The social in self build
End of project report for Self building: the production and consumption of new homes from the perspective of households

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Executive Summary

This report examines self build in England, drawing on ethnographic research with contemporary self builders to highlight the social dimensions of this practice of housing procurement. It is the final report from the research conducted as part of the three-year ESRC-funded research project *Self-building: the production and consumption of new homes from the perspective of households* (ES/K001078/1; 2012-2015).

The report adopts a broad understanding of self build, ‘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). The unique contribution of this research lies in its sociological focus, and in particular its privileging of in-depth research with self builders—a contrast to most policy- and industry-led research. In this way it provides a nuanced understanding of their experiences, valuable in demonstrating the limitations and challenges of the self building as a practice, the social relationships that sustain it, and its financial constraints.

The outcomes of this research make visible the importance of the self build as a source of innovation for the wider economy of housing, and the desire of individual households to manage more closely the production of their houses, despite prevailing financial and structural constraints. It confirms the findings of previous research (Duncan and Rowe 1993; Barlow et al. 2001; Wallace et al. 2013) that self build is a field of housing dominated by the middle classes, drawing on assets accumulated through prior property ownership, drawing parallels to wider patterns of home ownership in England brought about by the neoliberalisation of the housing market (Bone and O’Reilly 2010).

Sociologically, there are a number of additional lessons to be learned. The social characteristics of such populations—not only their financial wherewithal—facilitate their engagement in self build; they often have a wide range of skills, developed through their working lives but also in their previous experiences of property ownership, that they can put to work in the management, organisation and daily running of a project. Even for those who have the resources and assets to access this field of housing, there are significant challenges to realising projects; overcoming these requires the deployment of a range of skills but also support from wider social networks. This further demonstrates that self build is an inherently social process; relationships between household members, with friends and family and also with the professionals and contractors employed all play a role in this process, influencing and shaping its outcome. Finally, social identities shape and are shaped by the practice of self building.

The project updates earlier research on self build in England (Duncan and Rowe 1993; Barlow et al. 2001; Wallace et al. 2013). For those familiar with this literature, it might seem to at times reiterate earlier findings; this is instructional, demonstrating that these issues persist despite recent efforts by the self build sector to overcome them; it is of course too early to register the effects of these recent efforts. Additionally, the report draws attention to the changing context of housing—from supply through to regulation—in Britain, and the role that this plays in contemporary self build. What does this mean in relation to access to self build? What does it say about the people who are able to self build? How does it impact on the experience and process of self building? But also, what do the obstacles and challenges that self builders face reveal of the wider structural factors that explain the social distribution of self build? Further, what does the experience of self builders reveal about the wider economy of housing?
Key Findings

1. Not all self builds are ‘Grand Designs’

Although the majority of self build projects in England today result in home ownership, the community self build sector additionally promotes self build for social or private rental, while some innovative schemes centre on mutual home ownership (e.g. LILAC). These are an important part of the housing landscape that present real opportunities to challenge the system of housing procurement and tenure as it currently stands. Further, self build offers a possibility of challenging dominant modes of housing procurement and a market oriented towards home ownership and profit-making.

2. There are diverse trajectories into and through self build

Although a field of housing dominated by the middle classes, within this population, people choose to build their own homes for a number of reasons. There may be many people who harbour a longterm ambition to build their own house, to get a home that fits exactly to their tastes and to their purposes; they are often able to pursue this as a result of their movements through the housing market, and up the housing ladder. For others, it may be that self build is the only option for getting the house that they need for their family; this is perhaps best captured in contemporary examples of council-led self build developments (e.g. Headway Selfbuild Group) and other community focussed self build projects (e.g. Housing People Building Communities (formerly Liverpool Habitat for Humanity)). In other cases, self build might be unintended but necessary; families whose former houses had deteriorated to the extent to which the only solution has been to knock them down and start again.

3. The social characteristics of self builders are significant in the realisation of projects

The social characteristics of such populations—not only their financial wherewithal—facilitate their engagement in self build. While they are predominantly middle-class, specifically those who have benefited from previous property investment, self builders—however they participate in the production of their homes—also benefit from a wide gamut of skills and knowledge. These are not restricted to construction and technical skills; organisational and managements skills, knowledge and understanding of regulation and governance in relation to housing development and insider knowledge of housing associations (in the case of group projects), were perhaps equally—if not more—beneficial to the process of self building.

4. Many self builders struggle to maintain cash flow throughout a project

This has serious implications in relation to the cost and timing of the project and is brought about by a mismatch between the costs of a project on paper, and the overall financial outlay required to bring a project to completion. The findings of this research make clear that even for this with self build mortgages, the terms of the draw downs impede their cash flow. In the absence of other short term financing options, many self builders have to borrow the funds from friends and family to get them to the end of the build.
5. Managing social relations is as important to the experience of individual self building as to collective/community self build

While the academic and popular literature often focuses on the social dimensions of collective and community self build, highlighting in particular mechanisms for maintaining good social relations—within groups, with contractors etc.—and the development of community through working together on a project, these are often overlooked within understandings of individual self build projects. Listening to the narratives of individual self builders, it is clear that some of the biggest challenges they face in the course of the self build are often to do with the social dimensions of the build. For example, it does not take much imagination to see that if relationships with professionals break down, the progress of the build might be significantly delayed.

6. The experiences of self builders magnify understandings of the social structures of the housing economy in Britain

The social structure of the housing economy has a significant impact on self building in Britain, framing the experience of individual self builders. Indeed, many of the challenges that the self builders face in relation to building their own houses, are symptomatic of wider issues relating to housing procurement and supply. If even those with significant social, cultural and economic capital—as the vast majority of self builders have—struggle to navigate housing in Britain, the picture for others is bleak. Social scientists can play an important role in understanding the social structures that produce housing inequality; this is one step towards promoting solutions that reduce such inequalities.

Key recommendations

**Housing practitioners & self build industry**
- maintain the promotion and support for community models of self build, systematically documenting contemporary examples of community self build in England, to provide route maps that demonstrates how the challenges to these presented by the housing and land markets are overcome through community self building;
- extend advice on managing social relations currently provided in the training for group self build project to individual self builders;

**Financial service providers**
- consider how to make their mortgage products for self builders more flexible, or introduce mechanisms into these that would help to ease the problems that people have with cash flow. They could also think of ways of introducing short term financing that could help with this.

