Women’s Home-made Houses

Sex, Gender and Self-build Housing in Australia 1970-2014

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Abstract

Caroline Denigan has conducted a feminist mixed-method study documenting women’s self-build housing in Australia 1970-2014. The study explores the ways in which sex and gender contribute to the absence of female self-builders from the record and seeks to correct it.

“Self-build” emerges as an inclusive term in a literature where various phrases referring to common practices are used across a variety of disciplines. The documentation of Australian women’s self-build activity in previous research suffered from deficiencies due to the omission of evidence, and problems with how evidence was gathered and conceptually framed. Within a transdisciplinary approach and using standpoint theory, material for the study was gathered through participant observation of trainee builders, an open-ended questionnaire addressed to male and female self-builders, content analysis of Owner Builder and Earth Garden magazines, field interviews (predominantly with female self-builders), and an on-line survey. A grounded-theory approach to analysis was adopted and each source built upon emergent themes.

The construction industry cast a very long shadow on women self-builders. Through a variety of means its anti-woman culture and practice made self-build more difficult for them. Gendered social patterns of home and work life further complicated self-build for women. As was common with other home-based work of women, their self-build was not necessarily seen as having a monetary value and so was very frequently given no intrinsic value and diminished or ignored. This had a flow-on in terms of relating to others and building. The work women did in building their own houses, for example, was frequently conflated with their un-paid work as mothers or parents or as wives or partners. In the latter case, when working with a male, they often took, or were cast in, an assistive role. That was very much in contrast to what was reported by men. Self-build however proved to be an effective housing strategy and was used by women to build houses and re-build themselves, physically, psychologically and socially as strong, independent and, in contrast to industry stereotypes, capable builders. Indeed, their distance from the industry allowed them to re-conceptualise their self and their space in new ways that centred and valued women.
Introduction

Alberti’s fifteenth-century treatise, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, is explicitly offering us an architectural vision of how the boundary between the public and the private ought to be built and maintained. At the same time, it is a treatise on how patriarchal authority ought to be exercised in the household outlining a particular intersection between the spatial occupation of the husband, always exposed to the outside world, and those of the wife who is sequestered deep in the recesses of the house. (Birmingham 2002, p. 94).

Architecture has historically had a special relation to economic and political power. Requiring control over enormous resources – whether governmental or capital – buildings also express the fantasies of individuals; the actualization of abstract plans whose meaning (to the builder) may be more symbolic and self-referential than material… How do people with the power to control their physical environments project their desires onto it? How do those with less control negotiate spaces that are structured by others? (Bingaman, Sanders & Zorach 2002, p. 5).

Australian women have built and continue to build their own houses. Reading scholarly accounts of the practice of self-build housing, however, one would never come to that conclusion. As in many academic fields women have been written out of the record and it has been left to feminist researchers to write them in. The aim of this thesis is to correct that situation and write in to the academic record accounts of women who built their own houses.

In order to achieve this, I first assess the extent to which women are represented in the existing literature of self-build housing and investigate the nature of those depictions. Secondly, I begin to identify deficits and misrepresentation in the record. Thirdly, I counter the specific misrepresentations found and redress and rebalance what is known with careful documentation of the experiences of Australian women self-builders. Finally, this study questions the relationships between self, others and environments, and explores women’s efforts to define and redefine themselves, their relationships and the houses they live in.
If we search Australian popular culture accounts of self-build housing, we find some evidence of women’s activities. We meet a woman, heavily pregnant, who clambered onto the roof of the house she was building to give a sub-contractor instruction on cladding dormer windows. We meet women who toil beside male partners, going home at the end of the day to care for children or prepare meals while their husbands rest. We meet a woman who carried tonnes of rock up from a valley floor to build a stone house and we come to know of communities of women building their own houses and sharing knowledge of building among themselves. We must look long and hard, but their stories are there scattered among the much more numerous accounts of heroic men. Of these untrained female self-builders, around only 30 are mentioned in magazines published between 1970 and 2015, while only a handful would break into the formal construction sector to gain employment.

The examples above foreshadow how the experience of females, in building their own houses, differ from those of males. The female body differs from the male body, the influence of procreative capacities on behaviour at times results in differing physical opportunities. Gender also plays a large part. The disproportionately high domestic workloads women carry in the home contribute to different experiences from their male counterparts. Ideas about what it means to be a builder dovetail neatly into what it means to be a man; women, however, must negotiate what it means to be strong or skilled, a builder or a woman. Amid the trials of self-build, women must also engage as outsiders with a construction industry that remains, more often than not, hostile to them. This can be seen in the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures that in 2010-11 88% of all people employed in construction were males, and construction remains the most male dominated industry in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012). By the time the final paragraphs of this account of their travails have been read, the reader will have a good understanding of their impressive handiwork and the issues self-build women confront.

The time it has taken for this project to be completed means that it is at once historical and contemporary. The bulk of the material was collected between 1998 and 2003, while a 2014 on-line survey was used to explore further some aspects of the qualitative findings. Fortunately, the accounts rendered by the hardy women and
men who took the researcher into their confidence remain fresh and pertinent. Unfortunately, there has been little change within the construction sector, except the imposition of regulations to restrict self-build in most Australian States and Territories.

The Researcher

While I have not yet built a house for my own use, built environments have been the focus of much of my life. My play as a child often involved building cubbies and tiny civil engineering works such as carefully sculpted bridges in the sandpit, complete with flooded terrain around the mounded sand. I was free to follow these unfeminine childhood pursuits unhindered. I first noticed hindrance in my teens, when I tried to enrol in technical drawing, but that obstruction was as much about race and class, as sex or gender. The Year Ten students from the other end of the wing where, not coincidentally, the indigenous students and those not destined for university were clustered by those administering the school, were timetabled to do technical drawing. Those supposedly less academic students taking technical drawing were all males. It wasn’t questioned. It was seen as natural. The unseen hand of Catholic education guided the girls away from such masculine pursuits into the more ladylike arts, and if, as I did, they requested access to unfeminine areas of knowledge reasons could be found to divert them. The exclusion of females was not even a question needing an answer; “It’s not an academic subject”, “The timetable doesn’t allow it.”

The timetable at my new high school did allow it. Sitting in class on that first day of “tech drawing” was thrilling. Finally, I had access to the secret knowledge. I diligently powdered my page, gingerly held the t-square and drew a carefully measured border. And so it began: I was initiated into the masculine domain of building and construction.

My time at school was curtailed by education’s incompatibility with parenthood. Life as a single parent, however, brought new experiences that further fuelled my quest for an understanding of housing and built environments that could contextualise my experiences. It was a time of being homeless with my family, of the struggle to pay rent typical of a single mum on “welfare”, and economics that restricted my search
for housing to the less salubrious areas in private rentals and the stigmatisation of public housing. I also knew first-hand the unspeakable violence that many women endured as a consequence of insecure housing and independent efforts to keep a roof over their children’s heads. I dreamed of self-sufficiency and drew home-made houses with off-grid power and passive solar design, implementing such plans was well beyond my means. The Council of Adult Education Mud Brick Building course I took did nothing to dim my enthusiasm for self-build housing.

At 21, a single mother of three, I enrolled at university to study architecture, just as I had planned to at the age of 13. In my first year studying architecture on campus, 1986, I had joined nine other women in a class of one hundred. Rather consistently I bumped up against the male profession of architecture. I often felt I was being re-socialised to identify with male heroes and processes and ways of being and that I should hide that I was a woman and concerned about women’s lives. I realised I was not alone in this when one of my classmates exclaimed “Archi women have balls!”

Rather than hide my interests I took every opportunity to explore them, despite a degree of condemnation. One particular incident left a lasting impression on me. In a class on professional practice the students were given sample letters that an architect might use in their practice. One of these letters was addressed to “Ms Overly Buxom, 69 Carnal Lane, St Kilda”, the Melbourne suburb of St Kilda being synonymous with prostitution. For me this tacit support of prostitution allied the profession of architecture to an institution that preyed on women and abused their human rights. Perhaps this was part of why, as a woman architecture graduate, I still felt devoid of the power to make built environments conform to my designs.

While studying, and living in public housing, I worked as a researcher for a Tenants Group on the fringe of Melbourne. As with many former housing commission estates the housing was of poor design, often featured construction inferior to the standard required and had few local amenities and little infrastructure. With the group, consisting mainly of women, a participatory post occupancy evaluation of the local houses was designed and undertaken; we produced the report *Filling in the Gaps* (Denigan 1992). At the time sole parent women and their children made up 60% of
all public tenant households and 87% of all female sole parents were non-home owners (Denigan 1993).

The disjuncture between my lived experience and the aspirations of the profession prompted me to participate in the Women’s Winter School of Architecture and Feminism where I met many women with similar concerns. I learned to design conventional buildings while pursuing an independent reading program focused on women and the gender-based disparity of the built environments in which they live. I didn’t understand immediately why, in the face of so many obstacles to suitable housing, Australian women did not build their own houses. And then I found *Little Houses on Women’s Land* by Tee Corinne, and works by several others, which showed that women did so in other places (Corinne 1998). For me the environments documented were gendered spaces, but not gendered in the traditional sense by “habitual use or metaphor” (Bingaman, Sanders & Zorach 2002, p. 4) but gendered as women’s spaces by their makers, and in their making. This discovery led me to investigate whether women in Australia made their own little houses; so commenced the journey that led to this research project.

What I saw in the housing built by the women documented by Corinne (1998) and the Blackfoot women (Blue Evening Star 1995), Sub-Saharan Women (Prussin 1995) and in South African vernacular traditions (Van Wyk 1998) was that cultural practices determined whether or not women built.

**The Research**

This project had its genesis in the final undergraduate project of my Bachelor of Architecture, my first investigation of women’s self-build housing. It showed that Australian women do indeed build their own houses. My readings around that time were formative in establishing the context of this study, as I show later in this introduction. Undertaking a doctorate has provided an opportunity to shed light on the experiences of Australian women who have done so.
Gaps in the Literature
In 2000 Henry Glassie, a leading scholar of vernacular architecture, a field documenting localised building traditions, said “Man builds the house, woman builds the home within” (Glassie 2000, p. 66). At times, it seemed that Graham Holland, author of the only major Australian study of self-build housing held the same belief. His book *Emoh Ruo* (1988) documents the experience of some Sydney owner builders. Surprisingly it is a book about men, though the title gives no indication of that. While it makes many interesting points about the experiences of Sydney men who build their own houses it obscures the efforts and achievements of women to house themselves.

It’s important to understand Holland’s study, as detailed in *Emoh Ruo*, (Holland 1988) to avoid the problems he encountered. The main problem was one of evidence, specifically what was considered to be evidence, how evidence could be collected and thirdly the interpretation of that evidence.

For Holland evidence was sufficient even if it inadvertently omitted the opinions and experience of half of the population who were coincidently women. In his book, he mentions that 98% of his sample were men. He went on to assume that this was evidence that women did not undertake the practice, rather than his sampling method, that is, who he considered capable of providing evidence, was skewed. Apparently for Holland the words of men constituted evidence but not so the words of women. They were superfluous. Not only did Holland’s sample exclude women but he also discussed it in universal terms as if there was no gendered sample bias. The issue of sampling is discussed further in Chapter 2.

This leads to the second matter, method, meaning how evidence of self-build housing may be collected, particularly to counter the exclusion of women. If their words are given the status of evidence, ways must be found to gather women’s words. Identifying that a recruitment strategy only included participants from a distinct section of the population should lead a researcher to question the deficiencies of that strategy. Holland drew his participants from the files of the NSW Registrar of Owner Builders; to gather the evidence of women may have been as simple as sending two
or more copies of his survey and asking all adults within the household to complete one and indicate their sex on the survey.

Holland was faced with a third difficulty. The discipline of architecture did not equip him with a conceptual framework sufficient to understand and describe some of the evidence he gathered. Not only did he not understand and report the very biases in his sample he misattributed the absence of women as reflecting their absence from the construction industry. Without exposure to the fledgling area of women’s studies Holland could not easily conceptualise phenomena such as stereotypes, gender blindness, male universalising, or the roots of sexism and gendered practices in the home and the workplace. Without a sufficiently broad conceptual framework, evidence of women’s experiences present cannot be understood nor accurately described. Therefore the research will address the gaps methodologically, empirically and conceptually in Holland’s work.

This research is about reassessing the gender bias and revealing women’s many and varied roles in the process of self-building a house. Many other sources are examined in my study with the view to identifying if and where the self-build experiences of women are documented. Academic and non-academic sources are included as these liminal practices have hardly risen to the attention of academia.

**Conceptual Framework**

In understanding women’s experiences of building a house for their own use two concepts become important: what is meant by the term self-build housing and what is much more fundamental, how the self is conceptualised. Since Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex*, “He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—he is the Other” (Beauvoir 1953, p. xvi) woman’s selfhood has been much discussed by women within academia. The literature is immense. But how is the self conceptualised? Theorists’ ideas about the self vary and take in a range of concerns. Some of the more widely-discussed problems include: female selflessness and the roles of sex and gender in relation to the self, the relationship between the mind and the body, identity as superseding the self, self-determination, agency and autonomy and other issues of contested power, embodiment or corporeality as central to selfhood and the
role of the self in understanding space. These issues are explored further later in this chapter.

**Self-Build Housing**

One of the differences between this work and Holland’s is that this project looks at self-build housing rather than owner-built housing. People build their own houses in a variety of circumstances. The formal definition of an owner-builder is a person, and these days usually their partner, who have registered with the state-based registrar as an owner-builder. They usually have the means to buy land and may contribute their labour to the construction of a house they then own or have a mortgage on. The term implies a distinct class of builder and excludes others. Some self-builders have access to land and construct a house on it, sometimes in groups, often part of formal communities, who do not individually own the specific house or site. Likewise, there are Australians who have, under state housing authority schemes, in groups or individually, built houses they then live within. Ownership is not assured and usually there is some kind of agreement where the individual’s equity remains and they purchase or rent the house back from the authority.

With regard to housing, the term self-build encompasses these and potentially more practices. It is the process by which people construct or cause to be constructed, a house for their own use. In self-build housing the self-builder may act as a builder in an administrative sense or they may physically build. Throughout the conduct of this research, only one or two of the participants exclusively administered the building process and did no hands-on construction at all.

People coming to Australia since the first British invasion have faced the challenge of housing themselves and brought diverse ideas of the ideal house with them. A great many took the challenge into their own hands and built their own houses (Lewis 2000). Over time, as new generations of non-indigenous people were born and raised here, the idea of self-build remained and became a local tradition. Self-build came to the fore, for example, during the post-World War II housing shortage. Discussing that period Tony Dingle said, “most post war owner-builders were wage earners with regular working hours. It took determination and commitment to work at a job all week before spending each weekend or summer evening labouring on a
house for two years or more till it was finished” (Dingle 2000, p. 70). Building your own house before you married was a rite of passage for many men of that era.

The Australian tradition of self-build persisted well after that period. While it remained within the general population it was adopted as a housing strategy by the poor who had some kind of access to land as a response to unaffordable housing. Self-build became the preference of the 1970-80 self-sufficiency movement. Indeed the new settlers fleeing the urban areas were at the forefront of appropriate technology developments such as solar power and wind energy (Pedals 1993) along with low-tech building approaches like mud brick housing (Adobe Guildelines: Mudbrick Building in Victoria 1988) which became quite popular in the 1980s and 90s (Taylor 1981). During that time many multiple-occupancy communities were established on cheap farm lands in places like the NSW Northern Rivers region, which in 2007 still had one of the highest concentrations of such communities in Australia (Fisher 2007, p. 50).

If Dingle is correct in his assertion that Australia’s periodic housing shortages create booms in self-build activity (Dingle 2000, p. 58) tensions will rise as self-builders come up against the contemporary regulatory climate. Over the decades of activity considered in this study the regulations covering owner-builders has changed. While once smiled upon by governments of the left and the right, self-build seems no longer officially supported.

The days of the Government’s assisted self-build like the Victorian urban homesteading, individual self-build and group self-build schemes (Howe 1988, p. 271) operating variously between 1980 and 2005, seem long behind us. The assumption that those undertaking self-build are simply quasi-professional builders attempting to avoid regulation has been taken to heart by governments. Construction industry advocates now have the ears of regulators and have put a restrictive regimen in place designed to limit the practice. Notwithstanding, for a variety of reasons, people have and continue to build their own houses, mostly, it would seem, as registered owner-builders.
Self-build housing has been considered by some as a potential strategy to overcome the housing challenges faced by Indigenous peoples in Australia. Genocidal policies have left a legacy of cultural destruction that includes loss of vernacular traditions and the imposition of inappropriate housing forms (Pascoe 2014). Sonja Peter and Javier Ayora in their report *Self-build: alternative housing procurement in remote Indigenous communities*, document the contemporary examples of self-build in indigenous communities around Australia. The report highlighted that while the indigenous self-builders tend to be very motivated and resourceful individuals, adaptation of self-build across the wider community was not currently feasible (Ayora & Peter 2011). As with the larger Australian community, self-build is not possible without the necessary resources. In her discussion of the issue Stephane Smith pointed out that self-build in Indigenous communities has benefits over housing provided by those outside the community. She quotes community members saying housing is either “given or gotten” (Smith 2008, p. 81) and that housing that is “given” by others fails, while housing you get for yourself does not.

Discussions of self-build housing most frequently revolve around technology, the construction process and the housing itself. Less attention is paid to the experiences of self-builders, to what the process and the house mean to them, their commonalities and range of attributes. What is it that motivates them and what personal resources do they draw upon? It is essential however that in seeking to understand the phenomena we ask about these people about themselves. But how do we understand the self?

**The Self – Gender, Sex and Embodiment**

Marlene Benjamin said in an essay of exploring her own experience of self: “the body is material and real, and yet is also constructed in discourse that is always socially and politically located in time and space. In such discourse, the body is both tied to and separate from the self” (Benjamin 2007, p. 99). In this kind of distinction between the mind and the body, the mind is as a puppet master and the body as a marionette. It is a distinction patterned on a Western meme that is evident in so many ranked oppositional pairings – man/woman, culture/nature, inside/outside and so on,
this pattern, imposed on concepts rather than necessarily flowing from them, is a hierarchal dichotomy.

This hierarchal dichotomy, with its roots in Cartesian philosophy (Meyers 2014), discussed at some length by V. Spike Peterson and Anne Sisson Runyan (Peterson & Runyan 2014, pp., p. 46-7), also underlies the distinction between gender and sex. One’s sex, an immutable biological state of the body, has long been opposed to the socially constructed gender residing in the mind. (Lips 2005, p. 69). Genevieve Lloyd traces this pattern back to Plato’s “subjection of the body to the mind” (Lloyd 1993, p. 7). These categories were seen as different to, mutually exclusive of each other and posited as opposed. Twentieth-century Western ideas about gender supposed that males were hardy and strong, with men rational and intellectual who undertook masculine outdoor pursuits such as hunting and building, while females were supposed to be weak and delicate and as women be emotional and nurturing, pursuing indoor feminine activities (if they were moral) such as tending the home and children. This idea of a set of “natural” cascading correspondences in which one’s sex determines a rigidly defined gender is culturally persistent. Indeed Cordelia Fine pointed out that “for many decades, researchers supposed that masculinity and femininity… [were] polar ends of a single dimension: someone high in masculinity is therefore necessarily low in femininity, and vice versa” (Fine 2017, p. 104). What is clear now about sex and gender is that arbitrary categories, such as what constitutes a particular gender, have been socially constructed and differ across time and cultures. Further many definitions were made to conform to hierarchal dichotomies.

While there are differences between bodies due to the existence of primary and secondary procreative characteristics (Lorber & Moore 2007, p. 5) – and recognising humans are sexually dimorphic, they are more alike than different. The different characteristics of the female and male body, and the experiences they produce, are mediated by the mind. As Judith Lorber and Lisa Jean Moore observe:

Human bodies are not “natural”; they are socially produced under specific cultural circumstances. They are shaped by sociocultural ideals of what female and male bodies should look like and be capable of (and further shaped by national, racial ethnic, and social class ideals for each). (Lorber & Moore 2007, p. 4-5).
But is this in accord with the idea of the self consisting of a mind as puppet master and body as marionette? Do we only interpret and modify the body to fit the demands of the mind? Diana Tietjens Meyers in her discussion of corporeal selfhood criticises this notion when she says, “so potent… is western philosophical privileging of the mental that many prominent contemporary philosophical discussions of selfhood define the self strictly as a psychological or mental phenomena” (Meyers 2014, p.150). How else might the body be understood as part of the self?

Elizabeth Grosz, a proponent of corporeal feminism who discusses and critiques a range of philosophical positions on the body, said “no one yet knows what the conditions are for developing knowledges, representation, models, programs, which provide women with nonpatriarchal terms for representing themselves and the world from women’s interests and points of view.” (Grosz 1994, p.188). She proposes a framework that “acknowledges both the psychical or interior dimensions of subjectivity, and the surface corporeal exposure of the subject to social inscription and training; a model which resists as much a possible dualism and monism” (Grosz 1994, p.188).

An example of a non-dichotomous model of the self, commonly used by health practitioners, is the biopsychosocial model. It has been endorsed by some feminists as more holistic (Morse 1995, p. 274). As the term implies, the body, the mind and the social location together are seen as constituting the self. The business of social location does not just pertain to the usual aspects of identity such as race, class, gender, ableness and so forth, but also the related characteristic, embodiment.

This process by which the body makes space is mediated by the mind, to a point. But it may without thought or intention displace others and their atmospheres, it may interrupt or punctuate their space unwittingly. There are also bodily processes that are autonomous such as breathing, and some that are learned and performed without the mind’s constant oversight. I don’t think about how to hold the hammer, how high to raise my arm, how fast to swing or consciously readjust my arm to make it strike the nail. The eyes and the brain and the hands carry out the task, the body carries out the task with the simple instruction from the mind, hammer in the nail. Though none
of the body’s primary sex organs are involved in this process and other construction processes and very little that can be identified as a secondary characteristic, those embodied female have been deemed incapable of building and excluded. It is important therefore to maintain an awareness of how the female body is part of women’s experiences of self-build. Women have been denied rights over their bodies and excluded due to perceived deficits of their bodies, rather than an actual limitation.

The concept of embodiment is not just a concession to the location of the mind within a body, as if to say that the puppet master lives in the marionette. Beyond acknowledging the mind and body as constituent of one being, embodiment also incorporates the spatial volume of the body, and what might be called its atmosphere, as part of that self. That atmosphere can be understood as what a human body absorbs and eliminates but also the space that permits us to move and our senses to function. It is clear though that the body, the mind and the socio-spatial volume inhabited by the body and its atmosphere form the self. This leaves the questions: where does one person end and another begin, and where does the self end and unembodied space begin?

The location and interaction of the self in space, with its elastic and permeable boundaries and in creating self as negative to space, leaves questions about the boundaries of the self. For females, these boundaries become even more complex with the possibilities of pregnancy. From within their selves females manage the production of new selves separate from their own and contain those new selves until they can self-sustain to some degree outside her body. Philosopher Robin May Schott also identifies embodiment and this procreative capacity as needing renewed attention (Schott 2002, p. 328). This example underscores the permeable nature of the self for humans, their need for intimate socio-spatial volumes and their shared nature of their atmospheres. These characteristics of the female have led to intervention in the boundaries of women’s selves. In many ways, they have come to be defined and restricted by virtue of their bodily capacities. Their uteruses have been and in some cases still are, subject to legal interventions (Hamblin 2017) and the interior of their bodies have been made akin to public space, subject to the
interventions of medicine, the state and the church. What could have served as a positive template for human interaction, the human need to share atmospheres and intimate spaces evident in female procreative capacities, has instead been interpreted through a patriarchal lens, resulting in women’s confinement: a confinement not just through pregnancy and delivery but domestic confinement throughout their lives. It is a confinement that many women challenge and resist, however domestic responsibilities continue to fall disproportionately to women (Baxter 1998, p. 69; Oakley 1974; Simister 2013). It is evident in Glassie’s proscriptive rather than descriptive statement: man builds the house, woman builds the home within.” (Glassie 2000).

This brings us to a second meaning of embodiment, “the materialization, in the concrete designs for buildings, towns and cities… built forms [that] structure space, [a] space… intended for inhabitation by people” (Markus 2002, p. 17). The body and the built environment are intimately interconnected and instantiate power relationships between as people, as inhabitants, users, builders and owners of those environments. Not only is the body actively engaged in self making but the self also makes spaces and places through the process of living. Martina Löwe described the process thus: “in perceiving through our bodies, we form syntheses in our everyday activities as a means of linking together a great multiplicity of objects to form spaces” (Löwe 2006, p. 120).

We do so individually as families and communities, through physical and cultural means indistinguishable from nature not apart from it. In claiming and creating space the self attempts to contain the whole person to create a sustaining and pleasing environment. It attempts to determine which others may approach or cross its threshold, who may know the self and the ways they may be known.

Immersed as we are in the culture of hierarchal dichotomies we attempt to set a boundary, define our house, to achieve the distinction between ourselves and others, to maintain the integrity of the self and often to attain a superior position in relation to others. For when the pattern of hierarchal dichotomies is enforced by capital, as it is so definitively in the housing market, individuals try to achieve the best position
available, as far up the hierarchy of housing possible. During this research project it became evident however that some self-builders try to express and instantiate other cultural patterns, without hierarchal dichotomies, through self-build housing. It wasn’t evident to Holland; could that be because women lead the way?

