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BUDGET TIP

A new build can be cost-efficient: This house cost about $100 a square foot less than the median selling price in the area.

DIARY OF A NEW BUILD

You're not Employee Number 2, but you still dream of building your own home. Learn how one Seattle couple did it on a real-person budget.

SMART SPACE

A SEARCH FOR LIGHT pushed Julia Kuskin and Joel Bell to look for a new place—one, ideally, with two floors above ground so the couple could move their home offices out of the basement (Julia is a photographer; Joel is a private-practice therapist). But a house with enough room for work and their son, Ian, was out of their price range. Then the couple discovered a tear-down in Seattle's Sunset Hill. They bought the lot and decided to build. Julia tells us the lessons she learned while tracking every penny. ⟶

HOME AT LAST The couple with their son, Ian, shown above in the living room of their new house. The exterior, opposite, features cedar privacy screens—a budget-friendly alternative to siding the whole house. The trees were donated by Seattle reLeaf, a city greening program.

Photographs by THOMAS J. STORY

> ***"We wanted to see if normal people could afford to build a house that was environmentally sound—and had nice wood floors."***
>
> —JULIA KUSKIN

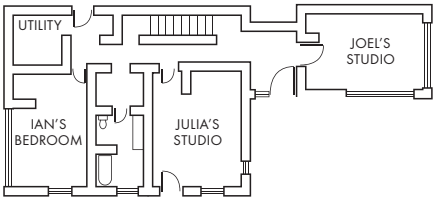
SUMMER 2010

We find an architect who isn't scared off by our budget. We met with two architects we found through the AIA website *(aia.org)* and had intense conversations with each one about our plans and budget. We feel like Chris Serra *(bjarkoserra.com)* can translate our vision into an understated, modern house. He calls our $170-per-square-foot budget "aggressive"—as in low—but is willing to give it a try.

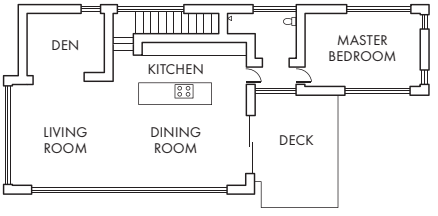
SPRING 2011

Drawing plans, changing plans. Since I'm visually opinionated, I have clear ideas of what I want. We started off talking to Chris about basic layout preferences and looking at photos of houses we like. Then we let him take it from there. We go through four or so designs, whittling away features to make the budget. For example, storage is an issue. A basement is too pricey, so we decide we can't hold on to too much crap. Every time friends come over for dinner, we make them take home a box of books. →

FIRST FLOOR



SECOND FLOOR



KITCHEN The room, top left and above, is free of ornamentation but gains warmth from the walnut cabinets. Julia Kuskin worked closely with Nathan Hartman of Kerf Design *(kerfdesign.com)* to plan cabinetry for the way they live: The mugs and glasses are in short open shelves by the sink, and the island bookshelves are sized for her cookbooks.

LIVING ROOM Light-starved no more: A 27-foot-long window that stretches from the kitchen to the living room, above left, as well as clerestory windows allow sunshine to reach across the open space. The living room is plumbed for a gas fireplace, which the couple hopes to add someday.

ILLUSTRATION: MARGARET SLOAN

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BUDGET TIP
Local craftspeople may be open to a trade of services to cover some costs.

MULTIPURPOSE ROOM When a separate guest room proved too costly, Julia added a fold-down sofa to her workspace. The poured-concrete floors on the lower level saved money for big-leaf maple on the second floor.

SUMMER 2011
Learning our limits. We want a guest room but can't afford a house larger than 2,100 square feet. We decide squeezing in another room that would get used only a few times a year feels like a waste.

EARLY FALL 2011
I pick up extra duties. Our great relationship with Chris means we can talk openly about what we can afford. That's how I start keeping the minutes for our monthly construction meetings instead of Chris. He says he's never had a client do it, but I'm happy to. It makes me more aware of what has been done, potential issues, and money spent.

LATE FALL 2011
We change our minds. A lot. I promised myself there would be no change orders [changes that require the architect to redraw construction plans], but we have about 12. For instance, we have a tiny broom closet in the original design but no pantry. So we reconfigure the space and put one in. That translates into paying for a change in design and to build. Ch-ching!

WINTER 2012
We splurge. Furniture designer Nathan Hartman built two pieces for our first house that we loved. So he is my choice for designing the kitchen for this house. Oh, and a wardrobe and side tables for the bedroom, and a bookshelf built into the stairwell ... that's all still on the wish list. But we are getting our kitchen.

FALL 2012
Moving in! Did we keep our initial budget intact? Honestly, no, but I don't think anyone does. The house is great, no question, and we love living here.

DIGITAL BONUS The 10 questions you should ask an architect before you build: *sunset.com/architect.*