Self-build homes: social values and the lived experience of housing in practice

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Self-build housing is a topic of continuing relevance within the fields of housing policy and housing research. And yet it rarely appears in the pages of the academic journals in these fields, its reputation as a niche market being echoed in sparse accounts. While the seminal texts in this area offer a good starting point for such enquiries, it is also clear that they speak to different times and contexts. Even though there is currently a resurgence of interest – as we recount below – from government and practitioners, who see the scaling-up of self-build as one of several solutions to the current housing crisis (see also Stevens, this volume), self-build is similarly marginal to housing policy.

Against this background, Self-Build Homes updates research on self-build to account for recent advances in housing and planning policy, while also bringing this into conversation with interdisciplinary perspectives – drawn from across the social sciences – on housing, home and homemaking. In this way, it seeks to update understandings of self-build by accounting for housing as a distinctly social process. It puts the social back into self-build. Through the introduction and exploration of the social values and lived experience of self-building, it provides insights into how individuals and communities are variously shaped by their housing experience. The volume is therefore underpinned by a conceptualisation of self-build that takes it out of its ‘small and special box’ – to quote Hill (this volume) – and recognises how it might cause us to reconsider the assumptions that frame our approaches to understanding housing – in theory, policy and practice.
Self-build: a note on conceptualisations

One of the guiding principles of this volume is to encourage dialogue across diverse forms of housing that we conceive of as self-build. But what do we mean by this? In the UK public’s imagination, self-build is often understood through the lens of the popular television series *Grand Designs*, which showcases ambitious and often costly individual housing projects. This is undoubtedly one form of housing procurement that can be considered as self-build, but we adopt here the broader conceptualisation provided by Duncan and Rowe (1993), aimed at capturing a wider range of practices that draws on considerations around the provision and procurement of housing. As they emphasise, self-build describes cases ‘where the first occupants arrange for the building of their own dwelling and, in various ways, participate in its production’ (Duncan and Rowe, 1993, 1331). This allows for households to have more control over the construction process. As various examples attest, this might include, *inter alia*, state support for self-build, or projects might be undertaken in collaboration with other households, housing suppliers, practitioners and associations.

Revisiting this definition allows us to think again about the self and how this might be mobilised in the concept of self-build. Discussions of the benefits of self-build often focus on what these might do for the individual; there is a considerable focus on self-improvement, empowerment and accomplishment that embeds a fundamentally psychological approach to understanding the self – as a form of identity – oriented around the individual. Further, the focus on consumption and lifestyle that underpins a lot of the media depictions of self-build makes the explicit link between the home and domestic interiors as expressions of self-identity. Indeed, the title of Barlow et al.’s (2001) report, *Homes to DIY For* and Channel 4’s flagship programme *Grand Designs* play on this sense of aesthetics. But this focus on taste and aesthetics might detract from the deeper sense of achievement that these homes signify to their owners. As Samuels (2008) documents in the case of suburban extensions, the value of these projects lies in the sense of pride and achievement at being able to create, thus in the practices rather than in the aesthetics of a project (see also Brown, 2007, 2008). And yet, the self, used in this way, is a misnomer; such evaluations identify the self as an individual in ways that distract from the sense of self-build as a thoroughly social process.

Our revised approach to thinking about self-build presented here is founded on an understanding of this as a social phenomenon embedded
within a set of social relationships; here the ‘self-’ signifies the relationship between the individual, household or group and the project of providing homes. Presenting self-build as a social process privileges insights into entanglements between the material and social structure of the home, and the building of relationships within households and within neighbourhoods. This shifts the focus towards the social identities of self-builders, but also to the social relationships that go into the production of new homes, whether these be within families, with contractors, suppliers and practitioners, and, in the case of collective or community projects, within groups. Approaching self-build as a social process infuses it with a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of self-builders and the social significance of self-build in ways that might otherwise be obscured.

With these considerations in mind, Duncan and Rowe (1993) provide a useful working definition. This allows not only for the model of sweat equity that is also common within wider understandings of self-build, but recognises diverse practices of housing production with a base line of recognising that it is individuals and small groups organising the provision of their (future) homes. Thus conceived, self-build functions not as a label that describes one discrete process, but rather as an umbrella term that can be usefully put to work to explore the range of different modes of housing procurement that start from the ground up (Duncan and Rowe, 1993; Parvin et al., 2011) and that share an understanding of the ‘self-’ as a marker of the relationships between agents and the process of providing/procuring homes.