The Research Context
This project sits in the context of diverse feminist housing and built-environment research and theory, conducted at a time when women were extremely marginalized within the construction sector. Though women have attempted to enter the industry, massive sex and gender disparities persist. Australian women’s employment levels within construction have remained between 6-9% for the last three decades (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017). Stereotypes that females are limited by some kind of sexed-brain based spatial ineptitude, physical weakness, a desire not to get their hands dirty or break a fingernail are common and still circulate widely. That such stereotypes are barriers to women’s inclusion was identified in many feminist critiques, such as those of architecture by Matrix and Weisman. (Matrix Group 1984; Weisman 1992b). Women’s marginal positions in built environments were also explored by feminists in other areas of the academy such as geography and planning (Johnson 1989, 1992; Skjerven 1993).

Sexed and gendered patterns of employment and education have played a role in women’s access to opportunities to learn about building or contribute to shaping their homes and neighbourhoods, towns and cities. Indeed housing designed by and for women (Francis 1981; Levrant de Bretteville 1990; Wekerle 1993b) and women’s efforts to understand and reshape cities were well represented in the literature of the day. (Hayden 1997; Johnson 1992; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 1995) These works describe how gender disparity has become instantiated in the physical world through built environments which directly express the prevailing power relations at the time of construction, discrimination embedded in design (Roberts 1990; Weisman 1992a) and how built environments function to resist changes in gender relations over time.
In those ways gendered power relations are made concrete, and limit women and the ways they may live their lives. For example, one pronounced change to house design over the decades has been the move away from separate kitchens where women toiled in isolation to open concept houses where they toil in plain view. It is yet to be shown whether this break down of the isolation of women foreshadowed greater sharing of household tasks, an oft heard demand of the women’s movement. Explicit discussion of unequal and gendered divisions of labour within the home could be found in much of research of the day, see for examples, Oakley (1974) or Sanday (1981), Hedley (1998) or Mainardi (1970).

A range of other researchers and writers documented the varying housing needs and experiences of a range of women: young women (Cannold-McDonald & Young Women's Housing Collective 1991), lesbians (Corinne 1998; Marsh & Galbraith 1995), and homeless women (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation 1995; Keys Young 1993; Miller 1990; Watson & Austerberry 1986). They highlighted the need to listen to the voices of those women and hear difference but also to note the complexities of difference and anticipate how factors intersect to exacerbate difficulties or enhance opportunities. Notably absent were discussions of migrant and aboriginal women’s housing experiences.

The meaning of home was also widely discussed. Polly Wynn Allen’s scholarly critique of Gillman’s (1988) ideas of home and Friedman’s (1998) work present historical perspectives. One key meaning of home, home as a safe place, emerged as centrally important to women. Women’s struggles for safe and appropriate housing was addressed in communities across the globe by (Brion & Tinker 1980; Cass 1991; Chan 1997; Hamilton Barwick 1993; Miraftab 1993; Pabian 1991, 1993; Reed 1980; Victorian Women's Housing Association ; Wagner & Morgan-Thomas 1995; Watson 1988; Watson & Austerberry 1986) Along with the emergence of a large body of work on domestic violence many researchers and theorists began publishing on emergency housing for women and children for example (Cools 1980; Department of Housing and Construction 1980; Toronto City Council 1988).
Some feminist academics explored home as a workplace, where women’s production and its economic value were acknowledged if not counted (Benería & Roldán 1987; Glazer 1987; McCleary 1982; Oakley 1974). In these examples of home as a space of production and consumption, the role of women in the production of housing remained unconsidered.

In spite of the breadth of this feminist built-environment research, women were still primarily seen as consumers of housing, not producers of it. Entering the construction sector in numbers sufficient and at levels conducive to building differently was unimaginable, and perhaps still is. As amateurs women sought ways to build on their own terms, usually only as individuals, but for the most part this had not yet come to the attention of researchers.

**Structure of the Thesis**
The literature of self-build housing is a disparate one, indicating the subject’s liminal position within the academy. The phenomena are minimally documented across a variety of disciplines, with writings describing people building their own houses but considering only some perspectives on the practice. Self-help housing (Skinner & Rodell 1983), vernacular architecture (Bernstein & Torma 1991), owner-building (Harris 1997), self-developed housing (Wekerle 1993a) and DIY housing (Cox 2016) are just some of the terms used to describe the practice. This study uses the more inclusive term, self-build housing, which encompasses a broader range of Australian practices and allows comparisons between Australian experience and that in other places. Chapter 1 surveys this literature and locates this thesis within it.

Chapter 2 examines in detail past methods used to explore and document self-build, with particular attention to the work of Holland as presented in his book *Emoh Ruo* (Holland 1988). Initially the chapter considers in depth the questions of Holland’s evidence as mentioned earlier, what is considered evidence, how that evidence is gathered and how the evidence is conceptualised. The chapter then moves on to set out a mixed-methods data-collection approach designed to avoid the problems Holland encountered. The main features of that approach include content analysis of
popular magazines *The Owner Builder* and *Earth Garden*, a long questionnaire, participant observation, field interviews, and a targeted on-line survey.

The efforts of people to build their own houses are mediated by the construction industry. Chapter 3 takes the reader into the builder’s nursery to meet some of the young men who will go on to be the master builders and building commission administrators of the future. The researcher employed participant observation to record the experience of training alongside the young men, recording the challenges in harrowing detail. It was not so much of a challenge to acquire skill, understand technologies, master power tools and develop strength but to persist in the face of an industry that fosters a workplace culture hostile to women.

Delving into the machinations of the self-build community was attempted in an altogether different fashion. Through an examination of selected content of the popular magazines, *The Owner Builder* and *Earth Garden*, the perceptions and interests of the community’s self-appointed spokespersons, and to a lesser extent other member of that community, are explored. Articles about building were analysed to reveal gendered patterns of authorship, content, interest in males and females as self-builders and the types of construction those authors and self-builders favoured. Letters were examined to determine the propensity of males and females to write to the magazines and of publishers to share those letters. Covers of the magazines were also examined in order to consider the frequency and nature of the depictions of male and female self-builders. It was not surprising that representations reinforced the ideals of males as builders and heterosexual couples as those being housed.

Early in this project over 200 long questionnaires were sent to a diverse range of Australian self-builders identified as potential respondents. Fifty women and 40 men responded to the questionnaire. Chapter 5 discusses the range of responses to selected questions. From those responses, an intersectional analysis was constructed looking at a range of demographic factors. Perhaps not surprisingly women emerge as champions of change and alternative approaches.
Approaching the final part of the project technological advances permitted the inclusion of an online survey addressing issues identified while conducting the questionnaire as needing further investigation. Analysis of those questions is presented in Chapter 6. The responses detail the perceptions of men and women on the decision-making behaviours of couples, the importance of decision-making for men and women and how important those decisions were in a range of situations. Did men and women care equally, for example, about who decided on paint colours and how the house is sited?

Field interviews gave an opportunity to around 50 people from 35 self-build projects across South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales to speak face-to-face about their experiences. Chapter 7 is an analysis of their transcribed taped field interviews. While the majority of those interviewed were women, some men who were either part of a self-build couple or in some way outliers were interviewed where it was convenient to do so.

The final chapter, Chapter 8, presents a set of conclusions that draw on the material in the preceding five chapters. It brings out the recurring themes and explores the meanings of the evidence accumulated through the diverse methods and offers suggestions for further research. It shows what we can learn about the self from the practice of self-build and provides a comprehensive picture of women’s experiences and the way in which gender impacts that experience.

**Conclusion**

This chapter set out the aims and objectives of the project and the structure of the thesis. In between those important bookends some key topics and background to the research are introduced.

To say that my interest in this area of research was influenced by my own socialisation is perhaps redundant. Nevertheless, this chapter recounted some of the experiences that stirred my curiosity, and showed how the research grew, fed by consternation at the absence of women from accounts of self-build.
Fortunately, feminist research and especially feminist housing research gave many examples of how to counter limited concepts and contextualize a project like this. It also illustrated how feminist concepts made sense of critical issues and foreshadowed the concerns of self-build women to some extent.

Key among methodological concerns were the conceptual frameworks used to contextualize self-build and concepts of the self in particular. Limited ideas about the self, particularly that the self involved in self-build was female, reduced women to irrelevancy and rendered them incapable of self-build. Lorber and Moore were crucial in that regard. Indeed I am indebted to feminists who have “grappled with cultural values and theories of power and control to analyse the complexities of these body-based phenomena” (Lorber & Moore 2007, p. 5). My approach remains one of sharing women’s lived experience, documenting it and acting as some kind of midwife assisting theory to emerge from the female embodied sociospace of women.
1. The Literature of Self-build

Some owner-builders may have only a nominal role with most of the work being done by others, for example a father for his son or vice versa, but, the great majority of owner-builders did most of the work themselves, helped by one of the following: their wife, father, son, uncle, daughter, or father-in-law (Holland 1988, p. 121).

If you tell him how to do something and he won't take heed, that’s bad. Being able to accept instruction from women is something a lot of men have a problem with, even if they love you. Actually, for some of them, especially if they love you, as they have a primordial need for you to admire them. Hence you cannot possibly be superiorly skilled and able to give them advice (Broman 2004, p. 55-6).

In this review of literature, which describes the activity of people building a house for their own use, the main aim is to identify instances where writings on self-build housing, in its various guises, have utilised a form of gendered analysis. In this instance, a gendered analysis might simply identify men and women and describe them, it may discuss interactions between and among them, pay attention to issues of representation, the family and relative power, or identify the way genders are conceptualised. The review will also identify instances where discussion of the above is pertinent but absent.

Sex, Gender and Research

Beth B. Hess and Myra Marx Ferree in their book Analyzing Gender: a Handbook of Social Science Research (1987) identify three phases of gender research and analysis. In the first phase differences between men and women are attributed to biological properties of the individual, or sex-based difference. The second phase, which considered the roles of individuals and their socialisation, attributed this to gender being a product of particular social arrangements, conceptualised however as an individual trait. The third phase recognised that all social systems use gender as an organising category, including work and family arrangements, legal, political and economic systems. This third phase also recognises that gender is mediated by race, class and other factors.
Given the continued absence of women from the construction sector it is also important to consider two further ways gender is portrayed in writings about housing and construction generally. Many times the existence of different genders and sexes goes unacknowledged. A masculine monoculture may be assumed but goes unnamed and unmentioned or gender may be ignored because it is assumed to have no bearing on the matters being discussed. Men and women or males and females are simply not identified. On other occasions, there may be instances where people are identified by sex or gender but no analysis is made, stark differences may be visible in the text, but they are simply not commented on and whatever their significance might be it goes unremarked. Examples of these approaches are exemplified in the next two sections of this chapter.

**Holland and Owner-builders**

Before surveying the literature broadly, it is necessary to look in detail at the most comprehensive study of Australians who built their own houses published to date. Being such a large part of the house construction sector, Holland (1988, p. 226) reported that at the most recent peak of owner-builder activity in the 1980s 25.9% of houses were owner-built, it is surprising how little this phenomena has been studied. Holland’s study covered only a relatively small part of Australia where a unique set of factors were at work in the housing market. The experiences of Sydney owner-builders cannot be generalised to people undertaking self-build projects across Australia. Holland’s study remains the most substantial published research on owner-building to date and is a thorough scholarly exploration of the financial, legal and technical issues faced by a particular group of owner-builders in Sydney in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Holland’s work raises interesting issues of gender. His sample, from the NSW State Register of Owner-Builders (Holland 1988) is, for a variety of reasons, almost exclusively male. No doubt several factors are at work. Holland suggests that the absence of women as owner-builders is a reflection of the lack of women in the building industry. He does not consider for example the work of Game and Pringle (1983) to explain how that may happen or why this might be the case. It is possible
that the dominance of men in the construction sector prevented women from being recognised as owner-builders. Perhaps female exclusion in his sample stems from his view, perhaps a widely held view, of how households are structured. This is evidenced by Holland’s use of the term “head of household” (1988). It is possible that men’s names are the only names listed on the applications associated with the owner-builder project? Perhaps owner-builder permits were issued almost exclusively to males because they were single men, or men in domestic partnerships with other men? That doesn’t seem likely. It could have been that the couple intended the male would indeed do most of the physical work or was the only one who had the skills to do the building. It may have been an accurate rather than a sexist description.

Another possible explanation was suggested by one research participant. Sheree proposed that, in the processes of constructing a self-build house, which includes applying for finance through a lending institution, and then through the process of building permits and approvals through statutory planning authorities, a greater emphasis is placed on the role of men within male-female partnerships, especially when applying for finance, to the point of his name being the only one to be placed on official applications.

Another possible explanation for this phenomenon was that within male-female domestic partnerships one or both partners see it as appropriate for the name of the male partner to be listed as the registered owner-builder. The extent to which such a decision is made with any level of consciousness, intention or agreement between the partners in Holland’s sample can only be a source of speculation. Perhaps the partners see it as easier or “natural” that the male is described as the builder; it may be seen as wise to use the name of the male in order to avoid any potential discrimination against a woman in a non-traditional role, that the paperwork only contains space for one name and it may correspond to a habit or convention of listing the male’s name first, or indeed that there has been some kind of implicit or overt pressure brought to bear upon the couple during the process of registration. However it was achieved, almost no female owner-builders were present in Holland’s sample.
and by inference, if the sample was representative, there were almost no registered female owner-builders in Sydney.

Holland constructs a picture of a typical family with what might be called traditional values. He says owner-builders are “people building the house they wanted for their family for the price they are willing to pay” (Holland 1988, p. 227-8). Given Holland’s sample it is not surprising that the profile of the typical owner-builder presented is that of a male breadwinner, providing for the physical and financial well-being of his dependant wife and children. She corresponds to the “feminine ideal of [the] woman in the home…mediating…the needs and fantasies of individual family members (Matthews 1984, p. 73).” He goes on to say that the Sydney owner-builders were “conscious of the achievement, the satisfaction they gained from it, and the strains placed on them and their families, but they do not make a big fuss about it” (Holland 1988, p. 227-8). That Holland interviewed men almost exclusively for his research, means the opinions of wives and children about the level of “strain” or “fuss” remains speculative. While “most (80%) [of owner-builders surveyed] would do it again, [and] few were disillusioned by what they have been through” (Holland 1988, p. 227-8), one wonders if their families would concur.

Other accounts of the experience of owner-builders were available to Holland, such as those published in the Owner Builder Magazine since 1981. This magazine is mentioned in a paragraph of Emoh Ruo where Holland said that it “dealt with many aspects of owner building, but its bias is toward alternative lifestyle dwellings, particularly those using mud bricks and other labour-intensive construction methods” (Holland 1988, p.228). He states that Sydney owner-builders are “not part of an organized mass movement initiated and led by a few” as if he sees the “alternative” owner-builders that way. He goes on to say that owner building “is not seen as a process of self-awareness through owner-building, and it is doubtful if they are enthusiastic joiners. On the other hand, they are not blinkered individualists doing it themselves because they do not wish to deal with, or cannot cope with other people. In short, they are little different from other Australians” (Holland 1988, p. 228). Holland points to the ordinariness of owner-builders, contrasting them to the
conventional stereotype of counter-culture dropouts. Further evidence of this is shown in the Australian Bureau of Statistics figures he reproduced, showing that:

In 1951-52 owner built houses accounted for 33.27% of all dwellings completed that year. By 1960-61 figure had dropped to 24.31% and in 1970-71 figure had declined further to just 8.81%. Within the following decade however the incidence of owner building rose again to reach 25.9% in 1982-81. In the period of this study owner built housing accounts for around 20 percent of all houses built. (Holland 1988, p. 229).

In his study Holland points out that the definitions used by government agencies which collected information about building and builders have changed only slightly over the years since collection commenced. An owner-builder can be defined as a person who was erecting a building owned by them, who was not “a recognized builder” (Holland 1988, p. 61) and who is not using the services of a contractor to supervise the whole job.

The Literature

Scattered across a variety of disciplines, academic literature contains many examples of people who have built a house for their own use. Reference to the practice is made in the disciplines of architecture, sociology, public policy, urban studies, geography, development studies, and history, under headings such as: architectural history, owner-building, self-help housing, vernacular architecture and human settlement development. Such housing is referred to variously as: do-it-yourself, illegal or informal, self-built, owner-built, self-provided, self-help housing and vernacular. These terms are often used interchangeably and by scholars discussing practices in developed and developing economies sometimes ambiguously describing houses built by the formal, informal or a combination of both segments of the construction sector.

Given the vast array of potential disciplinary locations, this review is wide ranging and investigates all the terms which could be included as self-build. Do-it-yourself housing could include those undertaking self-build as a series of discrete projects done over a longer period of time, owner-building is self-build undertaken by a registered owner-builder, informal or illegal can be self-build where relevant permits
have not been obtained and/or building regulations are not adhered to, self-help housing generally refers to group self-build schemes in developing economies, vernacular architecture refers to self-build or commercially built buildings, but not just houses, constructed in a localised style, while self-provided housing is a catch-all phrase that may include any of the previously identified forms of self-build housing.

This chapter examines peer-reviewed journals, monographs, edited books, and research reports from these various disciplines. Also reviewed are newspaper and magazine articles, newsletters, pamphlets, and websites. The common thread connecting the reviewed material is a description of processes and practices that can be called self-build housing, though often it is not identified as such. This review will highlight two particular aspects in relation to gender: what is said about women and self-building under the terms that identify the practice and a more discursive critique of the literature itself and how gender as well as women are approached. The scattered nature of the literature pertaining to self-build underscores the need for transdisciplinary approach.

**Owner-builder Housing**

Gender is also not discussed in the case of owner-builders, which is the dominant term applied to people who build a house for their own use in Australia and sometimes Canada (Harris 1997). The term is prevalent in the disciplines of construction and architecture and sometimes used by architectural historians. An owner-builder is a “person who carries out… building work pursuant to an owner-builder’s permit” issued by statutory authorities (The Technical Assistance Group Department of Architecture University of Sydney 1981, p. 11). They may do the physical work of constructing their own home, or they may have an administrative role in coordinating and managing the construction process, or some combination of the two. A person takes the role in lieu of a professional builder (Holland 1984).

Indeed, some professional builders avoid industry-based regulation by acting as owner-builders. This had not escaped the notice of the Building Control Board in Victoria. The board proposed that to combat “regulatory weakness” an owner-builder should be defined as “a person who intends to live for a number of years in a house
they construct, on land they own” (Projektion PTY Ltd. 2001, p. 24). Haughton reports that in NSW an owner-builder is only permitted to build one house every five years (Haughton 2000). Given that some owner-builders work in the formal construction sector the line between amateur and professional seems permeable in both directions, allowing workplace practices and culture to inform owner-builder practices and vice versa.

One example of where this holds true is in the look of the house. Sydney owner-builders built houses with conventional materials in a conventional manner that are indistinguishable from professionally built homes (Holland 1997). This is not the case in rural areas where they “tend to be very different from the average suburban home” (Archer 1986, p. 19). Interviews with predominantly rural owner-builders, published in 1985, point to the widespread utilisation of low technology housing solutions, such as mud-brick, wattle-and-daub and bush timber in early settlement Australia, and the resurgence of these technologies one hundred plus years later in the hands of Northern New South Wales new settlers (Archer 1985).

Archer’s interviews are unusual in that they give voice to women owner-builders. For instance, Ann Feeney built a typical suburban home with her husband on the outer fringe of Melbourne, and speaks of her admiration for her husband, who was not trained as a builder but meticulously designed their house. Her full participation is described thus, “we dug the trenches by hand and when we had almost finished, it rained heavily and they collapsed so the whole lot had to be dug again” (Archer 1985, p. 44). Ann Feeney also told of how the bricks were delivered to the wrong block, and that for months and months she carried 14,000 bricks, six to eight at a time back to the block, resulting in hands that were swollen and arms that were scratched, bruised and bleeding. She told of how at seven months pregnant she climbed a ladder up onto the roof to explain to a tradesman how to finish cladding dormer windows and how she successfully negotiated with a building contractor who said he never discussed such matters with women. Her story outlines some of the issues facing women who build with domestic partners:

We lived about twenty minutes’ drive away and we’d come home at nine or ten at night each weekend. Dennis would get into a hot bath with a beer and the paper while
I'd cook a meal. It was expected the wife would do that sort of thing but in a sense I was as cold and shaken as he was... We found we weren't communicating very well with each other because all of that energy was going into the building. I was also writing a thesis in whatever time I could scrounge... We worked non-stop for four years and I think we got to the point where we really wanted to give up. Dennis’s whimsical comment about a divorce in the process was not far from the truth. Not that we wanted to separate but we just had nothing left to give anyone, not even to each other. Added to the burden of lack of communication and the physical strain we were enduring, we had gibes from male passers-by. Although they were intentionally well wishes to Dennis (the man who is building his own home) there were a lot of sexist comments aimed at me, like ‘teaching the little lady the tricks of the trade, eh?’ And, ‘got her out there at it again I see!’ I was putting in every bit of energy I possibly could and I found that sort of stuff very destructive (Archer 1985, p. 47).

Another woman interviewed for Archer’s book was Pam Ross, who built with her partner in then, rural Healesville. Pam said she was usually the labourer for her husband Philip, and also did a lot of the physical work, particularly ramming the earth walls. Her description of her role as a labourer seems to reflect the terminology, and perhaps culture, of construction professions, where labourers were subject to the authority and instruction of a builder. The work Pam Ross described undertaking appears to be quite heavy and physically demanding; she seems to have done more than just help out as was said of the women owner-builders of the 1920s-1970s (Harris & Buzzelli 2005).

Debbie Richards was also interviewed by Archer. She said she found the whole idea of building a house “kind of liberating” in that she was creating her lifestyle. She also said that:

as our building progressed I found that there were some social pressures from men who suddenly found that I was stronger than they were. I remember when we were pouring a concrete slab and two of John's friends had come to help that neither of them was strong enough to wheel the concrete barrows. We had been building for a while and I was quite fit - you obviously do develop some strength hefting 16 kilo mud bricks up a high wall. So I found that I had to be careful not to damage the egos of people who wanted to help by showing them up. Eventually I thought, ‘well that's really their problem. It's my house and I want to build it’ on the other hand, there is a positive side to sexism. We needed lots of telegraph poles for the frame and at that stage John didn't have a drivers' license. I had the car and trailer so I was the one who collected most of the materials. I found that because I was the woman I got a lot more help from guys because they don't usually meet girls doing this sort of thing (Archer 1985, p. 142).
Those stories contrast with the dominant image of owner-building in Australia. The stereotypical owner-builder project would be a man and his wife with a couple of kids building, first a shed and then a mud-brick house on a rural block. Typically, he is portrayed as the hero of the story and scant attention is paid to other members of the household, even though their input, in one form or another, might be crucial to the success of the project.

**Do-it-yourself Housing**

Speaking of an earlier time Dingle offers a brief account of the experiences of men and women undertaking DIY-housing together in post-War II 1950s Australia.

> Men did most of the construction work. Women often laboured for them, fetching and carrying materials and tools and holding things in place. They also fed them on site and sometimes controlled the finances, but the act of building was seen to require skill, strength and stamina. Wives as well as husbands believed these to be essentially masculine virtues; consequently the building of the family nest was seen to be primarily a male achievement (Dingle 2000, p. 72).

Broman also gives an account of how the stress of DIY house building with a partner contributed to the demise of their relationship (Broman 2004). Dingle seems to concur in that building a house for your own use could have negative as well as positive consequences for individuals and families. “Some felt that their lives have been enriched and ennobled by the act of building a home, but for others the worry, the financial pressures and the incessant work left them profoundly damaged” (Dingle 2000, p. 72). Whether perceived positively or negatively these statements support Brown’s assertion that self-build homes “are primarily places of narrativity where the meaning of home is established through a complex set of material and human relationships… [and where] involvement in the creative process [is used] to reinforce notions of the self” (Atkinson 2006, p. 7).

One can only speculate on whether, and the degree to which, post-war Australian women minimised their roles and under-reported their participation to maintain a more “feminine” appearance, to allow their male partners to save face, or to preserve or foster harmonious relationships. Having run factories and farms in the absence of
men during the war years, it is hard to believe women were unable to make less than an equal contribution to the construction of a house. As if testifying to this Dingle writes in a footnote that there “appear to have been a handful of women who built houses on their own” (Dingle 2000, p. 72). When building alone, women could be recognised as builders but when building with a male, for Dingle at least, women could only be seen as assistants.

Recent reports from the United States showed an apparent increase in DIY home improvement spending among women, with the number of women attending do-it-yourself workshops tripling over a five-year period just prior to 2001 (Improvement 2001). US hardware giant Home Depot noted that, “more and more women are choosing workshops on ‘heavy-duty’ remodelling projects such as floor tiling and deck construction rather than decorating projects requiring less construction” (Improvement 2001, p. 9). It remains to be seen whether women’s DIY activities in the US are increasing or simply becoming more visible. According to Mackay and Perkins this is an expanding sector and a rapidly globalising one (McKay & Perkins 2016).

As a housing genre do-it-yourself housing is poorly theorised. However, it does provide some insight. Architect and self-build advocate Jon Broome is reported to have said that through the use of specific design and construction methods self-build utilises a “level of expertise people might acquire through basic DIY projects” (Holman 1997, p. 198). As news reports show, the similarities between do-it-yourself (DIY) and self-build are well established (Adams 2010; Gardiner 1990; Laughlin 1979).

