Self-Build Homes
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The camera pans to reveal the finished product, a self-built home. The details of the house are not important; every episode of Grand Designs ends this way, narrated by the presenter, Kevin McCloud, who makes a key point about the build, what can be learned from it, and often concludes with a comment about the perseverance of the self-builders.¹ The theme music kicks in, and you are left with a sense of completion. The programme has tracked the initial motivations, design and planning of a house, and followed the household through the build process. It has captured the difficulties, highlighting with dramatic tension the breakdown of social relations, the life events that take place alongside a build, financial challenges, and unexpected things that happen on site throughout this process. It often depicts self-build as an emotional rollercoaster, but this is all resolved by the end of the programme; leaving you with the vision of people settling into their homes.

This introductory vignette captures some of the main themes of this chapter: self-building, emotions and homemaking. However, while the narrative arc of this vignette gives the sense that once the house is completed home is made, the lived experience of this is quite different.

While at the outset self-builders – indeed, encouraged by the advocates, the how-to guides, programmes and tradeshows – weigh up whether they have the funds, knowledge and know-how to build, calculate the build time and arrange alternative living arrangements, they often overlook the significance of homemaking in the production of home through self-build. And yet, in working closely with self-builders, it

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¹ The programme often features a song titled “In the Heights” by The Whitest Boy Alive, which is used as the theme song for the show.
becomes clear that this is a ‘stripped-down’ version that does a disservice to what is often an intensely emotional process, through which ideals of home are challenged and contested – compromising the ability to make a home through building a house – as much as they are realised. This chapter therefore considers self-build as more than a process of housebuilding or a way of providing housing, turning additionally to the consideration of home and homemaking.

Drawing on ethnographic research with self-building households in England, I argue for a framework that understands self-build as homemaking. Through the focus on the self-build experiences of two households, the chapter presents the emerging house as an affective space, examining the emotional trajectories of these two households as they progress through their self-build. In this way, it lays bare the visceral experiences of self-building and how these challenge ideals of home. While the builds are organised around idealised imaginings of the home as stable and secure, the narratives here make clear that although houses may be finished, homes may still be in the making. In this way, the chapter makes manifest the ongoing practices of homemaking at the heart of the production of new homes to render visible a conceptualisation of self-build as homemaking, and to call for a critical social science of self-build.

**Self-building as homemaking**

As a first step in thinking about self-build as homemaking, I turn briefly to considerations of home. A multidimensional, contested and relational concept, home is a signifier with a range of different meanings (Depres, 1991; Mallett, 2004; Blunt and Dowling, 2006). It refers at once to the spatial, ideational and imaginary; it infers emotional attachments and affective relations; it is culturally (and temporally) constructed while also being subjectively experienced (Mallett, 2004; Blunt and Dowling, 2006; Pickerill, 2016); and it interplays with home and housing in dynamic and co-constitutive relationships. Indeed, it is this latter point that draws attention to the significance of materiality in the experience of home (Miller, 1998, 2001).

If home becomes predominantly about emotions, experiences and politics, then we lose an understanding of the material – the physical shape, structure and influence of the walls, windows, doors, floors and ceilings … the concepts of house and home are most usefully
considered always in dynamic relation with each other (not separate discrete approaches). (Pickerill, 2016, 54, emphasis added)

The breadth of meaning caught up in the conceptualisation of home in turn gives rise to breadth of experience. It is within this complex conceptual landscape that self-build – as it interplays with the production of home, rather than houses – is located.

This chapter focuses on the tension between the home as intended by self-build – what might be understood as the ideal home, a spatial imaginary (Chapman and Hockey, 1999; Blunt and Dowling, 2006) – and home as it is lived in and through self-build documenting how homes and home are constituted and made through the process. The conceptualisation of home I adopt to examine this accounts for how the material, social, economic and affective articulate in the production of the self-built home, an ideal locus through which to examine this interplay. In adopting a lens on homemaking, understood as the personalised and localised experience of home (Young, 1997), the everyday practice of doing home (Ingold, 1995), the chapter offers a shift in focus from the construction of houses that lies at the heart of most understandings of self-build toward a sense of how the home is experienced and made through this process. It focuses therefore on self-built homes, intended here in distinction to self-build houses.

