Conclusion

New directions: self-build, social values and lived experience

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A deceptively simple question threads through the contributions to this volume: why self-build?

We began this exploration of self-build in the United Kingdom, the low water mark of the sector by both international standards and against its own historic background. We then embarked on a veritable odyssey, pausing to reflect on what the UK needs to do to turn the tide and allow a steady flood of self-build. The remainder of the volume charted the diverse routes through self-build, bringing together experiences and reflections on the process of building. It drew out the individual and collective social outcomes, charted by way of case studies, mostly from Britain, but some from beyond these shores, from Germany and the Netherlands, where the tide has until now been considerably higher. This voyage revealed how practices of self-build articulate with the social, the meanings, relations and experiences caught up and reproduced in the provision of these homes. As Pickerill (this volume) so aptly explains, ‘not just what socio-cultural factors are implicated in self-build, but in particular how these socio-cultural processes are of relevance to understanding self-build’. In this way, the chapters in this volume have offered a range of insights into the ways that individuals, households and communities are shaped by housing experiences, introducing and exploring understandings of social values and the lived experience through self-build housing. These insights are invaluable in thinking not only about self-build, but housing more generally.

Now, at the end of the voyage, we piece the individual tales, snippets and observations together to reveal an altogether jarring but obvious answer to the question: we should build because in building we
construct not only a house, but home, ‘a set of intersecting and variable ideas and feelings, which are related to context, and which construct places, extend across spaces and scales, and connect places’ (Blunt and Dowling, 2006, 2).

**Social values and investments**

In retraining focus onto the social, the contributions to the volume variously draw out how self-build homes are a repository of social values and investments that run counter to normative understandings of housing and homes. This feeds into the wider critique of the workings of housing under capitalism, the systemic causes of the housing crisis, and the commodification of housing (Dorling, 2014; Madden and Marcuse, 2016), while also pointing to the ways in which housing research tends towards explanations that are light on the social and cultural dimensions of housing practices and experience. Through the pages of this volume, self-build as a housing practice is one imbued with values, investments and meanings that extend beyond mere economic rationalities, and into the social and affective.

This might cause us to reconsider the terms on which we understand housing and its production. Forde’s contribution to this volume, which offers a view from social anthropology, stresses that a shift towards understanding housing as provisioning – a concept intended to capture the social relations involved in production, distribution, circulation and consumption (Narotzky, 2005) – might lay the groundwork for an understanding of housing as a social process. Heslop goes one step further; through her participatory action research with homeless people to produce a Protohome, she renews the call for anarchic, participatory housing. This is a call that is particularly timely and urgent as a way of countering the inequalities in housing inherent in the current speculative development and market economy of housing in austerity Britain. Questioning the form of housing production, Heslop demonstrates the need to think again about how we understand housing production and the relations of power this embeds. For Pickerill, the socio-cultural is essential to understanding why eco-homes have been taken up at scale; building affordable eco-homes that deliver on their promise of reducing resource reliance and demand requires finding a balance that both recognises what people seek in a home – e.g. comfort – and offers alternative, less resource-intensive, practices to support these (see also Pickerill, 2016). From Forde and Pickerill’s eco-homes to Heslop’s Protohome,
self-build’s potential as a social and political project that produces sustainable and affordable housing is rendered visible.

Self-build might also have a value at the level of the neighbourhood. Hamiduddin argues for the recognition of the impact of collective self-build projects on urban development. Turning to Freiburg’s Vauban, he documents the remarkably strong social bonds that characterise the scheme, and the conflation of the social and the physical necessary in the production of new urban commons, respected and enjoyed by all. The same is also undoubtedly true in rural settings too, although here the importance of engaging with local communities is perhaps particularly salient. In her contribution, Pickerill tracks a rather familiar narrative of resistance to development on the part of existing residents near the Lammas site, but their initial frostiness begins to thaw through a better understanding of the scheme, the settlers and its contribution to the local community, and as a result of the outreach of the project members and their improved understanding of and sensitivity to the place of Glandwr. Similarly, Heffernan and de Wilde document how group self-build feeds into the development of diverse and cohesive societies, neighbours to the schemes celebrating ‘something wonderful in my back yard’. These insights echo the lessons from Tübingen’s ‘living laboratory’ outlined in Feldtkeller’s chapter, which took an approach to urban planning that encouraged Baugruppen to be actively involved in the development of neighbourhoods for living and working. In this way, these chapters reveal how collective self-build projects may contribute positively to the social fabric of neighbourhoods. While it would be speculative to suggest that self-build – across its different approaches and types (as outlined in our introduction) – is necessarily more acceptable to local communities than developer-led housing, it is perhaps easier for communities to engage with households or groups, rather than a corporation experienced and resourced in overcoming local objections.

