

Suburban Self build

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Abstract

My paper focuses on three case studies in suburban Cardiff. Through interviews with their designers David (Financial Adviser) and Rachel (part time Slimming World Consultant), Gareth (surveyor) and Belinda (part time Secretary, formally Environmental scientist), Pete (tax inspector) and Sarah (part time Tesco management) I examine the ideas and values expressed by the home owners, the role of non professional designer, their reasons for not employing an architect, sources of design inspiration, who actually made the decisions, attitudes to sustainability and satisfaction with the end product. Whilst the sample is small and the studies close knit – they are all within the same block - the study confirms, what many of us know from experience about what is really being built in Britain today and why, as well as serious concerns about the image of the architect in the minds of many people.

Introduction

The locus for my paper is suburban Cardiff, the subject - the extension, the practitioners - the owners and the band of individuals that assist them through the construction process. This is the alternative practice that I want to talk about – a melange of non designer designers and home owners that together produce what must be the vast majority of home extensions in Britain today. Cumulatively it has a profound effect on our built environment in even the most regulated areas. The value of this practice, if indeed it is a form of practice, depends greatly upon our perception of the claims to aesthetic authority are so necessary to Architecture as a profession and upon the degree to which we acknowledge the act of building as central to the processes of identity formation, played out ‘narratively’.¹

¹ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the late modern age* (Oxford : Polity 1991), p.53

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Here I will explore the ideas and values expressed by the home owners, sources of design inspiration, the role of non professional designer, reasons for not employing an architect, attitudes to sustainability and satisfaction with the end product. The study is more about exploration than conclusions, but it reveals something about what is really being built in Britain today and as well as the deeply problematic status of the architect in the mind of people just rich enough to employ them.

During this process I will try to examine the building practices of the various owners in their own terms, in terms of their original objectives and aspirations, even if it goes against every grain of my own architectural sensibilities or *habitus* – in Pierre Bourdieu's terms 'a sense of one's (and others) place and role in the world of one's lived environment'.² As Kim Dovey writes in 'The silent complicity of Architecture' Bourdieu's theory of habitus is 'useful in understanding the deep conservatism of the field of architecture and its deep complicity with practices of power'.³ In my opinion it is this complicity that has, in part, led to the neglect of non-architect designed domestic space by the architectural research community. It may be a low status area of dubious aesthetic worth, but it is however a sphere that is increasingly valued by the anthropologists and ethnographers who have made it the focus of their studies, via journals such as *Home Cultures*.⁴

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²Introduction to first edition, Jean Hillier and Emma Rooksby (eds.) *Habitus: A Sense of Place* (Ashworth: Aldershot, 2002), p.21. Each of us carries a range of different types of habitus. If operating in my parent habitus the degree of synergy between the owners and me is large.

³ Kim Dovey, 'The Silent Complicity of Architecture' in, Hillier and Rooksby (eds.) *Habitus*, pp. 238-296 (285).

⁴ On the advantages and pitfalls of interdisciplinarity see Sarah Pink 'Introduction, situating visual research' in Sarah Pink, László Kürti and Ana Isobel Afonso, *Working Images: Visual Research and Representation in Ethnography* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.3.

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The form of practice that forms the basis of my discussion is defined in the language of magazines such as *Grand Designs* and *Homebuilding and Renovating*⁵ as 'self build'. Very often however it is the technician who draws up the scheme and the builder that leads the design.⁶ Architects are rendered virtually invisible by this process. The wide variety of material on the web, on the shelves of WHSmith and in our libraries pertaining to the issue of home extensions does little to further the cause of the RIBA professional. Time and time again the architect is depicted as an expendable figure who is perhaps of some use in the drawing of plans necessary for obtaining various statutory permissions. There is no delineation between the architect, 'the architectural technologist' or indeed the 'chartered surveyor' - all are perceived equal to the task.⁷ Paul Hymers, in his book *Home Conversions*⁸, describes 'a good designer' solely as 'one who possesses the necessary skills of draughtsmanship and is familiar not only with the details of construction, but also with the problems and regulations relating to the work.' At no point is there any mention of the words design or quality. Hymers describes the RIBA as a 'club' immediately endowing the chartered architect with an aura of extreme elitism and several zeros to his or her envisaged fee in the minds eye of the potential employer. In doing so he reinforces what might be called a new 'culture of amateurism'⁹, potentially a sign of a more democratic, though some might say, more low brow, emerging culture in which the traditional role of the professional has been consistently undermined.