**Self builders**
- undertaking a successful self build project requires a range of skills that extend beyond the practical and technical and into organisational and managerial skills;
- managing social relationships with the people you employ on the build is a crucial element of the build;
- build in a contingency into your budgetary considerations; maintaining cash flow on a build requires greater funds that the overall costs of the build on paper.
1. About the project and the report

This report examines self build in England to highlight the social dimensions of this practice of housing procurement. It adopts a broad understanding of self build, ‘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). Its focus on the social and its importance to the practice of self build speaks to how society places parameters on people’s actions, in this case, in relation to housing provision; how people respond to the constraints and opportunities that society provides; the role of social relations and dynamics in these processes; and how social identities shape and are shaped by practice.

This is the final report from the research conducted as part of the three-year ESRC-funded research project *Self-building: the production and consumption of new homes from the perspective of households* (ES/K001078/1; 2012-2015), a multi-sited ethnographic research project examining self-building as a form of housing provision in England today. The project has traced the relationship of self-build to the wider contexts of the housing and land economy; it also takes place against the background of a recognised crisis in both the quantity and quality of new housing. The timing of the project coincided with an increased recognition of self-build as a form of new housing procurement, and greater interest and promotion of this by developers, housing practitioners, policy-makers and government ministers. It also pays attention to the changing context of housing—from supply through to regulation—in Britain, and the role that this plays in contemporary self build: What does this mean in relation to access to self build? What does it say about the people who are able to self build? How does it impact on the experience and process of self building? But also, what do the obstacles and challenges that self builders face reveal of the wider structural factors that explain the social distribution of self build? Further, what does the experience of self builders reveal about the wider economy of housing?

This focus on the structural and systemic dimensions of self build housing in England has been complemented by an in-depth examination of the lives and experiences of self builders, mapping the diversity of self building households—including both individual and group case studies—and their motivations and experiences. The combination of methods used—interviewing, participant observation, participatory video methods—intends to privilege and make sense of the experience of self builders. In this way, the project also develops a sociology of self-build, relating this not only to housing, but also to other areas of sociological enquiry; in this way, it demonstrates the relationship of self build to individual and household identities, belonging, and homemaking. Such an approach includes thinking through:

1. how self building relates to prior housing trajectories;
2. the skills and knowledge that self builders take into and develop through self-building;
3. the investments that households make in order to be self builders;
4. how household characteristics and relationships influence, and are influenced by, the material production of a new home;
5. how households overcome the challenges inherent to self building
6. the role of social support systems; and
7. how houses are made into homes.

Taken together, the component parts of the project make a strong statement about why it is important to include a recognition of the significance of the social to the experience and practice of self building.
2. Listening to self builders

A central element of the project has been to focus on the experiences of self builders as a way into understanding more about the process of self building in England today and what position these occupy in the wider social worlds of households and individuals. This has meant conducting in depth ethnographic research with people who have built or are in the process of building their own homes. I have worked closely with 16 self building households, conducting interviews; visiting them in their homes—often on more than one occasion—while they were under construction and/or completed; speaking to different members of the household to gauge a sense of their individual experiences of the build; preparing photographic and video records; taking extensive field notes; keeping in touch via email and phone; and, in some cases, conducting participatory video methods where different household members produced short videos about how they understand the self built house.

The research has also followed three self build groups—one recently completed council-led project, one group in the early stages of organisation, and another longstanding group who have just appointed an enabling partner and look set to go ahead. This part of the research has involved extensive participant observation of meetings and a small number of interviews with group members and with stakeholders within these projects. As with the work with individual households, my research with these groups enables an in-depth view of what people want to get out of self build housing, how they experiences the process, but also, in these cases, group dynamics and community making and how these shape and are shaped by the process of group self building. I have also worked closely with one family living on another group self build project in North London, and been fortunate to visit two other schemes that were in progress at the time of the research, conducting interviews and attending meetings. Finally, I have engaged in some research of the Walter Segal-inspired schemes in South London interviewing several of the original inhabitants and collating the available archival information. Developed and led by the council in the late 1970s and early 1980s, these are an interesting historical comparison to contemporary schemes.

This work with groups—both historic and contemporary—is important because it documents schemes in England that have managed to overcome some of the challenges presented by the way that the land and housing market are structured. Understanding how these schemes came to fruition and were successful can provide insights that will be helpful to current efforts to further promote community self build projects. Recent schemes are often highly publicised—e.g. LILAC, Lancaster cohousing, Cambridge K1—partly because they are unusual and different. The research I have conducted with these groups aims to contribute towards the production of a lasting record of these projects, demonstrating how the challenges of the housing and land markets are overcome through community self building.

The contents of this report are mostly derived from these elements of the project. Following the framing of the project around the perspective and experiences of households, it maintains a commitment to understanding the experience of self builders starting from the user’s point of view. It includes extracts from narratives produced through the process of analysis; these have been chosen to illustrate particular points, while also keeping a focus on the real stories of self builders. These stories invariably reveal the ambivalence that self builders feel towards the experience; indeed, several of the participants in the research have been keen to make these stories visible stressing that other accounts—e.g. those they read in magazines, the ones they watched on TV—do not truthfully reflect the reality of self building. Including these narratives in the report intends to demonstrate how a lens onto the social can help to unpick the complexities of self building.
Undoubtedly, many of the self builders who took part in the research are relatively privileged, middle class, with significant assets and resources to draw on in support of their project. You might ask why we should listen to the stories of these privileged agents. I argue that their experiences offer a lens onto the wider housing economy, in particular the structures of new housing procurement, the alleged saviour of rising housing inequality. What the stories of these self builders reveal is that, despite their significant social, cultural and economic capital, the structures of the housing economy—from the availability of land, through to the procurement of materials and skilled labour—make self build very difficult to navigate, painting a very bleak picture for others.

This approach offers valuable lessons to practitioners and policy-makers, stakeholders in the self build industry as it makes clear both the innovating capacity of self build to the wider housing industry and the extent to which this is constrained by the structure of the housing economy. For potential self builders, it provides a note of caution: self building is inherently social; time and energy is required to navigate these social dimensions of the build that might not be acknowledged in other formulations of self building; it also persists alongside everyday lives. For social scientists, in particular those interested in housing choice, the report demonstrates the process of homemaking, and how this is tied to practices of self building.
3. Everyday stories of self build

3.1 Entry points

For many of the participants in the study there was a longheld desire to self build; as recent statistics demonstrate (Ipsos MORI 2014), the idea of building a home to your precise specifications, exactly to your taste is appealing to many people. However, the number of people who dream of building their homes far exceeds the actual number of people who do it. The ability to build your own home requires far more than an vague ambition; it is other factors—often unanticipated opportunities and circumstances—that actually bring this to the fore and transform such ambitions into actions. Indeed, for some, the desire to self build is not so self-evident; the action instead a response to particular conditions and circumstances, the solution to which self build is deemed the best option.