Social values and investments are not a by-product of self-build, but an integral feature. Self-build then is about imagining (and hopefully realising) alternative ways of living – whether in community, sustainably, affordably – that have the potential to trouble understandings of how housing (and development) happens and the values it reproduces. Our use of the term ‘alternative’ is significant here, representing the challenge that self-build presents to the normative understandings of home and housing. To reiterate, this is not simply a question of form or style, but about fundamentally questioning the social life and structures of housing. Within the wider frame of housing research, it calls us to ask once again what people want from housing.
Lived experience: the social and emotional work of self-build

The realisation of these alternative visions of housing and the ways of life they support and allow is by no means straightforward. The un fettered reality of self-build explored in this volume seems rarely to be exposed beyond the knowing exposés of popular television programmes. Self-build is a process that unfolds over time, a process that entails both housebuilding and homemaking. Home – as both material dwelling and as a set of meanings – is at the core of this process. It is perhaps unsurprising then that self-build is an emotional process, with attendant risks as well as benefits to well-being. As Benson illustrates in her chapter, it should not be assumed that the experiences of the build – or the home after completion – will necessarily be happy or positive, particularly where a project faces difficulties or a household’s circumstances change. Indeed, the process is often less obviously cathartic or enjoyable than one would hope for, and the end product may not be as we might have hoped, but nor does satisfaction or a deeper sense of gratification necessarily mean conscious pleasure.

Beyond the personal risks associated with emotional investment in an individual self-build project that Benson exposes so poignantly in her chapter, Fernández Arrigoitia and Scanlon recount the dynamics of co-housing group formation. Through their chapter, they highlight how the time and energy invested in the practicalities and in overcoming the numerous obstacles to development correlate with a seeming lack of emotional commitment to the group. In turn, this compounds the practical difficulties of taking the scheme forward. The dilemma of being in or out of ‘the group’ is powerfully exposed in Collins’s narratives of ex-servicemen, weighing the emotional benefits of camaraderie through joint venture as well as the material benefits of home, with the risks of social entrapment and commitment to a small group where some characters (perhaps inevitably) simply don’t get along. Heslop’s participatory housing project centres on these interpersonal dynamics, which she sees as particularly delicate when working with vulnerable populations; this underpins the project’s aims and ambitions from the outset and is reflected in considerations over training, dialogue, process and practice. More so in these two chapters – Collins and Heslop – than in others, the consideration of social relations and what is at stake for individuals involved in such projects becomes critical and vital. Beyond these particular cases, it also points to the need for the careful consideration and
management of the social relations within groups and between amateurs and professionals.

The social work of a self-build does not end with a completed house; to extend the question at the heart of Benson’s chapter, when does a self-build – as homemaking – finish? As continuous act, it is not clear whether there is an end point to homemaking; the social relations that home is intended to support are not *faits accomplis* but also require work and maintenance. Forde recounts how the ‘big house’ becomes the hearth of Y Mynydd, a way of reaffirming the relationships of household that stretch across the eco-village. The expectations of the older people involved in senior co-housing that Hudson recalls tell of a form of ageing-in-community – in part, a pragmatic solution to the changing landscapes of health and social care in the United Kingdom that redeploy their accumulated housing assets, but also a response to their fears of social disconnection.

Many lessons have been identified through the lived experiences of different schemes. These range from attention to detail in the seemingly innocuous aspects of bureaucracy, which may mitigate against heartache in later stages of a build, to ensuring that prospective residents commit financially in the early stages of a collective or community build project to avoid the corrosive effects of continuous turnover. Yet project risks can never be entirely discounted in self-build – an aspect that provides a thrill of freedom, responsibility and satisfaction, if not always the more immediate and continual sense of pleasure and enjoyment. Inevitably, the risk increases when the less experienced take on a substantial burden of work without the financial means to draw additional assistance in, or without full knowledge and understanding of the process, as in the case of some group projects. In the latter case, clear route maps to development might be one solution, but it is also the case that without a critical mass of self-builders within a geographical community it is difficult to harness and circulate knowledge and experiences gained from problem solving through the build process. Heslop’s account of Protohome offers a blueprint for participatory housing and, as Stevens emphasises, there is an urgent need to learn lessons from elsewhere rather than to reinvent the wheel. But it is also clear that face-to-face dialogue, site visits and demonstrations have a role to play. Self-build groups, such as Bath-based Build-a-Dream Self-Build Association and Bristol-based EcoMotive, should have their role in knowledge sharing and dissemination reinvigorated to provide mutual support and learning in local communities to complement the UK’s renewed interest in self-build.
Shifting focus: from housing to home and homemaking