Self-build then is a broad category of practice that involves households and groups who invest time and energy in the building of their own homes in various ways. Our ambition in extending this broad definition is to draw in and bring into conversation those interested in co-housing, co-operative housing development, community-led development, eco-housing – which some understandings of self-build might exclude – as well as individuals financing and organising the construction of their own homes. As Duncan and Rowe (1993) highlight, by adopting a description that centres on the provision of housing, it is possible to speak across a broad range of practices and to recognise those practices that might fall through the gaps when other categories are employed.

**Self-build in housing crises**

It is against the backdrop of housing constraints across European cities – and nationally in the case of the United Kingdom’s continuing housing
crisis – that we are reminded of Duncan and Rowe’s (1993, 1338) earlier observations on the economic drivers for self-build:

In periods of economic difficulty and affordability problems in housing, self-provision often becomes a topic of increasing interest to governments, usually as a way of shedding responsibility for social housing … it has also been the case in Britain … self-provided housing, especially self-build, was increasingly seen as one means of filling the affordability gap.

The United Kingdom’s housing crisis, which has developed from a long-term shortfall in supply since the severe economic problems of the 1970s (Whitehead and Williams, 2011) confirms this observation. Writing in 1990, Forrest, Murie and Williams stressed that the British housing market was one dominated by property ownership – the main form of provision is second-hand (Forrest et al., 1990; see also Saunders, 1990) – with the shape and structure of this market in turn influencing the aspirations and meanings that people attribute to their housing tenure. In the intervening period, little has changed; home ownership remains the predominant form of housing tenure in Britain and new housing procurement makes up only a very small portion of the wider housing market. At present, the supply of housing cannot keep up with demand, with house-building at its lowest peacetime rate since the 1920s (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011). As in the past (Duncan and Rowe, 1993), the conditions of the housing crisis have brought renewed government interest in self-build – from both the previous Coalition and the current Conservative governments. Celebrating the past successes of this mode of development, claims have surfaced propounding (a) the value of self-build to alleviate problems of supply and demand, (b) its potential to introduce more affordability into the market and (c) its role in bringing to fruition a more competitive market. Further, alternatives to the development of new homes by national housebuilders are gaining greater visibility, through being incorporated into popular media discourse and promoted by trade organisations, housing practitioners and commentators.

Alongside self-build, such discussions have included co-housing and community-led development. Whether such increased visibility will be met by increased uptake remains to be seen. Importantly, these forms of self-provision are not a panacea for the housing crisis; they just point to other ways of approaching the provision of housing beyond the mainstream. As part of a housing and land economy that is tipped in favour
of the market, rather than challenging the structure of these economies, they most often offer alternatives within as opposed to outside the market. This view sits uneasily alongside imaginings of such housing provision as offering a radical alternative to the market (Hardy and Ward, 1984; see also Heslop, this volume), as is demonstrated by the inclusion of community-led self-build, community land trusts (CLTs) and co-operative housing as ‘alternatives to fight for’ in Staying Put: An Anti-Gentrification Handbook for Council Estates in London (London Tenants Federation et al., 2014).

*Self-Build Homes* is written against the background of a renewed focus from policy managers and practitioners on self-build as a means of producing homes that are more stylised, affordable and appropriate for the specific needs of households. Suffering from neglect in scholarship and within government and policy circles (Harris, 1999), the key texts on self-build – Duncan and Rowe’s ‘Self-provided housing’ (1993), Hardy and Ward’s Arcadia for All (1984), and Barlow et al.’s Homes to DIY For (2001) – urgently need updating to reflect changes in housing policy and practice, housing provision and inequality. At present, literature has been largely restricted to practical guides for prospective builders and discrete academic papers examining specific models of development, documenting the abstracted social values that relate to them. While there are several recent initiatives that document European models of self-build housing (see, for example, the Right to Build Toolkit, http://righttobuildtoolkit.org.uk/case-studies/), collective custom build (Brown et al., 2013) and the changing state of the UK self-build market (Wallace et al., 2013), these tend towards description, advocacy and discussions of how to scale up self-build as a housing practice. Importantly, such renewed promotion of self-build in the United Kingdom has yet to be measured in terms of whether it will increase demand.