It is very difficult to find any solid information on the subject of how many and for what reasons so very few people chose to employ an architect. The RIBA has no formal statistics

⁵ www.homebuilding.co.uk/House.Plans.asp

⁶ Roni Brown records the 'borrowing' of plans off a builder by one of her self build informants. Brown, 'Identity and Narrativity in Homes made by Amateurs', *Home Cultures*, 4, 3 (2007), pp.213-238. She notes that 'adoption and adaption of existing models and designs would appear to be a relatively common feature of amateur practice.'

⁷ In the words of 'House Extension Online' either of these 'consultants' will 'provide advice on what the best options are with regards meeting requirements within the constraints of the position of your property'. www.house-extension.co.uk/planing/use_an_architect.htm

⁸ Paul Hymers, *Home Conversion* (London: New Holland, 2003), p.16. This book is so popular that it is sold at a discounted rate by, the highly popular retailer The Book People.

⁹ C. Leadbeater, 'Amateurs a 21st century remake', *RSA Journal*, June 2003, pp.22-25. Cited in Brown, 'Identity and Narrativity', p.263.

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on how many domestic clients chose not to use architects, but K. MacInnes, in an article on self build in *Building Design* has asserted that only 6% of self builders contract an architectural firm.¹⁰ Certainly some of this type of activity operates at the level of the black market and is unlikely to be included in official figures. The perception is that the use of an architect worries builders who do not want to work within a detailed contract, rendering them less likely to want a job, the result being higher tender figures – a further financial disincentive for the potential client, already daunted by the prospect of imagined architect's fees.

Cardiff case studies

I have concentrated my research on three extensions all within the same area of East Cardiff – Roath Park. Although the sample is extremely small there is consistency in my study. All the houses are of the same type - 3 bedroom 1950s pebbledash semis, indeed all of them are on the same block. The houses that they occupy are currently worth around £3-400,000, fairly expensive for Cardiff where a house can be bought for £100,000 in a less desirable area. Through interviews with their designers David (Financial Adviser) and Rachel (part time Slimming World Consultant), Gareth (Surveyor) and Belinda (part time Secretary, formally Environmental scientist), Pete (tax inspector) and Sara (part time Tesco management) I chart their different stories.¹¹

Rachel and David's is the largest extension – contract sum roughly £100, 000. It has a single storey added on the side and back and a loft conversion in the roof to house a new bed room and en suite bathroom [Fig. 1]. On the ground floor the extra space provided by the building work has allowed for the expansion of the kitchen and dining room, a utility room and a little office to the side of the front door [Fig. 2]. Windows and doors throughout are made of

¹⁰ MacInnes, K. 'Here's One I Designed Earlier: How Architects Can Capitalise on the Growing Self Build /Market', *Architectural Design*, 64, pp.xvi-xvii.

¹¹ The names of the informants have been changed for publication.

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timber, the kitchen floor slate, the kitchen tops granite. Belinda and Gareth's house is a smaller version of the same thing. They have built a single storey extension along the back, repositioning and enlarging the kitchen and dining room in doing so and creating a downstairs WC and utility room at the centre of the plan [Fig. 3]. The contract sum in this case was roughly £40, 000. Both couples professed that their projects had come out on budget - Belinda adding that Rachel Beaney (of the programme Property Ladder) says 'always to allow 10% for extras' – but clearly neither of them had come out even remotely on time. Pete and Sara's extension was to have been of similar scale – a widening of the extension to the side and the building of a room to replace the garage in the garden, but because of unforeseen problems the project was confined to the latter which was just emerging from the ground when I went to interview them [Fig.4].

