

Property prices have left thousands of Scots wondering if they will ever have a place they can call home. But how much does a house actually cost? The answer could be as little as £4,000, if enough people are willing to build with straw, turf and second-hand wood.

Steve James, a 52-year-old software engineer, is now enjoying life in his tiny, rustic fairytale cottage just outside of Dumfries, after building the one-person home for less than the price of a flat-screen television.

James started the Galloway project four years ago, but only took 10 months to construct the building with his own hands using leftover doors and windows, rocks from nearby fields, and wood from a Govan public baths' cubicle doors. "It's lovely, and once I get the waterwheel going it'll be the final piece of the jigsaw," he enthused, speaking from his warm and cosy living space. "It's all working really well and I'm proud of it."

He believes his self-made success makes property prices look "insane", and hopes to show anyone resourceful enough to go it alone that costs can be kept at a minimum. "I've never understood why inflation in house prices is considered a good thing, but a bad thing with everything else" said James. "Land prices are artificially created because the scarcity problem over land is artificially created. There's easily enough room in Scotland. Planning controls only serve the big developers now; they don't serve the public."

James added: "We came out the caves without architects and developers and planners. People have built their own homes for millennia. It's only in the last 150 years that people stopped doing it."

While his example has caused excitement among housing groups in highlighting the limitations of an unrestricted and inflated property market, not everyone believes self-building can solve the nation's affordable housing crisis.

"It's great to see such innovation and this case proves that necessity is the mother of invention," said James Jopling, Head of Campaigns at Shelter Scotland. "While this is a great achievement and a fantastic idea it's not an option open to everyone. Unfortunately one or two houses like this won't solve Scotland's affordable housing crisis."

A spokesman for ASBA, an architecture firm specialising in self-build, said that even the shabbiest plots of land could cost £15,000 to £30,000, and most people had to hire a contractor to build. "Unless you're getting all the materials for nothing and build with your own hands, there's no way it could be a realistic option for most people," he claimed.

But James hopes to inspire more people to expand their DIY horizons, and believes thousands of people could benefit by grouping together to build a small community of homes. He thinks a three-bedroom family home could be done for as little as £10,000. "I want to make people think; 'why can't I do that?' I think everyone should be entitled to one home, and if they want to buy it or make it themselves, it should be up to them. Mine is not the only way; there's hundreds of different ways of doing things."

At last estimate the average house price in Scotland stood at about £158,000, but the idea of building many more cheaper, sustainable eco-homes is gathering

momentum. The Findhorn Ecovillage has already shown how adopting materials such as local stone and straw bales, and utilising small-scale sewage and turbine systems can sustain a thriving community of several hundred.

Islanders from the Housing Initiative for Arran Residents are hoping for government support for a programme of affordable and sustainable house building based on log cabin and blackhouse-style designs. They hope house prices can be protected for at least 20 years to prevent speculators from inflating cost beyond locals.

Scottish MSPs are also considering plans for the country's first full-scale eco-town after Hamilton-based property developers Banks Developments expressed an interest in building 5,000 sustainable houses in Fife. Yet one man in Dumfries has shown that waiting for the wheels of such huge projects to start turning is not the only option.

How Steve James did it:

- £500 sarking
- £400 floorboards
- £400 pond liner
- £300 straw
- £200 plumbing
- £150 reclaimed joists
- £150 plywood
- £150 equipment hire
- £150 glass
- £100 quicklime
- £100 wiring
- £100 tarpaulin
- £100 paint/varnish
- £100 batteries
- £100 fixings
- £100 miscellaneous
- £100 fuel for power tools
- £70 water pump
- £50 water heater
- £50 stove chimney
- £30 cooker
- £600 supplies for volunteers