

Where's the Social in Selfbuild

Michaela Benson

Michaela.benson@gold.ac.uk

To download the full report, please visit:

<https://selfbuildproject.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/full-the-social-in-selfbuild.pdf>

Listening to (& working with) selfbuilders

Selfbuild: *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)*

- Privileges understandings of selfbuild from the user's point of view
- Highlights diversity
- Draws out the social dimensions of selfbuild
- A lens onto housing economy

The story of the selfbuild in contemporary Britain

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

**BEYOND
GRAND
DESIGNS**
everyday
stories of
selfbuild

15-19
September
2015

9.30am to 5.30pm
(Late closing Thursday
17th 8.30pm)

310 New Cross Road,
Goldsmiths, University
of London, SE 14 6NW

E·S·R·C
ECONOMIC
& SOCIAL
RESEARCH
COUNCIL

A detour to Lewisham and the 1970s/80s

Extracts from the Minutes of Lewisham Council, Report of the Housing Committee, 13th July 1977

★5.

Self-build Housing Scheme

The Committee have investigated the possibilities of a Council-sponsored self-build housing scheme in Lewisham on certain selected sites not readily developable by the Council. A self-build group has been formed and a pilot group selected by a ballot was conducted by the Mayor on 1st December 1976.

The Department of the Environment have indicated their general support for the scheme but formal approval will be required when all the details are finalised.

Devising a legal and financial framework for the self-build operation has, however, proved difficult and time consuming because of the complexity of the regulations governing housing finance and the need to keep the scheme within range of the pockets of self-builders who are by definition not able to meet the full costs of purchasing a house on the open market. Architectural and organisational plans have now been drawn up in sufficient detail for a scheme to be presented in this report

which, if adopted, will enable a start on site to be made in August this year and for the houses to be occupied by Christmas.

The self-build group has registered under the Industrial and Provident Societies Act and has been conducting a programme of seminars on various aspects of the scheme and learning the necessary building skills. The entire pilot group has enrolled in a summer course now in progress in carpentry, electrical installation, etc. and arrangements have been made for tutors to visit the construction sites as work progresses.

The Committee have agreed that the sites of 11 and 17 Longton Avenue, land adjoining the Italian Villa, Elstree Hill and a site in Brockley Park should be made available for the self-build project. The Longton Avenue sites will accommodate five units, Elstree Hill two units and a further seven units will be erected on the Brockley Park site.

The self-builders have selected the plots which suit them best and individual designs for each family have been agreed by the self-builders in consultation with Mr. Walter Segal, the appointed Architect.

5.

Self-Build Housing Scheme

The Committee, having considered a report on the financial implication and administrative problems arising from Phase I of the self-build scheme, have agreed to proceed with a second phase, subject to the proposed financial arrangements being approved by the Department of the Environment. If it proceeds, Phase II of the scheme will comprise the development of 113-115 Honor Oak Park, S.E.23., a sloping site which can accommodate 15 two-storey, detached self-build houses.

Publicity will be given to Phase II at an appropriate time, inviting applications to join the scheme. A group of self-builders will then be selected by ballot.

Extract from Minutes of Lewisham Council, 15th July 1981

2.

Self-build Housing Scheme Phase II

The Committee have agreed to proceed with a second phase of the Self-Build Housing Scheme, using a site at 113/115 Honor Oak Road SE23 on which it is expected that 13 self-build houses can be erected. The scheme will be basically as before, using timber framed dwellings designed by the architect, Walter Segal, to the individual self-builder's requirements. It will be an equity sharing scheme and disposal will be by means of a 99 year lease and the 50/50 sharing of the equity will be based on the market value of the dwellings.

Publicity will now be given to the scheme and a public meeting arranged. If, as expected, the number of applicants exceeds the number of plots available, a ballot will be held to select the self-build group.

Extract from Minutes of Lewisham Council Meeting, 2nd March 1983

In the words of Lewisham's selfbuilders

... we saw there was this thing called the Lewisham Life or something like that, a thing they put through the door, anyone interested in building their own homes meeting at Lewisham Town hall on a certain day. So we turned up and there was about 100 other couples turned up with Brian Richardson, Walter Segal, and various other people from the Lewisham Council ... We had to register our interest, but they formed a steering committee because they had to get various grants and permissions from government bodies ... planning permission. They had to identify sites within Lewisham Borough, and they hadn't done at that stage, and that process took about five years before we actually did anything on the site ... Legal angle and steering committee, meeting after meeting, and then finally they got all the permissions, because of our pressure, because we were a group and the steering committee we actually exerted quite a lot of pressure on the council for them to keep up the momentum really and get all the grants and everything else, and it was just because there were certain people within the council that were very pro the scheme ...

- Extract from an interview with selfbuilders and original residents of Segal Close

Life changing, I think, for both of us, a life changing experience, and something I passionately believe could be a way of building communities, that's my line on it, if it was done properly and investment was there, I just think you could build some very nice communities, unlike the communities that are built and don't work. That comes from my having been a community worker for a long time, and worked in a whole range of communities, and I think selfbuild, if I look at the [name of other scheme], I think that worked for them, and has made them stronger, confident citizens if we want to use the jargon in lots of ways, and given them all sorts of skills and confidence that they wouldn't have had if they hadn't done that.

- Extract from an interview with a selfbuilder and original resident of Walter's Way

Fast forward ...

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.

Magnifying 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.

– *Findings*

- Creating a nation of selfbuilders (available to download from <https://selfbuildproject.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/full-creating-a-nation-of-selfbuilders.pdf>)
- The Social in Selfbuild (available to download from <https://selfbuildproject.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/full-the-social-in-selfbuild.pdf>)