All the extensions took place this year - 2007 - so the owners were still very much embroiled in the process when I went to visit them in Autumn 2007. My informants are all known to one another and they are all friends and acquaintances of mine. They are all in their late 30s and occupy the 2000 census band 4 'administrative and secretarial occupations'.¹² Each couple has two to three children, all of them under nine years of age.

It is tempting to describe the couples as ordinary, but half of them are part of the tiny percentage of people who, in the late 1980s, would have gone into higher education and each couples collective income is in excess of three times the national average.¹³ They are in fact relatively wealthy and well educated by British standards. Although fond of literature and music, none have any manifest interest in the visual arts, as such it seems that they have little

¹² www.statistics.gov.uk/methods_quality/ns_sec/soc2000.asp

¹³ Research into the readership of *Build It* magazine gives some insight into what a typical 'self builder' might be. But this research refers to the building of entire new homes. I have yet to find similar data on house extensions. AMA Research 2003, *The UK Self-Build Housing Market*, 2nd edn. (Cheltenham: AMA Research). Cited in Brown, 'Identity and Narrativity', p.270.

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interest in 'symbolic capital', associated by Bordieu with aesthetic taste, the production of which is, in Dovey's terms 'the architect's key market niche'.¹⁴

This is the group of people who, although probably rich enough to employ architects, remain completely alienated by the profession. Instead such home owners turn to builders, surveyors, technicians friends, indeed anyone who can produce the plans necessary to get through the process of obtaining planning permission. Armed with his CAD package this individual, cuts and pastes standard windows, cavity walls etc onto drawings for fees as little as £50.¹⁵ He is then frequently brought in to cobble together the necessary information to get through the building regulations. The resultant building, although rarely beautiful, is often deeply satisfying to the home owner and a source of great pride.

None of the informants were entirely inexperienced in the business of construction. Rachel's father, who had done several extensions himself, helped the couple, while Gareth, as a surveyor whose job is concerned with the disposal of office space had a good idea of the issues involved. He also received help from his father who is a builder. Pete and Sara had themselves completed an earlier extension to their living room a few years previously, an experience that informed this more recent work.

Interviews took place on site enabling me to see for myself what my informants were talking about., the house itself providing the starting point for discussion.¹⁶ My foreknowledge of the

¹⁴ Dovey, 'The Silent Complicity of Architecture' ,p. 288. 'Objectively and subjectively aesthetic stances adopted in matters like cosmetics, clothing or home decoration are opportunities to experience or assert one's position in social space, as a rank to be upheld or a distance to be kept.' Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard, 1984), p.57.

¹⁵ It is easy to find these technicians on the web. Brown discusses their usage in Brown, 'Identity and Narrativity', p.279.

¹⁶ On reflection I think it would have been more appropriate to video these conversations with my informants walking round their extensions showing me what they felt about them. I would then have been able to tell something, from the way that they moved through the buildings, from the ways in which they touched their surfaces, something about their very physical responses to their own homes. For an account of such a method see Pink, Sarah, *Home Truths: Gender, domestic objects and everyday life* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).

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couples would be both a benefit, as they would be more relaxed and a problem – they would not want to offend me. I did not want the interviewees to feel constrained because they knew that I was an architect, albeit a lapsed one. I told the interviewees that I just wanted to know about their feelings about their extensions and why they did them the way they did. I also said that I was interested in why people did not choose to employ an architect and who they employed instead.¹⁷

In addition I asked the couples to photograph the things that they felt were important about their extension projects (on throwaway cameras that I gave them for the purpose) as I knew that I could not help but misrepresent their homes either in the pursuit of aesthetically pleasing imagery or to dramatise my findings.¹⁸ I think I was hoping that the couples would take photos of their children enjoying the extensions, using odd corners for play or raucous dinners where kitchen and dining space worked in remarkable accord. Instead I felt somehow disappointed to discover that Belinda had seen fit to get rid of all the ‘junk’ off her surfaces, ‘dump it on the sofa’ and then take the pictures of the extension in the usual architectural manner, devoid of life and people [Fig. 5]. David did something roughly similar. The only photographs with people in them here are by me.