Simon and Laura’s entry into self build was a response to the degradation of their previous property; they had considered other possibilities for their housing including renovating and refurbishing the existing property and moving away. Self build is undertaken following consideration of these other options, evaluated alongside these for how they will resolve their housing problem. What becomes clear is that by taking one of the barriers to self building away—in this case land—it becomes an option that they can afford. But this also acts as a constraint; with the previous property in the state that it was in, the house and land would have been significantly devalued had they chosen to sell instead.

Other participants in the research also found themselves with unexpected opportunities to self build: one couple were approached by their local council, who had identified their back garden as a site for residential development; another had planned to develop a site in order to fund their own renovations, but then changed their mind and decided to self build instead; for others, it merely becomes the most viable solution to finding a new place to live. In the case of Matthew and Sarah, it is clear that although they were open to the possibility of self building—having previously build their own home with a friend in another part of London—but they were not actively pursuing the possibility. And yet, the circumstances seemed ripe: coming across a plot of land big enough for six or seven properties, at a price they could afford.

Simon and Laura’s 1960s bungalow is in dire need of repair; the floors in their elder son’s bedroom swell from the rising damp. They receive a settlement—the surveyor should have picked up the damp problem when they first bought the house—but the repairs will cost three times this amount. They want to stay put though; the plot is beautiful and they have a long garden that stretches to the fields behind. A good friend has self built a house, and the price looks manageable. They visit a few trade shows, have some plans drawn and costed up. For a little bit more money and by taking on quite a lot of the work themselves they can build a completely new house! They take the leap.

Matthew and Sarah do not want to move out of the area—which would mean moving their kids to new schools—but cannot afford to buy a house big enough for their family. They rent a house, quickly becoming friends with their neighbours; they are in the same position of wanting to stay put, but struggle to afford the inflated housing prices in the area. One day, they come to Matthew and Sarah with a proposition, they have found a site for sale and they think it would be a great place to build some homes. This might be one way they can all afford to continue living in the area! In a short space of time, they build up a group of people interested and who are in a position to immediately contribute to the funds required to buy the land—either from savings, properties just sold, housing assets, inheritance. In this rather serendipitous way a group self build scheme is born.
afford, before another interested party snapped it up and getting other people interested who could contribute towards their share of the land costs immediately.

Of course, there are those who directly pursue an ambition to self build. It is common to hear people explain their decision as something that they have always wanted to do. While for some this is a dogged pursuit, a systematic effort to build; for others it is more leisurely, they might spend years waiting for the right piece of land in the right location to come up.

While some self builders follow a more predictable route, setting out to build their own homes, for others this is less contrived; the decision to self build is better understood as a conjuncture of various conditions and circumstances. The specific opportunity to self build might result from unfavourable conditions—as in the case of Simon and Laura—or present itself in a way completely unanticipated by households. What also becomes clear, and as the following sections demonstrate, realising these responses and taking advantage of these opportunities is made possible by the financial resources and material conditions of the household, located within their housing trajectories, facilitated by their skills, knowledge and capability and social support networks. In this way, self build becomes a way that households can navigate the wider structures of the housing economy (see also Smith 2008).

3.2 Housing trajectories

Ann and John have moved through the property market by taking on properties with potential and doing them up. Moving from the northeast to the south of England in the early 1980s, they had found that they had to make compromises; with the proceeds from the three bedroom house, they could only buy a two bedroom terraced house. After living there for two years, they found a Victorian house that was in urgent need of restoration; it hadn’t been lived in for six months, needed central heating installing, all the services needed replacing, but it had character. By putting their own work in at evening and weekends, they could see how they could step up the housing ladder. And so began a practice of buying houses that they could sense the potential in; as they describe it, the only way that they could afford the houses they wanted was by doing the work on them by themselves. When they are offered the opportunity of building a house on the back garden to their existing property, subdividing the plot they are not daunted by the prospect; it will be a good way of getting to a stage where they would be mortgage-free after thirty years in the property market. They can continue to live in their house at the front of the site; they will be able to raise the funds for the build without selling the house.

Barlow et al. (2001) make clear that the social distribution of self builders is skewed towards people who have previously owned a home (see also Duncan and Rowe 1993; Wallace et al. 2013). In this respect, self build is a point in the wider home ownership trajectories of individuals; as such it can be considered a residential choice linked to social identity and position (Savage et al. 2005; see also Benson 2014). It helps to make sense of how they got to a stage where they are able to self build, but might also shed some further light on the motivations behind their self build.

Ann and John’s is a fairly typical account of the housing trajectories that lead people into self building. It is a classic story in which social mobility and property investment are intertwined, indicative of the way that property assets—an increasingly important dimension of class formation particularly among the middle classes (Savage et al. 1992)—are optimised by home owners. Simply put, climbing the property ladder is made possible not only by financial resources, but also through sweat equity. In this way, they have been able to get the houses
that they want it, even when they do not necessarily have the funds that would be required if
they were to buy these ‘off the shelf’. Literally cashing in on these past investments—
whether they are sold, whether they take out loans against their properties—is what makes
many self builds possible. The self build is also part of that trajectory; as Ann and John's
story shows, it is a way to get them to the stage where they can live mortgage-free. It is also
clear though that the work that they have done renovating past properties provides them with
the sense that they can get a house that fits exactly to their requirements by minimising
expenditure on labour and the confidence that they can take on the work required to self
build, whether they choose to outsource this, to manage it, or to take on the majority of the
work onsite themselves. The fact that this is a common story among self builders can also
provide some insights into the way that contemporary self build in England—as a form of
individual property ownership—privileges the engagement of the middle classes—in
particular those who have built up property assets.

Peter and Lizzie had no longterm ambition to build
their own house. Instead, the decision to build their
perfect bungalow on retirement, rather than buy it,
results from the limited capital that they built up
through their housing history. Peter attributes this to
the recession in the 1990s, a time when he had
both lost his job and had to sell a property at a loss.
He cannot afford to buy the bungalow that he
wants; to get a home that he believes matches to
his stage in life, he decides to build it himself. He is
clear, this is a way that they can correct the
discrepancy that this unfortunate incident had
caused, to get a house matching to their stage in
life.

