

Suburban Self-build

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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, formerly 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 the 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

My paper is located in suburban Cardiff; the subject is the house extension, the practitioners, who are 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 homeowners 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 of areas. The value of this practice, if indeed it is a form of practice, depends greatly upon our perception of the architecture profession's claim to aesthetic authority and upon the degree to which we acknowledge the act of building as central to the processes of identity formation, played out 'narratively'.¹

Here I will explore the ideas and values expressed by the home owners, sources of design inspiration, the role of the 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, 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 on their own terms, looking at their original objectives and aspirations, even if this goes against every grain of my own architectural sensibilities or '*habitus*', which—in Pierre Bourdieu's terms is '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 the 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 anthropologists and ethnographers who have made it the focus of their studies, via journals such as *Home Cultures*.⁴

Self-build

The 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 in this process. The wide variety of material on the web, on the shelves of the high street stationers' WHSmith and in our libraries pertaining to the issue of home extensions, does little to further the cause of the RIBA professional.⁷ Time and time again the

¹ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, (Oxford: Polity Press, 1991), p. 53.

² 'Introduction to First Edition', Jean Hillier and Emma Rooksby (eds.), *Habitus: A Sense of Place*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), p. 21. Each of us carries with us a range of different types of 'habitus'. If operating in my parent's habitus the degree of synergy between the owners and myself is greater.

³ Kim Dovey, 'The Silent Complicity of Architecture', in Hillier and Rooksby, *Habitus*, p. 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; Cf. *Home Cultures*, Berg Publishers, (2004-current).

⁵ *Homebuilding & Renovating* (1999-2008); www.homebuilding.co.uk, [accessed 2007].

⁶ Cf. Roni Brown, 'Identity and Narrativity

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

- ⁷ Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) is the professional body of architects in Britain.
- ⁸ In the words of the *House-Extension* website 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'; House-Extension.co.uk, *Planning Permission Using an Architect, Architectural technologist or Chartered Surveyor*; www.house-extension.co.uk/planning/use_an_architect.htm, [accessed 2007].
- ⁹ 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.
- ¹⁰ C. Leadbeater, 'Amateurs a 21st Century Remake', *RSA Journal*, (June 2003): 22-25. Cited in Brown, 'Identity and Narrativity', p. 263.
- ¹¹ Katherine MacInnes, 'Here's One I Designed Earlier: How Architects Can Capitalise on the Growing Self-Build Market', *Architectural Design*, (64)(1994): xvi-xvii.
- ¹² The names of the informants have been changed for publication. All quotes from informants are from interviews carried out by myself at their homes, over a period of a few weeks.

architect is depicted as an expendable figure who is perhaps of some use in the drawing of plans that are necessary to obtaining various statutory permissions. There is no delineation between the architect, architectural technologist, or indeed the chartered surveyor, all are perceived equal to the task.⁸ Paul Hymers, in his book *Home Conversions*, 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.'⁹ 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 helping to add several zeros to the client's envisaged fee. In doing so he reinforces what might be called a new 'culture of amateurism',¹⁰ 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 reliable information on the subject of exactly how many people choose to employ an architect and why so few do. The RIBA has no formal statistics on how many domestic clients choose not to use an architect, but K. MacInnes in an article on self-build in *Architectural Design*, has asserted that only 6% of self-builders contract an architectural firm.¹¹ 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 and so give higher tender figures, a further financial disincentive for the potential client, already daunted by the prospect of an 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 the study. All the properties are of the same type: three bedroom, pebbledash semi-detached houses from the 1950s, indeed all of them are on the same block. The houses are currently worth around £300-400 000, which is 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, formerly Environmental Scientist), Pete (Tax Inspector) and Sara (part-time Tesco management), I chart their different stories.¹²

Rachel and David's is the largest extension with a contract sum of roughly £100 000. It has a single storey added to the side and back of the house and a loft-conversion in the roof to house a new bedroom 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 timber, the kitchen flooring is slate and the kitchen tops are 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 and in doing so creating a downstairs WC and utility room in 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 Sarah Beaney (of the Channel 4 television programme, *Property Ladder*) says 'always to allow 10% for extras', but clearly neither of the projects 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



Fig. 1. David and Rachel's extension, rear view. Photo: Flora Samuel; Fig. 2. David and Rachel's extension, interior. Photo: David.

Fig. 3. Belinda and Gareth's extension, rear view. Photo: Flora Samuel; Fig. 4. Pete and Sarah's extension under construction. Photo: Flora Samuel.

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].