Conceptualising the self-built home

Considering self-building as homemaking is a valuable intervention into a body of work predominantly concerned with identifying the structural conditions that shape self-build and other forms of alternative housing in the United Kingdom and elsewhere (see, for example, Duncan and Rowe, 1993; Barlow et al., 2001; Wallace et al., 2013; Brown et al., 2013). Invariably describing how housing and planning policy, housing and land economies structure access to and uptake of these modes of housing procurement (see also Benson, 2014), this approach overlooks the social dimensions and dynamics of these processes (see Benson and Hamiduddin, this volume), but also the ways in which home and homemaking are implicated in the process of self-building.

My starting point here is Blunt and Dowling’s critical geography of home that brings together the spatial and political: ‘home as simultaneously material and imaginative; the nexus between home, power and identity; and home as multi-scalar’ (2006, 22). In shifting the focus
from house and home, to house-as-home, they emphasise three areas of enquiry, (a) the relations between home and economy on a range of scales; (b) imaginaries of home – normative and idealised understandings – and how these are reinforced, practised and resisted; and (c) the social relations that structure and are structured by home and homemaking.

These analytical foci are a good starting point in (re-)mapping the small body of work on self-build – broadly defined following the intentions laid out in Benson and Hamiduddin’s introduction to this volume – that extends beyond the policy and economic focus of much academic research in this area. Relations between the home and economy, particularly the idealisation of home ownership, are creatively challenged by the plotland developers – Hardy and Ward’s (1984) protagonists – lower-income families spiralling into the home ownership otherwise out of their reach through this alternative mode of housing provision (see also Heffernan and de Wilde, this volume). Co-housing offers an alternative framing of home, disturbing the normative imaginary of home as the site of belonging and intimacy for the heterosexual nuclear family (Blunt and Dowling, 2006) in its organisation around support for senior living in community (Fernández and Scanlon; Hudson, this volume), with a built environment and particularly shared spaces that encourage new ways of conceiving of household and the process of homemaking. Indeed, Forde’s contribution to this volume, where the shared hearth becomes the centre of a multi-family off-grid community, offers one illustration of how this might play out in practice. As Vannini and Taggert (2014) and Pickerill (2016, this volume) highlight, comfort – part of a broader imaginary of the ‘ideal home’ (Chapman and Hockey, 1999; Blunt and Dowling, 2006) – articulates with understandings of home, limiting the uptake of off-grid living and eco-homes, housing options that encourage more sustainable ways of living. These brief examples point to the urgency and necessity of a critical social science approach to understanding self-build as a housing practice, how this interplays with home – as spatial and political – and practices of homemaking.

The focus on lived experience in this chapter lies in the vein of research on the ways in which home intersects with identity and social relations, shaped by and structuring expectations of home, made through experience and practice. There is limited research on self-build that takes this as its primary focus. Exceptions to this are the qualitative enquiries into the experience of self-building by householders renovating and extending their properties conducted by Brown (2008) and Samuels (2008). These rich accounts identify how such
practices enhance the sense of home, and document the challenges of the professional-amateur relationship, with Brown (2008) additionally documenting self-build as a project of the self, a search for authenticity, everyday creativity and personal discovery. At the heart of these enquiries, though, is an unquestioned assumption that self-building equals home-building, their accounts echoing the narrative arc familiar from the opening vignette of this chapter, conflating the material and immaterial dimensions of home.

In other words, these prior published accounts do not go far enough in challenging the ready assumption that self-build practices produce homes. But if home is truly understood as a (necessarily) incomplete project, what might this then reveal of self-build as homemaking and how might we access this?