Objectives

When questioned about their objectives for the extensions Rachel, David, Pete and Sara were unanimous in their choice of one word ‘space’. If pushed further, the first couple said that they wanted the house to ‘work better’, the second that they wanted to ‘get our living room back’. Gareth and Belinda were rather more fulsome. They wanted a new kitchen; they

¹⁷ www.leeds.ac.uk/iss/documentation/top/top2.pdf. Accessed 8.9.7 was particularly helpful in creating the questionnaire.

¹⁸ When in search of architecture without architects Bernard Rudofsky sought out examples of edifices of aesthetic worth which were framed in dramatic black and white imagery to enhance the very qualities that he so admired in them. Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture without Architects* (London: Academy, 1965).

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wanted 'quality'; they wanted to overlook the garden and, lastly, space. Light had been a real area of concern for Gareth who had worried that it would be too dark at the rear of the extended room. Rachel and David were remarkably pragmatic, expressing no interest in light, detail, feelings or anything else that we might be pushed in an architectural education.

However David's photographs of the extension told a different story – he was clearly very pleased with the quality of light achieved in certain parts of it at certain times of day [Fig. 6]. Gareth and Belinda seemed to know more about particular design considerations and had the language to articulate them, possibly because they had sought out precedents of the kind of space they wanted to achieve in magazines. Having said this Gareth referred to the project 'as just a bog standard extension- nothing groundbreaking' as though, perhaps, it would be pretentious to aspire to anything more. Gareth was particularly pleased with the utility and downstairs WC as places to keep things that spoiled the look of the rest of the place. I found this striking as, unlike Rachel and David, he had not listed making the house 'work better' as a concern.

I asked about the relationship with the surrounding area. All the couples expressed a good deal of reverence for their – in Sara's words 'lovely' - houses and for the unified appearance of the neighbourhood despite the fact that the pebbledash semi is not generally admired for its aesthetics. I began to wonder whether they had cherished childhood memories of such places (it seems that indeed Pete and Sara had been brought up in versions of the same type of house on nearby Barry Island) or whether such neighbourhoods were appealed to particularly conformist people. All the couples wanted their extensions to look as inconspicuous as possible. In the words of David 'it's an old house and it is our duty not to mess it up'. Gareth and Belinda wanted their extension to 'blend in', feeling that if you lived in a semi detached house it was in some way a duty to mirror the house next door – even though they are not close to the couple next door.

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‘architectural design services’

Questions about the variety and type of help sought by Rachel and David in preparing drawings revealed their degree of confusion about what had actually happened in the process. They spoke most highly of a planning consultant (found through a family connection) who was reasonably priced, £100, and gave them what they felt to be good advice on how to get through planning. It took them a while to remember the profession of the first person that they employed to do the planning drawings. ‘Oh yeah that total dickhead. . .what were they?’ - a quantity surveyor , as it turned out. He drew the planning drawings ‘got lots of things wrong and didn’t listen’ as a result of which he had to redraw the plans four times. They found him through a family connection because he was cheap. He charged them for three days work, but David who saw him moving windows around on the computer thought the job had probably taken him ‘top end two hours’.

When asked if they actually understood the drawings the response was a unanimous no from David and Rachel because ‘they were so bad’. And a ‘More or less not 100%’ from Pete and Sara. The answer from Gareth was a categorical ‘yes’ - the answer from Belinda - ‘not really’. Clearly they had had to rely on words to communicate their desires and needs.

Gareth and Belinda also used a quantity surveyor, a colleague of Gareth’s to draw up their plans, both for planning and building regulations, though Gareth himself did the survey and spent a great deal of time sketching at the table with Belinda thinking through different options for the plan. The couple seemed reasonably satisfied with what Gareth’s colleague had done, although he had been very slow to do it. A structural engineer designed the foundations while the ‘builder just made it solid’. Gareth himself had written the specification together with his QS colleague.