The owners were still very much embroiled in the process when I visited them in Autumn 2007. My informants are all known to one another and they are friends and acquaintances of mine. They are all in their late 30s and occupy the 2000 census band 4, 'administrative and secretarial occupations'.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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 interest in 'symbolic capital', associated by Bourdieu with aesthetic taste, the production of which is, in Dovey's terms, 'the architect's key market niche'.¹⁵

This is a group of people who may be rich enough to employ architects but remain completely alienated by the profession. Instead such homeowners turn to builders, surveyors, technicians or friends, indeed anyone who can produce the plans necessary to get through the process of obtaining planning permission. Armed with a CAD package the individual cuts and pastes standard windows, cavity walls etc. onto drawings for fees as small as £50.¹⁶ He is then frequently asked to put together the necessary information for Building Regulations submission. The resultant building, although rarely beautiful, is often deeply satisfying to the homeowner and a source of great pride.

None of the informants were entirely inexperienced in the business of construction. Rachel's father had done several extensions himself and 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 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 referring to, the house itself providing the starting point for discussion.¹⁷ My prior knowledge of the couples would turn out to be both a benefit, as they were more relaxed, and a problem—they did not want to offend me. I did not want the interviewees to feel constrained because they knew I was an architect, albeit one who had stopped practicing. I told the interviewees that I just wanted to know their feelings

¹³ Cf. National Statistics, *Standard Occupational Classification* (2000); www.statistics.gov.uk/methods_quality/ns_sec/soc2000.asp, [accessed 2008].

¹⁴ Research into the readership of *Build It* magazine gives some insight into who 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. See: AMA Research 2003, *The UK Self-Build Housing Market*, 2nd edn., (Cheltenham: AMA Research, 2003). Cited in Brown, 'Identity and Narrativity', p. 270.

¹⁵ 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 MA: Harvard, 1984), p. 57.

¹⁶ It is easy to find these technicians on the web. Brown discusses their usage in Brown, 'Identity and Narrativity', p. 279.

¹⁷ On reflection I think it would have been more appropriate to video these conversations with my informants as they walked round their extensions and spoke about what they felt. I would then have been able to tell something about

their very physical responses to their own homes, from the way that they moved through the buildings, or the ways in which they touched the surfaces. For an account of such a method see; Sarah Pink, *Home Truths: Gender, Domestic Objects and Everyday Life*, (Oxford: Berg, 2004).

- ¹⁸ Particularly helpful in creating the questionnaire was; Thomas F. Burgess, *A General Introduction to the Design of Questionnaires for Survey Research*, (Leeds: University of Leeds, 2003), available: www.leeds.ac.uk/iss/documentation/top/top2.pdf, [accessed 8 September 2007].
- ¹⁹ 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. Cf. Bernard Rudofsky, *Architecture Without Architects*, (London: Academy, 1965).

about their extensions and why they did them the way that they did. I also said that I was interested in why people did not choose to employ an architect and whom they employed instead.¹⁸

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 in order to dramatise my own findings.¹⁹ 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’ from 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 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 more fulsome: they wanted a new kitchen; they 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



Fig. 5. Interior of Belinda and Gareth’s extension. Photo: Belinda; Fig. 6. Interior of David and Rachel’s extension. Photo: David.

anything else that we might be pushed to consider 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 the particular design considerations and had the language to articulate themselves, 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 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 spoil 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 to 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 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 your duty to mirror the house next door—even though they are not close to the couple next door.

'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 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 obtain planning permission. 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 and employed him 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', from Belinda, 'not really'. Clearly they 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. A structural engineer designed the foundations while the 'builder just made it solid'. Gareth himself had written the specification together with his colleague.

Pete and Sara had gone down a rather different route. Some years ago they 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 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 over scaled. 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 was a unanimous, 'absolutely not'. However, the builder had gone through it with Rachel and David clearly stating what was included in the tender price.

The most critical decision in the whole process was the choice of builder as much of the process seemed to be reliant on his skill and integrity. Fortunately all the couples seem to have chosen well. Four builders tendered for Rachel and David's job and the decision of 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 and finally they employed a builder who had worked with Rachel's father on a previous occasion. In spite of the 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 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 en-suite bathroom in the loft, which he put on the rear elevation when it could have been positioned in 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. Their chosen builder 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 roof lights (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 the neighbouring extension and for the builder's convenience. Gareth chose PVC windows although Belinda preferred timber. Pete and Sara chose PVC because they 'matched the rest of the house', as if 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 it to 'blend in'. Although the project had only just started on-site, their builder had already made suggestions about creating spaces for storage that they found helpful.

All the couples 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 Gareth's words; '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 did not make any enquiries as to how much this might cost. 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-making, the technician’s drawings might not look so very different to those of an architect, so there is no point in paying several hundred pounds extra for them. Then there is the question of whether people can really tell the difference between a space designed by an architect and that designed by a technician. My suspicion is that, very often, they can’t. Whether this is because of ‘nature or nurture’ is a very intriguing point that has its origins in the work of Plato and which can also be seen in the work of Le Corbusier, amongst others.²⁰ For Bourdieu however, the idea that aesthetic experience might in some way be innate or universal rather than social, would be yet another misleading belief that keeps ‘arbiters of taste’²¹ in their dominant roles.²² 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 prerequisites of amateur home-making and building’ instead, and perhaps paradoxically, ‘the desire to achieve an individualised and personalised home, appears fundamental.’²³

²⁰ Cf. Flora Samuel, *Le Corbusier in Detail*, (London: Architectural Press, 2007), p. 39.

²¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 16.

²² Dovey, ‘The Silent Complicity of Architecture’, p. 289.

²³ Brown, ‘Identity and Narrativity’, p. 278.

I asked Rachel and David if they were shown examples of extensions designed by architects and extensions designed by builders and technicians, and whether they thought they would be able to tell the difference.²⁴ The answer was ‘probably not’, although Rachel did concede that work 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 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 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 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’ of what they wanted.

²⁴ Brown indicates that some of her informants had difficulty in envisaging the size of the spaces that they were building. *Ibid.*, p. 280.

From my reading of the magazine *Grand Designs*, I had thought that its instigator, Kevin McCloud had done more in Britain to further the cause of architects than anyone else in recent years; his programme of the same name is 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 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 didn’t think it was a consideration. Gareth and Belinda said that they would have gone to some length 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 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 £5 000 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, in my experience, is the reality of homeowners who feel a degree of concern about the environment in Britain. Builders often look on such ideas with incredulity, making them very difficult and costly to implement. A provisional sum of £1 000 for solar panels, written into a tender document by an ignorant builder, quickly translates to £6 000 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 such an astonishing amount of building work is taking place, 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?’²⁵ I found myself, in the course of writing this paper, gravitating from a position that was pro-professional architects 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 itself clearly 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. 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 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 inhabitants.²⁶ Brown observes that the homeowners 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’.²⁷ Indeed, it is the role of self-building in the formation of identity that she emphasises 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*,²⁸ and illustrates how fundamental participation and creativity are to any definition of human needs. The extensions and conversions that I have discussed in this paper are not particularly aesthetically pleasing, in the usual sense of the word, they have different qualities, ones not usually addressed in architectural discourse.²⁹ The major factor seems to be the investment of time and thought by the owners, which gives the work a highly personal quality, even though paradoxically, they might appear to outsiders to be deeply generic.³⁰

British people are increasingly taking their homes in hand—in 2005 the average person spent 15% of their day on ‘repairs and gardening’,³¹ whilst the DIY market in Britain expanded by 77% over the period 1990 to 2000.³² 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

²⁵ Tim Anstey, Katja Grillner and Rolf Hughes (eds.) *Architecture and Authorship*, (London: Black Dog, 2007), p. 10.

²⁶ Pink, *Home Truths*, p. 57.

²⁷ Cf. T. Jackson 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.

²⁸ Christie and Nash, *The Good Life*.

²⁹ This point is emphasised by Neal Leach, ‘Belonging: Towards a Theory of Identification with Space’, in Hillier and Rooksby, *Habitus*, pp. 297-311 (298).

³⁰ We have explored an extreme version of this process; Flora Samuel and Sarah Menin, ‘Self-building’ in Jo Odgers, Flora Samuel and Adam Sharr (eds.), *Primitive, Original Matters in Architecture*, (London: Routledge, 2006).

³¹ Cf. National Statistics; www.statistics.gov.uk/STATBASE/ssdataset.asp?vlnk=9503, [accessed 7 September 2007].

³² Cf. Verdict (1998-2008); www.

Verdictonline.co.uk/VerdictReports/
EuroDIY01PRESS.HTM.,
[accessed 7 September 2007].

pleasurable, self-affirming act, though the cynical might suggest that it is solely a justification for high levels of VAT on DIY products and services.

The picture I describe here is of two groups almost fatally divided: the owners (and potential clients) and the architects. 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'.³³ Certainly, this is the case with public architecture, which should obviously be the territory of the architect but the situation in the home is less clear. It seems to me that there is room for architecture to be taught at a really basic level, perhaps in adult education classes, through the medium of the home-building magazine or through quick one-off fixed fee consultations with an architect. At the very least, some assistance could be made 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 architecture students knows that there is a real craft to planning, interweaving the considerations of use with a response to environmental conditions, particularly light. I refuse to believe that these issues are purely about aesthetics and therefore bound up with complex power struggles of taste. They are more to do with the space in use, but then where does use begin or 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: firstly, that self-build is an important and empowering activity,³⁴ secondly, that architects have much to offer in the design of the home.³⁵ 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'.³⁶

³³ Kim Dovey, 'The Silent Complicity of Architecture', p. 294.

³⁴ Cf. Daniel Miller (ed.), *Home Possessions*, (Oxford: Berg, 2001).

³⁵ Bourdieu himself has pointed out the futility of denouncing one set of aesthetic values for another, whilst still remaining within the constraints of the aesthetic game. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 48.

³⁶ Dovey, 'The Silent Complicity of Architecture', p. 295.