We insist that one of the defining features of home is that it is both material and imaginative, a site and a set of meanings/emotions. Home is a material dwelling and it is also an affective space, shaped by emotions and feelings of belonging … we understand home as a relation between material and imaginative realms and processes. The physical location and psychological or emotional feeling are tied rather than separate. (Blunt and Dowling, 2006, 22, emphasis added)

My focus on homemaking in this chapter intends precisely to draw out the complex ways in which households make home through the process of self-building. The self-build as an affective space features prominently within this, a way of capturing how ‘[t]he idea of home and the practices of home-making support personal and collective identity in a more fluid and material sense’ (Young, 1997, 164).

The protagonists of this chapter are owner-occupiers. This is unusual in the broader context of the volume, which seeks to demonstrate the diversity of self-build practices. And yet, they are representative of the predominant biography of self-builders in England, a mode of housing procurement dominated by owner-occupiers (Duncan and Rowe, 1993; Barlow et al., 2001; Wallace et al., 2013; Benson, 2014). In most cases, self-building in England requires substantial financial investment – the consequence of high land values and development costs. Household economics is therefore a central feature of many contemporary self-build projects; it facilitates housing development and becomes critical to the realisation of home through self-building. Inspired by Smith (2004, 2008; see also Munro and Smith, 2008; Christie et al.,
the self-built home is understood as ‘a hybrid of money, materials and meanings’ (Smith, 2008, 521). In other words, there is a social life to these financial dimensions of housebuilding that needs to be accounted for in the consideration of self-building as homemaking.

As I argue here, the hopes and fears that drive financial and personal investments in bricks and mortar in the mainstream housing market (Smith, 2004, 2008) are similarly at play in self-building; the emotional work that articulates with rational calculation in the purchase of homes (Christie et al., 2008; Munro and Smith, 2008) is writ large in the case of self-builders. The (financial) risks are far greater – the financial outlay and investment are at odds with the lack of value of a house-in-progress, whose value is assured only once a house is certified as complete and in conformity with building regulations issued by the building controls office – and self-building is a source of considerable anxiety for households. Hopes, fears and anxieties are entangled with the household economies of individual self-build projects, making visible the interplay of the economic with the material, social and emotional dimensions of homemaking (see, for example, Smith, 2004, 2008; Christie et al., 2008; Munro and Smith, 2008).

Against this background, the chapter considers how the material manifestation and emotional economies of self-build houses are related to what several authors identify as the embodied and affective dimensions of home (see, for example, Easthope, 2004; Mallett, 2004; Massey, 2005; Blunt and Dowling, 2006). In this way, it examines how self-building interplays with practices of homemaking.

**Listening to self-builders**

This chapter draws from ethnographic case studies conducted with self-building households as part of the research project ‘Self-building: the production and consumption of new homes from the perspective of households’. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ES/K001078/1, 2012–2015), this was a multi-sited ethnography examining self-building as a form of housing provision in England today. Through interviews and participant observation with experts – key stakeholders from industry and government – and documentary analysis throughout its duration, the project traced the relationship of self-build to the wider contexts of the housing and land economy. It focused on understanding the structural and systemic dimensions of self-build housing in England, taking seriously the implications of the changing contexts of
housing and its impact on access to self-build, the experience and process of self-building.

The project included case studies with 16 individual households and three group self-build projects, examining the experiences of self-builders as a way into understanding more about the process of self-building in England today. These case studies focused, in particular, on the position such homemaking practices occupy in the wider social worlds of households and individuals. These entailed repeat visits to the self-build site or house, and adopted a range of methods – in-depth interviewing, participant observation, participatory video methods – employed to make sense of the experience of self-builders. As the contributions to this volume have variously stated, there is very little published work drawing on in-depth research with those undertaking self-build (for notable exceptions see Brown, 2008; Samuels, 2008). And yet, such close-up approaches provide nuanced understandings of self-builders’ experiences that can be valuable in demonstrating the limitations and challenges of the self-build as a housing practice, the social relationships that sustain it, and its financial constraints.

The two households introduced in this chapter – selected from the case studies – had expressed perhaps the most visceral responses to their build process, revealing the social dimensions of the build as these relate to their relationships with other household members, friends and family, to contractors and other practitioners involved in the build, but also to the house itself. They also clearly depict how these responses were wrought through unanticipated financial challenges that put at risk the ideals of home at the heart of their self-build projects. In recounting the emotional registers that characterise their projects, I reveal the complex intertwinnings of housebuilding and homemaking.