In 2004 Better Homes and Garden’s ‘DIY Mum of the Year’, Sandra Broman, released her DIY housing book Built Like a Woman. Broman, according to the publisher, “draws on her own experiences as an owner-builder to give you her heart and tips on planning, building and renovating from the perspective of a woman and a parent…to survive it all with your mind, body, sense of humour and relationship , but probably not your fingernails intact.” (Broman 2004, p. 196). While it is not the first in the women's DIY genre, the book is notable for the way it emphasises Broman's
role as a mother and wife throughout the text and set aside a section to discuss anecdotally the intricacies of building with a domestic partner. (Broman 2004, p. 55). While Broman’s book provides unique insights into current DIY house building, amateur female builders had been given more comprehensive construction advice a generation earlier. This can be contrasted with Vannini and Taggart’s reports of DIY housing by a man and several couples in which the couples have a much more monolithic presence. (Vannini & Taggart 2014)

Books from the US like *Okay, I’ll Do It Myself!* (Curry 1971) and *I Built Myself a House* (Garvy 1975) provide greater technical detail. *Making Ourselves at Home* (Goldfrank 1995) presents the experiences of a range of women who could say “I did it myself.” Theory of practice of DIY has yet to be fully developed (Leonard, Perkins & Thorns 2004, p. 1), though Paul Atkinson posits that “it's democratizing agency… enabling the emulation of those above them in social hierarchies” (Atkinson 2006, p. 1). The implication here is that for women, saying that they did it, was an assertion of their equality with men. This would support Clive Edwards’ description of DIY projects as “important markers of self”, and indeed a long history of DIY projects by women (Edwards 2006, p. 6).

The term “DIY Housing” is used by two distinct groups: academics, often from housing and planning disciplines writing about historical practices, and enthusiasts, offering tips based on their own hard-won experience. Otherwise, in the first of those groups women and gender aware commentary remains a footnote. In the case of the latter, multiple volumes can be found written by women, who present critiques of their own gendered experience and critical analysis of the broader situation in the construction sector. They are not academic works, but they do constitute evidence of amateur women builders constructing houses for their own use.

**Self-build Housing**

Australian individual self-build practitioners generally describe themselves as owner-builders, but at least three distinct groups practicing self-build do not fit under that heading. First, are those who have participated in group and individual government sponsored self-build schemes, where the statutory authority manages such
applications, permits and approvals. Secondly, there are self-builders who build informally, without building permits, or who construct dwellings without the knowledge or approval of statutory bodies. Thirdly, there are participants in self-build schemes run by other organisations such as Habitat for Humanity or the Community of St Clare who built a large complex of buildings at Stroud, NSW (Nash 1981).

“When we first heard about Group Self-build on the radio we thought that was such a great idea,” Mrs Cranage said (Dellaram 2011). For many people the first they hear of self-build housing is a newspaper article like the one quoted from above proclaiming the benefits of this housing option. Such stories are not uncommon (Armor 1991), (Monk 2006), (Griepentrog 2010). Usually they will tell the story of a local man or couple, or outline the process of building your own home. Sometimes, as Mrs Cranage indicated, they lead the reader to further information about local programs.

Group self-build housing programs in Australia have been facilitated by community-based organisations and some state housing authorities (Human Services Housing NSW). State housing authorities have supported individual and group self-build projects. The form of these has ranged from a hands-off approach through to the provision of grants to community organisations (Human Services Housing NSW 2010) and supply of technical guides (Adobe Guildelines: Mudbrick Building in Victoria 1988), specifications (Department of Planning and Development Undated), costing books (Department of Planning and Development Home Finance Division 1994), and land buying guides (Government of Victoria 1990) through to quite intensely managed projects where sites and approved building plans, inspections and technical support are provided (Department of Planning and Development 1995).

The Ministry of Housing in Victoria also ran a program to assist individuals to build a house for their own use. My 1995 research project documented the experiences of two women self-builders who built houses under this scheme (Denigan 1996).

The high-profile Christian group Habitat for Humanity has also coordinated projects to build 35 individual houses in Australia (Limbrick 2002). They use a group self-
build model that utilises purchased materials and services, and donated, unskilled labour. It requires the family who intend to occupy the house to build alongside the rest of the team. Habitat for Humanity has coordinated several ‘Women Build’ projects in different parts of the world including a 2002 project in Sydney (Limbrick 2002). Recently a Habitat for Humanity group of 100 Australian women assisted women from women-led households in Nepal to build 10 houses to mark the centenary of International Women’s Day (Habitat for Humanity 2011). Habitat for Humanity has joined organisations like the UK’s Centre for Alternative Technology in sponsoring projects in developed (Wheat 2001) and developing economies (Habitat for Humanity 2003; Women Build Homes for the Needy 2005).

Self-build is employed by grass roots groups in developing economies in Latin America (Salas 1988), India (Patel & Burra 1994), South Africa (Development Action Group 1995) and Zimbabwe (Patel 1986). Interestingly, these articles all depict or mention women. Patel, for example, mentions that Indian women face particular disadvantage in the housing market. Women’s visibility in these cases may be due to the predominance of self-build and the larger informal building sector in these economies, where women participate to a larger extent than they do in developed nations.

Self-build housing is practised and has been documented in many developed economies: Austria (Loudon 1992), Canada (Homegrown Solutions Maison 1998; Scherlowski et al. 1997; Simpson 1999), Germany (Harms 1982), Ireland (Cowman Undated), Sweden (Hanström, Johansson & Leijonhufvud 1995) and the US (Housing Assistance Council 2003). The diversity of schemes and online information about particular self-build housing projects and programs internationally gives a brief introduction to self-build (Saville-Smith & Campbell 2000). Though some of these works make passing reference to a male or a female having a particular role as part of a couple who practiced self-build, none can be said to present in-depth gendered analysis, or detail the experiences of females as self-build practitioners.

Self-build programs were abundant in the UK during the mid to late 1980s (Broome 1988; Chisel Ltd 1988; Developments ; New River Housing Association, 1989;
Pawley 1986; Wates & Knevitt 1987). Female participants were often pictured in the literature of the day with little comment on obstacles they faced, in spite of some restriction on their participation. Self-build accounts for 9 per cent of new house building in the UK yet little detail is known about the practice (Barlow, Jackson & Meikle 2001). Perhaps this was in part because most are small local organisations such as the South London Family Housing Association (Szczelkun; Wheat 2001) and the Walter Segal Self-Build Trust (Olden).

The trust is named after one of the best known British facilitators of self-build housing, architect Walter Segal, who developed a building system that used standard, off-the-shelf components and simplified construction methods (Broome 1986; McKean 1989). What becomes evident in a reading of the work of Segal and his followers, is that the gender of self-builders was noticed and was seen as just another issue where a politics of inclusion was required. The literature indicates that exclusion was avoided from the beginning of projects when potential self-builders came together to plan or join self-build groups, and that inclusion was considered in the design and programming of the houses to enable individuals to construct these, regardless of the sex of the individual builder or gender relations within the group or broader community.

One publication discussing a Segal project, a 1980 supplement to the Architects’ Journal, does provide interesting observations on gender drawn from interviews with self-build families, architects and council representatives:

If the rules had been stricter, some members ‘would have been thrown out on their ear or ended up with their marriage around their necks’. According to another rulebook (this time the Self-Build Manual*) even if they are banned from the site, *it is essential that womenfolk fully support the commitment made by their menfolk... very valuable work has been provided in the past in secretarial, accounting and welfare duties as well as decorating and landscaping etc.* One of the group commented, ‘I would say that 99 per cent of the self-build schemes would ban women and children from the site. With conventional schemes, building one house at a time, it’s easy to see how friction could build up. But with Walter’s system you can do most of the work on your own. You only really need a hand to put up frames, roof slabs and external walls.’ From what the self-builders say it is clear that a group of women should be able to do it (Ellis 1980, p.1190) emphasis in original).

The passage continues:
... in their own case is encouraging to see in a group of ordinary Londoners with a conventional view of male and female roles - of [sic] view which has not changed after the experiences of building in which the male lead was very apparent - that nevertheless the women were able to do things on the site which were even further removed from their previous expectations and those of men (Ellis 1980, p. 1190) (emphasis in original).

Ellis’s passage above catalogues many ideas about women: whether they should be allowed on building sites, if they can build, their proper roles and work, gender roles within marriages and the divergence between what is expected of women and their actual ability or performance. It is evident that in order to gain insight into gender relations of people involved in self-build, one must piece together material from a variety of sources, as reference to the gender of participants, if made at all, is usually only made uncritically (as above) and in passing (Olden undated; White undated).

The *Self-build Manual* quoted from was prepared by the UK National Federation of Housing Associations, the National Building Agency and the Housing Corporation, so potentially reflects the opinions of the national statutory bodies governing the building industry and public housing provision and the peak body representing self-build schemes. It contains two paragraphs setting out the participation of women:

The part to be played by wives and girl-friends of members of the self-build group is a subject upon which it is difficult to be specific. Experience shows that groups will adopt totally different policies concerning the women-folk ranging from a complete ban of their visiting the site, to a very full involvement.

One thing is, however, certain and that is that for a happy and efficient self-build (sic) group, it is essential that women-folk fully understand and support the commitment made by the men-folk to the group. They should also be kept informed of progress. Family ties and other responsibilities will naturally dictate the amount of time that a wife or girl-friend can offer in practical support. Very valuable work has been provided in the past in secretarial, accounting and welfare duties as well as decorating, cleaning and landscaping, etc. (The National Federation of Housing Associations, The National Building Agency & The Housing Corporation 1978, p.14).

This manual sets out clear roles for men and women and endorses their enforcement for women, through exclusion, and for men, through requisite commitment to other men.

Though various writers discuss political aspects of self-build, a feminist analysis or detailed analysis of gendered practices is absent. Themes that emerge are: that
building for oneself is a right (Turner & Fichter 1972), the importance of dweller control (Ward 1993, 1995) and self-determination (Turner 1976; Turner & Fichter 1972), the egalitarian opportunity self-build provides (Walter Segal Self Build Trust undated), that the “poor-world approach is appropriate” in the developed world (Ward 1993), that technical aid can be made available on a non-profit basis (Kirkham 1985), that self-build is a profound form of self-expression (Wampler 1977), and a process of building community (Tan 1992). The literature is also replete with discussion of the technology of self-build. Topics from a sample include: earth as a building material (International Centre for Earth Construction 1991) recycled materials (Gaggino 2008), alternative technology (Broome 2007; Downton 1993; Harris 1990; Juffermans 1981; Pereau & Graham 1994) and the Segal method (Broome 1988; Walter Segal Self Build Trust 1989). The only overt connection between gender and self-build technology was made by a group of self-build participants who said that with Segal technology “a group of women should be able” to build their own house (Ellis 1980), sentiments echoed by Broom (Wates & Knevitt 1987).

Evaluations of self-build have come from the academy and community-based organisations. More recent examples include Walliman’s thesis, A Study of Recent Initiatives in Group Self-Build Housing in Britain (Walliman 1993) and Scarfi’s thesis Self Build Housing and Empowerment: An Evaluation of Four Self Build Development Projects in the UK (Scarfi 1996). These do not address women or gender specifically.

Occasionally sexed or gendered differences in self-build projects are commented upon in evaluations of self-build housing. Hutson and Jones reported that “a number of girls fitted in well to the college and the training. On the other hand, the ‘macho’ aspect of the building site can be a disadvantage to the girls and there is some evidence that girls drift into more administrative tasks and this did happen” (Hutson & Jones 2002, p. 649). Turok in his influential evaluation of a community self-build project for young people in Glasgow, reported that “five of the 15 [participants] were women to give a rough gender balance – a condition of European funding” and that six participants later left and were replaced by another five recruits without clarifying
the number of women remaining in the project (Turok 1993, p. 51). He mentions that one of the objectives of the scheme was not met as none of the self-builders gained employment in the construction sector. Among the possible reasons cited he does not mention the difficulties female participants would face gaining employment there given male dominance in the sector. Could this be because there were no females left in the program?

In an example from a developing economy, where self-build is the majority path to housing, Priscilla Connolly states that “the unquantified labour supplied by the user in the building of his own home is… a deduction from wages” (Connolly 1982, p.159). This observation may hold true for under-employed male construction workers, but what of females who self-build, who have no opportunity for such work?

Those parts of the literature of self-build that focus on stories of individual women building their own houses, mostly contrast with those that feature cohesive gender analyses. Set in developed economies and published in small specialist magazines, the rural women and self-build communities present the story of a woman building her own house either as an oddity or with discussion focused on the technologies she employs, with or without referencing her being female. Around 20 such examples were published in the period under consideration ('Building with Earth and Straw: Workshops for Women,' 1996; Andrews 1994; Cunningham 1988; Dee 1991; Elias 1981; Fitzgerald 1989; French 1986, 2001; Merrifield 1988; Ryan 1991; Smith 1985; Whisson 1997; Willow & Brown 1997; Wise 1992); Redwood, 1993 #79; Thomas, 1987 #96; Andrews, 1994 #2076; Elias, 1981 #2071). These articles mention women building with bush poles ('Building with Bush Poles,' 1997), mud-bricks ('Building with Mud Brick,' 1996; Casey College of TAFE Business Enterprise Centre ; Nash 1981), recycled materials (Dee 1991; Whisson 1997), stone (French 2001), straw bales (Barker 1998; Bradbee & Terrett 2000), cob (Bee 1997; Willow & Brown 1997), timber (Casey College of TAFE Business Enterprise Centre 1995; Hamilton 1997), traditional suburban materials (Improvement 2001) and using the Segal method (Jones 1987). Women in these articles built alone (Hamilton 1997), while caring for family members (Wise 1992), with a spouse (Merrifield 1988), with family
and friends (French 2001), in groups with other self-builders (Wheat 2001), with other women, all learning trades together (Chaudhuri 1999), and with their spiritual communities (Habitat for Humanity 2003; Nash 1981; Women Build Homes for the Needy 2005; 1999). They built as communities, like the community of St Clare at Stroud, NSW (Nash 1981), where building was not a rarity for women, but part of a valued skill set nurtured by the community.

These stories have appeared in magazines such as *The Owner Builder, Grassroots, Earth Garden* and *Earthwise Women*. To date they have mostly been ignored by academia. They represent a series of anecdotes that recognise the experience of women as sexed and gendered people but there is no cohesive analysis of their pervasive common experience in broader society.

The majority of those writing about self-build housing within the academy are architects and sociologists. With the exception of my own work, where the sex or gender of people is noted, these are mostly examples of the first and second phases of gender analysis. The sex or gender of the person remains insignificant except as relating to the experience of an individual. Even when the sex-segregated nature of work, inside and outside the home, paid and unpaid, and specifically within the construction sector is obvious, the authors remain silent.

**Self-provided Housing**

The term “self-provided housing” has been used by housing and planning scholars discussing housing in Scotland and refers to “housing provision... where it is the household itself that... finds finance, buys land, manages the project and owns the finished product” (Duncan & Rowe 1993, p. 1334). While this definition includes some examples of self-build, others such as government group self-build schemes where finance, sites and plans are provided, are excluded. That some self-build activities are included under this heading makes self-provided housing important to consider.

It was estimated that in the year 1988/89 12 000 homes were self-provided in Britain. Of those some 85% were individually self-provided; that is, each house was constructed individually (Clapham, Kintrea & McAdam 1993). Self-providers can
make large savings partly through “sweat equity”, investing their own labour, “in the form of both blue-collar labour (in construction phase) and white-collar labour (in the promotion process).” This may be true of male workers where “the typical self-providing household is a middle income nuclear family with children where the adults are between 30 and 45 years old” (Clapham, Kintrea & McAdam 1993, p. 1363). How then do women’s patterns of employment figure in the scheme? They are often paid at a much lower rate than men, are largely excluded from blue-collar work, are clustered in what have been called pink-collar occupations, and their work is often unremunerated. Does self-provision allow women a greater equity in their self-provided house as the “sweat equity” is calculated at male rates of pay? Do women even participate in the self-provision of housing? It seems unlikely that they are perceived as participating; Duncan and Rowe observed that “there may be strict gender divisions of labour on-site even if women are involved” (Duncan & Rowe 1993, p. 1346).

Even when making no apparent direct economic contribution women free men from domestic work and “commonly, women in part-time employment or working full-time as housewives, extended their domestic labour to free yet more time for their male partner who can then work on the housing project” (Duncan & Rowe 1993, p. 1346). The women’s labour is absorbed as “traditional family gender roles” rather than being seen as a contribution to housing the family. What does the term “traditional family gender roles” mean in Scotland? Edge and Duncan in their paper “Motivations in the Self-Provision of Social-Housing: The Political Economy of Self-Build” (Edge & Duncan 1998) do not include analysis of women’s economic activity, which is usually seen as a family duty and part of their “natural” role rather than as work.

When self-build is described as women building their own houses and self-provided housing the predominant type of gender analysis identifiable is that designated as phase two analysis by Hess and Marx Ferree (1987). Individual women are recognised as having gendered experience, and somehow their families are implicated in those experiences but the connections between women as a class are not being made. Their stories remain a series of anecdotes without recognition of
their common experience of housing and the way gender structures those experiences across society.

**Vernacular Architecture**

The idea that social values and power relations are immanent in the material world is central to the pervasive methodology of vernacular architecture, the study of material culture. This work, carried out by architectural historians, anthropologists and sometimes archaeologists interrogates the material record and speaks of a specific place and time. It speaks of social relations and therefore a trained eye may read the story of the local people from their houses and other remnants in the landscape. Henry Glassie declared that:

> If buildings are distinct among the things of material culture precisely because they have both interiors and exteriors, and if buildings are the creations of their creators... in many places, men build the house and women build the home within it. (Glassie 2000, p.66)

This begs the question, is this role within the home prescribed, a “choice” made in a context where women have few other choices? And what of the incidences where they do not make that choice? What of the houses women build?

There are vernacular traditions in which women are the house builders. Women were the proud and skilful house builders of the American Blackfeet and other indigenous tribes (Blue Evening Star 1995). Their building skills were a source of high status within their communities and yet early anthropologists described them as mere homemakers and housekeepers, unable as they were to perceive the balance of power that existed between the genders in indigenous American nations (Oldershaw 1987). Thompson identifies other examples: Bedouin women and their tents, Mongolian women and their yurts, Zulu women and their thatched dwellings, Pueblo, Ghanaian and Southern African women who built plastered mud walls (Thomson 1985). Across the north of Africa from Algeria, Mali and Nigeria through Chad, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya to Somalia women manufactured the structures and coverings of their sophisticated technology, tents that housed their families, and the conveyances
which allowed them to be transported (Prussin 1995). Indigenous Australian women created and maintained *yunta*, “open living environments created on the leeward side of a single walled structure” that have a complex set of meanings associated with their location, orientation and materiality, and showing deft construction, design skills and manipulation of space (Keys 2000). This is one of only a handful of research projects that document the construction techniques and materiality of self-build housing by indigenous Australians (Long, Memmott & Seelig 2007).

New vernacular traditions in which women are the house builders are emerging. One such originated in Southern Oregon from 1972 (Corinne 1998). Inspired by *WomanSpirit Magazine* and the book *Country Lesbians: The Story of the WomanShare Collective*, women from all over the world banded together and began establishing land cooperatives and building their own small houses:

> Small cabins were easy to build and manage. They represented the negation of traditional womanly roles. They were not built to accommodate entertaining or child-rearing. Often lovers lived in separate buildings thus reinforcing the autonomy and independence which were cornerstones of this community (Corinne 1998, p. 3).

Many aspects of these communities could be described as revolutionary due to the relationships between members, materials and technologies used in building to the processes used in developing community (Gagehabib & Summerhawk 2000). As the original community members spread back across the globe, “women’s land” settlements sprang up elsewhere, including in Australia (Hall 2016). Some of these are flourishing lesbian and separatist communities (Shugar 1995). The built legacy of these communities awaits further documentation.

In recent years gender has emerged as a major category of analysis within studies of material culture. Scholars have investigated and theorised gender and women’s work places and domestic spaces; the ten-volume book series *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* contains many such chapters, so too books like *Families and Farmhouses* (McMurry 1988), *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women* (Gilchrist 1994), and the landmark volume *The Material Culture of Gender, The Gender of Material Culture* (Martinez & Ames 1997).
McMurry outlined what she thought to be the main questions to be considered in the study of women in vernacular architecture by asking “to what extent and on what terms, were women active participants in vernacular design?” And “has the vernacular landscape affected women’s daily lives?” (McMurry 1989, p. 49). The paper *Exploring the role of Women in Vernacular Architecture* observes that “The role of women in the design, construction and use of vernacular architecture is little understood… few researchers have asked women themselves appropriate questions concerning their involvement in architecture and its creation” (Bernstein & Torma 1991, p. 64). The paper also poses the rarely articulated question as to “how… dynamics within the family affect roles and consequent… participation in the architectural process?” In addressing these and other questions it is suggested that “Within historical studies of vernacular architecture, oral history provides one of the best means of reconstructing ethnographic context” (Williams & Young 1995, p. 43). While these authors refer specifically to historical studies their questions are equally applicable to research of more contemporary vernacular environments.

**Informal or Illegal Housing**

Settlements, and the houses within them, may be described as illegal or informal if the land on which the house is built is not occupied with the permission of the owner of the land, if permission to build was not acquired from relevant statutory authorities, or if the building has not been constructed to conform with relevant planning or building codes. In developing economies large-scale settlements have grown up on the urban fringe in Latin America and the Middle East (Alsayyad 1993), Mexico (Varley 2002; Wigle 2008) Turkey (Aksoylu 1993), Africa (Kalabamu 2005) and Brazil (Cardoso 2004). Such houses may be self-built, constructed wholly or partly through the informal building sector and may have the input of professionals and tradespersons, forming part of the “complex network of relations” between the formal and informal housings sectors (Alsayyad 1993, p. 33).

Informal housing in the most densely populated parts of Australia largely consists of non-permitted additions and alterations to existing houses, some “off the books”
hostel-style accommodation, and the occasional inner-city squat. In rural areas, where alternative communities have prospered, it is a different story. The area around coastal Northern New South Wales, known as the Rainbow Region, is one example of a concentration of developments beginning in the 1970s, that began with illegal settlements (Taylor 1981) that have become legalised as planning laws changed to permit multiple occupancy development. Examples of some of these houses can be seen in Living Shelter: Handmade Houses in Australia (Re, Miller & McKay 1979). Over the years some buildings have retrospectively acquired building permits as local councils have become more inclusive.

Many Australian self-built illegal houses have been ‘legalised’ through a variety of processes. Historian Meredith Fletcher chronicled such a process in the North Riding in remote, mountainous, eastern Victoria (Fletcher 2004 ). While the article is not specifically focused on gender, and makes no claims to tell women’s stories, it outlines the struggle of several women and their families who had built houses which were deemed illegal by local government officials. Notably, those stories identify a wide range of issues that were confronted by the women and their community as they strove to house themselves. Women are portrayed as central figures in courageous struggles; to house themselves before their babies were born, using legal processes in a fight against local government to gain occupancy rights over their houses, modifying houses built illegally and building new dwellings to conform to building regulations. Fletcher shows women to be not just builders of houses but also builders of communities, communities that had access to health services, were well informed, environmentally sustainable, and just.

Discussion of the roles of females, women or gender relations within the provision of informal housing, if it occurs at all, is usually minor. There is little mention of gender in texts identifying informal housing. Two exceptions are the mention of the education levels and employment status of inhabitants (Saglamer et al. 1997, p. 291), and a paper on women as builders of informal housing in Botswana (Kalabamu 2002). The latter paper is discussed under Self-help Housing, as it was referred to in an earlier edition.
For most of the discussion of do-it-yourself housing, owner-builder housing and informal or illegal housing, sex and gender are not recognised as categories of analysis. The authors may not notice the sex or gender of the people they are writing about or may not comment on it. At times, this appears to be because an all-male group for example, is seen to be the norm, or the inclusion of a female may be seen as an outlier or aberrant and so is safely ignored. In that regard, these examples can be seen as a type of research that precedes gender analysis and that could be a precursor to the phases identified by Hess and Marx Ferree.

In such a precursor phase the sex or gender of people may be mentioned inconsistently or sporadically when individuals go against accepted norms. As such, these do not constitute formal categories of analysis. What these brief passages hint at, is that a whole separate set of experiences of self-build may be hidden by a research approach that does not pay attention to the sex or gender of the builder, and that what results may only tell part of the story of self-build.

**Self-help Housing**

Within the academy the phenomena named “self-help housing” is researched and discussed by a wide range of scholars from sociologists, urban studies scholars, geographers, planners and economists. It is part of a group of housing processes, programs and policies that are collectively known self-help housing.

The latter term is most commonly used to describe government and non-government organisations supporting housing processes or programs responding to massive urbanisation in developing economies, where the work to construct the housing, or at least the process of organising labour, is done by the persons being housed. Tait says the term self-help housing is preferable to concepts such as self-build which “tend to reduce the social dimensions of housing provision” (Tait 1997). Unfortunately, the broader term often obscures the practice of self-build housing; discussions can be quite ambiguous in that it is often not possible to understand the roles of men and women and the processes by which housing is achieved. The body of literature that can be identified by this term is vast and exceeds the scope of this project. Therefore,
discussion will include work sufficient to indicate the range of the field and assess the extent to which gender is discussed.

Millions of people in developing economies house themselves through self-help processes, some of which have been discussed in previous sections of this chapter. Housing settlements developed in this way have their own local names, *gecekondus* in Turkey, *bustees* in Calcutta, *bidonvilles* in Algeria, *pueblos jóvenes* in Peru, *favelas* in Brazil, *colonias proletarias* in Mexico” (Ward 1982). A small sample of publications show the practice is widespread, occurring in: Bangladesh (Ahmed 1998), Botswana (Datta 1995; Kalabamu 2005; Kerr & Kwele 2000), Brazil (Volbeda 1989), the Caribbean (Potter & Conway 1997), India (Patel & Burra 1994; Sinha 1989), Kenya (McCann 2003), Mexico (Connolly 1982; Ward 1982), Peru (Skinner 1982), Turkey (Payne 1982), Uruguay (Zillmann 1995) and Zambia (Tait 1997). Paul Haar, who examined self-help housing in an Indigenous community in Australia, acknowledges the process as one of empowerment (Haar 2000, p. 223).