For others, the decision to self build is
not the result of a normative trajectory of
trading past investments for properties
more fitting to life stage and status. It is
a way for making up for past disruptions
to these trajectories, of mistakes made,
of assets lost. Intricately intertwined
with housing trajectories, resting on prior
experiences self build becomes a way of
navigating the housing market.

Less common among the participants in
the research, were accounts where self
builders did not rely on these previous
investments and assets. A notable
exception was in the case of a council-led—self build for social rent—scheme in a London
Borough completed in 2015. This case was particularly striking; in exchange for their labour
on the internal fitting out of the properties, households received lifetime tenure of family
homes suited to their needs, bypassing the otherwise ten-year council waiting list. The
trajectories in this case were through social housing; none of these residents had been
property owners as they could not afford to get onto the property ladder in London. While
this is a example comes highly commended, and hopefully replicated, it remains exceptional.

Chris, his partner and their three children live in a two-bedroom flat on a council estate in East
London. He would like to have a bigger house for his growing family, but there is a ten year waiting
list to get a bigger property. Chris recently completed a degree in building surveying and is
working for a housing association. He thinks self build might be a way that he can afford to own a
suitable property but he cannot raise a mortgage, the house prices are just too high. He
approaches the council; surely they have to help him! They explain that they have no power to help
an individual, but if it were a group project they might be able to step in. This is how Chris
becomes the ring leader of a council-supported self build scheme, pushing the council and
housing association take up this self-build, encouraging others living on the estate to get involved.
His primary motivation: to improve the living conditions of his family, but also of the other families
he encourages to get on board with the scheme.

The different entry points and housing trajectories—past, present and future—additionally
give a sense of the motivations behind self build. For many self build simply provides a way
of improving their current living standards, of meeting a perceived housing need; through this
research project I have documented the council tenants self building to get properties that are a better size for their growing families; young Londoners grouping together to (hopefully) build affordable homes that will reduce their reliance on a rental market that provides little stability and poor accommodation; the families and households rebuilding on the sites of their previous homes to overcome structural problems and degradation of properties; and the multi-generational house, built by a retired couple and their son to house his growing family and commute to work.

The diverse entry points and trajectories also reveal the different motivations behind the design of a property. While it is clear that most people take self build as an opportunity to build something that fits to their precise specifications, for most of the participants in the research making a house that was functional was of primary importance. This functionality often related to energy efficiency and the performance of the building; the layout of space; wiring and cabling the house, down to the location of light switches, plug sockets etc.—in other words, houses that were designed with an eye towards how the space would be lived in. How the house looked—the aesthetics of the building and the internal space—might be a secondary consideration; indeed, decorating and furnishing, which is when many of the ‘wow factors’ might be introduced to the property, was often something that had to take place over time as towards the end of a build people invariably run out of money. So while many people stressed that they intended to buy new furniture for their properties, their budgets had to recover from the build before this was possible.

Self build is just one point in a housing trajectory; it is just as likely that people might eventually move on from this home as it ceases to be fit for their way of living. While some people stressed that they hope that this would be their ‘forever home’, building significant future proofing into the design of their properties, others anticipated that they might move on. And for one participant in the research, the current self build was just a stepping stone to the next build.

3.3 Skills and knowledge

As Barlow et al. (2001) document, in the 1970s self builders were often those in the skilled trades, who could not otherwise afford mainstream housing, while since the 1980s, the social distribution of self builders has shifted more towards the middle classes—those with higher incomes, property assets, and in professional managerial positions—seeking distinctive properties in particular locations. The opposition here between those who work in the trade, and the perception of self build as ‘a reliably middle-class activity’ (Brown 2008: 362, see also Duncan and Rowe 1993; Barlow et al. 2001) bound to social status can undermine the extent to which self builders benefit from a range of skills, knowledge and practical experience. Not least, by putting some of these skills to work, they are able to reduce the amount spent on labour and therefore the overall financial cost of building their house.

The participants in this research project found useful many of the technical skills they had developed in their professional lives—e.g. design, planning, electrical work—the practical abilities that they had developed through their DIY on previous properties also coming in useful. While construction and technical skills are self-evidently valuable to self builders—particularly to those who intend to be involved in the construction and fitting out of the property—organisational and managements skills, knowledge and understanding of regulation and governance in relation to housing development, and insider knowledge of
housing associations (in the case of group projects), are perhaps equally—if not more—beneficial to the process of self building.

Many of the male participants in the study had some form of qualification or practical experience as engineers. They made clear the way that their career progression from technical qualifications—either through on the job training, or through their attendance of technical colleges—through practical experience and later into management positions, and in some cases to them becoming self-employed, had given them an unparalleled range of skills—practical, technical, organizational, managerial—that they readily put to work on their self build projects. Some of the qualifications that they possessed were extremely useful in areas of the build that required professional installation (e.g. plumbing and electrics). Beyond this, however, particularly notable in their accounts were their practical problem-solving abilities, the way that they applied themselves to thinking through how to make things work—even in cases where they did not have direct experience of the technologies, products and materials—and the attention to detail that this requires. Self building provided them with an opportunity to put to work skills and practical experience that has been put to one side in their later professional lives. These engineers are often the people who take on a large amount of the self build project themselves, confident that their range of skills will make this possible.

While their career trajectories reflect social mobility—indeed, recent research has demonstrated that engineering is the profession most open to upward mobility (Friedman et al. 2015)—it is also clear that the combination of skills, knowledge, experience and way of approaching practical problems reflects the opportunities for training that were available to them when they were first entered the job market, and the changing economic structure and the opportunities that this brought them as they progressed through their professional lives.

Of course, engineers are not the only people who build their own houses, but their success in taking on these projects, in managing the building process and getting their hands dirty illustrates the diverse skill set required to self build, whether these are the characteristics of one individual or shared across a range of different people—householders and professionals alike. However, what is increasingly evident are the benefits of managerial and organisational skills to the day-to-day running of the build—keeping it on cost and on time—matched with a clear understanding of the process of building a home, down to the tiniest of details.