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Pete and Sara had gone down a rather different route. Some years ago they had had their living room extended by a builder with an in house 'architect'. They had worked with the same team at the start of their new extension. I asked them how they knew that the architect was an architect. Only because that was what the builder called him, was the response. Apparently he worked on these jobs in the evenings and weekends outside his usual full time employment. He did all the drawings and the written specification for the couple.

In Rachel and David's case the full plans submission for Building Regulations approval was completed by a structural engineer recommended by the builder who was, in the opinion of the couple, not cheap. Apparently he was very sloppy with his drawings, changing scale by accident as well as blocking up windows. More 'used to designing bridges than houses' the structural elements, in the opinion of the builder, had been vastly overscaled. What was worse he had 'lied' on several occasions. The structural engineer also wrote the specification. When asked if they understood this document the response unanimously was 'absolutely not'. However the builder had gone through it with Rachel and David clearly stating what was and was not included in the tender price.

The most critical decision of the whole process was the choice of builder. Fortunately all the couples seem to have chosen well, as much of the process seemed to be reliant on his skill and integrity. Four builders came round to look at Rachel and David's job. The decision over who was employed was based on the builders 'attitude to Rachel' who knew she would have to put up with these men in her house for several months. There was not a great deal of difference in the tender sums. They ended up employing a builder who her father had worked with on a previous occasion. In spite of his careful vetting he had great difficulty in taking orders from Rachel, always deferring to David instead. It took three months of Rachel acting as project manager for the builder to accept her, a woman, in the role. Her method of managing the team was to write weekly lists of things that, in her opinion, needed to be done. David meanwhile handled the financial side of things. In general they were happy with the input that they

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received from the builder who 'said when things wouldn't work' and 'changed things helpfully'. For example he advised them to have a unified floor finish across the room that they were extending to make it feel more spacious. The couple did however recognise that they should not have taken his advice regarding the position of the ensuite bathroom in the loft which he put on the rear elevation when it could have been positioned at the middle of the plan creating a large sunny living space overlooking the garden.

Gareth and Belinda saw three different builders and took a great deal of care in following up personal recommendations. They confined himself to issues of construction, advising the couple that it would be more straightforward to knock down part of the existing structure than to try to work with it, making changes to the floor slab and to the height and the pitch of the roof. Somehow – and Gareth and Belinda didn't really seem to know how this had happened – the builder made a change from three to two velux windows (a sensible decision in my opinion as each window became associated with a particular living zone, though the implications for illumination could have been grave). Materials were chosen to match with next door's extension and for the builder's convenience. PVC windows were chosen by Gareth (Belinda herself preferred timber). Pete and Sara chose PVC because they 'matched the rest of the house', almost as though PVC windows were 'original features', not 1980s replacements.

Pete and Sara initially chose their builder because they had worked with him before but were disappointed when he pulled out of the project in favour of a larger job. They then sought prices from three contractors only to choose one that had been 'recommended by somebody in Church' because they 'felt that he knew what he was talking about'. They had left all the decisions about materials up to him just saying that they wanted them to 'blend in'. Although the project had not got far on site their builder had already made suggestions about creating spaces for storage which they had found helpful.

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All the couples interviewed recognised that special skills were needed for dealing with builders. Gareth had learnt that ‘you have to keep on top of the builder – keep speaking to them’. Rachel had learnt the importance of planning ahead, anticipating when decisions would be needed, for example on the positioning of the electrics. None were keen to repeat the process in the near future.