As a housing strategy self-help housing has been subject to ongoing scrutiny and critique. Some of the major critical works are *Something To Build On: The Future of Self-Help Housing in the Struggle Against Poverty* (Margolis 1967), *Housing by People* (Turner 1976), *The Myth of Self-help Housing: A Critical Analysis of the Conventional Depiction of Shanty Towns* (Huque 1982), *Self-help Housing: a Critique* (Ward 1982), and *People, Poverty and Shelter: Problems of Self-Help Housing in the Third World* (Skinner & Rodell 1983). These texts do not identify a need for gender analysis though Turner does almost inadvertently introduce the idea of the importance of housing processes that accommodate women’s diverse roles through his case study of Mama Elena, who left a violent relationship, derived income from the informal sector and founded an aggregate household through self-help processes (Turner 1976). Mama Elena’s story epitomises the triple roles of women in reproduction, production and as community managers, identified by Moser a decade later (Moser & Peake 1987).

In *Women, Human Settlements and Housing* (Moser & Peake 1987) the editors bring together an important collection that focuses, for the first time, on women’s
experiences of self-help housing in developing economies, exploring a range of ways
gendered analysis contributes to a deeper understanding and possibly better housing
outcomes. The book appeared at the end of the UN Decade for Women, a time when
there was increasing attention being paid to women’s rights across the globe and
when, in increasing numbers of households, women were the only adult supporting
increasing numbers of children (Peake 1987). These “woman-headed households”
(Moser 1987) fell disproportionately into the lowest income groups due to gendered
patterns of employment and their concentration in the informal sector (Machado
1987), resulting in greater difficulty accessing housing and programs. This is a
problem reiterated a decade later in Klak’s discussion of Jamaican housing. He
devotes a paragraph to outlining the greater difficulties women face in gaining access
to self-help housing, stating that “female-headed households” live in the worst
housing, caused by greater poverty and disadvantage (Klak 1997). Interestingly,
Mexican evidence showed that in housing terms “women in non-nuclear households
often fare better than their counterparts in nuclear families” (Chant & Ward 1987).

In this same volume Peake discusses a self-help scheme in Guyana (Peake 1987)
where a group of women acting cooperatively, overcame delays and other difficulties
and built a group of houses and infrastructure that form the Virginia Women’s
Homestead. This example raises an interesting issue in that the members of this
group were 12 women, of whom “seven were heads of their households… [and] five
households [were] headed by men”. She goes on to say that:

In the five households headed by men all the men were involved in income-earning
activities... and the women were housewives, whereas in six of the woman-headed
households the women were engaged in waged work... with the remaining woman
living on money from her children (Peake 1987, p. 117).

In this example it is not clear why women are only considered a head of the
household if a man is not present. It is of interest though that “head of household”
status does not correlate to being the person in the household nominally responsible
for construction of the house. Evidence shows that the title “head of household” is
defined variously through bureaucratic processes such as census taking, or cultural
processes and tradition, or a combination of both. The Brazilian census states that “In
principle the head should be the Husband.” (Machado 1987). This term is examined again and discussed more fully in the next chapter.

Also in the same book, Vance outlines a project in Nicaragua of a bottom-up initiative generated and led largely by women. This self-help scheme produced 48 houses. Women were active in all phases of the planning process which helped to meet both their practical needs and more strategic needs “by providing the basis for a redefinition of the different roles of women in society” (Vance 1987). There were conflicts due to the lack of recognition of the actual roles of women in their families and communities and “stereotypes surrounding the sexual division of labour [which] excluded women in various stages of the project” (Vance 1987), including in construction where the women wanted to contribute equally and fought to have the opportunity to develop building skills, build and have their long hours of work acknowledged (Chant 1987).

Further, women’s access to the resources to improve their housing situation through self-help and their participation in decision-making is mediated by the structure and composition of the household (Chant & Ward 1987; Varley 1995), even where, in the past, decisions about housing provision had been the domain of women (Kalabamu 2005).

Women in Kenya faced a similar struggle in confronting the view that “women do not build… they just help out the skilled and semiskilled [male] workers on site” (Nimpuno-Parnte 1987). Fernando reports on a Sri Lankan self-help housing project which was forced to take the concerns of women into account during the implementation process. Organisers went on to prioritise the training and employment of women as masons as a strategy to ensure they had the skills and income to benefit from the project (Fernando 1987).

Discussing women’s efforts to house themselves in Botswana, Larsson says that in “traditional society women play a major role in house building; they build the mud walls… and thatch the roofs” (Larsson 1989). She goes on to say, however, that the rules covering the project which afforded the women house sites did not permit the use of those technologies. Nimpuno also observed this (Nimpuno-Parnte 1987). In
addition, the materials required to build to project standards were more expensive than the women could afford with their lack of access to employment that might bring a higher income and they were not given sufficient technical assistance to be able to identify affordable, competent, reputable builders. Given that situation, there seems little chance the women would have access to training so that they might build with the “high tech” materials themselves.

Moser’s framework for analysis and policy-making with regard to women and self-help housing projects reappeared in *Beyond Self-Help Housing* (Mathéy 1992). In this updated and amended version she refines her distinction between the practical and strategic gender needs. Meeting the housing needs of low-income women meets the practical gender needs of women “who in their reproductive role are the principal users of housing” (Moser 1992). To meet the strategic gender needs of women however one must, for instance, ensure women have tenure in their own right:

> Women do not automatically become the equal or sole owner of either the house or land. In many housing projects tenure is the most significant issue with rights to land generally given to men on the assumption that they are household heads. It is only where housing projects have been designed to provide ownership regardless of sex of the household head and women have been able to achieve equal rights to property that strategic gender needs are met (Moser 1992).

When practical gender needs are met, women’s status remains unchanged. When strategic gender needs are met, women move closer to attaining their full rights. On a personal and community level gender relations are transformed through house building; once oppressive places “are being transformed into creative expressions of creative female agency” (Pauli 2008). Through self-help housing women are also able to achieve secure tenure, a major factor in their empowerment.

Self-help housing is a practice that has a long history in Europe, and in places where Europeans have lived, that is quite disproportional to the attention scholars have paid to it (Duncan & Rowe 1993; Harris 1999). Nevertheless some detail of local practices in developed economies is reported in texts from Canada (Daly 1993), France (Wakeman 1999), Germany (Harms 1982; Katz & Mayer 1985), Japan (Great Britain Department of Trade and Industry 1996), New Zealand (Cattenach 1989),
The Netherlands (Priemus & Groetelaers 1990), the UK (Hutson & Jones 2002) and the US (Davis 1967; International Self-help Housing Association 1968).

Evidence of the need for more critical gender analysis of self-help housing in the developed world can be seen in the work of authors like Margolis, who wrote of North American experiences. He said:

“So often joining [a self-help scheme] is the wife’s idea,” says Ida Edelen, the former social worker there. “The husband just goes along with her to avoid arguments. But he’s the guy who is going to have to do the work.” If the husband didn’t turn the television off when the social worker called, and if he seemed to be only lending half an ear to the interview, he was marked down as a doubtful risk (Margolis 1967).

This book contains a number of images of people involved in self-help projects building their own homes. Several of the photographs show women building; the caption on one photograph reads in part: “the women provide about 30 per cent of all the labour on their homes.” Another shows a “mother working on [a] kitchen cabinet in one of the self-help homes” (Margolis 1967). In a later section of the book he talks of the construction process saying:

the construction supervisor calls a meeting of the group, including the wives, and urges a final tremendous effort to finish the job. The wives are quietly encouraged to see that their husbands stick to their tasks... the wife [has] a crucial role: “she can greatly influence her husband’s participation. His contribution may well be measured by the extent of her patience, cheerfulness, understanding and encouragement.”

At the same time wives have been known to upset a mutual help program by insisting that their house be finished first. In [one project]... some families were allowed to move in ahead of others because “the wives kept nagging us.” If there is a lesson here, it is that the world of self-help is not entirely a man’s world, and wives should be included from the start in all group proceedings. A project with which the women do not wholeheartedly identify is a project in trouble (Margolis 1967, p. 43).

What conclusions do passages like these enable the reader to make? If a woman is married to a man who is committed to a self-help project she will be permitted to have a role in the project, possibly contributing 30% of the labour required to complete the house while the rest is contributed by her husband and other members of the group. She will be expected to behave appropriately to facilitate her husband’s proper participation while maintaining her role as a cheerful, patient, helper and supporter.
Examples of commentary on Australian experiences are *The Role of Self Help in a Basic Housing Strategy* (Laquian 1987), *Self Help Housing* (Ingemann & Rodger 1989), *Self Help Housing in Victoria* (Tan & Ingeman 1990), *Impressions of Self-Help Housing in Victoria* (Turner, 1991 #1040), *Housing in the Torres Strait Region: Towards a Self-Help Approach* (Haar 1992), and *Self-help Housing and Co-operation in Post-war Australia* (Dingle 1999). These texts are generally silent on the experiences of women. References to women’s experiences are hidden within the context of the “family”, except when mentioned as part of a couple or the wife of someone who built their own house.

The literature of self-help housing contains a few reports of schemes initiated and completed by women. Discussing projects in the US, Werkerle notes that:

> the projects represent the grassroots initiatives of community women perhaps because low-income women heads of families are being so hard-pressed in today's housing market they have decided to help themselves as no one else seems to care (Werkerle 1981, p. 15).

A brief report on a separate project by a group of six families, “primarily women”, states that they rehabilitated a three-storey townhouse, creating homes for the six families and communal spaces, including for the provision of child care. The women were said to “not identify themselves as feminists” but were motivated by a desire to have control over their lives, and create a better life for their children. Lindquist describes this as “displaying a female tenacity in the face of caring for and sheltering one's children” (Lindquist 1981). A longitudinal study of low-income urban mothers and their residential environments followed a group of women while they constructed new houses for themselves until after they relocated to the new homes. Based within the discipline of psychology, the focus of this study was health. It found that the women's sense of well-being increased (Wells 2005). The practical gender need was for training, housing and childcare, and the strategic gender need was for a sense of control of the housing and neighbourhood. Werkerle agrees:

> women must lobby for alternative home enabled designs which will free them from total responsibility for their own family and from isolation in the home, otherwise self-help housing will only replicate patriarchal patterns and the possibilities for real control by women over the housing environment will be lost (Werkerle 1981, p.16).
Studies which analyse vernacular architecture and self-help housing are the most comprehensive in their gender analysis and form part of the third phase as described by Marx Ferree and Hess. (1987). These analyses have cohesive gender analysis in which a gender system is seen as a major factor in peoples’ lives and that impacts much of their experience.

**Conclusion**

This review of literature examines material on self-build housing in its various guises across the last 45 years. The publications describe practices in developed and developing economies, urban, suburban and rural locations, State-run, NGO and individually organised projects. The sources range from peer-reviewed papers, through policy documents, to newspapers, websites, theses and pamphlets.

Self-help housing depicts gendered analyses of self-build housing practices in developing economies, presented largely within a sociological framework. For developed economies, the approach is from two different perspectives: the discipline of psychology, and through the field of vernacular architecture where there are three distinct forms of gender analysis, those being women’s vernacular building in traditional cultures, historical examples of women’s domestic building activities in developed economies, and emerging vernacular traditions in the alternative communities. Other references to gender and self-build housing present only brief observations, sometimes containing or accompanied by rudimentary and fragmentary analysis.

Australian Self-build housing has not been subject to rigorous academic analysis, some patchy analysis has been attempted in other parts of the world as is reported in the literature review. From a feminist research perspective, such analysis should start with the same kinds of questions and strategies that were employed in early “second wave” feminist research that enabled some of the classic feminist issues to be explored. Where are the women? What are the mechanisms of their exclusion? Why has their absence been ignored? Why is their presence disregarded? Marx Ferree and
Hess (1987) developed an early feminist framework useful to an initial exploration of women and self-build housing. Though feminist academic research in most fields has moved to more sophisticated analyses, in this case it is important to begin with a preliminary approach.

Marx Ferree and Hess describe three phases of gender analysis thus. The first stage focuses on sex differences and uses supposed biological capacities to explain different experience between males and females. This type of analysis can be seen in the exclusion of wives from building, or their being allocated secondary roles. Though not always explicit this was likely linked to women’s procreative capability, they were seen as vulnerable due to potential or actual pregnancy or the risk or inability to bear children in the future. The pregnant Ann Feeney climbing on the roof of her house to instruct a tradesman seems to be triumphantly confronting that notion (Archer 1985). Vance describes an example where men tried to exclude women from a project by saying the women were physically weak and lacked stamina (Vance 1987).

The second phase of gender analysis, marked by an emphasis on sex roles and socialisation, presents more sophisticated perspectives. Female house builders are more often presented as housewife or homemaker. Analysis by Duncan and Rowe attribute to women a supporting role, such as cooking for the builders, rather than a leading role, such as building. They conceptualise this as “traditional family gender roles” (Duncan & Rowe 1993, p. 1347). Observations by Margolis indicate that the role of the male as builder was paramount, and the woman’s so insignificant that, unless his enthusiasm was sufficient, the family was excluded from the self-build program (Margolis 1967). Some researchers who do mention that men and women were building together, fail to identify the woman as builder or take her contribution to construction seriously. These studies indicate that women and men who engaged as couples in self-build tend to see the woman as having a subordinate or supportive role (Dingle 1999), even when she contributes the majority of a couple’s individual building hours (Margolis 1967).
The third phase of gender analysis brings different perspectives on gender, which is seen as one principle, “organising social arrangement, behaviour and even cognition” (Marx Ferree & Hess 1987). This type of gender analysis could be seen in the discussions of self-help housing and vernacular architecture, notably these analyses also outlined other organising principles. Wells (2005) analysed gender using markers of health and socio-economic status, and explored the psychological impact of self-help housing on women in poverty.

Also part of this third group of studies, the most well-developed and sophisticated body of literature documented poor women in developing economies as they attempt to build their own housing. Sociologists and housing researchers incorporated the global and local economy into their gender analysis of self-help housing, pointing out how structural adjustment policies disproportionately increase financial hardship for women and put even self-build housing further out of reach. They also discuss local labour markets and the relative disadvantage women face, which leads to their predominance in the informal sector. The gendered analysis of established vernacular cultural traditions recognised not only gender but also culture as a principle around which meaning is constructed. Oldershaw says as much when she points out that the early anthropologists simply could not comprehend the subtlety of Blackfoot gender relations (Oldershaw 1987). Tee Corinne recognised gender and sexual orientation among the organising principles that were central to understanding the self-build practices that were part of the emerging vernacular tradition she documented (Corinne 1998).

At times women’s presence and their contribution to construction was noted, but they were not described as builders of their own houses. It seems as if, for some, the concepts of builder and woman are mutually exclusive. It is important to note that the authors of much of the material reviewed were simply gender blind, offering neither observation nor analysis. Sometimes they noticed women but failed to notice discrimination against them, their exclusion and marginalisation, and too often ignored the contribution of women. One example of this was evident in the discussion of the relationship between men’s loss of wages while building and accumulation of sweat equity, where no account was taken of whether this occurred

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for women in the same household, or the way in which such a relationship would be more beneficial to women, who generally have lower wage levels than men of comparable background (Connolly 1982; Edge & Duncan 1998). It is unclear whether the women were simply not considered or if the male case was considered universal.

Duncan and Rowe say that “the interaction between gender roles and self-provided housing is not researched, but it is likely to be important to how or even if it proceeds” (Duncan & Rowe 1993, p. 1347). By developing a methodology to examine women’s efforts in building a house for their own use, and conducting gender-based analysis, this research seeks to give voice to Australian women and more accurately contextualise their experiences.

It seemed that the most rigorous approach to women’s self-build housing was to combine the successful elements of a range of studies in a multi-method strategy, while being open to the emergence of a range of issues and concerns identified in the literature. This transdisciplinary approach, incorporating inductive method and grounded theory could provide material of use in advancing a range of literatures from psychology, sociology, vernacular architecture, architecture, housing studies and women’s and gender studies addressing theoretical aspects of the self, sex and gender, embodiment and built environments. Chapter 2 sets out in detail how such an approach may be constituted.
2. Building Method

All but two of the 185 respondents were male. This is probably because the sampling process yielded conventional households with the owner-builder as the conventional male head of household (Holland 1988, p.149).

It would have been interesting to compare the survey data with the age of the male heads of households buying contract-built houses during the period the sample was building but no such data was available (Holland 1988, p. 149).

The experience of female self-build housing practitioners in Australia is almost completely absent from the record. This original research is the first project to centre their experiences and give them voice. This chapter describes how the project identified, and moved beyond, the limitations of Holland’s study, discussed in the Introduction and Chapter 1. It details women’s experiences of self-build housing and provides a gendered analysis of the practice. It does so by addressing the gap in the literature, outlining the ways the gender-blindness of previous research was overcome. It also shows how a broader, more detailed picture of self-build housing in Australia, one that redresses the absence of women from the record, was achieved.

In Chapter 1, the literature showed three distinct epistemological concerns, also arising in Holland’s study, which were addressed in order to develop a suitable methodology. Those concerns were: what was considered to be evidence, how evidence was gathered, and how that evidence was understood. It also outlined the methodological flaws that limited Holland’s work on owner-builders.

What was most striking in Holland’s work on Sydney’s owner-builders, and seriously undermined it, was the absence of women. It was difficult to understand how the unplanned exclusion of half the population was not seen by the researcher as a flaw. In the light of the literature, however, it is not so surprising. There are three reasons for this absence that require examination if those problems are to be avoided; this section looks at the reasons in detail. Subsequent sections of this chapter discuss how they were countered and methods used to overcome them.
Where were the Women?

Gender bias pervades Holland’s study. The study’s sample frame purports to be a study of owner-builders, whereas it is a study of male owner-builders. The sampling procedure is biased in that, with the exception of two women, it included only male participants and yet is still represented as a study of all owner-builders. While he took great pains to present all the available ABS data on owner-building in Australia, Holland also said “little information exists on owner built houses and their builders”. The ABS data presented does not suggest that only males build houses for their own use, and yet in Holland’s study, “all but two of the 185 respondents were male” (Holland 1988, p. 149). This disjunction between ABS data and Holland’s sample seemed to go unnoticed. The women’s absence seems to indicate to Holland that women generally gave no thought to the built environments they lived in and therefore what they may have had to say was not seen as having the status of evidence.

Feminist researchers had published material before Holland conducted his study, material that discussed the problems of gender bias evident in Holland’s study. Stanley and Wise (1983, p. 21) for example, critiqued the exclusion of women through data selection and described “non-sexist methodology”. Oakley (1981) wrote about how to successfully interview women and avoid bias, while Llewellyn (1981) discussed the exclusion of female research subjects and how it might be avoided. Had Holland questioned why so few women were included in his study when it became evident, he may have found ways to rectify the problem rather than just assume the problem to have been a reflection of the exclusion of women from the construction industry. Further, had Holland consulted the work of feminist scholars, such as Marx Ferree (1987), one of many researchers to examine women’s entry into non-traditional work places, he may have found alternate explanations that were a better fit for the circumstances.

In a section of Emoh Ruo where Holland discussed his survey of Sydney owner-builders, he asked respondents about other people they knew who had owner-built and supplied the following possible responses, “none, grandfather, father, father-in-law, brother, brother-in-law, uncle, and others” (Holland 1988, p. 150-158). The reader was left to wonder how many of the 14 “others” identified by respondents
were female (Holland 1988, p. 158). In asking about respondent’s other do-it-yourself activities he listed projects that were stereotypically masculine. He asked if his respondents “built a boat, built a caravan, built furniture, built radio or hi-fi, built a garage, built a carport, done repairs on a car, made toys, made model aircraft, made other models, altered a previous home, painted a previous home [or] done household repairs” (Holland 1988, p. 157). There is no mention of other creative manual pursuits, such as gardening, cooking, sewing or crafts that also have corollaries in construction but which might have been seen as feminine.

Holland, a male, a trained architect and an academic teacher of architecture, was accustomed to the absence of women. The discipline of architecture had at the time much lower numbers of female students compared with males (Brine 1989b), it favoured male students (Brine 1989a), the profession had only a small number of practicing female architects (RAIA 1991), and had even fewer female teaching staff (Brine 1989b). Rather than identify the almost complete lack of female respondents in his research as a shortcoming, Holland explains it with reference to the lack of women in construction (Holland 1988, p. 149). He does so without evidence of a causal link between the two phenomena or seeing it as a problem that required further exploration or explanation.

While not without their limitations, built environment disciplines have provided some basis from which to explore self-build housing. From studies of architecture, an understanding of the art and or technology of these houses has been obtained. Through urban studies, approaches to understanding self-built housing in their urban and rural contexts have been made. Through public policy studies the broader housing issues that underpin state decisions to support, control or discourage self-build within communities have become visible. As the literature review illustrates, social and spatial aspects of self-build housing in different locations nationally and internationally can be compared. If architecture is any example though, without intervention, built environment disciplines do not spontaneously drop their gender biases. This is one reason for a transdisciplinary approach, a measure that will be discussed later in this chapter.
The second concern that emerged from the literature review was the question of how evidence was gathered. Centring the evidence of women epistemologically will not produce greater knowledge unless care is taken in gathering that evidence. A number of factors are critical in the process: identification of sources, recruitment of participants, the framing of questions, and paying attention to who speaks, who is listened to and who is not.

Holland drew his random sample of participants directly from the records of the NSW registrar of owner-builders (Holland 1988, p. 72). When it became evident that this process excluded female participants, rather than questioning his recruitment process or correctly labelling his sample as sampling men, Holland saw the lack of female registered owner-builders as reflecting the few women employed in construction. He may equally have attributed it to the cultural practices of financial institutions. Husbands were routinely assigned the status of “primary” on loan applications, a practice that probably resulted in statutory bodies registering the senior male householder as an owner-builder. But in Holland’s mind it appears there was a rightness in speaking to men when asking questions about self-build housing. He didn’t imagine that couples built.

Where Holland observed women participating in self-build housing, he often made assumptions about their roles, which resulted in de-facto exclusion. Questions were framed around the tasks carried out by men, and the tasks undertaken by women were often deemed not to be actual building. Examples in the literature showed that at those times women have been included in projects, it was often characterised as limited to so-called support roles. It seemed that what women said would simply not have been seen as pertaining to the practice and so their exclusion was unquestioned. Quite clearly the boundaries separating women and self-build rested on gender bias in the mind of Holland, a bias that led to their exclusion as research participants.

In this project recruitment processes and data gathering techniques addressed this. By recognising that women in households where self-build is being undertaken are involved in self-build, even when their names are not recorded on official registration documents, and that ancillary tasks associated with building are indeed part of
construction, even when undertaken by women, it becomes possible to recognise that women do participate in self-build. Given though the persistent bias that has excluded them, it would seem sensible to take steps to design measures to specifically include them in research, setting aside time to talk with women, addressing questions directly to them, anticipating that they may indeed have internalised bias and so enquire about their experience of self-build as women.

One of the striking features of the literature was the predominance of observational, interview or survey-based data collection. Holland employed a questionnaire (Holland 1988, p. 239) and field interviews (Holland 1988, p. 245) to gather material. It could have been possible that some of the interviews may have provided an opportunity for women to speak, however Holland’s method prevented the inclusion of unscripted responses:

The structured interview using an interviewer administered questionnaire with all questions, and most answer categories predetermined was selected for the following reasons. It can be carried out by trained (but not necessarily highly skilled) interviewers, and does not require any knowledge of the subject. (Holland 1988, p. 72).

A multi-method approach must be designed to ensure that questions are asked in ways that enable women to speak and provide multiple opportunities for them to do so. Had Holland included a third source, such as magazine analysis, it may have helped him rectify the project’s shortcomings. The literature review gives some indication of the pervasiveness of these problems.

At the time, self-build usually had a devoted following in local communities. Formal and informal communities were publishing newsletters, magazines and resources where stories and information were shared. This was a neglected source which could have enhanced the potential to reveal different stories that could have balanced the voices of male researchers documenting the heroic lone male battling to provide for his dependent wife and children. Indeed Reinharz, an advocate of multi-method research favoured by many feminist scholars, advised researchers to “… cast their net as widely as possible in their search for understanding(1992, p. 201).”

A third methodological concern emerged from the literature review that is crucial in documenting women and self-build housing: it is the absence of an appropriate
conceptual framework. Unless the conceptual framework employed allows evidence to be understood, its potential cannot be realised. Without a suitable conceptual framework, the full meaning of material under consideration cannot be fully understood.

Holland’s conceptual framework was limited in a way that did prevent him from communicating what he observed. One example of this is his description of his survey respondents as coming from “conventional households with the owner builder as the conventional male head of household” (Holland 1988, p. 149). He uses the concept “head of household” uncritically, despite the term being discredited by many writing about housing at the time. Indeed The 1986 Census Dictionary states under the heading “Household Head” that “[t]he concepts of household and family head are no longer recognised in the census” (Castles 1986, p. 76) and that in the censuses prior to 1981 census coders preferentially selected “employed, middle-aged males” as heads of households (Castles 1986, p. 63).