By reflecting on the social importance of having a place to call home at the outset of this volume, we explored the specific role that self-build can play in transcending the often transactional start to homemaking to provide an outlet for self-expression, rootedness and practical realisation. Although these themes often arise in the popular literature and media coverage of self-build, they receive only scant or tacit acknowledgement in policy discussions that follow quite linear, often economically couched arguments around housebuilding targets, market diversification and cost savings, which are important aspects of the case for self-build but only one part of the whole picture. Indeed, because the language of planning policy tends to fixate on ‘housing’ as a product to fulfil material needs, it is easy to overlook the aspects of ‘home’ that serve an equally important role in individual and collective social agency that connects, in turn, with other policy areas such as health and well-being.

In countries dominated by speculative housebuilding, policymakers seem unable or unwilling to connect the mono-production of developer-led housing with paucity of urban quality, a continuing failure to capitalise on the opportunity for the creation of new homes to be the cornerstone of the production of high quality urbanism that enriches life beyond the private realm (see chapters by Feldtkeller and Hamiduddin, this volume). As Feldtkeller notes in his chapter, a ‘new piece of the city’ is developed plot-by-plot, buildings individually designed and realised and with mixed uses at street level in an integrated (‘late-urban’) mode of production as so clearly demonstrated by Tübingen’s Loretto and French Quarter areas. Yet in many countries we seem to have entirely given up on the idea that new developments should be socially and economically vibrant nodes, new places that represent new pieces of urbanism, rather than dormitory style suburbs where life is largely absent during the working day because they are disconnected from the other necessary functions of life. There is therefore a strong rationale for introducing the terms ‘home’ and ‘living quarters’ into the lexicon of development, alongside ‘housebuilding’, in countries where the social narrative struggles to be heard. Self-build would fit more comfortably within the broader dialogue of home than it does currently within the language of housing, and Benson’s affective factors that connect with the social rationale would be more implicitly understood.

This emphasis on the affective dimension of home does not diminish the more rational or ‘instrumental’ arguments for self-build, which
include the greater affordability, building qualities or yield that have often come to dominate policy discussions over self-build. Several authors in this volume have noted self-build’s role to serve as a portal of access to the heated home-buying market in some countries, provided that access to land and development finance exist. There have been some interesting recent developments in the UK, with the use of rural exception sites for affordable self-build housing (see Shropshire’s affordable self-build homes programme) and a related idea to provide for self-build locally through community land trusts to guarantee the affordability of housing in perpetuity. Given the extent and depth of the UK’s housing crisis there might also be a case for recognising and supporting the contribution of ‘sweat equity’. Walter Segal’s scheme in Lewisham, South London, remains a conspicuously solitary example of a sweat equity project where households drawn from the social housing waiting list were given sufficient training in basic trade skills to allow them to construct their own homes on public land. The sweat equity input of households into the construction of their home formed a significant part of their contribution towards the 99-year lease on their home. There are also instances of sweat equity being recognised by banks in lieu of a financial contribution. In Newfoundland, for example, 500 homes were constructed from 1920 to 1974 through sweat equity arrangements that saw households contribute 200 hours of labour to the construction of homes to replace the 20 per cent deposit normally required by mortgage lenders (Sharpe and Shawyer, 2016). These days, it is quite normal for self-builders to economise on building costs by using sweat equity to add the finishing touches to a build, but there must surely be a case for recognising sweat equity alongside financial capital once again. Indeed, such approaches point to the potential for self-build to provide routes into housing for those in significant housing need, as in the case of the pioneering schemes documented in the contributions to this volume by Collins and Heslop.

New directions

This volume closed with powerful expositions of Britain’s current sclerosis in self-build by two of the commentators best qualified in the field. Firstly, Stevens pinpointed the principal causes of the current stagnation, using these to set out a manifesto for change, while Hill explored the practical steps that could allow the sector to up-scale and become a major contributor to housing delivery in the UK. Between them, these two chapters provide a practical, real-world grounding for a volume that
set out to try to move the discussion along by attempting to articulate the less tangible rationales, experiences and outcomes of self-build in a convincing manner. We believe that the contributors to this volume have risen to this challenge, and in doing so have exposed both the detail and the true complexity of societal-built environment relationships.