However, new academic research on these alternative forms of housing procurement are emerging in the wake of such renewed interest. This volume draws together this cutting-edge academic research on self-build, alongside commentary from leading figures in the self-procurement and wider housing sector, to offer new directions for understanding the rationales and meaning, values and imaginaries, and the concepts of community and identity, as experienced through such housing practices.

**Self-build in an international context**

While in the Global South, self-build goes hand-in-hand with informal settlement – a creative response of households and communities that
provides low-cost solutions to those in need when states and governments do not have the resources or inclination to provide shelter for the most disadvantaged (Hall, 1989) – in Western Europe and other advanced capitalist economies, it occupies a very different position. In these economies, self-build as a low-cost solution accessible to the most disadvantaged has been systematically undermined by land reform, the introduction of land use and planning regulation, bureaucracy and legislation (Hardy and Ward, 1984; Hall, 1989). Rather than existing outside the market and housing economy as we see in other parts of the world, in such economies it operates in uneasy tension with the housing market. The motivations of most self-builders in such economies reveal this in full; they are framed not so much in terms of shelter but of the desire for (a) a choice that the market does not otherwise offer and (b) lower cost relative to the prices of the mainstream market (Clapham et al., 1993; Barlow et al., 2001; Wallace et al., 2013). The structure of wider housing and land economies is therefore important to understanding the constitution and uptake of self-build in any given location.

Many countries have experienced growth in speculative volume housebuilding in recent decades. The United Kingdom’s progressive shift away from self-build from the 1920s is perhaps the most extreme example of housing market restructuring. Today, self-build represents barely 10 per cent of aggregate housing production across the UK, in stark contrast to most other West European economies. In Germany, for example, over 60 per cent of homes are commissioned by individual households and built by local companies (Lloyd et al., 2015; Duncan and Rowe, 1993). A similar pattern is found in Austria and Switzerland, while self-build in the Netherlands consistently represents around 20 per cent of overall housing production.

In the United Kingdom, self-build housing played a significant role in new housing development following the end of World War II (Hardy and Ward, 1984; Harris, 1999). Hardy and Ward’s account of the plotters – a text that remains the most politically astute and comprehensive account of the history of self-build in Britain – documents how self-build was once a primary route into home ownership for working-class households, sweat equity substituting for economic capital (see also Ward, 2002). As Hardy and Ward (1984) documented, changes in the political landscape of housing – specifically the alliance of speculative builders and public bureaucrats who introduced planning and conservation legislation – resulted in significant obstacles to housing provision through self-provided housing. This is reflective of the increasing intervention of the state in land and property development – rather than
bottom-up development – that was detrimental to the poor and the working class (Hall, 1989). Positioned outside the mainstream housing system, it is perhaps unsurprising that the legacy of this mode of housing development has been repeatedly neglected, understudied by housing scholars, and its contribution undervalued by government (Duncan and Rowe, 1993; Clapham et al., 1993; Barlow et al., 2001). As the responsibility for housing development has been increasingly passed over to a small number of national housebuilders, the ‘long tail’ of individuals and small groups who provide their own homes through the purchase of land and the development of homes has been forgotten despite the potential they offer for re-visioning the housing economy (Parvin et al., 2011).

As we recounted above, there has been a revival of interest in the prospect of alternative forms of housing – self-build, custom build, and co-housing – providing a correction to the problems exacerbated by the housing crisis.

As a first step towards moving the sector forwards, policy managers, practitioners and others working in the field began to benchmark the United Kingdom’s self-build sector against its near neighbours within Europe and comparable housing markets further afield. The exercise has found the United Kingdom’s self-build sector generally to be both significantly smaller and narrower than many in terms of the well-rooted diversity of models, practices and production modes (Hamiduddin and Gallent, 2016). By ‘well-rooted diversity’ we mean that whilst there has been a myriad of pilot schemes and one-off projects in recent decades trialling a range of different approaches to appeal to a wider demographic, the stark reality is that this sector in the United Kingdom remains overwhelmingly dominated by individual household schemes, brought forward by wealthier retirees or those nearing retirement (Duncan and Rowe, 1993; Wallace et al., 2013; Benson, 2014). By contrast, self-build in most other West European countries appears to be predominantly a younger person’s activity, centring on the desire to create a family home. As Duncan and Rowe explain, ‘Individual attributes of income, time availability and confidence will largely explain the social distribution of self-provision … it is the wider structural factors that explain its prevalence in any one country’ (1993, 1342).