I present the emotional trajectories of these projects as I heard and witnessed them in the research encounters. Invariably, these emotions were named (and claimed) – including those that they did not feel – by my interlocutors (see Ahmed, 2004, 13), but also reflexively produced and interpreted through the relationship between the researcher and the researched within the space of the research encounter (Gray, 2008; Walsh, 2012). At the time of the research and subsequently – in listening again, reading and watching the research materials – these narratives and actions continue to move me. Such emotion extends beyond my engagements; in presenting the narratives orally at conferences, I have additionally layered these so that participant-produced video material runs alongside my presentation. It is clear from questions and discussion following these presentations that this approach has moved the
audience, the video adding a further layer of complexity to the narratives presented below.

As Svašek (2008) makes clear, the production of empathy – itself drawn from shared cultural understanding – is crucial to the communication of emotion. Within the context of the research encounter, then, the production of emotion speaks to the reproduction of social and cultural relations. Further, as Gray argues, emotions are ‘never absent from the research situation’ (2008, 936). Inspired by Williams’s (1977) ‘structure of feeling’, she calls for a reflexive engagement that recognises how emotions influence knowledge production, structuring and constraining the researchers’ understandings. This enhanced understanding of reflexivity is central to the narratives and interpretation presented below.

**Imagining homes**

*Les*

Les had started his self-build project in 2006. He had sold his previous property in anticipation of finding a plot close to the sea. He was in his early sixties, and imagined building a house that he could retire to in ‘God’s waiting room’ (as he described the British coast) that would cost him very little to run. When he found a plot with outline planning permission for an eco-home on the outskirts of a south coast seaside town he was excited. As a freelance camera operator, he had found that the work was starting to dry up, the phone with offers of work had stopped ringing so frequently and he read this as a sign that he was being eased into retirement. He bought the site, and approached the architects that had done the original planning outlines with his ideas for a modernist house. He had always admired the Case Study Houses, the aesthetics and minimalist open spaces that these included formed part of the inspiration for his new home. Having previously managed some quite large home renovation projects, seeing each of these as part of his legacy, he was looking forward to the build, anticipating that he would enjoy the process and the resulting house.

*Steve and Elsa*

The original idea to build their own home had come from Steve, but it was clear that the rest of the family – his wife Elsa and two daughters – were enthusiastic about it, too. The decision to self-build had come from the observation that they would get a higher-quality and bigger house this
way than on the open market. Steve’s experience working as a procurement officer would be essential to his role as project manager. In 2012, while riding his bike home from work, Steve accidentally came across a plot with detailed planning permission for an eco-home. He turned his bike around and went directly to the estate agent to register his interest.

The intention behind this build was that it would be the first family home that they had owned and lived in; a base for their daughters while they attended secondary school. Steve had had a long career in the armed forces, and while he had previously owned a house, the family had only ever lived in rented accommodation. This had meant that they could move around quite easily when required for Steve’s job. However, as both Steve and Elsa described on separate occasions, this had also meant that their daughters had not had a lot of stability – their eldest daughter had had to move schools (and homes) five times. He and Elsa had decided that it was time that the girls had a permanent base; in future, if he was posted elsewhere, he would commute or live away from home. The new house should first and foremost represent stability. The house was to be a family project; the girls would, for the first time in their lives, be able to decorate their own bedrooms.

**Emotion in and through the build**

A jaundiced view

When I first spoke to Les on the phone in 2013, he was still on site, still building. He had initially imagined being able to sit back and watch while other people built his house, but had found himself doing a lot of the labour on site because of the spiralling costs of the development. He was angry over the architects, who, he felt, had misled him, massively underestimating the overall costs of the build. The build that had started off as his way into an independent and self-supported retirement now had to be rescued by his son, who had taken out a mortgage on the property to access the funds that would help Les to complete the build. An additional complication related to the fact that he had decided that he would get an architect’s guarantee on the build – rather than the standard National House Building Council warranty. His recourse for the mistakes that he believed had been made was therefore limited because he was still reliant on the architects to provide certification to the council that the house and build met with regulations. Unable to say how he felt to the architects themselves, he had found that these things came out to anyone who would listen – the postman, the people who worked in the
local DIY shops, his friends, me … He described how this experience had made him into a ‘glass half-empty person’ rather than the ‘glass half-full person’ he had been before.