3.4 Managing social relations

The previous section highlighted the equal importance of managerial and organisational skills to the process of self building as practical and technical skills. It is important to incorporate these into understandings of the self build process, because of the extent to which getting through a self build project requires the maintenance of social relations. What has become clear through the project is that social relationships have the potential to create the most damage in a self build project. Practitioners who support community self build projects provide support and advice to groups about how to manage group dynamics, recommending (and providing) training on topics that include conflict resolution, the decision-making process but also the more mundane day-to-day management of the group. They might also recommend drawing up a group agreement that formalises this. In contrast, the training and advice that is offered to individual self-builders focuses instead on the process of getting through the build, stripping away the social relationships that are a necessary part of it.
Many of the participants in the research reflected on the relationships that they had with the professionals and trades people that they had employed over the course of their self build. It was common for a mixed picture to emerge: the people who had been a pleasure to employ, who had gone above and beyond what had been expected of them, who they now called friends versus those who had seriously let them down. No story was complete without one example of a situation where things had not turned out as expected. Frank’s case is perhaps the most extreme that I came across in the research—even he had developed a good working relationship with the carpenter he had taken on to build the timber frame—illustrating well how relationships with contractors and professionals working on the build can break down, and the adverse consequences of this. Several participants made clear that they wanted the ‘real stories’ of their self builds to be made public, as they felt that the sanitised versions that circulate through Grand Designs and through the self build magazines often glossed over these difficulties with contractors, or found neat solutions that did not reflect their experiences. As such, it is difficult to ignore the reports from participants that contractors and other professionals do not know how to work with self builders; who make mistakes, then deny responsibility; who take on jobs of which they have limited knowledge and understanding—this was particularly expressed by people who were incorporating new and innovative technologies, products and materials into their home (see below Self builders at the cutting edge); of the project managers who could not manage people.

This list is hardly exhaustive, but each of these has been at the route of why relationships with professionals, contractors and self builders have broken down, at times leading to an impasse. As I outline in the following section, building your own house requires significant personal investment; when things do not go to plan, when your expectations are not met it can be extremely disheartening and is experienced acutely by self builders. However, it is also the case that over the course of a build, which is a big project, there is always the possibility of things not quite going to plan. But reaching an impasse helps no one.

When things do go really wrong, self builders often find themselves in a bind; there is very often no contingency for how to rectify mistakes, either by the self builders or by the contractors that they employ. The cost implications of this then fall to the self builder; they might be willing to write off small, less costly mistakes, but they feel reluctant to pay again for

Frank has always sought to leave his mark through the work he has done on the houses he has lived in; when he comes across an opportunity to the build a modernist eco-house, he is excited. But unlike the previous houses, he imagines that he will just sit back and watch the house being built. He is thrilled with the plans drawn up by the architect. This is a house that he will live in until he is taken out feet first.

But as the build starts, it becomes clear that the original costings by the architects were unrealistic, their measurements inaccurate. The house will cost far more than originally anticipated; he has no idea where he will get the money from. A delay of two years ensues before work recommences. He is disappointed with the working practices of many of the contractors, describing the industry as dysfunctional, people not following through on their promises to turn up at a particular time to do a particular job, taking money and then delaying the work that they have been paid for. It becomes clear that to get to the end of the build, Frank will have to take on quite a lot of the work on the property himself. His relationship with the architects has broken down, and yet he relies on them to sign off the property, to provide the architects’ guarantee that he decided to go for at the outset. Caught in a double bind, all this makes him worried and anxious; it turns him from a glass half full to a glass half empty person.
those requiring greater sums of money to correct. A further problem seems to be that rectifying these mistakes self builders are often reliant on the same contractors who made the mistakes in the first place coming back and doing the work; other contractors are reluctant to take on work that others have started. Those who had found themselves in this position explained that they felt they had no recourse in these cases—they have the most to lose in this relationship as it is their home that is at stake; they either pay to have the work done again or the job remained done badly/wrongly as they go through lengthy and uncertain complaints procedures. These elements of the build are not covered by self build insurance policies; building a contingency into these might be valuable in order to provide self builders with compensation in the case of genuine mistakes.

However, the biggest lesson from all of this, and the one that needs to be listed alongside the other obstacles to self build—land, planning finance—is that social relations are at the heart of self build. These need to be taken seriously and carefully managed throughout the build. Crucially, this is a skill that not all people possess or are even aware will be necessary in the process, and yet many of them are willing to take on the role of project managing their self build, believing that this way they will save money, without really questioning whether they have the necessary skills in people management. Being aware of the extent to which they have to manage social relationships, and the impact that these might have on their future home might cause them to reconsider and think about taking on a professional project manager—although this in itself does not fully eliminate the need to manage people.

In my opinion, advice on how to manage the social relations within a build would be extremely valuable to many of those thinking about building their own houses. This could be communicated through the magazines, self build fora and TV programmes that most self builders seem to consult. The advice should highlight that the break down of social relations is at the root of some of the most costly and time-consuming delays in a self build project, and provide some useful advice on managing relationships through the build, while also providing some lessons on issues such as conflict resolution. Community self build practitioners have long experience of focussing precisely on the social relationships integral to self build projects that could be adapted in the development of such training and advice.

3.5 Investments

To engage in self build requires a range of investments, that stretch beyond the financial and into the practical and emotional, the latter not only an active investment but often a result to the experience of the process (cf. Blunt and Dowling 2006; Christie, Smith and Munro 2008; Munro and Smith 2008; Smith 2004). Indeed, self build as a form of housing provision appears to be particularly emotionally fraught, no doubt the result of how people understand the process, the costs (financial and otherwise) involved, and the consequences for households. The nature and the extent of investment varies across self build projects, fluctuating over the course of the build, in response to changes in the wider contexts of people’s lives—for example, there were several cases of people being made redundant while the build was ongoing, with the result that they had unexpected problems with cash flow—or to unanticipated challenges on the build.

Sweat equity—investing your own labour in the process—might make up for limited financial investments; for some of the participants in the research, this was a fallback position, an option that was open to them when they found themselves running out of money or with a significantly reduced cash flow. Of course, the household’s ability to do this will depend on whether they have the materials paid for and on site in order to continue the work, and their
skills and capabilities to take on the work required. To a certain extent, stepping in like this enables the self builder to overcome the constraints placed on their ability to complete their projects, demonstrating that they have some agency in this process (Smith 2008). Practical investment is often stated as the reason for why self build is able to return reduced costs to households and is a central element of many community build projects making up for the fact that many members cannot make financial contributions to these projects. Sweat equity therefore makes clear that an exchange between financial investment and working on site might be possible.