The role of the architect

So why didn't any of the couples directly employ an architect to assist with this highly stressful and expensive process. In the words of Gareth ‘I'm not sure how much an architect would add’. Clearly cost is a major issue in all this – arguably the only issue. For Rachel and David the imagined cost of an architect was the real issue – as they never actually bothered to enquire what that cost might be. Whatever the cost, it clearly was not going to be worth it in their opinion. If you are not familiar with reading plans and understanding the nuances of space the CAD plans of the technician might not look so very different to those of the architect so there is no point in paying several hundred pounds for those of the architect. Then there is the question whether people can really tell the difference between architect and technician designed space. My suspicion is that, very often, they can't. Whether this is because of nature or nurture is a very intriguing point that harks back to Plato and is one that exercised Le Corbusier, amongst others. For Bourdieu however, the idea that aesthetic experience might in some way be innate or universal rather than social would be yet another one of those misleading beliefs that keep arbiters of taste¹⁹ in their dominant roles.²⁰ Roni Brown, in her study of self builders, observes that ‘Novelty, distinction, originality, and above all, a “total design concept” (or flow between aspects of the design”, are not

¹⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), p.16.

²⁰ Dovey, ‘The Silent Complicity of Architecture’, p.289.

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prerequisites of amateur home –making and building’ instead, and perhaps paradoxically, ‘the desire to achieve an individualised and personalised home, appears fundamental.’²¹

I asked Rachel and David if they were shown examples of extensions designed by architects and extensions designed by builders and technicians whether they thought that they would be able to tell the difference.²² The answer was ‘probably not’, although Rachel did concede that works by architects might be more elegant in terms of materials as ‘getting a decent finish out of builders was really difficult’. Both had seen an extension done by an architect on the other side of the road and they had not been impressed. When asked if they thought that architects made a difference to the way in which a space was designed they had to think for quite a while ‘umm’ before acknowledging that ‘they might see things that you couldn’t see’ and also that the use of materials would probably be better. Pete and Sara didn’t think that an architect would make much difference on a ‘project this size’, but that maybe you could tell whether an architect had been involved from the ‘windows, their shape and style’ and the ‘details’ which might be ‘out of the ordinary’. Rachel, David, Gareth and Belinda felt that there might be times when it was appropriate to employ an architect, but they didn’t think that they themselves had needed one because they had a ‘good idea’ about what they wanted.

From my reading of the magazine *Grand Designs* I had thought that its instigator Kevin McLeod had done more in Britain to further the cause of architects than anyone else in recent years through the medium of his programme of the same name, keenly viewed by most of the subjects of this survey. My illusions were quickly dispelled however by Rachel who pointed out that whenever they showed an architect on *Grand Designs* they were usually ‘real prats’. She did however speak approvingly of the programme *Property Ladder* ‘which makes you feel you can do without them’. Belinda felt that the architects on *Grand Designs* were quite pushy, citing the example of one female architect who had been ‘quite miffed’ when things

²¹ Brown, ‘Identity and Narrativity’, p.278.

²² Brown indicates that some of her informants had difficulty in envisaging the sizes of the spaces that they were building. Ibid., p.280.

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had not gone according to her plans. Either way it is always the owner not the architect that is placed at the heart of the process.

The respondents were unanimously negative about the public image of the architectural profession. When asked what architects could do to make themselves more employable David thought that more should be done about marketing 'we get stuff from double glazing salesmen through the door – why not architects?' For him, their lack of prominence on the high street was a real issue. Rachel made a face before saying 'well they seem to have a problem with their street cred at the moment'. It turned out that they did have a brief conversation with a 'creepy' architect who they felt to be too senior a member of his practice to be of much assistance to them. Gareth and Belinda found the idea of a percentage fee 'weird', they would be 'scared' of it escalating.

When asked whether they were worried that if they had employed an architect he or she might have taken over the job, they said that that was not really a consideration. Gareth and Belinda said that they would have gone to lengths to find an architect that they got along with.