On my first visit to the house in 2014, Les explained to me that he had been struggling with depression, having been treated for over a year. Trying to get up every day and continue the work that was necessary on the house had been a real challenge. Furthermore, he had recently been diagnosed with cancer, and attributed this directly to the difficulties of the build. Conflating the difficulties of the build with his mental and physical health in this way drew attention to the visceral experience of this process, while also accentuating his emotional response. His description of the process of building and its influence on how he understood the house – ‘it has certainly jaundiced my view of it’ – unwittingly reproduced the impact of his cancer on his body, the first sign of which had been severe jaundice. In this way, Les narrates a deeply embodied experience of the build that was always lingering in the background, flavouring his day-to-day experience:

I started off full of optimism and it’s effectively turned into a bit of a nightmare … it’s almost like a background hum in … if you work in an industrial place and there’s this background noise all the time, the problem with the architect and the cost and things, it’s always there … and then it comes to the front sometimes … repeatedly …

Hanging on by my fingertips

When I first spoke to Steve about his build, the financial stretch that they were making to get the build done was already in evidence. As he described, ‘I’m quite shocked really at how poor I am … I’m scratching around trying to afford things, and hanging on by my fingertips at the moment’. At the time, I had the sense that he thought that this might subside, but as time went on and as I followed the build more closely, I started to get a sense of the delays that were emerging as a result of bad weather conditions but also cash flow problems. For the most part, though, Steve remained upbeat, keen to make sure that they were not risking everything for the build:

I wanted to have moved in now. As I’ve said, I’ve had problems. Over the Christmas period, the weather was just appalling so … I’ve slowed down because … I wanted to make sure I get the quality in there and because I had concerns about funding as well. What you
don’t want to do is to go along at risk; you want to be fairly secure so I’ve held the line. I’m not unhappy with what I’ve done; it’s just par for the course, I think. But it could be easier.

From the start though, Elsa had been worried about money, finding the constant paying-out stressful and difficult alongside the frustrations with tradesmen and their ways of working. She described how she felt about the build on my first visit:

Mixed emotions really. It’s quite frustrating with the way the lenders work, and the way the building trades work, some can be very aggressive on the payment side of things, that I want this now, and then this then. So that’s been quite frustrating … people turning up and saying, ‘oh, that’s not right’, and then just turning away from the job again, and then it’s another week before you can get hold of them, and they don’t reply to your texts. That has been quite frustrating, which of course puts a delay on us, and financially you’re paying your rent for this house plus starting to pay for a mortgage as well, so it’s quite stressful that way … but I am sure that when we are in and settled, we’ll be like, ‘I’m so glad we did that’.

Unfortunately, this worry and concern would only grow as they continued through the build and tried to maintain a cash flow, juggling money between credit cards, as the 20 per cent buffer that they had put in place was completely eroded.

When I returned to the house to help Steve with some decorating in summer 2014, the full emotional impact of the build was brought to my attention. Elsa and the girls rarely came to the house; as Steve described, whenever Elsa came, she would end up in tears. The build had taken longer than they had expected and they were now reaching the stage where money was really tight as the final drawdown from the mortgage, which they sorely needed, had not yet been paid as the house did not meet the requirements to be signed off. At the same time, family life continued and with it, unanticipated costs; his daughter needed a new flute, and they had found themselves for the first time in their married lives really scrabbling around to find money. As Elsa described, in the final stages of the build, any days out had been because they had discount vouchers, and meals out had been through the coupons they got from the supermarket as all their available resources were placed in the build.