**Self-build in the structure of housing economies**

Distinct national cultures of housing might provide one explanation for this contrast; namely, few European societies place such
importance on home ownership as in the United Kingdom, where progress up a ‘property ladder’ – from starter home and through several rounds of family home – is regarded as equally salient as career progression as a mark of esteem and self-realisation (Saunders, 1990). However, these cultures of housing are not self-sustaining; rather they are supported and made possible by housing and land economies that facilitate such housing trajectories. For example, in West European economies, where it is more common for households to step up from rental in early life to the purchase or commissioning of a family home, the housing economy is structured with carefully matched infrastructures – e.g. financial products, planning regulations, land provision – to support this.

Inspired by Munro and Smith (2008), our understanding of the housing economy moves beyond a view of the housing economy as a set of economic ‘facts’, to considering its structure as inherently social rather than ‘natural’ and self-perpetuating (see also Miller 1998, 2002; Christie et al., 2008), performed by key players within it (Wallace, 2008). Competing markets within housing provision thus vie for a position within this economy. Understanding how these stakeholders are variously positioned allows for consideration of the ways in which markets are arranged and socially structured (Bourdieu, 2005; Lovell and Smith, 2010). The interests of stakeholders within the market can therefore influence its shape, with housebuilders and property developers perhaps exerting pressure on governments to further their own economic ends. As Smith (2008) argues, while recognition of the ways in which governments support the construction industry through the housing market is important, this should not be to the exclusion of considering the agency of households. Self-build provides one site where this agency might be writ large.

Nevertheless, an analysis focusing on the social structures of the housing economy (Bourdieu, 2005) provides an explanatory framework for how some areas of housing procurement are excluded from mainstream markets, turning on the question of whose interests are being supported. Another dimension of this can be seen when we consider that the state also seems to play a stronger supporting role in European countries, with high levels of self-build, both passively through transparent and supportive land use zoning ordinances and actively through the provision of land and essential infrastructure or the backing of financial products to help marginal or specialist groups advance their self-build project. In Germany, for example, active municipal support has been identified as a key factor behind the recent rise of collaborative models.
of self-build in cities across the country (Hamiduddin and Gallent, 2016; see also Stevens, this volume).

The highly differentiated reality of housing markets and housing cultures internationally seems to pose significant challenges for learning between contexts. This means that it may be overly simplistic to assume that models of group self-build could be deconstructed from the German cultural and housing market context and applied to representative cities in the United Kingdom. Yet, stepping back allows us to consider, firstly, whether proximate societies really are so fundamentally different and, secondly, specifically in relation to the United Kingdom, whether we really have the sort of housing market and opportunity for self-build – in its full range of guises – that we would wish for.

Until the late nineteenth century, the United Kingdom shared flourishing self-build and mutual housing sectors with its European neighbours, but it began to disappear in the wake of government support for speculative housebuilding from the 1920s onwards. It is only recently that the housing crisis has begun to reveal the extent to which this speculative market structure serves the vested interests of the few while failing the needs of the many.

In response, recent UK governments have recognised both the gravity of the housing crisis and the potential role for self-build to increase diversity and balance in the housing market. Since 2013, there have been at least three parliamentary reports on self-build in England; the establishment of an All-Party Parliamentary Group on self- and custom build; the inclusion of the need to measure demand for self-build in the National Planning Policy Framework and subsequent development of local (council) registers for potential self-builders; the provision of loans to support the development of ‘custom build’ and engage communities in the ‘right to build’; and the introduction of exemptions for self-builders such as those announced in relation to the recently introduced Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). It is precisely as a result of government lobbying that such changes have been brought about.

Alongside these policy and governance changes, new providers have emerged; the burgeoning custom build sector – small-scale property developers offering products ranging from serviced plots to fully turnkey solutions – being a case in point. Knowingly or not, these changes echo the suggestions made by Brown (2008) on the need for the development of a professional self-build industry and for greater involvement of householders in the design of their homes. In this way, some of the risks for householders are mitigated and challenges to accessing self-build housing are overcome through the custom build developer as intermediary.
State assistance in earlier developments – for example, the Walter Segal self-build schemes supported and developed in Lewisham, London, in the 1970s and 1980s – has been replaced by alliances of local authorities, housing associations and other registered providers. While these alliances support various modes of housing development, leading to purchase, private or social rent through more community-based initiatives, their uptake, success and outcomes need to be further documented.