It is not clear why the Australian Bureau of Statistics recognised the imposition of this term as problematic and changed its practice. The UN however labelled the term a “sex-based stereotype,” and said that its elimination from:

... the national data system of a country will not only improve the statistics needed by those concerned with the realization of the goals of the United Nations Decade for Women but will also improve the data used for many other purposes. (United Nations Secretariat 1980, p. 5)

This shift shows the influence of feminists at that time. The “Decapitation [of the]… Head of Household” (Presser 1998, p. 145) was celebrated optimistically as the “demise of patriarchalism” (Smith 1992, p. 422). Holland shows us the concept persisted even when it was rejected at the highest levels of bureaucracy. Examples of its persistence can be seen in the term “Female-headed household” which was used in some of the reviewed literature to describe households where there was no male parent present in the household. The implication being that where a male parent is present, he is the head of the household. Perhaps the term “Female single parent household” was too cumbersome? Perhaps it was too ill fitting in the case of multi-family households?
Self-build housing is a complex activity. Its very nature defies the neat dichotomies that have been used to constrain gendered divisions of labour in the past. For both men and women it traverses work and home, work life and family life, professional and amateur work locations and skills, home and workplace concerns, housework and waged labour, volunteer and paid work and is an activity influenced by pragmatic and ideological concerns, material and social. The next three sections of the chapter discuss how the three methodological concerns outlined in this section were addressed to further the aims of this study.

**Locating Evidence of Women’s Experience**

In her landmark survey, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (1992), Reinharz used an inductive approach to theorise the features of feminist research. Her observation of hundreds of feminist research projects (Reinharz 1992, p. 240) prompted her to state that feminist research strives to represent human diversity, attempts to develop special relations with the people studied, and establishes on-going criticism of non-feminist scholarship. It includes the researcher as a person, aims to create social change, uses a feminist perspective, employs a multiplicity of research methods and may be transdisciplinary. This list of attributes both locates this project in the broader endeavour of academic research and guides its implementation.

Reinharz’s approach can be described as inductive because it begins with specific observations from which a general theory is formulated (Schwandt 2007) rather than testing a hypothesis. Some feminist theorists have argued that a truly inductive approach does not exist, that pre-existing research and theory inform future study (Letherby 2003).

At the time Reinharz was writing, however, there was little comprehensive analysis of feminist research. Likewise, the lack of accounts of self-build housing by women meant that there is still very little in the way of pre-existing theory for this study to challenge.

While Reinharz says feminist research may be transdisciplinary, in her discussion of the concept she says “it reaches across disciplinary boundaries.”(Reinharz 1992, p. 61)
Magarey had previously outlined the nature of the transdisciplinary approach noting that:

A trans-disciplinary enterprise... endeavours to transcend a specific range of disciplines, and this must mean that it establishes criteria for assessing and selecting techniques and procedures from those disciplines, according to their usefulness in illuminating a particular field of knowledge, or in facilitating synthesis of information from a variety of intellectual traditions. (Magarey 1983, p. 164)

In this case, however, Holland’s study was confined by the discipline of architecture which confirmed the invisibility of women. While transdisciplinarity implies a process of change and the creation of something new, that goes beyond and radically challenges any chosen discipline from a critical gender perspective (Lykke 2011) and an inductive approach allows the theory to emerge from the evidence methodologies, concepts developed in women’s and gender studies are necessary to locate women’s evidence.

Developed within women’s studies, by scholars such as Harding, Hartsock, Hill Collins (Hill Collins 1990) and Smith (Smith 2004), standpoint theory locates women’s experiences as central in understanding situations in which they have been marginalised or excluded. Wylie says the central premise of this approach is that those who are systematically marginalised may be epistemically privileged in some respects. “They may know different things, or know some things better than those who are comparatively privileged (socially, politically), by virtue of what they typically experience and how they understand their experience” (Wylie 2004). In order to explore the experiences of women and construct a gendered analysis, this study positioned women as providing key evidence. In their development of standpoint theory, Hartsock (1983) and Harding (1986), advocate such an approach. Standpoint theory specifically values women’s knowledge, and centres women’s “strong objectivity” as outsiders within a dominant culture. (Harding 2009)

Harding was careful to assert that the value of women’s knowledge did not come from an essentialist assertion of the specialness of the female but rather arose from the material conditions of women’s lives, often invisible and outside the places where power resides. Harding said standpoint had been adopted as a way of “empowering oppressed groups, of valuing their experiences and of pointing to a
way to develop an “oppositional consciousness” (Harding 2004). This claim is borne out in the writings of scholars such as Moreton-Robinson who says “feminist standpoint theory… provides useful tools for developing an indigenous women’s standpoint theory that can be utilized whether we are researching within our communities or outside them.” (2013). The particular value standpoint theory has is, that in centring the knowledge of the marginalised, what was hidden is brought out into the light. The knowledge produced reveals power relations that maintained the status quo which was obscured by traditional processes.

Another theory used and developed within women’s studies, grounded theory, is an inductive methodological approach that is useful in situations where it is difficult to develop a deductive hypothesis as the area is under-researched (Brine 1994, p. 2). The central method of grounded theory is to use rigorous coding processes to develop theory from data(Strauss & Corbin 1990). The detailed application of this method is taken up in the section of this chapter below which outlines the analysis of material gathered through participant observation and field interviews.

In locating evidence of women’s self-build activities, the utility of an inductive, transdisciplinary approach, focused on built-environment disciplines, using standpoint and grounded theory and concepts developed within women’s and gender studies is indicated.

**Gathering Evidence of Women’s Experience**

Research is not without its risks for participants. Some researchers have pointed out the potential dangers to women from research; women’s willingness to talk for example, is an index of their powerlessness and vulnerability (Griffiths 1991). In an exploitative setting, research participants run the risks of stress, emotional upset and embarrassment. Simply having women do the interviewing has not been seen as a panacea for those ills (Roberts 1981), with one feminist researcher noting she found herself wondering “whether the appearance of greater respect for, and equality with research subjects… masks a deeper more dangerous form of exploitation” (Stacey 1996, p. 90). Feminist theorists have claimed feminist research is more appropriate to
women because it brings the researcher closer to the participants and makes the researcher more responsible for the social effects of the research (Farnham 1987).

Fortunately, more rigorous processes, ensuing research is carried out ethically, have been mandated in recent years. In addition to meeting the stringent ethical requirements of the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC 2014) this study incorporated the measures advocated by Sprague (1991) to limit the risks of exploitation; making the researcher visible in the text and emphasising the personhood of the participants.

Feminist scholars such as Reinharz (1992; 1999), Crawford and Kimmel (1999) and many others have advocated the use of mixed-methods strategies as more inclusive of women. More recently Nagy-Hesse-Biber said:

... mixed-method research provides feminists with a strategy for responding to traditional forms of knowledge... [and] using quantitative measures in tandem with qualitative methods provides a mechanism for changing the ways in which research is practiced... [offering] the opportunity to uncover subjugated knowledge and silenced voices (Nagy Hesse-Biber 2010, p. 132).

In this study, which challenges traditional views of self-build as a practice of men, the qualitative methods employed are an open-ended questionnaire, participant observation, content analysis and field interviews while the questionnaire and content analysis also offer quantitative opportunities along with an online survey.

In the past, feminist researchers have disputed the value of quantitative methods, particularly with regard to scientific research. To some extent quantitative and qualitative methods have been discussed by feminists in oppositional terms and even as part of a hierarchal dualism with quantitative methods regarded with suspicion, associated with science and a male perspective, while qualitative methods have been associated with the concerns of women, being more trusted and humane. It appeared at times to have been a battle between what Cole and Stewart call narratives and numbers (Cole & Stewart 2012). Reconciling the different epistemological and ontological assumptions of quantitative and qualitative approaches has been possible in a variety of ways; this study most resembles what has been referred to as using diverse materials as data. “This approach… is particularly fruitful for those interested
in popular culture and visual imagery… by expanding traditional social science notions of what constitutes ‘data,’ this approach could open new avenues of enquiry” (Cole & Stewart 2012). Certainly that has been the hope with this study.

There is a long history of feminist use of mixed-method research approaches that focuses on built environment issues. Some of the more recent examples include Bowstead’s project that “mapped and quantified women’s journeys to escape domestic violence in England, and builds on the empirical findings to theorise about the nature of such journeys” (2017) and Dasari et al’s study that used “surveys and guided interviews … to explore women’s contraceptive and reproductive experiences, interactions with the health care system, and their histories of homelessness” (2016). Both projects were complex, transdisciplinary and utilised mixed-methods to analyse material from a variety of sources and provide insight into how women negotiate challenging circumstances and built environments while trying to maintain their health and wellbeing.

Evidence of the long-standing interest in mixed-method research among feminist researchers interested in women and built environments can be seen in the continued used of mixed-method studies over many years. Part of that popularity is related to the capacity for it to be implemented as action research by community organisations exploring aspects of the built environment in their neighbourhoods and communities. Three Australian examples are the study Speaking of Housing (Barclay et al. 1991), Just like a Family: The experiences of women and children in the Victorian Rental Housing Cooperatives Programme (Hamilton Barwick 1993), and It’s a Long Way to the Shop : Women’s Housing in Queensland (Wagner & Morgan-Thomas 1995).

Each of these community-based research projects used a combination of interviews, focus or discussion groups, as well as ways of documenting the built environment, and gave voice to women at the margins.

What these mixed-method studies all have in common is that they focus on women as consumers of housing and built environments. This is one of the factors that sets this study of women’s self-build housing apart from most studies of women and housing and other studies of Australian self-build. It draws attention once again to
the dominant pattern of hierarchal dichotomies in contemporary Australia. When it comes to housing, women are associated with the almost passive and certainly the less powerful role of housing consumption, whereas men are associated with the active and powerful role of housing production.

**Understanding the Evidence of Women’s Experience**

Earlier in this chapter exploration of Holland’s use of the discredited concept “head of household” illustrated the need for a suitable conceptual framework if evidence is to be understood. This section expands on that issue.

The conceptual framework used to describe and analyse the data constrains understanding. In reading the literature it became clear that there was little in the way of a shared conceptual framework across the discussions, as the majority of frameworks lack the capacity to allow researchers to identify and articulate gendered experiences in all but the crudest of ways. In all likelihood, other aspects of the self that play a role in the experience of self-build housing are also neglected, resulting in a flat and uniform rendering of what should be a rich, detailed account. As was the case with Holland’s observation that all but two of his respondents were men (Holland 1988, p. 149), without a broader conceptual framework what has been observed may defy proper description or understanding. General concepts that underpin a gendered analysis and enable us to document women’s experiences include terms such as: sex and gender dichotomies, the social construction of masculinity and femininity and gender roles. Concepts that enable discussion of relative power might include: discrimination, stereotypes, gender inequality, women’s invisibility, gender blindness and patriarchal norms. (Pilcher & Whelehan 2004).

The literature was replete with such examples. In one UK article discussing students undertaking a community-based self-build project the authors said: “the ‘macho’ aspect of the building site can be a disadvantage to the girls and there is some evidence that girls drift into more administrative tasks” (Hutson & Jones 2002, p. 649). There was no discussion of whether they were subject to any form of gender-based harassment, whether existing gendered structural inequality was reflected in
training they had previously received that better equipped them for those tasks. Was affirmative action or other strategic intervention required to prepare and support them as females to build with, or indeed apart from, the male participants? There was no discussion of the need for female role models or trainers. There was no mention of project management as a critical skill in construction, and a legitimate and valuable construction-industry career choice, which the particular female students may have had an aptitude for.

Why was there no mention of the stereotype of office girls? Was it that the female students had formed their own gender-based support group to deal with their marginalisation and exclusion in the face of deficiencies in their education or the pressures of the construction site? Without a conceptual framework that included gendered understandings of education, training, and work and construction workplaces in particular, the researchers could not make sense of the girls’ experiences. The experiences of females in the construction sector are relevant to their experience of self-build. Measures included in this study to provide such context are set out in the next section of this chapter.

Of course a list of gender-related terms restricts discussion unless broader concepts such as intersectionality are used. The concept of intersectionality was first put forward by feminist legal scholar Kimberlee Crenshaw (Crenshaw 1991) as a key concept in understanding the startling disadvantage African American women face in a US culture that privileges masculinity and whiteness. It references and takes seriously the multiple interdependent aspects of a person (gender, sex, sexuality, ability, class, race, nationality, locale, etc.) that are subject to a system of oppression and describes how the effect of multiple forms of oppression combine to impact individuals and communities.

Intersectionality is now a widely used concept in feminist theory and practice. For example, a Women with Disabilities Victoria report in *Voices Against Violence: Summary Report and Recommendations* notes that the very high rates of violence against women with disabilities can be attributed to gender-based discrimination that puts women with disabilities at increased risk of male violence combined with social
isolation due to a lack of services for people with disabilities (Woodlock et al. 2014). Where multiple forms of disadvantage intersect they greatly increase the impact of each other, therefore it is necessary for researchers to be able to recognise the many forms oppression and disadvantage that result from a cultural norm that privileges one group over another.

Much of the research on self-build identifies gendered aspects of work and employment as impacting the practice of self-build housing. However, without greater understanding of gendered analysis of work and family life - including concepts such as the home-work dichotomy, gender segregation in the workplace, women’s work, gendered division of labour, domestic work/paid work dichotomies, patterns of unpaid domestic labour, gendered familial roles, the different parenting roles of mothers and fathers and the sexual division of labour - meaningful conclusions are not available. As these terms indicate, gendered analyses of work are closely tied to an understanding of home life and the family, nowhere more so than in households when self-build housing is undertaken.

Women’s patterns of work are very different from those of men to the extent that much of what women do has historically often not been described as work and goes unpaid. The reality of women’s work is complex and needs to be articulated for a real understanding of all that women do directly in building but also in freeing up men’s time from household, income earning and child rearing responsibilities so that the men may build. It also needs to include consideration of which of women’s roles are paid and unpaid and how in “traditional” families women’s role as child-rearers, cooks and cleaners are assumed to be “natural” expressions of femininity. In the past a career was even seen as unnatural for women and unfeminine, particularly if that career was not nursing, teaching or clerical work.

A conceptual framework drawn from women’s and gender studies is essential in perceiving and understanding a gendered landscape and a feminist perspective is required to notice the distortions produced by its absence. In this case it is a landscape that is both a workplace, a domestic space and more, a house built by its
future residents whose lives and home are structured by deeply ingrained gender patterns.

**Multi-method Research: Making Self-Build Women Visible**

In 1996, for assessment in the Bachelor of Architecture Program at Deakin University, I completed a small study, supervised by Sandra Kaji-O’Grady, investigating whether women undertake the practice of self-build housing (Denigan 1996). Within a relatively short period I identified and documented seven cases of women building a house for their own use. I included only women who were not living with an adult male partner in order to avoid the issue of mis-attribution of work between male and female couples, a problem that plagues the architectural profession (Agrest, Weisman & Conway 1996; Schmertz 1982). The seven cases compiled showed a broad range of situations, establishing that women on their own and working with female partners build houses for their own need. In addition, anecdotal evidence gathered during the process suggested that typically women build alongside male partners in scenarios that do not quite fit with the dominant narrative where they ”help” occasionally.

While searching for cases to document I spoke with many women who had been involved in self-build projects with male partners and family members and compiled a list of potential participants for a broader project that I hoped would have greater scope to document a wider range of women’s experiences. The contact list developed did not form part of the assessed materials but proved invaluable in sampling for the initial parts of this study.

An evaluation of the case study process was used to inform this project. All the self-build women who participated completed a written evaluation form, giving comments detailing any concerns about the research process or difficulties with the researcher, which were used to refine the design of this study. Some of the participating self-build women did indicate that face-to-face meetings would have been preferable to the telephone interviews, as this would have allowed them to better explain what they had built.
That study also served as a pilot-study in other ways. It allowed the location of regions and communities where self-build housing was a relatively common practice, identification of the publications used by practitioners to gather resources and model the role of ”owner-builder,” find forums and networks where people involved in self-build exchanged information, and links to communities.

Through that process it was possible to trial, evaluate and reflect on the efficacy and appropriateness of the methods and to consider the robustness of the methodology. That initial work on women and self-build housing was informed by readings of feminist research and heavily influenced by Stanley’s discussion of the *Impact of Feminism on Sociology* (1992), Truman’s discussion of feminist research (1994) and Reinharz’s *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (1992). Reinharz’s influence can be seen in part in the use of case studies. Other influences were Oakley’s discussion of interviews with women (1981), discussion of power relations and research by Roberts (1981) and Finch (1993) and Jagger on consent (1993) as well as Stanley’s earlier work with Wise (1983). This small project seemed to be part of the perennial academic feminist project of developing critical feminist approaches to research and writing women’s experiences into the male-focused historical record. It is a task far from complete in the fields of architecture and construction.

The overarching problem of women’s absence from the record of self-build housing was addressed. Designing methods to produce evidence of women’s experiences building their own houses drew upon examples from other studies of women, gender and housing, feminist research more generally, the lessons of previous research into self-build housing that largely ignore women, and my own pilot study that showed that indeed women do build houses for themselves.

This study used a mixture of approaches, employing a feminist perspective. Using qualitative and quantitative methods it drew material from five sources: participant-observations gathered during a 16-week building course; responses to a questionnaire directed at people who had built a house for their own use; content analysis of *The Owner Builder Magazine* and *Earth Garden Magazine*; field work interviews undertaken with a convenient sample of those who completed the questionnaire; and
an online survey of self-selected respondents who self-built. This section outlines how each source fitted within the feminist framework of this project and met ethics requirements. It also details recruitment, instrument design, data collection and analysis processes consistent with that framework. For the safety of all those discussed, pseudonyms have been used throughout this work. However in order to acknowledge achievements of individual women who built their own houses, as identified in the magazines, a list of their names was included.

**Participant Observation: Learning Building or Masculinity?**

Prior to conducting fieldwork on self-build building sites, training in construction basics was undertaken. This consisted of a three-day cob construction course for women and a sixteen-week pre-apprenticeship building course. The second of these provided an opportunity to undertake participant observation with trainee builders that would provide insight into the development of industry-based building skills and enculturation into the industry. In order to meet current requirements for ethical research, details of the course have been withheld. What can be said however, is that it was markedly different to the first course which was a women-only, residential course, taught by a woman, which included delicious generous specialised catering and focused on alternative or appropriate technology. For the first course I was almost a comfortable insider (Merriam et al. 2001).

Participant observation has been used widely by feminist researchers. One of the most colourful examples, Steinem’s *A Bunny’s Tale* (1963), saw the researcher live as a Playboy Bunny for 17 weeks, working long hours, enduring uncomfortable attire and being subject to blatant sexism in the work environment. Steinem’s resemblance to a typical ‘Bunny’ was essential to her participant status. For me, as a 34-year-old in a class where the average age was close to 20, as a graduate student among high school leavers, as a grandmother in a group of young men, as a female in a class of males, the researcher could barely have been more different from the researched. While perhaps not an ideal situation for participant observation, where the researcher might aim to be just another participant, my outsider status generally did not seem to motivate others to modify their behaviour. When it did, that too was of interest. This confirmed “the simple dichotomising of insider and outsider to be misleading”
In that situation there was also no possibility and little value, in attempting to be objective, as Charmaz said (2006) subjectivity was more honest and in my view contributed more to the value of the observations.

My difference seemed reason enough for my classmates to ignore my note taking. Generally it went unacknowledged. Only two of the students and none of the teaching staff ever commented on the practice, even though once or twice I wrote notes rather than undertook assigned work. One student did confide that he was worried I was writing down what he said. I reassured him he had nothing to worry about, not a thing that transpired would ever be linked back to him. In that moment, the assertions of Sprague (2005) about the dynamics of power and privilege rang true when a 15-year-old at trade school felt vulnerable and alone, questioning a university-trained researcher more than twice his age.

Since the collection of the material, a number of issues arose that necessitated the transfer of the project to a new institution and an application to this new institution’s ethics committee for approval to use previously collected data. Collection took place within the provisions of enrolment at the previous institution, and were subject to ethical approval and have since undergone further vetting at the new institution. The Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee approved inclusion of this material under application number DUHREC2011-224.

Undertaking the process of seeking approval to include those notes in this project was a somewhat jarring process so many years after the fact and with so much emphasis on the welfare and safety of the participants. As a researcher, I was concerned for my own safety on more than one occasion during the course. The risk of harm to the researcher was much higher than realised or could have been foreseen, an issue that deserves further investigation.

At the completion of that construction course the notes were stored and analysis took place many years later when work on this project resumed. That analysis was loosely based on a grounded theory approach, as outlined by Corbin and Strauss (1990) in which theories are continually tested until an explanatory framework is developed. Such explanations can then be said to be grounded in the material. Feminist
researchers such as Brine (1994) and Taki (2006) have demonstrated the value of this approach, while Lu and Sexton (2010) successfully used grounded theory approach in analysing interviews focusing on women’s career paths in construction management.

Charmaz’s detailed discussion on the ways grounded theory can be implemented in a mixed-method project emphasises the flexibility of the method. She describes it as: “a set of principles and practices, not as prescriptions or packages nor methodological rules, recipes, and requirements. (2006, p. 11)” That method involves the collection of rich data that is subject to multiple processes of analysis; coding, memo-writing, conceptualising, sorting and allowing theory to emerge at multiple points in that process. It is a laborious process that produces theory grounded in data. The software package N*VIVO has been developed to facilitate this process.

**Content Analysis: Is that a Builder or a Woman?**

Feminist use of content analysis has a long history. The technique has been used to critically analyse gender, such as in conversation, on television and in other media (Brown 1990; Rudy, Popova & Linz 2010; Speer 2002). In a discussion of the classic feminist example of the examination of magazine content, Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, Reinharz points out that cultural expression, production and perpetuation of patriarchy can be explored by analysing cultural artefacts such as texts (Reinharz 1992, p. 150). Content analysis can be employed quantitatively or qualitatively. In this study a mix of approaches was used, with quantitative techniques to compare men and women’s representations and a qualitative approach to explore a sample of images and texts in detail the nature of the representation of women self-builders.

Two popular Australian magazines, *The Owner Builder* and *Earth Garden*, published between 1972 and 2001, were selected. The parts of the magazines selected for analysis were: cover images, articles about building, articles about building featuring women as builders, and letters to the editor. This section discusses the choice of the magazines, the rationale for content selection, the approach to analysis and the questions the content analysis addressed.
The Owner Builder and Earth Garden feature articles looking at housing built by people for their own use. Sold through private subscription, through the networks of local news agencies across Australia and available in public libraries, these magazines are widely available avenues through which models of what it is to be a builder are portrayed. The magazines identify themselves as being targeted toward people interested in building their own homes. They are one resource people interested in self-build are likely to turn to for ideas and information about how to achieve their goal.

These two magazines target somewhat different self-build audiences. The Owner Builder, as the name suggests quite specifically, addresses itself to a readership which identifies with the category “owner-builder” and to the extent that this term is gendered male, the audience addressed by this magazine is implicitly male. The magazine also explicitly addresses a readership which identifies with the category owner, addressing people with a concern for their status as derived through economic indicators such as property ownership. This, it can be argued, coincides with the identification of the male as breadwinner and head of the household. The second magazine chosen for analysis, Earth Garden, is less explicitly focused on self-build but includes it as one aspect of self-sufficiency and sustainability principles which guide the magazine. The title of this magazine genders it as female, through the association of the word “garden” and “earth” to female principles. The magazine describes itself as a “lifestyle” magazine, perhaps an alternative version of the stalwart of Australian women’s popular culture Woman’s Weekly (The Australian Women's Weekly 1933).

Earth Garden, as an “alternative” magazine, focuses on self-sufficiency and life outside the mainstream. It disavows what it calls a “high consumption lifestyle”, instead focusing on “surviving and thriving”. It may appeal to those on lower incomes, perhaps unemployed people and sole parents, a readership critical of Australian class strata and concerned with their day-to-day welfare, as well as those interested in “alternatives”. With its focus on the status of the builder as owner of the house, The Owner Builder also positions itself to attract a readership more affluent than that of Earth Garden. Seen together these magazines could provide a wider
image of the characteristics of those involved in self-build, both in terms of class and
gender. Examination of the cover prices of 1999 suggests that *Owner Builder*, at 7.8
cents per page, is pitched at a slightly more affluent reader than *Earth Garden*, which
was priced at 6.7 cents per page.

Magazines such as these have a role in creating the popular image of an owner-
builder and in depicting the ideas held by their communities of readers. Over the
years of publication both magazines consistently included four types of content that
depicted people involved in building their own houses, these were: cover images,
articles about building, letters to the editor and articles about building featuring
women as builders. While these parts of the magazines were selected for qualitative
analysis, the data was also counted to validate various categories (Seale & Kelly
1988). The cover images, articles about building and letters were examined for
information about the sex or gender of the people described and depicted, and a
range of other attributes that would allow comparisons to be drawn. Articles about
women building, of which there were a very small number in comparison to the very
large number not about women, present an opportunity to examine the depiction of
females and women as outliers that might stand as contrast against norms.

These magazines offer opportunities through which one may come to identify as a
builder. Representations of men and women who build their own homes, write and or
speak about such activities, engage in the roles of practitioner, editor, contributor,
author, expert or even as someone seeking information or responding to content in
the magazine and model aspects of what one does when involved in a self-build
project. In order to gain an understanding of the extent to which, and ways in which,
such modelling is gendered, the following questions are considered. To what extent
are people who build their own houses depicted in these magazines? Are the genders
of people who build their own houses discussed or depicted, and if so, what is the
nature of this depiction? What other gendered depictions of engagement with self-
build housing practitioners are available? What relationship exists between the
depiction of people and representations of builders with regard to gender?
Four types of content that could be investigated in relation to these questions are: cover photographs; letters to the editors; articles about building and articles about building featuring women as builders. These and other questions are addressed in relation to the content data in Chapter 3 of this thesis. The material from these magazines was subject to preliminary analysis and discussion prior to the transfer of this project to the current institution. That initial numerical analysis involving simple percentages was conducted using MS Access and MS Excel, with percentages compiled and cross-tabulated manually for qualitative purposes.