A project that had started as a way to gain stability and security for their family had turned into something more risky.
Stalled homemakings and uncertain futures

The emotions that accompany self-building impacted on how people related to the finished houses, at times stalling the process of homemaking as secure futures remained uncertain.

Elsa, Steve and their daughters finally moved into the house in September 2014, after considerable delays. I went to visit them early in 2015, partly to see the house, but also to talk to them more about the experience. It was half-term, and while Steve was out at work, both their daughters were at home. Elsa and I sat on the sofa while her younger daughter was making cupcakes in the kitchen behind us. Elsa had brought me a cup of tea and we sat chatting. I looked around, commenting on the house and how they must be pleased with the finished product. She thanked me, but her responses about the house in general were notably cool; I was startled as she did not convey any excitement about her house.

She called over to the kitchen to ask her daughter to check whether there was a ‘tick’; this was the symbol that appeared on the meter when they were using energy that the house had generated. When her daughter replied yes, she explained that this would be the time that she would put on the washing machine on an ordinary day. She hurried into the utility room, where the washing machine was located, and quickly switched it on; the clothes had already been loaded, so it was ready to go. Her face had lit up at the idea of using this ‘free’ energy and, as she sat back down, she recalled with delight how the energy they had used to cook Christmas dinner had been free.

Her excitement and enthusiasm for the energy-saving potential of the house was in stark contrast to the sadness and frustration with which she described the final stages of the build. She had turned to her sister to explain the frustrations of the build; every time she had picked up the phone to speak to her, she would burst into tears. As I wrote in my field-notes that day:

As she related this, her eyes started to well up with tears, and her voice wavered, changes that she drew attention to as she pronounced that even now, she found it difficult to think about those final stages without getting upset; it showed how deeply embodied the experience of the build had become, and how this was marked on her body. Indeed, later in the day, I was also able to see how this was marked on Steve’s attitudes and relationship to the build as well; it was as though they were both still wearing the build – it had changed them as people.
The ‘champagne-popping’ moment that they had expected had not (yet) come, even though there was a bottle of champagne in the cupboard, ready and waiting for that moment. The party that they always thought they would have once they moved into the house hadn’t happened; they had just not felt that it was the right time, or that they had the energy to do it. Part of this, Elsa felt, was that they hadn’t really finished; there was still so much work left to do, finishing off here and there, touching up the paintwork, not to mention the garden and all the landscaping. She recognised that it was a comfortable house, but I had the sense that the stress of the build had tainted the sense of this being home; the effort and energy that had gone into constructing the house had exhausted them to the point where they had run out of energy (at least for now) to make the house home.

The story strangely echoed one told to me by Les on my visits to him. People would walk into the main living area, see the view from the floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall glass doors that ran the full width of the back the house and say ‘Wow! That’s fantastic’, while I go yeah, and thank you very much and whatever but I couldn’t see it, I couldn’t even begin to see it’. His son had suggested having a party as a way of celebrating some of the good things about the build and saying thank you to some of the people who had been a real help in the process, but Les had been adamantly against this plan, angry that he might still find himself in the position of having to move on and out despite having sacrificed his health to the house.

In both cases, the imagined home with its offer of stability and security had been really compromised by the build. For Les, the house had become a source of anxiety and worry at a time when he had other concerns to attend to; rather than fulfilling his ambitions for retirement, he had laboured night and day to build the house. For Steve and Elsa, setting up the family home had been intended to allow some continuity and stability in their daughters’ lives. But as their build unravelled, it became clear that part of the stability and security that the house offered was linked to their finances. Steve related this to me clearly as he described the build as:

one of the biggest challenges I’ve ever taken on … every challenge you take on in your job, what’s the worst that can happen? The worst thing is that you get found out as being an idiot and you get sacked, that’s not as bad as investing your own money and your own life savings, and your family’s future in a project, which is what we did here, and so the downside of getting it wrong was very serious.
Stepping off the rollercoaster?