While self-build is frequently pitched as a solution to the housing crisis – and the rising inequality this entails – we reiterate Duncan and Rowe’s (1993) emphasis that self-build may, at best, contribute to reducing housing disadvantage indirectly. Rather than a panacea, if significantly scaled up, it might slow the wider market, taking some households out of the mainstream market and thereby reducing demand relative to supply. In re-positioning self-build within the wider structures of the housing economy, we recognise that the obstacles to scaling up self-build are symptomatic of problems faced throughout the housebuilding industry in the United Kingdom. For example, lack of availability of land – the consequence of an idiosyncratic land economy where land is in private ownership – is a challenge faced by national housebuilders, local councils and self-builders alike; further, they vie for this land in a field that also contains corporate, industrial and retail development. Any efforts to scale up new housing provision in the United Kingdom – self-build or otherwise – rely on the availability of and access to land. This is not to excuse housebuilders from accusations of land banking, but rather to demonstrate shared struggles within the field of new housing provision, extending the conversation beyond the silo of the discrete market interests touted by many stakeholders, practitioners and advocates within the burgeoning self-build industry.

The market is writ large in the current encouragement of self-build, at once a solution to the problem and yet fundamentally shaped by the market (see also Benson, 2014). This is perhaps unsurprising given the extent to which housing and land are market economies in the United Kingdom. Within this framing, alternative housing is limited in terms of the opportunities it offers beyond the market. Instead, it is more likely to provide different ways of engaging with the market rather than operating beyond it. Although the inclusion of other modes of alternative housing provide some evidence of resistance to the marketisation at play in these economies (see, for example, Forde, this volume; Heslop, this volume), the prevailing structures persist, as evidenced by the limited uptake, overwhelming obstacles, and the sheer amount of energy required to complete these schemes. In the absence of route maps guiding these
alternative forms of development, the models are those of ‘making it up as you go along’, with each step a significant achievement and completion often many years down the line. We therefore advocate caution in thinking about the potential of self-build to provide solutions for the market, and question instead how we might go about deconstructing the structures and strictures of the market and the role of self-build within it.

**Putting the social into self-build**

Through their focus on community, dwelling, home and identity, the contributions to this volume explore the various meanings attributed to these forms of housing, building on rich traditions of research and theory on housing and planning, alongside conceptual work on these themes drawn from across the social sciences. In this way, the book makes key interventions into conversations about alternative housing procurement, updating the literature both in respect to the contemporary conditions of the housing economy, governance and policy, and considers how these interventions can advance theory, practice and research. It includes empirical research with both individual households and group projects, and seeks to develop a new definition of self-build that reflects this diversity of practices and encourages critical dialogue between academics and practitioners. Similarly, the academic research reported here is drawn from a range of disciplines – including sociology, planning, geography, social anthropology, housing studies and architecture – and builds on wider literature relating to housing, planning and urban studies. By drawing out a series of themes that are prevalent in wider and established bodies of research, the collection seeks to demonstrate that self-build housing has wider relevance to contemporary discussions ongoing in these areas.

The book takes as its starting point the multiplicity of rationales, discourses and meanings surrounding contemporary self-build in relation to different development models. In the opening chapter, Iqbal Hamiduddin turns to larger scale self-build communities and developments in a bid to account for the resurgence of larger schemes across Europe in recent decades. The connection between self-build and place identity forms a focal point of the chapter, particularly the integration of collective self-build with employment and community spaces that form authentic ‘new pieces of the city’ (Feldtkeller, 2015, 16) – a counterpoint to the discrete housing developments, disconnected from broader physical, cultural and historical contexts, that became normalised with the
development of suburbia in the late nineteenth century (Hall, 2013). Martin Field, in his chapter, attempts to unravel the multitude of drivers underpinning a revival of mutual models of self-build, which include a range of forms and scales from small co-operatives to mutual neighbourhoods. In the final contribution to the opening section, Jenny Pickerill makes the powerful case for eco-building as a form of self-build development that offers both affordable and sustainable living. As she documents, while there is a celebration of the technological solutions offered by such homes, this overlooks the significant socio-cultural framings of the relationship between housing and environment, people, politics and place that are crucial to its realisation. It is only through shifting focus towards these dimensions that a better understanding of how to encourage uptake might be achieved.

