusual design, with a dramatically sloping roof and a wall studded with windows of different shapes and sizes, mirroring the famous wall of the chapel.

"We had a derelict house on our land that needed replacing," says Lloyd Webber's wife, Madeleine. "We wanted a modern, practical home that was more interesting than a standard house, with a bit of design flair." The couple decided against a traditional build, opting instead for a factory-built home that arrived in flatpucks from Germany by truck.

"One evening, we were with our friends the Bamfords [Lord Anthony and Lady Carole Bamford], and Anthony was telling us about plans to build sustainable houses on his land – like my husband, he's very interested in architecture," Madeleine says. "At the time, he was having a modular house built for one of their senior staff by a German company, Baufriz. He seemed very happy with it, so I asked Baufriz to come and have a look at our site."

Like Huf Haus, Baufriz is one of the German firms that have established themselves at the top end of the self-build market in the UK. Prefabricated sections fit together precisely, with no draughts. Energy bills are low, thanks to the high level of insulation; and, once the components are on site, the houses are quicker to put up than conventional properties. The Lloyd Webbers' home took about a year from deciding on the design to getting a spade in the ground.

"The build itself was pretty efficient. The house arrived on the trucks when it was meant to, so that part went smoothly," Madeleine says. "It's better to use their tradespeople than your own, even though it might be more expensive. You have to get all the details right, such as the electrics, and they know how everything works."

As well as speed and energy efficiency, the couple wanted control over the design of the house. While Huf Haus has a recognisable design format, you get more flexibility with many other European factory-made homes, as well as UK-based companies such as Potton and MBC Timber Frame. "People may not realise that you can have a lot of control over the design of a factory-built house," says Michael Holmes, chairman of the National Custom & Self Build Association. "Subject to planning permission, you can clad the walls with whatever you like, or go completely bespoke."

The term "modular" usually now means lower-cost, factory-made homes where there is less design flexibility in order to keep prices down. If cost is less of an issue, as in the Lloyd Webbers' case, then that glazed roof terrace or altered room configuration is yours for the asking.

The Baufriz designers adapted their templates to fit Lloyd Webber's brief, but the flint wall was the couple's own idea. "We wanted the house to fit in with the Hampshire landscape," Madeleine says. "Flint has been used in buildings here for centuries, so we decided to have a flint-clad wall, but designed in a modern

# SKYLIGHT EXPRESS



Andrew Lloyd Webber has built an all-singing, all-dancing prefab home at his Hampshire estate. *By Cherry Maslen*



**Jesus Christ modular**  
The superstar build, top, was inspired by a Le Corbusier chapel, above

**“**The Lloyd Webbers decided on a factory-built home that arrived in flatpucks from Germany by truck

way. It would have been finished three months earlier without our ridiculous flint. Every piece was hand-chipped by craftsmen, so it took ages. Of course, that was our choice, but if you want something amazing like that, it does take time."

Madeleine was also hands-on when it came to deciding on the interior details. An advantage of factory construction is that you have to select your kitchen, bathrooms and details such as the door handles ahead of the build, which means no delays during construction – although it does demand some intense decision-making.

"I went to the factory in Germany to choose all the fixtures and fittings," Madeleine says. "I spent a day and a half there, which was fun but exhausting. I had forgotten how many decisions you have to make, down to the skirting boards,

door handles, taps. If you've got a few bathrooms, you've got tons of taps to choose! It was pretty efficient, though. The fixtures and fittings were the quality I wanted, and I think I made the right choices. I would advise anyone doing this kind of build to go and see how everything is made and look at the materials before deciding anything."

While German precision lives up to its reputation, you don't have to go to Europe to get a well-designed factory-made house. British companies worth a look include Beattie Passive, whose Norfolk factory builds to Passivhaus standards; Potton, based in Cambridgeshire, which allows self-builders to adapt a timber-frame or a SIPs-panel design, or to go bespoke; EB Bespoke, also in Cambridgeshire; and MBC Timber Frame, which builds precision homes at its Gloucestershire factory.

"I think it's possible to build a bespoke house that's much better quality than a traditional build, and only slightly more expensive," Madeleine says. "I also think we're making the point that you can do something interesting architecturally even when you're building a house in a factory – which might surprise people."

## COULD YOU BE A BIMBY?

**What is a bimby?** It's an acronym for the opposite of a nimby. A bimby ("build in my back yard") is happy for their land to be used for new housebuilding projects.

**Why would I bother?** Even outline planning permission can add to the value of your house. With no land to buy, it can be a cheap way to build a granny annexe, an Airbnb let or a custom retirement refuge if you're finding your existing home too big to manage.

**Do your homework** "If you stay within the rules, you have a lot of flexibility with materials and form," says Mark Hood, a designer with the online architects Resi. That means understanding regulations pertaining to the size, space and height of a new building, as well as boundary restrictions and services. You're less likely to get approval for a site in the countryside than you are for one in a built-up area; expect more restrictions and a slower process if your home is in a conservation area.

**Is your garden big enough?** According to government guidelines, the minimum floor area for any new dwelling is 37 sq metres; for two bedrooms, it's 61 sq metres. A garden and a parking space may also be required. You'll need enough room to separate the new home from your existing one – and make sure there's access from the road for cars and pedestrians. Even if access issues don't stop you getting planning consent, you'll lose privacy if your new neighbours can only get home via your drive.

**What will the neighbours say?** Their objections could scupper your hopes of getting planning permission. Loss of privacy and light are usually their biggest concerns, so factor these into your design. Roof lights will go down better than picture windows, and putting the floor below ground level will keep the height down. Above all, consult them in advance and keep them up to date.

**The design** Even if you're planning to sell up and move on, good design will help you to convince the planners. A lot of companies offer ready-made buildings in kit form: the best of these look good, are quick to install and offer certainty about final costs.

*Tim Palmer*