In spite of Belinda's background in environmental science sustainability made no impact on the design of her extension possibly because Gareth, for whom it was not really an issue, was the dominant partner in the process. Sustainability had had absolutely no impact on Pete and Sara's scheme – 'maybe in an ideal world'. David and Rachel were concerned about issues of sustainability in the design of their home, but their aspirations were quickly thwarted by the practical implications of pushing for sustainable construction. Solar panels had been investigated but were, as they are for many people, quickly deemed to be too expensive – it being difficult to claw back the £5000 or so cost in the event of moving. They tried to use less concrete, but to little avail. Generally they were faced with so much complexity in trying to get the job done at all that pushing environmental alternatives seemed all but impossible. This is, in my experience is the reality of home owners who feel a degree of concern about the

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environment in Britain. Builders often look on such ideas with incredulity making them very difficult and costly to implement. A provisional sum of £1000 for solar panels, written into a tender document by an ignorant builder, quickly translates in to £6000 or so for the panels and tank once the project is under way, rendering them financially unfeasible. Such is the scarcity of skilled contractors in areas like Cardiff where an astonishing amount of building is going on that there is very little choice when it comes to builders. Until more builders become experienced in these areas there is little hope of pushing the sustainable agenda, especially when architects are so peripheral to the process.

Conclusion

As Tim Anstey, Katja Grillner and Rolf Hughes have so appositely enquired in *Architecture and Authorship* 'who is to be identified with the role of authoring in architecture – who is to be excluded from such an account?'²³ I found myself, in the course of writing this paper, gravitating from a position pro-professional architect to a position broadly supportive of the owners themselves. These people had learnt a great deal in the process of developing and extending their own homes – this highly positive process clearly itself adding to the degree of engagement that they felt with the place as home. However a sense of despair creeps in when I consider the near total disengagement with issues of sustainability presented by these extensions. Gareth and Belinda had done more homework than Rachel and David who might have benefited from a checklist of issues to consider, or being made to articulate their desires more precisely. If, like Gareth and Belinda, they had put the relationship with the garden on the agenda they might not have ended up with a bathroom on the critical south facing façade.

Although none of the informants wanted to repeat the process they all talked of further changes that they felt their houses needed. Such ideas fit in with those expressed by the

²³ Tim Anstey, Katja Grillner, Rolf Hughes (eds.), *Architecture and Authorship* (London: Black Dog, 2007), p.10.

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anthropologist Sarah Pink who writes of the home ‘as a necessarily incomplete project’ constantly subject to change whether in reality or in the imagination of its inhabitants²⁴ Brown, observes that the home owners are embarking on ‘a creative journey that allows for reflexivity and personal discovery and the representation of autobiographic content in the materiality of the home’. Indeed it is role of self building in the formation of identity that she emphasise in her study of self builders. In justifying her findings she tries to correlate them with current thinking on the measuring of ‘well being’ - in particular the work of Christie and Nash on *The Good Life*²⁵, and illustrates how fundamental participation and creativity are to any definition of human needs.²⁶ The extensions and conversions that I have discussed in this paper are not all particularly aesthetically pleasing, in the usual sense of the word - they have different qualities, ones not usually addressed an architectural discourse.²⁷ The major factor here seems to be the investment of time and thought put, by the owners, into their homes, giving the work a highly personal quality even though, paradoxically they might appear to outsiders to be deeply generic.²⁸ If, as Mary Douglas suggests ‘we had to choose an index of solidarity from the time-space structure of our homes, the strongest indicator would not be the stoutness of the enclosing walls but the complexity of co-ordination’.²⁹ It is in some sense the history of the extension project, its complexities that ties the house together.

²⁴ Pink, Sarah, *Home Truths: Gender, domestic objects and everyday life* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), p.57.

²⁵ I. Christie and L. Nash (eds.), *The Good Life* (London: Demos, 1998).

²⁶ Jackson, T., and N. Marks, ‘Found Wanting’ in I Christie and L. Nash (eds.), *The Good Life*, pp.31-40. Cited in Brown, ‘Identity and Narrativity’, p.269.

²⁷ This point is emphasised by Neal Leach, ‘Belonging: Towards a Theory of Identification with Space’ in Jean Hillier and Emma Rooksby (eds.) *Habitus: A Sense of Place* (Ashworth: Aldershot, 2002), pp. 297-311 (298).

²⁸ We explore an extreme version of this process in Flora Samuel and Sarah Menin ‘Self building’ in Jo Odgers, Flora Samuel, Adam Sharr (eds.), *Primitive, Original Matters in Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2006).