From the outset, financing the project is complicated. The professionals Douglas consults pronounce that it will be impossible to finance, pure insanity! But Douglas is not put off. After all, retiring at 50, he has lived on a pension of £12,000 per year, raising his son and maintaining two houses, financial juggling a way of life. But with the development finance he is promised not forthcoming, he struggles to qualify for a mortgage—aged 65 few companies will take the risk. A heavy blow. Purchasing the site takes Douglas’ capital, a small mortgage that he secures against the future value of the property, and a loan—strictly a business arrangement—from his brother-in-law. But the cash flow to finance the build remains a major nightmare and the build drags on. Raising funds through a mortgage on another property, loans from friends and family, moving money around through 0% finance credit card deals, progress on the build is slow. In 2014, the project grinds to a halt; there is no more money and six, then twelve, now approaching eighteen months pass with no work onsite.

Looking across the participants, it becomes clear that how they invest in the process—what they are prepared and able to contribute financially, vis-à-vis how much of the management, organisation and labour they want to do on the project—depends on the individual, on their perception of their skills, knowledge and capabilities as much as their financial wherewithal. It should also be made clear that there are people who are not solely invested in the project as a means to an end, but who enjoy the process of planning and building, their practical investments out of choice rather than necessity.

Before moving on, however, I think it is important to look again and the financial investments that people make in their self build projects. Among the participants in the study, initial capital investment in the project was drawn from a variety of sources including property assets, savings, lump sum payments (e.g. those resulting from redundancy), or maturing insurance politics. Property assets—either realised as capital or remaining within a property—were used in a variety of ways:

(1) To finance the cost of the self build outright with no further financial borrowing necessary;
(2) to use these assets as a way of getting a self build mortgage;
(3) to take out buy-to-let mortgages on existing properties to release equity that can be channeled into the self build.

Finance is regularly stated as one of the key obstacles for self builders; through the research it became clear that it is not only raising the money to self build that is a challenge, but also managing cash flow on a day-to-day basis. Indeed, this was one of the main issues that the self builders in the study stated for their projects being held up—one project stalled for two years, the total build taking eight years; Douglas’ projects, described below—watertight and ready to be fitted out—has been on hold since May 2014; for others, work on site continued in small doses, as and when a small amount of money and time could be diverted to the build.
Admittedly, self builders have very different approaches to the finances involved in their build; some never really evaluate how much the build is going to cost, while others cost up every aspect of the build down to the last penny. Quite often people do not have the full amount they need at the outset, even if they know how much the project is going to cost them; they know that they will have some income that they can devote to the build as they go along—although it is also the case that several of the participants in the study were made redundant part way through with financial implications for their projects.

What becomes clear, however, is that there is often a significant mismatch between capitalising self build and the cashflow requirements of building. It is also notable that in order to maintain cash flow through the project, many self builders found themselves doing substantial financial juggling, maxing out credit cards, moving balances from one card to another, and taking loans from friends and family. To actually self build, you need more funds to keep the project afloat than the build costs on paper; once the build is signed off, these additional funds come back to the builder, for example, through VAT returns, final drawdowns on mortgages. But there is often very little provision for this, resulting in significant anxiety and stress. It seems that even financial products specifically designed with self builders may not be able to resolve this issue, demonstrating that they could be better fit for purpose than they are at present.

3.6 Rethinking investment

As Susan Smith has argued, the nature of investment in the home can be characterised as ‘hybrids of money, materials, and meanings’ (2008: 521). The self build home is perhaps an extreme example of this; the project of building a house and transforming it into a home, brings people face-to-face with the materiality of the homes—the very bricks and mortar (sic) that they are built from—engages them in a project of home-making, with a significant financial outlay. Self build itself can be conceptualised as an investment; the narratives of many of the households in the study reveal how self build is intrinsic to the making of homes, family lives and relationships. In this respect, for most self builders, investment is about more than financial return; to fully understand what these investments mean to people it is important to look closely at the meaning they place on home.

Steve, Elsa and their two daughters have moved house frequently, as Steve's job in the armed forces demands; new schools, yet another rented house a familiar story. Now is the time for some stability in their family life, to find a place to call home until their daughters go to university. They decide to build their own house, drawing on some money they have saved from the sale of a previous property and taking out a self build mortgage to meet the balance. Financial difficulties complicate the build; cash flow stalls—there is still money in the mortgage but they find themselves in a catch-22 situation where they need to get to a particular stage in order to draw down the next lot of funds, but to get to that stage they need money. They have no money—even the everyday family budget suffers—and no house. Seeing Elsa distraught by the situation, friends and family step in, providing the funds to get them to a stage where they can move into the house.

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. And it’s not like being at work, because you don’t have that risk. (Steve)
Steve and Elsa’s story reveals that self build is an inherently risky and emotional process, but it also demonstrates how self build is embedded in wider social relationships. Financial aid is just one of the ways in which friends and family help out—I have lost count of the times when participants told me of the financial support that families had stepped in with at times of need; how this had been invaluable to get them to the end of projects. But of course, friends and family also provide additional support: Elsa also told me about how when she was feeling particularly frustrated and upset about the delayed progress of their build, she would make a phone call to her sister. Similarly, Frank often told me about his conversations with his son about the problems with his build, his son offering to just pay for the remainder of the work to be done on the property. Of course, family and friends are also witness to the good times and to step in a lend a hand. For several of the participants in the research, it was also clear that friends and family had come on site to help them, particularly in the early stages when land needed to be cleared and later on in the process when the decorating of the house was being undertaken. These occasions were opportunities for camaraderie, often captured in the photographic record of the build. Participants recalled the generosity not only of close friends and family, but also of acquaintances who had been prepared to come and help out. In this way, it becomes clear that self build can be an opportunity for an investment in social relations, a way of consolidating social relations.

### 3.7 Self builders at the cutting edge

Self builders often build to higher specifications than are required by planning (Barlow et al. 2001). Among the self builders in the research, it was common to find that, at the very least, they had incorporated some of energy saving technologies into their design and build. For some—as in the case of Rob and Lucy below—this was driven by a deep seated concern about the future of the planet and doing their small part by minimising their effect on the planet, while for others escalating energy costs were a primary driver. Understandably, the innovative features of their homes were something that many of the participants in the research were particularly excited about. Often, it was this aspect of the research that they had conducted the most research on and they were keen to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of these. From the different build systems that they had used to increase thermal efficiency, through the insulation, windows and doors to obtain the best u-values, to the ventilation and heating systems, they are excited about the different way of living that this will allow. Of course, many of these building systems, materials and technologies all add cost to the build.