Several scholars influenced the use of content analysis in this study. Weber’s simple yet insightful explanations of the technique of content analysis give clear instructions for its application (1990). Reinharz’s expansion on the way content analysis can be utilised by the feminist researcher who, she says, will more likely examine “the text… the process of its production… [and] the processes that prevent texts from being produced”. In this case the texts not produced are women self-builders. The approach to analysing the content was also informed by close reading of Szczelkun’s work on self-builders at Sharsted (2002) and filmmakers (1997) which utilised content analysis in a mixed-method research project. It pointed to the utility of such an approach to analyse the work of a diverse group of creative people. Natalier also demonstrates content analysis used to good effect in her study of the role of gender in structuring domestic practices in share households (2003). This study, however, relates building and gender to the self and self-expression.

The use of this material was ethically uncontroversial. Permission for its inclusion was considered by the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee under application number DUHREC2011-224

**Questionnaire: Are all the Self-builders Men?**

Much of what is written about the use of surveys and questionnaires by feminist researchers focused on critiques of quantitative methods. That critique reflects a point where feminist researchers broke away and developed new approaches, feminist ways to use the method (Miner-Rubino & Epstein Jayaratne 2007; O'Shaughnessy & Krogman 2012; Reinharz 1992; Stanley & Wise 1983). The
questionnaire used in this project was not designed for statistical analysis rather, in
the face of Holland’s homogeneous sample, to explore the range of experience of
people who build their own houses.

To recruit respondents for the questionnaire letters to the editors were sent to major
Australian daily newspapers, suburban newspapers, rural and regional papers and
special interest newspapers and journals. Calls to participate were also placed on a
handful of internet notice boards that catered to the interest of self-builders. Calls to
participate were made via *Earthwise Women*, *Earth Garden* and *Owner Builder*
magazines. Calls were also made through letters to people formerly involved in the
Victorian Government’s self-build programs. Invitations to participate were made in
all states and territories of Australia, with the exception of the Northern Territory
where fees were prohibitive. The project was limited to those who self-built between
1 January 1971 and 31 December 2000. The resulting sample was drawn from all
states of Australia.

A copy of the questionnaire was also sent to 67 women from South Australia,
Victoria and Queensland who made contact during various non-professional level
courses in building targeted at women. In addition, questionnaires were sent to
several women who made contact after reading information about the research on
list-serves. Other women, who contacted me after hearing about the research or were
referred to me by acquaintances, were also sent questionnaires. In total 459
questionnaires were sent to individuals and 95 completed questionnaires were
returned. Responses have come from five states including 58 different postcodes.
Ultimately, completed questionnaires from 90 people were included for analysis, 50
females and 40 males. (For the questionnaire see Appendix A: Questionnaire)

The recruitment strategies devised for this project contrasted those used by Holland,
as they were designed specifically to include a more diverse range of participants,
not just in terms of gender but also include other categories of people involved in
self-build, not just owner-builders. Where Holland aimed for quantitative analysis,
this research was designed to be both quantitative and qualitative.
The long questionnaire designed for this project differed from Holland’s interviewer administered questionnaire through the use of open-ended questions and unsupervised completion. While it did include questions regarding demographic information such as age, sex and the time of life in which construction took place, the remainder invited respondents to give longer, more detailed responses and add additional pages if required. (See Appendix A: Questionnaire.) Some questions were also designed to produce material comparable to Holland’s data.

During design, questions about financial aspects of the self-build process were considered and rejected. As Holland found (Holland 1988, p. 143), a number of factors unique to self-build projects make discussion and comparison of self-build finances difficult. Often projects stretch over a variety of time frames, in many cases two to three years with different rates of progress over time and inconsistent labour input, a proportion of which would likely be unpaid. What value should be attached to that labour? Further, the relative cost of materials and labour would vary greatly over that time. Sometimes the period under consideration spanned 30 years and many of the figures would therefore be not comparable. Rather than asserting the assumed affordability of self-build with such questions, respondents were allowed to raise the issue in responses to other questions detailing their perceptions.

Only questionnaires pertaining to houses built in 1970 or later were included. Responses to the six-page questionnaire were manually entered into MS Access database, analysed and discussed, and some preliminary findings were published (Denigan 2002). The initial numerical analysis involved cross tabulations compiled manually. The volume of material collected was greater than anticipated and only a selection of the material could be included in the thesis.

Since the collection of the material, a number of personal issues arose that necessitated the transfer of the project to a new institution and an application to this new institution’s ethics committee for approval to use previously collected data. Collection of the data had been subject to the processes and conditions prevailing at the initial institution, however, in the intervening period processes for gaining ethical approval were strengthened significantly in Australia. The material collected has
been included with the approval of the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee under application number DUHREC2011-224.

Field Interviews: What Do the Women Say?
The identification of so many examples of women building their own houses, and in particular identification of a community of self-build women in one location, provided an unprecedented opportunity to explore their experiences in detail. Field visits and interviews, planned since the inception of the project, were undertaken with selected participants, with the view to adding fine detail to the broader observations of the previously collected data.

Fieldwork processes were informed by a variety of feminist scholars: O’Connell Davidson and Layders’ discussion of sampling (O’Connell Davidson & Layder 1994), the discussion of insider/outsider status of the researcher discussed by Bowes et al (Bowes, Dar & Sim 1997) and Browne (Browne 2003), Oakley’s and later Finch’s discussions of the complexities of interviewing women (Finch 1993; Oakley 1981), and Bell’s recognition women’s space within the communities that she worked and her discussion of feminist fieldwork (Bell 1993).

Oakley highlighted the problems with traditional social science interview practices as fitting within a masculine model that was antagonistic to feminist approaches. A feminist approach, according to Oakley, would adopt a non-hierarchal model where the interviewer was prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship with the interviewee. In her case Oakley reported that at times she helped out with housework and became close friends with some of the women, around a third of whom were still in contact four years after the study ceased (Oakley 1981).

Bell’s work as an anthropologist conducting fieldwork, as discussed in Daughters of the Dreaming (Bell 1983), also involved her intimately in the lives of the women of the Western Desert. Her account of their lives shows an unwavering commitment to the women in several different aspects of the work, in acknowledging the androcentrism of her discipline, and in seeking to understand the impact of white
invasion and genocide on indigenous culture and how those acts may have impacted indigenous gender relations.

Fieldwork presented several specific concerns for researcher safety. Issues around the long distances and driving time involved and concerns around visiting participants in their homes were resolved with careful planning and adherence to a prearranged schedule of interviews. Concerns about conducting fieldwork on construction sites were addressed by the researcher undertaking a basic construction course, namely the Certificate II in Building and Construction: Carpentry, which also provided an opportunity to undertake participant observation, as detailed previously.

Selecting a sample for fieldwork was a complex process. The single most important criteria for the selection of participants was that through documenting their experience the range of people depicted became broader. This meant ensuring the inclusion of those who identified as gay and lesbian, identified as having a disability, had divorced the partner they built with, but also where there was a grouping of women known to each other and involved in self-build. The locations of respondents was mapped and routes were planned to maximise those meeting the first criteria and include others who lived relatively close or en-route. A travel route was devised that allowed for overnight accommodation, meal stops, reasonable driving times and distances per day. No funding was available to complete the fieldwork, making financial constraints the fourth and final criteria determining the number of days available in which to conduct fieldwork. Ultimately the fieldwork took 22 days to complete over a period of three months, during which 6500 kilometres were covered visiting 35 sites in South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria. This somewhat gruelling schedule precluded making time in the schedule to offer participants a few hours building assistance as a way of reciprocating their participation.

Dr Margie Ripper, formerly of the University of Adelaide, assisted in my preparation for fieldwork, advised on the conduct and schedule of interviews. Poland and Stanley’s report of fieldwork in Rochdale (Poland & Stanley 1988), was also influential, particularly in the way it made clear the subtleties of power relationships in research processes and the importance of detailed fieldwork descriptions.
Consequently my interviews commenced with a brief summary of this project and the background of the researcher and all participants were asked for written consent to have the interview recorded, including those whose presence was not initially anticipated. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions on a range of topics, guided by the interviewee (Reinharz 1992, p. 24). Where further elaboration was necessary non-directive probes and prompts were used (Brenner, Brown & Canter 1985). (See: Appendix D: Field Interview Sample Questions).

The fieldwork involved recorded on-site interviews, access to the building and site to take photographs of the house, and usually a guided tour of the house led by the respondent and sometimes other family members. When the field visits took place the participants signed consent forms allowing the researcher to use photographs which might identify them and or their dwelling. The considerable pride that the participants take in their self-build achievements was, no doubt, a motivating factor in their desire to see photographs of their houses published. The possibility that this desire made participants more vulnerable and influenced their decision to consent to be identified when it may not have been in their best interests, cannot be ignored and suggests that it might have been unethical to use the photographs. Though it was within the bounds of what was permitted at the time the fieldwork was conducted, the publication of photographs that may identify the participants would now contravene the provisions placed on this research by the National ethics guidelines. It would be an unnecessary risk and so interview transcripts remain the only field data to be used in this study.

The interviews were transcribed and the resulting transcriptions were coded with the qualitative research software N*vivo using a grounded theory approach to coding, as discussed previously, with key concepts thus emerging from the material. Incident by incident and focused coding approaches were applied to the data to ready it for full analysis and discussion (Charmaz 2006).

The fieldwork was undertaken between early 2002 and mid 2003. Soon after this the research was affected by significant, unavoidable delays. When the project was recommenced several years later permission was granted by the Deakin University
Human Research Ethics Committee to use some of the previously gathered data for project DUHREC2011-224. The material generated from the field interviews is presented and discussed in Chapter 6 of this thesis.

**Online Survey: Do Women and Men Build Together?**
The initial design of this study included only four phases of data collection. With the passage of time, the development of new technologies and the support of a new institution, an opportunity arose to include a fifth data collection technique, an online survey. In recent years online surveys, such as on feminist labelling and activism (Yoder, Tobias & Snell 2010), have highlighted the potential of online surveys.

Studies such as Holland’s which exclude women and present the experience of men as universal is indicative of why quantitative methods have been rejected as biased and sexist by feminist scholars (Reinharz 1992). The struggle between qualitative and quantitative researchers was even dubbed the “method wars” by Sprague (Sprague 2005). Some feminist researchers, however, have pointed out that when qualitative methods are used to inform quantitative methods they can be very useful in feminist inquiry (Mills et al. 2011; Scott 2010). The first four collection methods elicited very rich detailed qualitative data. As a complement and to further understanding of self-build, an online survey was created. The survey took a quantitative approach and questions were very carefully crafted to bring out detail related to the previously collected data.

Categorised as a low-risk method, approval to conduct the survey was granted by the Deakin University’s Arts and Education Human Ethics Research Committee reference number HEAG(AE)11-119. The application was compiled using the National Ethics Application Form online (NHMRC 2014). As no identifying information was requested and the survey provided little opportunity for respondents to add extraneous personally identifiable information, it was deemed a low-risk project.

For all the potential benefits of online recruitment, difficulties with recruitment and sampling remained (Madge 2010, p. 177). Initial recruitment for the survey was done through calls for participation in online forums and through social media and free
notices in *Earth Garden* and *Owner Builder*, all of which provided insufficient data. A report about the research, published in the *Geelong Advertiser*, seemed to prompt another handful of respondents to complete the survey.

Stage two of recruitment involved approaching all of the State and Territory bodies who register owner-builders with a request that they contact a selection of their registrants to inform them about the study and provide them with sufficient information that they may participate. This recruitment method could have garnered a random selection of participants whose survey responses, entered via an identifiable link, could have been subject to statistical analysis. Perhaps unsurprisingly, as their remit is to limit and control the practice of owner-building, none of the State or Territory registrars allowed their registrants to be notified about the research.

Around 12 months later, with less than 100 respondents to have completed the survey, a third stage of recruitment was undertaken. This stage was made possible upon receipt of a grant from the University to advertise in a variety of newspapers and magazines. These were *The Northern Territory News, The Hobart Mercury, The Canberra Times, The Adelaide Advertiser, The Courier Mail, The West Australian, The Weekly Times, Owner Builder Magazine* and *Earth Garden Magazine*. Re-New Newsletter and Sanctuary Newsletter, newsletters that address the alternative technology community, were also included. Most advertisements were placed in the Public Notices sections of the papers as it was difficult to locate a better option. Display advertisements were taken out in *Owner Builder Magazine* and *Earth Garden Magazine*. The publishers of Re-New and Sanctuary also promoted the study on their email lists.

The content of the survey was informed by preliminary analysis of the questionnaire and the magazine content and reflections on the field interviews. In practice the field interviews provided insufficient opportunity to question participants about their specific roles and those of their partners, and provided insufficient time for participants and their partners to give that issue detailed consideration. This was in part due to an unanticipated phenomenon: in almost all of the cases where an
interview was booked with a partnered individual, their partner also participated in the interviews. At the time I was also concerned about potential negative impacts on couples of asking potentially divisive questions about who did what during the build.

Those circumstances led to the development of a survey of closed questions informed by the work of Babbie (2011, p. 271) that covered four areas of interest: a demographic profile; development as a builder in terms of skills and identity; life while building; and building with a partner. Likert scales (Babbie 2011, p. 191) were used to give respondents a range of possible responses to questions about their perceptions and experiences. A positive and negative affect schedule (Watson, Clark & Tellegen 1988) was developed to gather responses about the feelings of participants facing the prospect of building their own house. The survey is included as Appendix C of this thesis.

The survey, entitled “Owner Builders and Self-build Housing”, was hosted on the research website SurveyMonkey.com (Survey Monkey) which also stored all the survey responses. It also collected a set of IP addresses that confirmed each respondent was unique. Subsequent to collection, the data was downloaded and imported to SPSS, the analytical software, which was used for calculation of simple percentages. The non-random nature of the sample precluded probability statistics from being applied. The final number of respondents as at November 2012, after two years of recruiting reached 192 respondents. The data generated by analysis of the online survey are presented and discussed in Chapter 7.

Conclusion

Holland’s study of owner-builders in Sydney suffered from several problems that led to the exclusion of female owner-builders. This occurred despite the fact that it is possible to identify quite a few instances where women undertake this practice both individually, in cooperation with male or female partners, or as part of a group. The three most obvious methodological problems were: Holland’s failure to notice that his sample frame and sample were biased and his inability to recognise that what women could contribute was also important evidence. Holland’s method did not allow him to rectify his sample, to gather the evidence of women, even though
simple solutions were available such as sending two questionnaires to his respondents and asking for each member of a couple to complete one. Holland also lacked a conceptual framework which could have enabled understanding of the gendered nature of the evidence he found.

Table 2.1 Timetable of examined phenomena.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Method / Site</th>
<th>Number of Respondents or Cases</th>
<th>Date Data Gathered</th>
<th>Publication or Construction Date</th>
<th>Approx. Date of Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Construction course</td>
<td>Personal observation</td>
<td>Confidential</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>2014</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This project is designed to uncover the hidden knowledge of women’s experiences of self-build housing and develop a nuanced understanding of the contribution gender makes in shaping that experience. It is achieved through a mixed-method approach that consists of five opportunities to collect and interpret material. The first of these was qualitative analysis of field notes gathered through participant observation of pre-apprenticeship trainee builders. Quantitative and qualitative content analysis methods were applied to letters, articles and cover images in the magazines *Owner Builder* and *Earth Garden* in particular to examine the disjuncture between the categories of woman and builder. A questionnaire designed to gather numerical and narrative
material was distributed nationally. An online survey completed by people who had built a house for their own use was subjected to numerical analysis. Field interviews across three states, that focused on eliciting free flowing conversational responses were then analysed using the qualitative data analysis package N*VIVO.

The data was collected over the period 1998 to 2014, however the houses discussed were under construction over an even wider period of time, 1970 to 2014. Table 2.1, above, sets out when the houses under consideration were built, when the magazines were published, when the various types of data were collected and when analysis was undertaken.

This project utilised feminist theories and methods, is critical of scholarship that excludes women, works toward pro-woman social change through research and strives to document human diversity in self-build housing. It is an example of inductive, transdisciplinary feminist research that uses a multi-method strategy, with narrative and numerical data to examine self-build housing from women’s standpoints.
3. Learning to be a Builder

I'm working with Ryan and using the power saw. It was very scary at first, I had palpitations! So we went along cutting stuff and I had to go blow my nose. While I was gone Warren came over and made a joke with Ryan. "Sit down here and I turn you into a girl" he said, motioning toward the saw horse with the circular saw. Ryan didn't seem to be amused (field notes).

Another aspect of the [construction] culture involves on site “personal image”, often associated with a lack of hygiene, coarse language, explicit sexual references and gross behaviour… men may use the “pigness” culture [and] mark territory and make women feel unwelcome… by treating the socialization of women as something which is alien to it, this subculture acts as a barrier to women’s social integration, in a way it works as symbolic violence (Ibáñez 2017, p. 45).

This chapter discusses observations made while taking what for most participants was their entry into the construction industry, the pre-apprenticeship course, Certificate II in Building and Construction. To satisfy current ethics requirements no information that could identify any of the participants will be given, this includes the identity of any person, the timeframe during which the course was undertaken nor the location of the teaching institution.

This course was initially undertaken in preparation for the fieldwork on construction sites written about in Chapter 5 of this document. Participation was also a planned participant observation process designed to gain insight into issues of sex and gender in the construction industry, the industry we were being inducted into. This is pertinent to all involved in self-build as interaction with the construction industry, or participation in it, is unavoidable. Entry into courses such as this is quite competitive among young men; as a female, my place was assured by equal opportunity provisions. From those first moments, my experiences were at odds with my male counterparts, the ease of entry gave no hint of that as a woman I would encounter significant struggles.

This course was aimed squarely at professional builders, and was not open to hobbyists or self-builders. The professional/amateur divide was strictly maintained
and further training was dependent on securing ongoing employment and an apprenticeship.

When I enrolled in the course I explained my purpose in completing the course to officials of the institution. During the first classroom session I was introduced as ‘the architect’ and students were told that at times I may know more than the teacher. That description placed me on the unfavourable side of both the theoretical versus practical knowledge divide, and architect versus builder conflict. The students were not, as far as I was aware, informed about my research. At the tertiary institution where I was enrolled however, I had completed all required ethics approval processes.

I took notes during class and wrote about my experiences in the evenings. Though generally my note taking went unacknowledged, one student worried that I was writing down what he said, but the other students and teaching staff almost never commented on the practice. After a particularly harrowing incident I spent an extended time writing notes and processing my feelings while I was supposed to be working on a set task. The teacher walked past several times looking curiously at me, but made little comment and left me to write. He did say later that he was wondering if I was going to do the work but did not try to compel me to do so while I was writing. Perhaps my distress at the time was evident and prompted a cautious response on his part?

As a doctoral candidate undertaking this course as part of my research, I was aware that I had ethical responsibilities towards the other students that were not reciprocated. At the time the course was done and the notes discussed in this chapter were made I was not required to seek the consent of the other students or staff of the training organisation to take notes. Nonetheless I felt it was my responsibility as a researcher to minimise any negative impact I might have on the people around me and for that reason I only raised issues of concern with persons in authority when my personal safety or welfare was at risk. Generally my rights as a woman in a non-traditional environment and protections afforded me under equal opportunity laws
were given no consideration and only in three instances did I feel compelled to speak up about those issues. This is discussed later in this chapter.

Towards a Pedagogy of Construction

The practice and format of teaching construction differs from University teaching in several ways. While university learning environments include lectures, seminars, studio sessions and tutorials, the method of teaching formal theory in construction has more in common with a training program where formulaic information is presented to the student for them to uncritically put into practice. Theory also takes up little time, the bulk of a student’s time and energy is engaged in practical work, attempting to recreate objects to the standard outlined in theory sessions.

Ideas about knowledge

One idea of knowledge presented over and over again during this process was the greater value of practical over theoretical knowledge. Knowledge that enabled one to build a particular object, materialising a standard of work appropriate to the situation was prioritised over knowledge that one obtained from written sources that had not been confirmed through the use of one’s own hands. This was epitomised by an instructor’s response to a question from me about building inspectors; he said, “‘Book boys’ are trouble, they never have the practical knowledge.” This point was impressed upon the class very early on. For my own part, as a good student, I took the initial lesson onboard and when a teacher tried to defer to me on a technical issue, I refused to take a position, deferring instead to his practical knowledge. It was also unclear to me at the time whether this might be an informal test of my respect for the hierarchy of practical as superior to theoretical knowledge. As an “architect” I was subject to speculation, it was suggested in class that I, “might know more than the instructor at times.” I took care not to encourage such a view.

Categorisation using hierarchal dichotomies was evident from the outset. These two ways of attaining knowledge by different classes of person was documented by Lloyd. In discussing the foundations of Western thought she illustrates it thus: “Women are educated – who knows how? – as it were by breathing in ideas … the status of manhood, on the other hand, is attained only by the stress of thought and
much technical exertion” (Lloyd 1993 p. 38). In this context, a blue collar or working class domain, men’s practical knowledge was more highly valued and my lack of worth, as a person possessing only theoretical knowledge confirmed the lesser status I held as a woman. Using that device many concepts were neatly divided and arranged as more and less preferred. Ideas about knowledge in construction were divided into book knowledge and bodily knowledge or skill, and bore a similarity to the Cartesian mind body split. The professional/amateur divide was another example of the same type of hierarchal dichotomy evident in the profession.

**Teaching and Learning**

Hierarchal relationships were central to the teaching and learning processes, no doubt a legacy of the system of training from apprentices to master evident in medieval guilds, where skill and competence were developed over many years (Reyerson 2013, p. 303). Indeed, students go on to formal apprenticeships after this particular course, and the term “Master” is preserved in the construction industry’s designation of skilled senior builders, master builders.

In the case under consideration the formal division between apprentice-master and student-teacher prevailed. While there were instances when the rigid divide between teacher and student were temporarily set aside, that seemed to be the case only when initiated by those at the top of the hierarchy, and did not fundamentally challenge it. This divide was somewhat challenging to me, being more accustomed to critical questioning and dialogue between teachers and students, at least on a superficial level. In contrast, in university classes I taught, I often learned as much from my students as they might from me, the flow of knowledge was more two-way.

At times there was a casual brutality in the way the male students were humiliated and belittled with “matey” put downs and “blokey” humour by teaching staff. The hierarchy was not just policed by the teacher; when a student gave the right answer or questioned something, they were at times harassed by the other students. On one occasion the teacher took the opportunity presented by my presence in a room, where there were also two of the male students, to criticise their work as being of a lesser standard than my own. Their skills being described as inferior to those of a female
seemed to be deliberately used to humiliate the male students. We were also subjected to humiliation in circumstances that was seemingly more gender neutral.

This is from my notes:

I was late today so Danny Young is using the humiliation tactic on me. He was fielding a question from Warren and I tried to help out by asking a question which would provoke the answer the thing Warren was looking for. It sort of back-fired on me as I got the response... “We went over that this morning.”. So much for trying to help.

That situation made it clear that humiliation generally was used punitively to maintain unequal relationships in a variety of scenarios. In the later example my lateness was considered a challenge to the authority of the teacher and I was made to look ignorant to reinforce my inferiority. That I had sole responsibility for children, that school didn’t start till 9am and classes started at 8am, that a member of my household required frequent hospitalisations, family responsibilities that are more likely to impinge upon a woman’s time, were of no interest to my teachers and they never enquired as to why I was late. My notes read:

The boys always comment [if I am late] and so do the teachers. I have someone in my house who is hospitalised frequently, there’s no avoiding taking a little time for her. I am late frequently due to family responsibilities.

All that mattered was that I conform to the start time. Failure to do so indicated a person was not suitable to be part of the construction industry.

A suitable student would be part of a homogenous group. While as a female my lower status relative to the male trainers gave me some potential to be a proper student, other factors worked against me. Being the only female, being 34 when most students were in their late teens, being a grandmother when the other students were generally childless, being a university graduate while the other students' last experience of schooling was most likely high school: all these factors demonstrated my unsuitability as a student of construction and confirmed the fitness of the others. “I was surprised when the boys were friendly to me.”
Many of the assignments we were given required us to work in pairs or groups. My classmates were mostly openly resistant to working with me, and if required to, generally adopted a superior position with regard to me:

Yesterday working with the power saw... I had to do a “drop in” cut. Martin was so impatient he just wanted to do it. I said for him to go away, I was going to do it. I have to learn too. Martin tried to take over... I stood my ground and did it.

One saw it as a distasteful thing but reluctantly took his turn. Others avoided it as long as possible. There was one particular student who took this kind of behaviour towards me to the level of bullying, which I discuss later in this chapter.

There were exceptions to this pattern. Faced with one dilemma my approach was considered and adopted as the solution. I noted:

… there was a problem - the fillet was too short to support all the joists. While everyone was standing round looking I suggested we cut it in the middle and spread it so the gap falls where there are no joists. There was some discussion and Jake said “I think we should do what Caroline said!” And they did!! It was great, like some form of vindication.

In this instance my jubilation was short-lived as the pranks at my expense and whispers and snickering recommenced soon after. “Shhhh, she heard you,” one of my classmates whispered loudly.

For one assignment Kane was required to work with me on building a small roof structure out of timber. My notes read:

Danny Young intervened in an attempt to choose someone for me to work with and called out to Ryan. He ran into the storeroom where the rest were. They all proceeded to stir him while he congratulated himself on his lucky escape. When I walked in to get my tools they were still guffawing. All because Ryan nearly had to work with a girl. In the end it was Kane who “struck out,” and had to work with me.

Kane was the least conforming of all the male students; he was respectful toward me and we had had some in-depth conversations. Very quickly we developed a cooperative approach and divided the work according to our skills. He allowed me to manage the process and we completed the work correctly and before any other pair.