In turning attention towards lived experience, the second part of the volume explores how values, lifestyles and imaginaries interplay with and in the production of self-build homes. It includes a travelogue of case studies to emphasise the different social processes and outcomes related to self-build models in a range of contexts. Picking up the baton for low-impact living, Elaine Forde calls for a reconsideration of self-build located within the broader context of provisioning. This marries well with the communitarianism that is an integral feature of Y Mynydd, an off-grid eco-village in West Wales. Her account thus provides a useful counterpoint to traditional production and consumption discourses that continue to prevail in housing studies. While Forde’s chapter challenges us to think about what ideas of living underpin normative understandings of housing, Julia Heslop’s account of an innovative participatory housing project questions the functioning of power in housing in austerity Britain. Focused on the co-production of a Segal home with homeless people, and the social processes that surround this, she reiterates the call for a socialised understanding of housing; it is only in this way that housing can become a site for empowerment and in which people may invest value. Melissa Fernández Arrigoitia and Kathleen Scanlon then provide a unique insight into the formation of a co-housing group, through a detailed case study of a project for older people in south London. Their account provides clues as to why the collaborative self-build sector – and co-housing in particular – has struggled to gain momentum in the United Kingdom despite an apparently strong appetite for it.

The third section of the volume focuses on how self-building articulates with community and identity. In the opening chapter of the section, Michaela Benson offers new insights into individual self-build projects. Through a focus on the emotional trajectories of two self-build projects,
she argues for a shift from an understanding of self-build as housebuilding to one that recognises its location in ongoing processes of homemaking. In this way, she reminds us that the building of houses is not the same as the work required for the making of homes. Shifting to the relationship between community and identity, Jim Hudson’s chapter draws on the study of two senior co-housing groups in the United Kingdom. While growing old in a community has been heralded as a significant motivation behind such formations – an issue of increasing pertinence in light of ongoing changes to health and social care provision – he draws out how the attitudes and motivations of individual members relate to wider issues of social connection, class and belonging. Emma Heffernan and Pieter de Wilde focus on affordable group self-build projects in the United Kingdom. They tease out the experiences of these self-builders, revealing how community is central to their imaginings of life following building. While it is clear how this might be facilitated by working closely with others on the building process, they also explain how it stretches beyond the building site, with their new neighbours being equally committed to the development of affordable homes in these areas. In the final empirical chapter of the third section, Katherine Collins powerfully explores how a community self-build project working with homeless ex-services personnel feeds into the reconstruction of identity. Produced through arts-based research, the rich semi-fictionalised narratives she presents in the chapter draw out the complex and varied biographies and experiences of those participating in the project, revealing the challenges and hardships of re-integrating into civilian life.

The final section of the book brings the conversation back to three leading practitioners (Feldtkeller, Hill and Stevens). It draws on their deep experience to consider the new directions for self-build internationally, and to reflect on the steps that need to be taken to develop three aspects of the field. We travel to Tübingen’s celebrated French Quarter, with Andreas Feldtkeller, the mastermind of this project, to consider how self-build can be combined with a mixed land use strategy to create authentic new urban quarters, setting out the steps that are necessary to return to these elemental and essential tools of city making and the urban commons. The second contribution draws on recent research from across Europe, conducted with a view to developing the sector in the United Kingdom. Here, Ted Stevens sets out a road map for the further development of practice and policy that he helped to instigate as chair of the National Custom and Self Build Association (NaCSBA). The third of these practitioner perspectives focuses on the intertwining of the political and social in community-led housing, as Stephen Hill – a veteran of
the sector – showcases new models of community organisation that may support and lead a fast-growing sector of the self-build market.

We close the volume with a conclusion that thinks through what recognising the social in self-build offers in terms of new directions for research and practice.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have argued that self-build ought to be extracted from the strictures of construction modes and methods, and instead placed within a more expansive social envelope, where development processes can more clearly be seen to serve greater ends of place shaping, the expression of relationships between self and others, and self or collective fulfilment. We have also noted the radically different housing market conditions and cultural contexts in which self-build is undertaken internationally, recognising that many of the countries where self-build is a social norm have not needed the same level of discussion around the topic as is currently taking place in the United Kingdom. Ultimately, however, social challenges relevant to self-build pervade all parts of the globe – from acute housing demand across cities of the Global South to demographic change and ageing across societies of the Global North. Urban development has always entailed a sharing and swapping of ideas between different geographical and social contexts in ‘circuits of knowledge and techniques’ (Healey, 2013), and it is with this spirit that we embark on this journey of ideas, experiences and case studies, and reflect on what we might wish to pollinate between different places.