The house that Rob and Lucy build functions autonomous of most mains services. It is designed to be highly thermally efficient; to enhance passive solar gain, it has a high thermal mass—it heats up slowly and cools down slowly. But it does not stop there; they install composting toilets—they empty the chamber by hand every few weeks; their only source of water is harvested rainwater, which they treat—to make potable—and store in their own plant in the basement; their hot water heated by the sun. They generate electricity through a solar array, while also making sure that their appliances, lights etc. use as little energy as possible to run. Taking themselves off external services eliminates the energy costs of supplying the house, and further reduces their impact on the environment. Similarly, the materials for the house are carefully sourced to make sure that their production has had as little impact on the environment as possible; they recycle from a previous building on the site, minimise the transportation distances of materials that have to be brought to site. Many aspects of the build are experimental; some recommended by the energy consultant and by their contractor, a specialist in low-energy building, but others engineered by Rob.
Designing to include these technologies is one thing; procuring and installing them in quite another. Repeatedly participants explained the difficulties finding contractors who were prepared and knowledgeable of how to work with new building materials, and the installation of new, specialist technologies, illustrating a wider skills lag in the construction industry. This demonstrates continued constraints on introducing innovation into homes (see also Barlow et al. 2001). It is inevitable that it takes time for the housebuilding industry to develop the knowledge and expertise of how these function, how they should be installed, and how they interact with other systems. This can be frustrating but also time-consuming for selfbuilders, who find themselves in the perhaps uncomfortable position of having more knowledge as amateurs than the experts they employ on their projects. They spoke of contacting specialist companies, and waiting months and months for quotations. Of the small-scale manufacturers who often had far more demand than supply; although this was not particularly the sourcing and supply of innovative technologies—indeed, wider issues with the supply even of bricks have been cited to me as an issue—it was common to find that people ordered a product to be delivered at a particular time, only to find that months later they were still waiting for it. Given that building a house requires a complex arrangement of different processes—of lining up the various tradespeople and installers (who may have other jobs to go to in the meantime)—these delays could have a knock on effect on the process of building the house.

When Joan and James set out to build their new house, they take for granted that it will integrate new technologies to make the house energy efficient. James plans the technical elements of the build, the work to make to the house energy efficient running through the design; it includes the consideration of the basic materials—thin joint masonry—used to build the house, a complex heating system that combines solar, log burner and LPG boiler, mechanical ventilation, and home automation. Many of these are new technologies, but they choose to take this fork in the road, attracted to the challenge.

However, they struggle to find tradespeople with the appropriate knowledge, expertise and experience, whether to build the walls, install the wiring, or understand how the different systems run together. On occasion, they find people who will do this work, only later to discover that they have over-estimated their skills. Work has to be redone, at a further cost. Further, it is clear that the only person who has a good understanding of how the different elements of the system work together, and therefore have to be set up, is James. Project management requires greater coordination across trades— who have, at best, partial knowledge of the systems to be installed— than an ordinary build with standard construction and materials.

Those planning to work with techniques, materials and technologies that are not yet mainstream should prepare themselves not only for the extra cost that they might incur, but also for the impact on the length of the build.

3.8 The challenge of self build

It is clear that the investments that people make in their homes through self building feed into their sense of achievement, satisfaction and pride (Brown 2008; see also Samuels 2008). But it is also apparent that most people taking on a self build are aware that it is likely to be a challenge; a process that will bring rewards, but that might also require pain and anguish—they hope that the former will outweigh the latter. They might relish the personal challenge; after all, this feeds into the sense of achievement that it brings. However, beyond the intrinsic challenge of selfbuild, are the unanticipated challenges that really put self builders to the test.
On the one hand, these might emerge out of the build—unexpected costs, delays caused by supply chains, by lining up trades etc. On the other hand, these might be external to the build and yet impact on it significantly; among the participants in the research, these external issues included ill health and redundancy. Ill health threatens the progress of a build because of the roles that people had taken on in their projects; in many cases, they were holding the project together and when they became ill—cancer and depression were repeatedly stated—the project either stalled, or roles on the project might have to be reevaluated. Understandably, these periods of ill health can bring significant delays to a project. As Peter, who was doing all of the work to construct and fit the house himself, explained, he was taking extra care not to injure himself on site as this would bring the project to a grinding halt; he was a key component in his self build project, and without him it just would not happen.

Frank attributed his depression—for which he had been treated for over a year—to the problems that he had had on the build. He described the difficulties he had had getting out of bed in the morning to install ventilation systems and the air source heat pump through the fog that the depression had brought him. The only way he could finish the house, which had massively exceeded budget, was to do the work to fit it out himself. But if he did not get out of bed, the work on the house would not get done.

Redundancy also featured in a number of participant narratives; this often presented significant challenges to the build, because cash flow was reliant on income. Although on the one hand this meant that people found themselves with more time to work on their projects, they had limited funds to do so. The self build project is unlikely to be something they abandon, as until the house is officially signed off they risk losing all/most of the money and effort they have invested in the project—the signing off of a house gives the house its value—while also having nowhere to live.

Simon explained how, when he was made redundant part way through the build, he had worked on the property using the materials that they had already purchased, but then had to stop when they could not afford to buy any more materials; and yet once he got a new job, he found that he no longer had time to work on the property even if he had the money!

For the most part, self builders are resourceful, and so when unexpected challenges emerge in the process of building, they find ways of overcoming them; but it is also clear that at times, these challenges become overwhelming. There are significant social dimensions to this—family and friends stepping in with financial help, practical skills, emotional support to get them to the end of a project.
4. Self build in the social structure of the housing economy

When Duncan and Rowe (1993) were writing over twenty years ago, it seems likely that the conditions in which self builders were approaching their projects may have been quite different. The systems of social support that most contemporary self builders in England seem able to rely on are friends and family; the wider social structure—that of the housing economy—seems less conducive to the production of self build housing than it was, symptomatic of the effect of neoliberalism on the housing market that has seen investors, the property industry and financial sector benefit at the expense of the home owning public (Bone and O'Reilly 2010: 252).