²⁹ Mary Douglas, ‘The idea of home: a kind of space’, *Social Research*, 1991, 58, 1, p.305-306..

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British people are, increasingly taking their homes in hand - in 2005 the average person spend 15% of their day on 'repairs and gardening',³⁰ whilst the DIY market in Britain expanded by 77% over the period 1990 to 2000.³¹ Significantly DIY is classified as a 'leisure' activity by the office of national statistics. Why it ceased to be classified as a necessity and translated into a pleasure is a thought provoking question that is at the heart of this discussion. Here enshrined in the methodology of the government's statistical data is a belief in the importance of DIY as a pleasurable, self affirming act, though the cynical might suggest that it is solely a justification of high levels of VAT on DIY products and services.

The picture I describe here is of two groups, the owners (and potential clients) and the architects, almost fatally divided. When an earlier version of this paper was presented at the Sheffield conference in November 2007, one member of the audience made a comment to the effect that it was lucky my informants did not want to work with architects as he didn't think that 'we' architects would want to work with them either. For Dovey 'the key role of architects is to join design imagination to the public interest; it is to catch the public imagination with visions of a better world'.³² Certainly this is the case with public architecture which should obviously be the territory of the architect, but the situation in the home is a great deal less clear. There seems to me to be room for architecture to be taught at a really basic level, perhaps in adult education classes, through the medium of the home building magazines or through quick one off fixed fee consultations with an architect. At the very least some assistance could be available for the reading of plans, or more effort made to generate legible visual form. Anyone who has worked through countless plans with first year

³⁰ www.statistics.gov.uk/STATBASE/ssdataset.asp?vlnk=9503. Accessed 7.9.7.

³¹ [www. Verdictonline.co.uk/VerdictReports/EuroDIY01PRESS.HTM](http://www.Verdictonline.co.uk/VerdictReports/EuroDIY01PRESS.HTM). Accessed 7.9.7

³² Kim Dovey, 'The Silent Complicity of Architecture' in, Jean Hillier and Emma Rooksby (eds.) *Habitus: A Sense of Place* (Ashworth: Aldershot, 2002), pp. 238-296 (294).

Suburban self build

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students knows that there is a real craft to planning, interweaving these considerations of use with a response to environmental conditions, particularly light. I refuse to believe that these issues are just purely aesthetic and therefore bound up with complex power struggles to do with taste. They are more to do with the space in use, but then where does use begin and end? I do not believe that the self builders were as good at organising space as a reasonably well trained architect. In the end I am forced to accept two, perhaps contradictory, beliefs – the first that self build is an important and empowering activity,³³ the second that architects have much to offer in the design of the home.³⁴ As Dovey observes ‘from within the field of the design’ it is necessary to ‘acknowledge yet ignore Bourdieu’s work because it does not offer an easy way forward’.³⁵

Images and credits

1. David and Rachel’s extension. Rear view. Photograph Flora Samuel
2. David and Rachel’s extension. Interior photograph by David.
3. Belinda and Gareth’s extension. Rear view. Photograph Flora Samuel
4. Pete and Sarah’s extension under construction. Photograph Flora Samuel
5. Interior of Belinda and Gareth’s extension. Photograph by Belinda.
6. Interior of David and Rachel’s extension. Photograph by David.

Biography

Flora Samuel is an architect and writer who teaches at the University of Bath Department of Architecture and Civil Engineering where she is Director of Studies for the MArch. She has published extensively on the subject of Le Corbusier and is currently in the process of amalgamating teaching and research through the development of a highly interdisciplinary project on what might constitute the ideal home in Britain today. She is Associate Editor of *arq*.

³³ Daniel Miller (ed.), *Home Possessions* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p.11.

³⁴ Bourdieu himself has pointed out the futility of denouncing one set of aesthetic values only to try to secure aesthetic recognition for their opposite, whilst still remaining within the constraints of the aesthetic game. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1984), p.48.

³⁵ Dovey, ‘The Silent Complicity of Architecture’, p.295

