# Graven Hill: the UK’s largest self-build community faces challenges and changes



On the outskirts of Bicester in Oxfordshire, a decade-long experiment in self-built housing presents a vivid tableau of architectural diversity and individual expression, challenging the conventional homogeneity of modern housing developments. This is Graven Hill, the United Kingdom’s largest self-build neighbourhood, where residents have been given the freedom to craft homes that deviate dramatically from standardised brick box designs.

Graven Hill’s origins trace back to 2014 when Cherwell District Council acquired an 188-hectare former Ministry of Defence site, inspired by the self-build community of Almere in the Netherlands. The council established a development company to manage the project, setting out a master plan designed by Glenn Howells Architects that delineated 11 distinct character areas. These zones come with prescribed building heights and material palettes intended to balance creative freedom with some coherence, although in practice the development is a patchwork of wildly varying styles and materials.

The homes at Graven Hill are uniquely individual. Rooflines tilt and bulge unpredictably; windows in a variety of shapes are found in unexpected places; balconies come in glass, steel, timber, and other materials. The facades feature stone, brick, wood, fibre-cement boards, fake wood panels, and rusted cor-ten steel, among others. This architectural cacophony embodies the ambition of residents to build personal “Grand Designs,” inspired by the popular Channel 4 series.

One standout example is the home of Frevisse and Giles Dearsley-Hitchcock. Their residence, designed by local practice LAPD, is a bright blue New England-style house with two octagonal turrets—one for each of their children—topped with teal cupolas and unique weathervanes: a unicorn and a penguin reading a book. Frevisse shares, speaking to The Guardian, “We’ve heard local kids say that a Disney princess lives here. I think I disappointed them one day when I came out in my hi-vis and boots.” The couple acquired their plot in 2018 for £260,000, attracted by the lack of planning limits, but the reality of realising their vision proved challenging. “The concrete basement was still wonky when we had to sign it off,” Frevisse reveals. After spending £400,000 just on groundwork and nearly seven years later, their home remains unfinished, with costs more than double their initial estimate.

Among the initial group of pioneering residents was Lynn Pratt, who moved from rural Northamptonshire and designed a “pangolin” house with scaly tiles wrapping around an oast house-inspired roof. She noted that Graven Hill was originally promoted as “a development like no other,” with all homes intended to be high-spec, low-energy, and devoid of large developers. Pratt remarks, “They said they wanted a wide demographic, with a variety of ages and incomes, so it wasn’t just fancy dream homes. I built my whole house for about £350,000, including the land.” Nevertheless, Pratt observes that in recent years the vision has shifted. “I know costs have gone up, but the vision now feels very different. There’s very little self-build now – they’ve priced most people out.” Moreover, she notes the delayed arrival of promised amenities such as a grocery shop and bus stop, with the pioneers’ homes remaining somewhat isolated from the broader community.

Affordable housing has been a significant point of concern. With a 30% affordable housing requirement, many feel the design and siting of these homes have created a divisive “us and them” atmosphere. Retired architect and resident John McCormack criticises the affordable housing’s design quality, which he describes as “almost zero,” resembling 1980s council estates and segregated from other tenures intended to be integrated. Complaints from residents of shared ownership properties include issues like black mould and poor insulation, despite the developer’s assertion that environmental standards were met in tests. Additionally, key community facilities remain absent: though 600 homes are occupied, there is still no mini-supermarket or community centre, and a planned pub appears unlikely to be realised.

Adrian Unitt, managing director of the Graven Hill Village Development Company, acknowledges these challenges. Speaking to The Guardian, he says, “You can build a shop unit, but getting someone to lease it is a different story.” The so-called village centre includes a building with a coffee shop, wine bar, and dentist, but broader amenities lag behind expectations. Plans for a health centre have been replaced with a care home after the proposed GP provider withdrew. The promised community centre for resident gatherings remains a work in progress.

Unitt points out financial constraints: “If I’m selling the land, with foundations and services, I’m getting about a third of the income that a usual developer would get. But I’m still delivering all the roads, the amenities, and the Section 106 affordable housing obligations.” He also highlights the impact of having an active building site with staggered construction schedules, which has led to ongoing damage of infrastructure like kerbs, green spaces, and play areas, costing around £2 million to repair.

The development's layout results in a “chaotic jumble” of homes scattered without much regard for street coherence or integrated public spaces, marred by inconsistent fencing, hedging, and parking. Nonetheless, the neighbourhood retains a charm rooted in individual ambition and the pursuit of personalised homes. Frevisse Dearsley-Hitchcock sums up the experience: “To be honest, I don’t know if I would recommend self-build... you’ve got to be in it for the long haul.” Despite the difficulties, she and her husband have found joy in customizing their home, recently installing LED strip lights on their gables, inspired by the Empire State Building’s nightly illuminations.

Graven Hill’s ongoing evolution continues as consultants rework the masterplan for the next phase, stirred by resident feedback about density, green spaces, and parking. The development company has signalled a move towards more stringent design codes, though concerns persist that the percentage of plots available for true self-builders may diminish in favour of more traditional developer-led building.

This pioneering self-build community illustrates both the possibilities and complexities of enabling greater individual control over home construction within a large-scale housing development, set against economic realities and evolving project management challenges.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.gravenhill.co.uk/move-to-graven-hill/self-build/> - This URL confirms that Graven Hill offers a unique self-build experience where residents can design and build their own homes, providing a variety of options for different needs and lifestyles.
* <https://www.gravenhill.co.uk> - This link highlights Graven Hill as the UK's largest self-build and custom build community, offering a range of housing options and focusing on community development.
* <https://www.gravenhill.co.uk/grand-designs-the-street/> - This URL supports the idea that Graven Hill has been featured in Grand Designs series, showcasing the community's self-build journey and highlighting its pioneering status.
* <https://edgeud.co.uk/graven-hill-the-future-of-self-build-in-the-uk/> - This article discusses Graven Hill as a forefront in promoting self-build developments in the UK, pointing out both positive and challenging aspects of such large-scale projects.
* <https://www.gravenhill.co.uk/move-to-graven-hill/custom-build/> - While not directly available in search results, this URL typically would provide information on custom build options at Graven Hill, aligning with the concept of diverse housing styles mentioned.