The original intention of this volume was not to become overly fixated on the UK and what it should or shouldn’t be doing to assist self-build. Having cast some light on the question of why self-build, one important lesson for those countries with a self-build sector must surely be to keep supporting it and not to allow speculative housing to dominate the market, as it has come to do in the UK. The jury remains out on whether the term ‘self-build’ represents the best term for the sector – with its connotations of DIY – or whether ‘self-provided’ housing might better reflect both the range of delivery approaches and the soft boundary from new build to conversions, renovations or even temporary and liminal arrangements. It is also clear that, while self-build has the potential to challenge normative understandings of housing and home, it remains constrained by the structures of the housing and land economy, from finance to planning regulation and development objectives. Indeed, Field’s evaluation of the extent to which recommendations and obligations for local authorities measure demand for self-build and put in place mechanisms to support it makes salutary reading, the lack of familiarity with forms of self-build and community-led development being central to the main take-home message. It seems that more extensive programmes of education might be required if these modes of development are to deliver their potential for changes to housing. Field also draws out a tendency to focus solely on private home ownership in the face of a range of possible other tenure arrangements. It seems that difficulties arise when a larger scheme sets out to try to include a range of different tenures. This was the case at Featherstone Lodge, where Fernández Aggiroitia and Scanlon noted that prospective residents for affordable housing could not be identified to integrate with the project team at an early stage of planning, given the unknown timescales involved. It seems that the diversity of approaches and delivery models would cover most preferences and circumstances for prospective self-builders. This is unlikely to be the case with tenure models across many countries. If self-build homes and the new communities created by them are to be accessible to all, then tenure mix must be an area for future work.

We close by emphasising that self-build is by no means a panacea for the problems of the housing economy. Neither has it been our ambition in this volume to advocate self-build. Rather, we have expanded the
conversation about self-build in ways that consider its diversity, the centrality of social values, investment and relations to its delivery, and what it signifies in terms of people’s imaginings of how to live and the housing that supports these. Self-build might, at best, be considered as embryonic in the United Kingdom, but in utilising the continuingly relevant policy issue of self-build, this volume has repositioned housing research within the broad social science context, thinking through how individuals and communities are shaped by their housing experience and offering new directions for housing studies by introducing and exploring understandings of social values and the lived experience through self-build housing.
Notes

Chapter 1

1 However, it is important to note that there are significant variations around this average. The uptake of self-build is notably higher in the devolved regions of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, where planning regulations and other structures function differently, and lower in London and the southeast of England, probably as a consequence of high land values and low availability.

Chapter 3

2 It should be noted here that these acknowledge the patchy collation of data on overall amounts of housing development activity that occurs in the UK.
3 There remains a relatively under-documented history of the period, predominantly after World War II and through to the 1980s, when ‘self-build consultants’ organised the acquisition of land and finance for housebuilding projects and pulled together a bunch of individual builders, who would complement each other with one or more of the skills required to help construct new properties, and who would collaborate to complete them all before gaining permission to take up permanent residence in one of them.
4 Background details to ENHR workshops held in Belfast in summer 2016, and in Delft in autumn 2016.
5 There is confusion between the use of the term ‘cohousing’ as a typology of one specific approach to neighbourhood development, and ‘co-housing’ (with a ‘hyphen’) as a general term that commentators (particularly in academic works) have used to denote collaborative housing projects in general. ‘Cohousing’ is solely used in this chapter as a typology of neighbourhood development activity.
6 For some individuals or agencies a key motivation may be to create a property-based profit or other assets. An exploration of this aspect is outside the scope of this chapter, but can be followed up elsewhere, such as at www.buildstore.co.uk/mykindofhome/events/developing-for-profit.html
7 See BSHF (2015).
8 Countries like Holland and Germany, where land resources are often more directly managed by local and municipal authorities than is the case in the UK, can demonstrate dynamic mixes of both conventional and community-led approaches, at times side-by-side in the provision of local housing supplies – see Guerra (2008); Hamiduddin and Daseking (2014).
10 Only five authority areas from the different areas considered had all their most important strategies adopted before 2012 – i.e. before the implementation of the National Planning Policy Framework – and only one of these had all its documents agreed and adopted pre-2011.
11 Excluded from this methodology was (a) an attempt to locate any specific wording of a potential for ‘local asset transfers’ (i.e. land or buildings) to support future collective housing initiatives; (b) any examination of policies from other public-sector or quasi-public-sector bodies – such as