As the interim report from this project\(^1\) illustrated, self build housing in the United Kingdom is thoroughly and inextricably entangled with wider housing and land economy and submarkets of these (in particular local housing markets and the field of new housing procurement). Rather than an independent and autonomous market, self build exists within a wider housebuilding sector, relying on the knowledge, skills, products and labour of those who supply this industry; located within the fields of new housing procurement, land and housing markets; shaped by the same regulatory and governance frameworks that determine residential development in Britain. The influence of these on self-procurement is evident. Supply of land through the land market influences the possibilities for self build as much—if not more than—as in other areas of new build housing procurement. It is also the case that for the large part, self build relies upon the products and services—finance, materials, contractors etc.—of the wider housing market, and is subject to the same problems with the supply chain. This relationship to the wider field of new housing procurement pits self build up against the volume housebuilders—who dominate new build housing in Britain—in competition for land, building materials and expertise. The social structure of the housing economy thus has a significant impact on self building in Britain, framing the experience of self builders. Further, many of the challenges that the self builders in this study face in relation to building their own houses, are symptomatic of wider issues relating to housing procurement and supply. Crucially, unless there are significant changes to the land and housing market in the United Kingdom, self build will only make a marginal contribution to the development of new housing, pursued precisely by the same type of middle-class households that Barlow et al. (2001) identified as responsible for the growth of self build in the 1990s, as these are the only members of the population who have the assets and resources to navigate the challenges of self build.

The particular way in which the housing economy in England functions has produced a highly idiosyncratic population of self builders. In comparison to other European countries, where self provided housing is a major player in the construction of new homes, the uptake of self provided housing in England remains small (Duncan and Rowe 1993). As recent

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\(^1\) Creating a Nation of Self Builders, available to download from [http://bit.ly/1htSZnV](http://bit.ly/1htSZnV)
statistics released by NaSBA (2013) reveal, only 8% of new build properties—about 12,000—were constructed through self provision, and while there is an acknowledged problem with the quantification of self build, it is undeniable that self build has only a small stake within the wider market of new housing provision. While in other countries self build is popular among middle income, nuclear families (see Duncan and Rowe 1993), in England it attracts an older population ordinarily two-person households benefiting from the accumulation of housing assets alongside higher than average incomes over their lifetime (Duncan and Rowe 1993; Wallace et al. 2013). In other words, the beneficiaries of self build in England are middle-class—their class determined not only by their occupational status and but also by their property assets (Savage et al. 1992)—but also more likely to be representative of an older generation. This reflects the wider transformations of English housing markets, the growing inequalities and generational politics characteristic of these, with those at the lower end of the market—notably first time buyers—priced out (Bone and O’Reilly 2010). The few schemes that enable those in housing need—either access to affordable housing or housing full stop—to self build are much applauded, but are few and far between; a far cry from the arcadian possibilities that self build offered up until the end of World War II (Hardy and Ward 1994; Harris 1999; see also Barlow et al. 2001).

To be clear, while the structures of the housing economy—the availability and cost of land, the cost of property development—increasingly restrict entry into this field of housing provision, it is clear that people find innovative ways of overcoming these challenges. In this respect, it is clear that households have agency and their actions are not solely determined by the structures of the housing economy (Smith 2008). The group self builds that I worked with illustrate this particularly well:

- the dogged determinism of Chris who, looking for a way to improve his own family’s living conditions persuaded his London borough and his housing association to undertake a group self build scheme and drew together a group of people in similar need to people the scheme; this way, the financial costs of land purchase and property developer were met by the housing association;
- the group in North London who were fortunate to find land owned by a church, who were prepared to sell to them at a reduced value because of the social values of their project; if they had had to go to the open market, they might have struggle to find land that they could afford;

Successful groups are often advised and aided by housing practitioners with specialist knowledge in co-housing development or community self build. It is also clear that their success relies on the relationships that they build up with local councils, housing associations and other parties that might aid in the development process in some way. What this illustrates is the importance of social networks, but also cultural capital—brought by those with specialist knowledge—and the perseverance of group members to bringing these projects about. While individual projects might not face the same challenges in relation to getting a project off the ground, they similarly require perseverance, knowledge and understanding—brought from external sources when the self builders themselves do not have this—benefitting from the support provided from being within social networks. Self build, whether group or individual, is therefore an inherently social process. The contemporary structures of the housing economy mean that resourcefulness—the ability to access opportunities and to overcome the constraints put in place by these mechanisms—is required in order to become a successful self builder.
5. Recognising the social in self build

The sociological focus of the research, the in-depth research with self builders, provides a nuanced understanding of their experiences, valuable in demonstrating the limitations and creative challenges of the self building as a practice, the social relationship that sustain it, and its financial constraints.

Self build seems a microcosm of the wider housing market; since the 1980s, and coinciding with land price inflation (Barlow et al. 2001), it is a form of housing provision that has been predominantly undertaken by the middle classes, funded by the assets generated through prior property ownership. This reflects wider shifts in the housing market as this has become increasingly neoliberalised (see Bone and O’Reilly 2010). My focus on class here—rather than income and occupation as other research has stated—is intended to capture the wider social characteristics, the capabilities, resources and assets that the middle classes have available to them as a result of education, training or other opportunities. While practical and technical skills are self-evidently useful in the process of self building, management and organisational skills play an equally significant role. Indeed, it is the wide range of skills that people have that enable their successful engagement in the process of self building, but which also allow them to overcome many of the challenges that they encounter through the process.

The social relations that make up a self build project are also significant to its delivery. These include the relationships within the household/or group, to friends and family, and with professionals and contractors working on the build. Maintaining good social relations, particularly with the latter, is critical to the outcome of a build. It is for this reason that (people) management skills are valuable in a self build project. Friends and family provide a range of support to self builders, from practical involvement in the project, financial and emotional support.

For many, self build provides the opportunity to design and build a house that functions to their precise requirements, to their way of living. While there are minimum standards for housing development, it is common for self builders to exceed these. Most of the self builders in the research built to higher standards than required. This was tied to a desire to enhance the energy efficiency of homes, for many, a way of reducing the bills of maintaining a home in light of ever-rising costs, although this was often paired with a concern for the planet. What is important here though, is that working outside the mainstream, it can often be difficult to find the people knowledgeable of and experienced with the technologies to be installed. This is significant for the process of self building in terms of both time and cost.

Finally, it is important to think reflect on the mismatch between cashflow requirements and the overall costs of a project. Alongside the breakdown of social relationships, this seems to be the main source of anxiety for self builders, while also introducing considerable delays into the process. It may be that the industry can focus its attentions either on how to make self build specific products better fit for purpose, or to introduce short-term finance that might smooth out the bumps in the process.

From the structure of the wider housing economy, through social characteristics of contemporary self builders in England, to the social relations and dynamics that mark the process of self building demonstrate that self build is an inherently social process.
References