Les’s diagnosis of cancer had, in his own opinion, put the troubles relating to his self-build into some perspective, causing him to become ‘more philosophical’: ‘having this health issue, suddenly, it’s like, well that’ll get dealt with when it gets dealt with, you know? This is far more important. And with that has come a pleasure in aspects of the house, and as they’ve come together.’ Since being diagnosed he felt that he had stepped off the ‘roller coaster’, which was how he felt about the build and the architects. The analogy of the roller coaster conveys the sense in which this experience had been visceral; highlighting the deeply embodied impact of the whole experience of the build and his relationship with the architect.

Steve and Elsa, too, had started to stand back a little from their build. Since moving in, they had refocused their energies on doing nice things with the girls. Even the tasks that related to the house prioritised the girls’ needs; for example, getting the garden ready so that they could bring out the trampoline that they had gone without the previous summer. Although there had still been no ‘champagne-popping’ moment, Steve described ‘a growing relief’ paired with a sense of certainty that ‘there will be a moment when we finally decide that we’re finished enough’. It seemed that there had been moments when the house had started to resemble a home. Just before Christmas, after living in the house for two months, they were finally able to move the remaining building materials into the garage – a move that meant that the house more closely resembled a home as opposed to living in a building site.

I struggle to be proud of it, which is interesting because most people who come in are fairly impressed by it. So I’m seeing all the problems, and I’m remembering the process, and I’m too close to the process to really enjoy it. I think given another year, and given those major things finished, hopefully I will begin to like it.

Steve’s description of how he feels about the house is telling. As an affective space, it has become more than a house; it holds difficult and compromising memories that intervene in the possibility of its becoming home. But this description also offers an insight into Steve’s (and Elsa’s) transition from housebuilding to homemaking, through which the house might, over time, become home, the stable and secure – in more ways than one – base they hoped for. Finishing the build and moving into the
Conclusion

When is the end of a self-build? Although we leave both households installed in their self-built houses, in both cases these remain unfinished homes. Their understanding of home as providing a sense of security and stability – albeit reflecting different stages in their lives – was disturbed and compromised precisely by the process of the build. The emotional journey – or roller coaster – that accompanied the build reveals that the ambitions, at least of these self-build projects, are deeply entangled with imaginaries of the home and practices of homemaking that building alone cannot produce. And it is this, perhaps, that is not captured by assuming the self-built house is a home.

Grand Designs has done exceptional work in terms of introducing the public to the possibilities of self-building houses in the United Kingdom. In the context of low levels of self-build, such second-hand experiences feed understandings and expectations of the process. Indeed, Les explained that he had been an avid viewer of Grand Designs; he owned many of the series on DVD and watched them time and again. But then he had started his own self-build, and he found that he could no longer watch them. Perhaps this points to the limited capacity of this narrative arc, this carefully curated and edited product, to communicate the complexities of self-building. The happy-ish ending that concludes each episode masks the raw emotion and visceral experience of the process. The closing bird’s-eye view trained on the house occludes the view of the work that must now go into making this house a home.

While the self-build house might be designed and imagined as the ideal home, the work that goes into this extends beyond the material construction of a building. What is clear is that this is about more than furniture and decorating; it is about the emotional work that goes into making a home, including the work needed to put the stresses and strains of the build aside. As Clare, another of the participants in the research, aptly explained, ‘You move into a building site and still have to make it into a home.’

Reading self-build as an affective space reveals the work of homemaking that necessarily needs to accompany the production of new houses if they are to be made home and to offer the feeling of being at home. The articulation of economics with home, ideals and imaginaries...
shaping this experience; relationships within the household, with practitioners and tradespeople, but also with the materiality of the house framing such practices. In privileging an understanding of self-building as embedded within an ongoing and unfinished project of homemaking, what becomes clear through these two evocative accounts is that self-built homes remain in the making long after their material form is complete.

Addendum

Les died of cancer in October 2015, his feelings towards the house unresolved, the house still not formally signed off. The legacy? Perhaps Christmas 2014, when Les was first undergoing treatment for his cancer, his sons and ex-partner staying for the holiday season, the house functioning the way it should, cooking in the kitchen together and spending time together as a family.