For the final project the class was to build two cabins.
On Friday I managed to speak to Danny Young about the cabin groups and how I don’t want to work with Warren. He said it was already in-hand and I’d be in the other group.

The male students were divided into two groups with an equal number of boys in each group. I was told that the more competent group of boys were given the larger more complex job and the other group the smaller, simpler job. When I asked why I was not counted in that reckoning and simply added to the smaller job I was told it was because I asked not to be put with Warren, who was in the former group. Those of us working on the smaller cabin were quickly left with nothing to do, at which point all the male students went over to the larger job’s site and I was left alone.

Each day one of the group was selected to be the foreman for the day and it was their responsibility to allocate tasks and keep the job moving along. Usually I was given some tasks to complete except when the youngest of my classmates was the foreman.

Today Martin is the “foreman”. Bad news for me. He won’t give me things to do, he just ignores me and gives the jobs to the boys. I could stand here all day and he’d never even notice.

That as a female I was never given the role of foreman echoes again the situation for women in medieval guilds, “where women rarely achieved master status” (Reyerson 2013, p. 303).

**Developing construction skills**

As a woman I was automatically deemed unsuitable for the construction industry. However, the protections from discrimination in education females have acquired in the last 40 years permitted me to enrol and attend. In my work I was held to the same standards as the other students and my work was at times recognised as of the same quality as the best of the male students. When I was exhausted or resistive there was no suggestion I should not persist until I had achieved the best I could. My own infrequent concerns about taking longer to complete the work than the majority of other students were never echoed by teaching staff. In spite of soreness at times, developing skills and being able to complete the work to the highest standards was exhilarating. At no point did my female physicality ever prevent me from doing the same work as the other students or cause me danger.
In spite of my achievements one teacher did not appreciate my efforts. He directly stated that my work was slow and substandard; implied I was not hard working; said I would cause trouble on construction sites; and that I would not find work in construction and I should not bother applying. It was an attitude the students seemed to emulate as an excuse to discard and redo work I had done. Contrary to this critique I reached the required competency in every construction module undertaken. Results were not announced so it was not possible for me to know which of my colleagues also reached that standard.

At times the class inexplicably turned into de facto single-sex classes. The male students would clump together before I even noticed and receive additional instruction. For the most part the teacher would then come and deliver additional instruction to me. If there was a cue that prompted this huddling on the part of the male students it must have been very subtle, as I was never aware of it. A preference for learning among people who were alike was evident.

My fellow students’ attitudes toward me did cause me some concern. I often found myself working alone. While this enabled me to achieve high standards of work, I did, at times, feel a sense of aloneness and isolation. While the teachers and students did not praise my achievements, the practice of keeping notes during the course allowed me to celebrate them myself. There are a number of entries saying things like, “… the work is coming along well”, “… my quirk is perfect” and “I’m enjoying my achievements”, comments that I had no one to share with. Unexpectedly the practice of writing also became a buffer to negative feelings and experiences. As will become evident it became particularly important when the course became extremely distressing.

I did not observe the male students experience the kinds of distress I did; perhaps the preceding years of male socialisation had equipped them to disguise it if they did? Witnessing the young men being made to conform to hegemonic masculinity was distressing. Sometimes they were pulled up for their individuality, sometimes for not achieving a standard of work that met the teacher’s standard. It also seemed that
maintaining homogeneity among the males came at a cost for some of the 
individuals, a matter I will discuss further in later sections.

**Issues of Safety**
The walls of the workshop, where most of the course time was spent, were decorated 
with materials designed to promote safety. They showed graphic images of people 
with a variety of wounds. During the course there were no major injuries of that 
nature and only a few minor incidents; I was aware of one I caused. I had left my 
hammer in a place where it fell and struck one of the other students. That student 
chastised me immediately. He had a minor abrasion and perhaps a bruise and I have 
never left a hammer in a position where it could fall since.

As far as physical limitations went, there were no tasks during the course that I could 
not accomplish safely. While I found that the power saws frightened me and dug into 
my hands uncomfortably, it did not prevent me using the tools to perform a certain 
task, whereas the presence of some of my classmates did. At the time I noted:

> When I’d finished marking the timbers I started to rip them and when I got the first 
one ready to start Kane got out a cigarette and put it in his mouth. He didn’t light it 
because I asked him to hold the end of the timber before he could, then I asked him 
to wait till I’d finished.

> While we were cutting the timbers Warren came over and took the cigarette out of 
Kane’s mouth and put it in his own. I got a bit distressed at this point as I was sure 
Warren would light it. He seemed to hesitate for a while but eventually he did light 
it.

> This little scene was played out while I was ripping the studs. It took some effort on 
my part of concentrate on the job at hand. I am already nervous about the use of the 
circular saws and with the fumes of the smoke and Kane and Warren acting how 
they were it was a struggle to focus and be calm and do the work without error and 
injury. In fact I ripped one stud down way too far. In fact all the studs I ripped were 
wrong. I’d cut them for 35mm lintels and they should have been 45mm.

Safety seemed to me to be in large part to be about a frame of mind, a frame of mind 
that did not always coincide with the attitudes of the other students in the course.

This was what I noted:

> A load of oregon for the bearers arrived this morning and we all unpacked it. That 
process reinforced my feelings about working with some of these people. Jake was 
helping me carry a length of timber and Kane pushed him from behind to make him 
run. This made it all move faster than I’d expected and I was put off balance and
taken by surprise. I didn’t fall, but it was close. And with the heavy timber I could have been hurt.

The skylarking and joviality the male students indulged in seemed to me to undermine safety principles. My consideration of my physical safety was tempered by fear. Being in an environment where I was not treated with respect heightened this. I tried to limit my exposure to potential danger, such as the use of the power saws, until there were few if any of my fellow students around. Likewise I would not venture on to the roof of a cabin while any of the male students were on it.

Each student was given a small safety manual that, to my surprise, included a section on sexual harassment as a safety issue. The most glaringly obvious example of contravention of the principles outlined in the manual was display of pictures of naked women in one area of the workshop. I was sent to collect some timber from that area and was confronted by it. At the first opportunity I reported it to the organisation’s administrators and it was not there when I was next sent to that area. On one occasion another student asked me if I had been harassed during the course. When I responded that I had, he correctly identified the person I was referring to, but I didn’t confirm who it was. Having read the section on sexual harassment in the safety guide I was all too well aware that the student he named was indeed sexually harassing me. The harassment covered the full spectrum of incidents from belittling me, spreading distrust of me, patronising me, yelling at me, making threatening gestures and making direct threats to my safety. At no time did any of the teaching staff acknowledge problems with his behaviour, let alone take action to correct it.

Some of the issues identified as injuries resulting from construction accidents were mental health issues. As someone with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), I was only too familiar with its causes and impact. One episode of harassment was all it took for me to realise my disability was going to impact me in this class. My notes from the day read:

> So what a pile of crap. I sat in the dunnies and cried for half an hour. Very therapeutic? And why? Well it started with Kane. He decided to flog some of the materials I had claimed for my own use and made a show of doing this while we were all having a demonstration of the next project. I retrieved the piece and he took another. I didn’t know he hadn’t given me the one I had marked. Anyway Warren
said something like “Oh so no apology for Kane - that’d be right!” in his usually superior tone.

Why did that make me feel so hurt? Was it the fact that there I was, the only woman in the midst of 13 guys? Was it that I felt embarrassed and humiliated? Was it that it was a familiar feeling to me to feel outnumbered, alone in a hostile environment? It is threatening to be the only female in a group of men? But when one or two decide to display their power and allegiance to each other as blokes - while the rest stand silent, seemingly compliant - it is more than I can bear. My mind makes the connections with those other times...

The poster on the wall here – it’s about the dangers of electric shock - says: “In addition to the physical effects, victims of near fatal shock can also fall prey to the psychological effects of post-traumatic stress disorder. This can often be missed in the initial diagnosis. The symptoms of this condition can include sleep disturbances, nightmares, sudden flashbacks and difficulty concentrating. Victims can be afraid of being in similar situations to that surrounding the accident. Counselling is the best way to prevent this situation.”

So what can I do to prevent the situation and just who should counselled?

I began to wonder whether this learning environment could ever feel like a safe place for me given that I had PTSD from surviving violence at the hands of a group of men. Given the rates of violence against women in Australia this is potentially a widespread problem.

As has been the case for decades, the construction industry in the Western world is still almost exclusively male (Agapiou 2002b; Baxter & Wallace 2009; Cantrell 1996; Dabke et al. 2008; Dainty, Bagilhole & Neale 2000; Loosemore & Galea 2008; Pringle & Winning 1998; Watts 2007, 2009; Workplace Gender Equality Agency 2016; Worthen & Haynes 2003). While my right to participate in a construction course was respected, my right to be free from discriminatory practices was not. The sense of camaraderie among the males seemed to make the classroom a comfortable place for them and generally my presence did not seem to disturb that:

We’re sitting in the theory room waiting - not sure what for. The two older male students are not here. The boys talk about football, their weekends and Kane tried to convince Jake to buy drugs. There is a happy excited chatter.

Partway through the course one class included a section on body language that utilised a video by Allan Pease, author of the book *Talk Language: how to use conversation for profit and pleasure* (Pease 1985). The video showed racist,
homophobic and sexist behaviour which was normalised and made acceptable. In its misogynist depiction of women it was akin to an episode of Benny Hill (Hunt 2004, p. 12). The theories presented appeared to be lacking in foundation, showing no evidence of being based on research or a peer review process. That this material was offensive should have come as no surprise to those designing the curriculum, given Pease’s catalogue included titles such as: Why Men Don’t Listen and Women Can’t Read Maps, Why Men Lie and Women Cry, Why Men Can Only Do One Thing at a Time and Women Never Stop Talking and The Rude and Politically Incorrect Joke Book. Aside from the immediate impact of the video, which humiliated and demeaned me as a woman, the lack of response from my colleagues on the racist and homophobic aspects implied that maintaining the homogeneity of the group was of the utmost importance. The Pease video alienated me from my classmates and the teacher who showed the video. I lost respect for my teacher and began to doubt his knowledge. It was very difficult for me to return to class that day and in the days to come. The male students in the class had, metaphorically, been given a guide to sexist behaviour and told it was fine to use it as they saw fit.

Day-to-day sexist harassment from my peers acting alone, in pairs and as a group was the norm. None of which prepared me for what I experienced in First Aid training. My notes give some detail:

I found it all rather sickening. Not any aspect of the medical or first aid treatment. It was the way the boys talked about the resuscitation dummy. The dummy’s name was Little Annie. It was stuff like: (Ryan) “… she can’t fight back” and especially when we had to clean the mouth piece before using our disposable face mask there were every manner of rude comments about “it is my turn”, “clean her off so I can have a go”… the double meaning and sexual innuendo were so blatant. The boys were all laughing and giggling. It was as if the dummy were a woman they were taking it in turns to have sex with. But it was more than sex, the dummy was not conscious, it was mute, it couldn’t speak or move, the scene they were acting out was rape, it was gang rape. It certainly took me back a bit to the banter of a pub and the scenes of gang rape in the Jodie Foster movie The Accused.

In order to pass the First Aid component, which was mandatory to complete the course, we were each required to get down on the floor and demonstrate that we could satisfactorily perform the resuscitation procedure. For me, being in a small room at the back of the building with this group of young men surrounding me,
standing between me and the door, the teacher saying nothing to moderate the situation while they acted out a gang rape fantasy was traumatic. Being required to get on my hands and knees in the middle of the room and have my turn with the dummy was traumatising in the extreme. My terror was that I would be used as the “dummy” next. Once again the behaviour in the classroom triggered a PTSD response in me.

One afternoon we were scheduled for a site visit to view a tilt slab construction project. It wasn’t comfortable in the bus with my classmates but it was tolerable until Ryan commenced peppering his monologue with the word “cunt”. It wasn’t his use of the word itself that bothered me. The way he delivered it, with complete hatred and visceral disgust that made me feel worthless and hated. To be in a confined space with a group of males and subjected to this degradation was deeply uncomfortable. I made sure I was seated in the front of the minibus from then on; that way I was more removed from the talk and able to exit the bus when I chose.

In every aspect of this course, in every part of the learning experience, the hierarchal nature of the construction industry was expressed or reinforced. It was inherent in the didactic approach to teaching method, centred on the teacher, with passive students. When it came time to develop skills, it became more experiential, but students were thrown in the deep end. For the male students there was a hope of succeeding. The framework of the hierarchy supposes the student does their best to ascend to the level of master, constantly striving for something achievable. Continuously improving. For the women, however, this is never achievable. Failure is assured unless one can abandon the feminine and become one of the boys. It is the only way to turn theory to practice, learn, develop skills, be safe and be free from discrimination.

**Teaching the Culture of the Building Industry**

The culture of the construction industry has been a work in progress since the time humans began building. Cultural practices persist with old technologies such as building in timber, concrete, stone and brickwork, and carry on with the implementation of new construction techniques. In the time since gendered divisions of labour became the norm in the industrialised West, women’s participation in
construction in Australia has remained extremely low (Workplace Gender Equality Agency 2016) in spite of legislative and regulatory initiatives to encourage or protect it. The cultural practices that exclude women cannot simply be undone by a few relatively new rules.

As with any knowledge developed and controlled by a particular social group, learning about construction is accompanied by processes of enculturation, in this case into the Australian construction industry with its distinctive language, values and practices of the culture. In many ways my presence as a student confounded the process of enculturation, which may account for why I was often isolated or simply ignored and at the same time I was the outlier that permitted everyone else to fit in. I discovered my ill fit when, on the first day, I initiated a round of introductions. The age range was 17 to 19, except one aged 15 and two in their twenties; I was a grandmother and in my thirties.

Exclusion was also a legitimate tool used to punish students for non-compliance, when it was found that I did not have a nail bag I was excluded. As I didn’t have the means to purchase a nail bag I was not able to return to class that day. Others were excluded for comparable reasons. As noted previously, punitive measures were not uncommon.

At times teachers bullied students, ostensibly as a form of teaching. This consisted of using a raised voice and threatening demeanour, a refusal to smile or use positive reinforcement, threats of exclusion from the class, demeaning comments of a personal nature, deliberate humiliation, physical intimidation and other displays of dominance. To me this kind of behaviour was a signal of a capacity for violence and carried with it a very real threat. The increased level of compliance and decreased silliness among my classmates indicated that this form of management of the class was effective. Based on the number of times teachers behaved like this I came to the conclusion that it was neither novel nor remarkable; it was accepted unquestioningly that one ranked more highly could behave so in giving instruction to those ranked beneath them in the hierarchal culture of the industry.
It was not surprising then that students employed various means to rank themselves and establish their place in that cultural scheme. All of my classmates, with one exception, were quick to position themselves above me in the “pecking order”. The one exception was Kane, a student who did not appear to immediately accept the imposition of the hierarchy. Eventually he signalled his willingness to accept the hierarchy by getting his long hair cut off and getting a number 1 cut. Other students demonstrated my place by stealing or hiding my tools, directing hostility at me, ignoring or excluding me; one even gave materials I had cut for him to a student above him in the hierarchy. Two students made sustained efforts, though different tactics, to undermine my sense of safety within the course; one adopted the role of bully, the other the role of a stalker.

The Stalker
Ryan’s role of stalker started opportunistically. He did not seem to set out with the intention of observing me outside of class time but when the opportunity arose he attempted to use the situation to ensure his power over me. My first inkling as to what was happening came when one day Kane asked me if I had had a “good night”. The innuendo present in that phrase was clear, but my instinct was to ignore it and not engage in any discussion of my intimate life. Mystified, I asked Kane why he asked, to which he responded, “Ask Ryan.”

Later I pressed Kane for further information. He said Ryan saw me get picked up after school by a guy and “Ryan saw a car at your house last night. He figured out you got lucky.” Kane seemed to find the situation amusing. Sometime after that, as I sat in the cafeteria writing notes in my journal, Kane and Ryan and Bryce had a conversation in low tones, one table away from me, while Ryan watched me studiously.

Well now I feel completely invaded and like my home is not safe. Not only does Ryan know where I live, but he’s taking an active interest in who is coming and going. He’s seen the car he saw me get a lift home [in, driven by a] guy still at my house late at night and therefore I’ve “gotten lucky.” His interest in and discussion of my personal life is an invasion of my privacy. I surmised that by chance Ryan had found out where I lived. As my car was quite distinctive, I assume he passed my house when the car was on the street and after
some time was able to connect my car to my home. Upon checking with a few other students I found that Ryan’s story, a source of amusement, was being shared with other students. Close to the end of the course, concerned that I would be targeted further after completion, I did take this matter to higher levels within the organisation. This allowed me to assert my own agency in the larger world outside the construction industry and ensure it was brought home to Ryan that further such actions could open him up to legal action or criminal charges. Fortunately the matter ended there.

The Bully
At first I didn’t understand the role Warren had claimed for himself. When the course first began he made a point of treating me deferentially, opening doors and passing things to me. I was reluctant to be treated differently from the other students and so found ways to avoid having to accept Warren’s assistance. There was an awkward moment when one of our pieces of work was graded and Warren and I received equal top marks. He said with some bitterness, “You must be proud, you’ve done as well as the boys.”

Perhaps that was when his attitude and behaviour toward me changed. I assume he picked up the same cues I had about my place in the course from the same sources I had. He was a fast learner and picked up the lessons about construction skills and culture readily. Soon enough I found that Warren made pronouncements about me to the class; it seemed he was trying to stir up resentment. When I joined in and made a suggestion, he said, “Caroline’s the boss, we better do as she says.” Later on he took to sarcastically calling me “Miss Caroline” and later, “Carol”.

Warren made no secret of his disapproval of me. Perhaps this was why we were assigned to the same group for levelling. When he realised that I was in “his” group and let out a loud exaggerated “Oh No!” Martin completed the group. I hung back while Martin and Warren helped each other complete their tasks and waited for my turn.

Warren asked if I was having a go I said, “Yes...” When he said, “Don’t you want to play with us?” I said “No.” So Warren then told Martin to pack it up, “She’s not having a go” he said. By the time I walked up to Martin he was packing up. Martin
said “Are you having a go?” I said “Why wouldn’t I be?” It was as if Warren’s word was law. I took my levels and Warren had smoko. He’d stalked off to have a smoko when I started doing my levels but was back by the end of my turn. By this time the comments and put-downs were interfering with my ability to participate in the class and I asked the teacher to make sure I was not in the same group as Warren. I found it quite humiliating and wearing to have to endure being treated with hatred and contempt on a daily basis. There was only one occasion when it didn’t hit me with the impact intended.

All day I was giving my usual responses when I heard the word “cunt” used by one of the boys to describe another. When someone called Warren a “cunt” I piped up - “He’s not that good’ in my usual way and got an amusing response. Warren said “Who fucking asked you?” in a viscous tone. It amused me because his anger to me was so deep and so directed, and blatant hatred in front of all the boys. That passion of his against me as a woman just trickled off me that day. I don’t know why... but it was as if he exposed himself as mean and petty in front of all his mates and they ignored him. I think too that because I was comfortable in the smaller group I was in and the work going well his attack had little impact. When I looked at him there was no hostility in his face - ultimately he is a coward who can’t even meet my gaze honestly.

Not only was Warren verbally abusive to me in plain view of the other students, and openly tried to sabotage my work, he took the opportunity to show the teaching staff he did not approve of my presence in the course. I saw this for myself one afternoon when I approached the teacher for instructions. Warren was speaking to him in an animated fashion about how all the other students had congregated around the larger cabin. “You know why they’re all over here, don’t you... they don’t want to be around Caroline.” He said this just before he turned and saw me. He went red then pulled some strange expressions, including a guilty look and fake smile.

Warren was never held accountable for his bullying of me, nor was it ever acknowledged as inappropriate by any of the teaching staff. It seemed as if an ideal response on my part, a “manly” response, would have been to stoically ignore his behaviour. In the relatively short 16-week course, with so many different teachers, it was difficult to get a thorough understanding of how construction culture responds to bullies over time, if indeed it does. Clearly it was my problem, a personal problem, and no one was going to intervene. Bullying may not necessarily be a gendered phenomenon but in a patriarchal culture where male violence against women is
widespread, it presents a handy and effective strategy for males to use against females to deter them from entering the industry. Other researchers have reported that women “… experience harassment, isolation, and lack of support. Thus many of them leave the field” (Hillyard Little 2005). I am left wondering whether Warren’s status as a member of the “more skilled” group was bolstered by his readiness to do the industry’s dirty work.

**Ideas about Sex and Gender**
That the construction industry remains persistently a male bastion (Clarke et al. 2004) indicates that consciously or unconsciously ideas about sex and gender are built into the recruitment and training of people to fit the industry (Hillyard Little 2005). Many factors contribute to this sexual division of labour, equal opportunity (Pringle & Winning 1998), work pattern and family life (Lingard & Francis 2005, 2008; Lingard & Lin 2004), job satisfaction (Dabke et al. 2008), workplace culture (Cunradi et al. 2009; Watts 2007), differences in communication (Loosemore & Galea 2008) and male violence (Cunradi et al. 2009), to name a few. Clearly though, for the industry’s purposes the ideal builder is male and has qualities specific to men’s gender norms (De Klerk 1997). This next section looks more closely at ideas of sex and gender expressed or enacted within the course and how they influenced experiences.

**Women**
I had contact with few other women from the training organisation during the course. There were women employed in the administrative area; when we had contact by chance it was not positive. The looks of disapproval may have been due to my then recent contact with an occupational health and safety office regarding the constant exposure to cigarette smoke. I learned later the administrative worker in question was a smoker, so my presence may have placed her under some pressure as a woman, a smoker or for some other reason.

During the course I also had contact with the organisation’s equal opportunity representative, who was also a woman. I raised the unsuitability of the Allan Pease videos with her and she agreed to look into them. I received a letter from her, not
long after, apologising for the discrimination that occurred through the use of the videos and informing me they had now been withdrawn from the library.

One weekend, by chance, I met a colleague who had studied architecture with me; she was also teaching construction in the particular organisation where I had enrolled to learn to build. I sought her advice and support to cope with the challenges I was experiencing, she sympathised and showed some understanding of the situation. Any positive or strengthened feelings I gained from our interaction were lost when I returned on Monday to find she had used the contents of our conversation, in line with her own agenda, to criticise teaching staff to management. I was further marginalised and criticised by my teachers. My expectation of female solidarity was clearly misplaced.

A supportive relationship based on female solidarity or friendship certainly did not seem possible within that learning environment. It seemed to me that to identify with one’s own or other women’s status of female only had negative consequences. Even the successes of a woman who had very successfully completed an apprenticeship there before me were brought up only to point out my failure to fit in with the male students.

I had a discussion with Danny Young after we’d finished and everyone else was gone. He was talking about the woman who’d finished the course before me and how she was Apprentice of the Year for her three years of the course. The best a woman could hope for was that others would generally not notice she was not male and achieve a certain status among her peers so to avoid being bullied. Otherwise these issues may not be overcome until a critical mass is achieved, until sufficient numbers of females are enrolled in, working in and or teaching in construction schools.

Men
The focus of training in the construction industry is to take males and turn them into men and builders. The two categories were indistinguishable. There was no question, my colleagues were fit and strong and male and so naturally ready to build. One of the older male students used a back brace as he had a previous injury; he was also frequently absent, issues that did not seem to jeopardise his chances. Perhaps a sign
that they still had some way to go from boy to man status; some student strength and fitness, to ideas about genital “size” consideration which, they decided, was also a manly thing to do.

Being seen as a builder was also to be “tough” both physically and emotionally. One of the teachers and some of the students stood watching out of sight as another student nailed some timbers. The student predictably struck his own hand with the hammer and glanced around to see who was watching before bursting into tears, much to the amusement of the watchers. Rather than warn the student he was about to hurt himself, the emotionally tough males watched and laughed as the apprentice builder hurt himself and cried. Swearing frequently was evidently another marker of toughness. The more extreme the obscenity, the tougher the man. That was the inference that could be drawn from the silence of all but one member of the teaching staff in the face of, at times, torrential obscenity.

The other inference one could draw was the high regard for a particular type of masculinity among builders, what Connell calls “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 2005, p. 37) – “a culturally dominant ideal of masculinity centred around authority, physical toughness and strength, heterosexuality and paid work” (Pilcher & Whelehan 2004, p. 83). This contrasts clearly with the stereotype of women, who formed the other side of this hierarchal dichotomy, as belonging in a domestic setting, being physically weak, overly emotional and unpredictable (Pilcher & Whelehan 2004, p. 167).

The legitimacy of such hierarchal dichotomies, and the power relations they defined, was evident in the expectation that the young men would submit to the authority of the older men. This was certainly communicated very strongly and persistently. One example of this was the young man mentioned earlier who had his hair cut short to show he was willing to fit into the hierarchy. Given that women nearly always seen to occupy the lowest rung on the skills ladder, this aspect would not seem to be one that would deter women from entering construction education (Phillips & Taylor 1980).
Gender relations
Clearly the age range of my classmates was a large factor in the behaviour they displayed and their attitudes. It was particularly evident with the chorus of giggles at terms like “boning up”, which is the name for the process of making a doorframe plumb, square and true. It is likely that at least some were still influenced by adolescence with the attendant focus on sex and awkwardness due to their developing sexuality. The pressure to be sexually active and discuss sex with their classmates was quite evident, and appeared, as Segal reports, a common process of male bonding (Segal 2006, p. 104).

Some of the most difficult parts of the course were being with these males while they verbalised their ideas about sex. They referred to sexual activity as “fucking,” “rooting” and “poking” and referred to other parties to these activities as passive, more akin to objects than people, devoid of agency and lacking the capacity to consent. The descriptions indicated the recipient garnered the same respect as the Little Annie resuscitation dummy, which was also in line with the depictions of some of the women in the Allan Pease videos. The display of pornographic materials in a restricted part of the workshop confirmed these messages.

Lynne Segal, in discussing men’s manual jobs, says that this kind of talk “calling up images of male sexual performance serves to consolidate and confirm masculinity, and to exclude and belittle women” (Segal 2006, p. 105). David Collinson and Jeff Hearn also discuss the culture of male dominated workplaces saying:

Those who display a willingness to “give it and take it” are accepted into the masculine sub culture, membership of which in turn is then believed to differentiate individuals from other groups such as white-collar employees and managers “who never have a laugh and a joke” (Collinson & Hearn 2006).

Clearly women form one of those other groups who likely never have a laugh or a joke.

Only on one occasion did I hear direct encouragement to brag about sexual conquests. It was from a teacher who asked the class on a Monday morning if they “Got any sheilas?” Only one teacher put up a counter argument to the idea that bragging about sexual experience was appropriate. He did this with the words “Those who talk about it most do it least.” He put forward the notion that silence on the
subject implied the greater sexual experience. Perhaps it was a ruse to silence the students?

That women could not take a joke was understood by course participants; you had to be careful what you said and did around women so as not to offend them or get accused of sexual harassment. Two reasons to work with women were evident: you could use women to humiliate the other males into doing better work and women were more mature and friendlier. Many other reasons to watch yourself around women were mentioned: they don’t have the skills, they might do better work than the males and show them up, they work more slowly and you have to wait for them to catch up, they’re weaker, not strong enough, they’re not work ready, they don’t have the same attitudes, you have to help them, you have to get used to working with them, you can’t trust their judgment on technical matters, they are too busy being pretty to be safe, because that’s not what women are for, they expect to be included like any other student and if they’re not they get upset about things, they complain if they get bullied or harassed, they expect their rights to be respected, and they will use affirmative action to take the job you want. This last concern seems commonplace, Game and Pringle report finding plenty of evidence of men feeling threatened that women will take their jobs (Game & Pringle 1983).

Collinson and Hearn say that in such male-dominated workplaces, a sub culture exists where “interactions between men manual workers are frequently highly aggressive and derogatory, humorous yet insulting, playful yet degrading” (Collinson & Hearn 2006, p. 151). Segal gives further details of these male bonding rituals, a form of sexual signalling, as “produced through derisive sexist sniggering, the inexhaustible joking, the suggestive gestures, around “cunts”, “pricks”, “queers”, “studs”, “shafting” and “wanking” (Segal 2006, p. 104). These teachers and students clearly knew that their subculture was hostile to women.

If the ideal builder was a strong, skilled, active, virile, unfeeling, sexually-active male braggart, what space is left for women to occupy? Is the female counterpart in this binary pair a weak, unskilled at building, sedentary, chaste, emotional, sexually passive, modest homemaker? The teachers and students gave some clues about
professional relationships between men and women in the construction industry which mostly amounted to reasons why they could not work with women. This gendered landscape seems to closely reflect the ideal hierarchal dichotomy handed down in nineteenth century notions of separate spheres where:

Men, oriented to the public sphere, are understood to be active, strong, independent, powerful, dominant, and aggressive with masculinity signifying “being in control”. Women, associated with the private sphere, are seen as passive, weak, dependent, powerless, subordinate, and nurturing. (Adams & Coltrane 2005, p. 232).

Examples of my actions seemed to confirm some of these perceived difficulties men have working with women. My contact with the OHS and Equal Opportunity part of the organisation were not well received by the staff of the construction section. Going to outsiders was frowned upon. As an outsider within the course it was a distinction not lost on me but one I did not feel bound to respect. There was little concern for my welfare as a minority student shown by the construction teachers and staff but clearly I was expected to maintain solidarity with them.

Conclusion

The body of knowledge pertaining to construction is tightly controlled by an industry that only allows access through a strict regime of stages, where the student’s suitability is constantly policed. Frequent formal and informal testing occurs. Suitability, the ability to meet the formal criteria against which students are measured, is only defined in terms of competency with particular manual skills. Informal criteria exist but are not acknowledged or defined and students are assessed against those criteria mostly without their awareness. Administrative sleight of hand can be used to exclude students considered unsuitable according to informal criteria.

The students in the course I completed were a step below apprentices and as the lowest class of builder were not expected to aspire to adhere to professional standards of behaviour. This seemed to me one of the two possible explanations for the appalling way I was treated as a female student in that course. The other possible explanation was that the way I was treated was entirely consistent with standard practice within the construction industry and I was merely being inducted into the
industry according to its norms and values. Indeed I overheard one male student saying to another, “She’ll find out when she gets on the job.”

I did find out quite clearly that I would not be permitted to “get on the job.” My participation in the First Aid course was not recorded and without completing that component I was not permitted to proceed to further training or an apprenticeship. I had also not completed a section on concreting, due to being ill and one other small section, however those components could have been completed in subsequent years, as other students were permitted to do, should I have secured an apprenticeship.

Some years later I was permitted to complete the missing sections and was awarded the Certificate II in Building and Construction (Carpentry) pre-apprenticeship. The timing of that notification that I completed the course was such that the certificate could have been awarded immediately or I could have waited 11 months and receive my certificate as part of a public graduation ceremony.

The course was designed to introduce novice builders to basic skills that would allow them to gain employment at the lowest levels of the construction industry. There was some demand among males so those not seeking such employment, such as hobbyists and self-builders, were generally not given entry. Self-build women, however, would have found few barriers to enrolment due to the lack of women completing such courses and their right to participate according to equal opportunity provisions.

While working on a building project is very different to working on a construction site many of the skills of the course would be of use to self-builders.

There have been moves to address some of the issues in the monocultures of male-dominated industries such as construction. The video series Man Up (Bourke & Lawrence 2016) for example, advocates against the dominant culture. While it might ensure status and ongoing employment conformity to the hegemonic masculinity of the industry, the dominant construction of masculinity, it also causes harm to men. The stoic emotionless male builder has been identified as vulnerable to suicide and mental health issues.

My experience in the course had parallels with the experiences of other women who had tried to learn to build or enter the construction industry only to find barriers.
(Abankwa et al. 1997; Agapiou 2002a; Bilginsoy 2003; Dainty, Bagilhole & Neale 2000; De Klerk 1997; Latour 2001; Thiel 2007; Watts 2007; Young 2005). Industry-based training programs are the sites of frontline policing, of the idea of who can be a builder, (only males) and how it is appropriate for a builder to behave (in accordance with the manly norms of the industry) through informal processes that students, teachers and associated staff all participate in. Men who fail to adopt the cultural standards of the industry risk exclusion and treatment of women serves as an example to them. If they have any reservations about the culture of the industry they learn to “man up” and fit in.
4. Constructing Self-build Perceptions

The women have good organisational and negotiating skills and these certainly came to the fore when building a house. Men were always quick to offer advice and assistance to a woman building her house. However, I soon discovered that often the advice given was meant to impress me and not necessarily the right advice – Linda (Andrews 1988, p. 20).

… at that stage I only weighed 7 and a half stone. I mention that because I’d imagine that anybody contemplating building a stone house usually thinks of big strong men doing the job. This is just to show that it needn’t necessarily be so – Julie (Baigent 1985, p. 42).

The academic literature shows that women who build their own houses are rarely identified as the builders of those houses and people identified as builders of their own houses are rarely women. To identify or be identified as a woman seems to have excluded one from being identified as a builder and vice versa. The material analysed in this chapter is drawn from two magazines widely read by people involved in building their own houses, Earth Garden and The Owner Builder. They reflect and reinforce the perceptions of self-builders and in some way function as a pre-internet social space where self-builders interact. By looking in detail at specific content from the publications, for example covers, letters and articles we can gain insight into the social environment self-building takes place within and the social construction of the self-builder. This chapter presents simple quantitative analysis, percentage based comparisons, complemented by qualitative analysis; it draws upon a grounded theory approach, as outlined in Chapter 2.

The Magazines

The Owner Builder Magazine (Wilson 2017) and Earth Garden (Gray & Gray 2017) are two very well-known Australian magazines that stand out for their consistent focus on housing built by people for their own use. No other magazines, of similar circulation or longevity, have such a focus. That focus and longevity made them rich sources of data pertaining to self-build housing. Published at times irregularly and distributed by mail, through the networks of local news agencies across Australia, and via public libraries, these magazines are widely available sources which depict what it is to be a self-builder. The magazines identify themselves as being marketed toward people interested in building their own homes. They are prominent resources.
people interested in self-build are likely to turn to for ideas and information about how to achieve their goal.

EG was founded in 1972 by Keith and Irene Smith who published and edited the magazine until the end of 1986, when those responsibilities were taken up by Camille and Alan Thomas. Their successors Alan T and Judith K Gray still publish the magazine. Since it commenced publication the magazine has been published with the following description:

*Earth Garden Magazine* is Australia’s original journal of sustainable living and alternatives. It is a forum of practical ideas, shared knowledge, sources and a guide to alternatives to high-consumption lifestyles. It is about putting a roof over your own head, growing your own food organically, aiming for appropriate, renewable home energy systems and surviving - and thriving – in the city or the bush, with the inner changes which follow when you’re in harmony with Nature. (Smith & Smith 1986)

*The Owner Builder Magazine* was first published in 1981 by John and Gerry Archer who were also the magazine’s editors, work their son Justin later assisted with. In 1991 Valerie and Russell Andrews became editors of the magazine with publishing by Russell Andrews and Associates Pty Ltd. Originally this publication bore the sub-title, “The Australian home builder’s magazine” and later becoming “The Australasian home builder’s magazine”. Unlike any other magazines published across the same time span these two consistently examine the activities of self-builders.

These two magazines do, however, target somewhat different self-build audiences. At first glance it seems *The Owner Builder*, as the name suggests quite specifically addresses itself to a readership that identifies with the category “builder” and to the extent that this term is gendered male, the audience addressed by this magazine is implicitly male. The magazine also explicitly addresses a readership which identifies with the category “owner” addressing people with a concern for their status as derived through economic indicators and property. This, it can be argued, coincides with the identification of the male as breadwinner and head of the household.

The second magazine chosen for analysis, *Earth Garden*, is less explicitly focused on self-build but includes it as one aspect of the self-sufficiency and sustainability principles which guide the magazine. The title of this magazine genders it as female, through the association of
the word garden and the earth with ‘female’ principles, such as in mother earth. The magazine describes itself as a ‘lifestyle’ magazine, perhaps an alternative version of the stalwarts of Australian women’s popular culture New Idea, Home and Garden or Woman’s Day. Stylistically The Owner Builder more closely resembles an architectural magazine than a lifestyle magazine.

Earth Garden, as an ‘alternative’ magazine, focuses on self-sufficiency and life outside the mainstream. It disavows what it calls a ‘high consumption lifestyle’ instead focusing on ‘surviving and thriving.’ It may appeal to those on lower incomes, perhaps unemployed people and sole parents, a readership critical of Australian class strata and concerned with their day-to-day survival, as well as those interested in ‘alternatives.’ With its focus on the status of the builder as owner of the house, The Owner Builder positions itself to attract a readership more affluent than that of Earth Garden.

For both magazines, every edition that had been published up to the time analysis commenced was subject to content analysis. For Earth Garden this was a 30-year span of publication, from 1972 to the end of 2001; while for The Owner Builder this was a 21-year one from 1981 to the end of 2001. Thus, every edition of the magazines published before the end of 2001 was examined. Each edition did not necessarily feature every type of content analysed. Selected contents of 225 editions of the magazines were examined. This was difficult due to the fact that no single library held a complete set of either magazine. Many of the bound copies also had their covers removed for binding. Libraries from right across Australia allowed access to their collections in order that this content could be analysed. An analysis of roles modelled within these magazines, focusing on gender and authority in relation to the building will go some way to shedding light on the context within which women build a house for their own use in Australia.

The Content

Seen together these magazines could provide a wider image of the characteristics of those involved in self-build, both in terms of class and gender. As commercial ventures however, they also have an interest in presenting idealised versions of self-builders, a factor that was kept in mind during analysis.
Through their content these magazines articulate visions of people who build their own houses. These visions play a role in the formation of an individual’s perceptions of how one practises self-build and who does so; a source that both comes from and feeds into the self-build community. This is not to say that these magazines have played a particular part in the formation of the identities of all or indeed any of this study’s participants; the commercial survival of these magazines however, having been in continual publication for 30 and 20 years respectively, indicates that they have a strong readership base and credibility in the Australian self-build community.

These magazines offer opportunities through which one may gather knowledge about building and come to identify as a builder. Representations of men and women who build their own homes, write and or speak about such activities, engage in the roles of practitioner, editor, contributor, author, expert or even as someone seeking information or responding to content in the magazine, model aspects of what one does when involved in a self-build project. In order to gain an understanding of the extent to which, and ways in which, such modelling is gendered, the following questions were considered: To what extent are people who build their own homes depicted in these magazines? Are the genders of people who build their own homes discussed or depicted, and if so what is the nature of this depiction? What other gendered depictions of engagement with these issues are available? What relationship exists between the depiction of people and representations of builders with regard to gender? Four types of content were investigated to answer these questions: cover photographs; letters to the editors; articles about building and articles about building featuring women as builders.

Every cover of each edition of the magazines was considered. Images were examined for: whether people were depicted and in what number, whether they were shown to be masculine or feminine, whether they were shown engaged in builder-like activities, their attire and props in the image to determine whether the people were depicted as builders and finally the groupings of people. Surprisingly the depiction of self-builders was much less frequent than may have been expected and for that reason the analysis of the magazine covers was combined. Several examples of the covers are reproduced after the analysis, with discussion of the ways in which the images of builders are managed.
Letters to the editor were featured in both magazines and it is assumed that these letters were written by readers of the magazines. The number of letters published in *The Owner Builder* was generally much fewer than the number to be found in *Earth Garden*. By writing to these magazines readers indicate their membership of a community of interest which has a commitment to self-build housing. Whether their letters address self-build or not, they nevertheless identify letter writers as part of a community that embraces the practice. In this regard writing to the editor is an activity through which they both identify as and model self-building. Focus remained on authorship of the letters rather than their content.

For each letter published in every edition of the magazines issued up until the end of 2001, the following aspects were considered: the gender of the letter-writer and whether it was signed by an individual or couple. Possible categories were: male, female, couple and indeterminate. Where a letter was attributed to two people, for example Lee and Lesley Jones or Lee Smith and Lesley Jones or L and L Smith, it was assigned to the couple category. When the gender of the single author was unclear it was not included. Quantitative analysis was applied to the authorship of the letters to determine the extent to which men and women are depicted as members of the self-build community as well as whether the extent of this depiction may have changed over time.

The third type of content considered was articles about building. These articles model building expertise and authority for the self-build community, the rates of inclusion of articles by male and female authors, and depictions of male and female builders, which gives an indication of the extent to which men and women are seen to model authority as a builder.

For every edition of the magazine, various aspects of articles about people building their own housing were counted. These aspects were: the gender of the author as it could be seen to fit into the categories, male, female, couple or unknown; the gender of the builder/s when depicted in the article could be seen to fit into the categories of male, female, couple, group or unknown. Also noted were aspects of construction that were discussed in the article including whether the method involved timber framing, earth construction such as mud-brick, pisé or cob, alternative energy, building with stone, the reuse of buildings or materials, straw-bale construction, and whether floor plans were shown.
The fourth type of material examined was the articles that featured women building their own houses. Included in these were instructional pieces on building by a woman self-builder, articles about women who built a house by another author, and first person accounts of, or interviews with, a woman building a house for her own use. As the articles specifically present women as builders, thus they exemplify the discursive construction of the female self-builder.

In analysing the content of these articles the following questions were considered: How was the woman described? What reason was given for the woman building? Who were they said to be building for? What were they building? How was the building described in terms of materials, process and style? Were any relationships mentioned; if so what were they? Were any other builders mentioned? Did the woman mention any training or previous experience with building? What other activities that the woman undertakes were mentioned? What comments were made about women generally if any? What other relevant comments were made? Who was the author? What year was the story published? Were there any comments about gender or critiques of aspects of gender made?

The resulting discussion considers the specific ways women involved in building their own houses are depicted. The construction method and the materials used all contribute to understanding her embodiment and competence as a builder, her trajectory toward building speaks of how she obtained the skills and experience to build, the relational context she is described as having give insight into her integration and status within the community, and how she is specifically described as a woman illustrates how the concept of category of women are positioned in a gender scheme.

**Depictions of Self-builders**

Both magazines sometimes depict men and women as builders on their covers. This section looks at the pictorial portrayal of builders especially with reference to gender. It also examines groupings of people and compares frequencies of representations.

An assessment of the sex and gender of the persons represented in the cover images was made by taking into account factors such as body shape, posture, dress, footwear and adornment, hairstyles, including the absence, presence and patterns of facial hair. Using these
visual cues, people have been attributed a gender and corresponding sex, male for those who appear masculine and female for those who appear feminine. These categories are used not to reinforce hierarchal dichotomies of sex and gender but to seek to discern and then understand how the categories of male/masculine/man, and female/feminine/woman and builder are seen to relate to each other in the context of magazines publishing about self-build.

**Images of Self-builders**

In the following discussion of magazine covers I considered only the images that depict people. There are several ways the content of these photographs can be categorised to explore the frequency and nature of gendered representations. When taken together just under half (46.4%) of all the cover photographs of *The Owner Builder* and *Earth Garden* considered depicted humans. Of the images showing people, males were depicted in just over three quarters (77.9%) of the images while females were depicted in two thirds (66.4%) of images. Both men and women were depicted in 44.3% of the images containing people, 22.1% featuring only women, and 33.6% featuring only men. Images depicting men were more common than those showing women.

Looking at the number of people depicted rather than the number of images, of all the people depicted we see that 54% of those depicted were men and 46% were women. (See Table 4.1) Only a little over half of all the people depicted were men. This means that women were more frequently depicted in groups. By more frequently depicting men alone, the idea of the publications lay the groundwork for the idea of the strong, solitary, heroic man and women as weaker and dependent but also more sociable and community-oriented.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>People (%)</th>
<th>Builders (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These proportions of images were echoed in the depiction of builders. Builders were identified in the images in a variety of ways. Some builders were shown working on construction projects, others were dressed as builders with work boots or tool bags, and some held tools or other props. Of all the images of people, builders were depicted in 32.4% of those images. Of all the builders depicted, there were 26 male builders (66.7%) appearing
twice as frequently as builders who were female (33.3%) (See Table 4.1). While women and men have close to equal representation in cover images the same cannot be said of their representation as builders, where women are represented in lesser numbers.

Table 4.2 Cover Images: People by Gender and Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Males only</th>
<th>Males and females together</th>
<th>Females only</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Images%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3 Cover Images: Builders by Gender and Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male builder</th>
<th>Male builder &amp; female</th>
<th>Male &amp; female builders</th>
<th>Female builder &amp; male</th>
<th>Female builder</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of images</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Builders are shown in mixed gender settings 44% of the time and single sex images 56% of the time. Women depicted as builders were most often shown with men who were also building, followed closely by their depiction in single-sex settings. Men depicted as builders were most commonly to be seen in single-sex settings and only about half as often with a woman or women depicted as builders. One image of a woman depicted as a builder along with a man or men who were not building came to light, compared with the five images depicting men as builders in a setting with a woman or women who were not building. The most frequent depiction of a builder was of a man, alone or with other men. There were fourteen examples of such images with the next most numerous, at half that number, being the images of at least one male builder with at least one female builder. With five instances of each, male builders depicted with at least one woman who was not building were shown as frequently as women builders depicted in a single-sex setting.

Overall these frequencies point to higher representation of men in cover images generally; a disproportionately higher representation of men as builders and that for men, building more often takes place in a single sex environment. See Image 4.2 for one example of men building only with other men. Conversely women are shown disproportionately less as builders than might be supposed from the number of representations of them, and when they are shown as builders they will most likely be depicted with at least one other male builder. Both men and women are most likely to be seen in mixed gender images when not depicted as builders. When not building, women are often depicted in their gardens, as in Images 4.3, 4.4, 4.5 and
4.6. Often it’s unclear whether they are being presented as pottering in their gardens or in construction mode undertaking landscaping. In Image 4.3 and Image 4.4 women are pictured with shovels, which seem to imply landscaping, and a woman in the background of Image 4.4 is pictured without tools, which seems to imply she is just enjoying the garden. Women are also commonly shown within a house, seated in a lounge or dining area, sometimes with a mug at hand. Image 4.4 shows a variation on this type, the woman with mug is seated in an alfresco area.

Depictions of men and women on the covers of the magazines considered show women as builders in 33% of the cases that builders are depicted. As both authors of articles on self-build and as builders discussed in such articles women appear only 20% of the time. This may be due to the number of women hidden in the author and builder categories of “couple” or perhaps women are still being shown as cover girls, that is commodified and idealised versions of women created to increase the sales of the magazines to some degree. Image 4.5 and Image 4.6 both show a smiling woman in front of a house, one clutching a mug, one clutching a man.

Over time the magazines did seem to be more interested or perhaps more able to show images of self-builders on their covers. There were more builders featured on covers as the years progressed. Some of the builders themselves still seem awkwardly posed, however. Comparing the examples in Image 4.1 where a woman is posed building while standing on an upturned bucket and Image 4.5 where a man is posed with a saw in one hand and a hammer in the other, the photographs appear staged to indicate who built the house. Likewise, in Images 4.3 and Image 4.4 two women are posed with shovels, a tool which in earth-building circles connotes construction and also landscaping, to confirm their status as builders, while another woman in the background has no tools. In all of the images of people shown in this selection of covers the men are generally shown to be actively involved in building or work. The women are posed in a greater variety of situations, building, relaxing, supporting a man and looking at the garden, but even when shown to be builders they appear passive.

That some magazines chose who to represent as builders is beyond dispute. The question arose again during the field interviews where one couple talked about how they were represented in an article in another magazine. The male partner was positioned as a bushman-
builder. He was posed, crouched, like the men in McCubbin paintings (Gray 2009) who are always either tending a fire or a grave or mining, but exist only on the rugged frontier. The editors were drawing on decades of depictions of “wild, untamed Nature through Romantic constructions [that] came to be a source of man’s knowledge and pleasure” (Schaffer 1988, p. 59). The female partner was posed in front of a wall that was photoshopped into a more
complete state. It is somewhat difficult to understand what the editors/publishers are trying to achieve with such choices, but it is important to remain aware that choices about how men and women should be represented are being made.

The covers of both magazines were clearly used to create and reinforce gender roles. They confirm the masculine association of men and self-building and conflate them with other Australian ideals of masculinity such as the pioneering man of the bush. Women are less likely to be depicted as builders, and more likely to be shown as assisting and supporting their men or in an interior or in social groups that confirm idealised aspects of femininity such as dependence, emotionality and sociability. The selected covers illustrate one of the more multiplicitous depictions of women. Pictured in the garden with a shovel a woman can be seen to be innocently engaged in gardening or the image can be read as a self-build woman engaged in landscape construction. Such images can confirm traditional femininity and suggest the less feminine act – construction. As the examples show, both magazines used such images.

Self-builders Writing Letters
Letters to the editor were published in both magazines. The number of letters featured in *The Owner Builder* was generally much fewer than the number to be found in *Earth Garden* and while all the letters to *The Owner Builder* pertained to self-build, those in *Earth Garden* related to a wide variety of subjects.

Over the combined 51 years of publication of the magazines *The Owner Builder* and *Earth Garden* when considering the letters where authors could be so identified as being a woman, a man or a couple, more letters to the editor written by women were published than those of any other group. Women wrote 49% of the published letters, men wrote 29%, 26% were ostensibly by couples who generally wrote as “we.” A total of 2485 letters were included in this analysis.

The limited number of letters published in *The Owner Builder* magazine makes it difficult to discern patterns in the authorship of published letters. The only notable exception occurs in the first eight years of publication, between 1980 and 1988, where three spikes appear,

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1 In order to protect the privacy of the research participants citations are deliberately not provided here.
indicating letters by women were published at rates that were 10-25% higher than in the period after that, up until 2001 when analysis ceased. During the same time period letters to the editor written by women and published by Earth Garden magazine show a marked decline. After 1988 the numbers of published letters written by women declined in The Owner Builder to levels in the same range at which other authors are represented, while in Earth Garden the numbers rise and stay elevated by around 10%. It could also be that female readership of Earth Garden declined as they switched to the new magazine, The Owner Builder, and that once the style of the magazine was established the women switched back to Earth Garden around the late 1980s and at the same time readership of Earth Garden by couples declined. This remains speculation.

The only other clear trend in published letters is seen in Earth Garden magazine. The number of published letters authored by more than one author rises by around 10% and stays higher as the number published that were written by women declines. As the number of letters authored by women in Earth Garden increased, conversely, the numbers of published letters by couples declined.

Two author categories in the publication Earth Garden also appear to correlate. The number of published letters by women appears to rise when less letters from couples are published and vice versa. This is the case throughout the duration of the magazine’s publication. Possible explanations for this include: publisher policies around the number of letters published, space constraints, a preference for letters from women and against couples. It is also possible that this pattern relates to readership of the magazine or that women gradually abandoned the practice of signing their letters as if from their spouse and self and signed their letters only with their own name or that more single women and less women in couples wrote letters.

What can be said with certainty is that number of letters whose authorship is attributed to couples identifies self-build as an activity for couples. Furthermore, the magazines often show women as letter writers as persons seeking and offering information and as more communicative than their male counterparts. Women lack access to forums through which to develop competence and authority as builders; this process allows women to seek that. In the time before the internet the letters pages were a social space where a self-build community
could share and question. Women clearly dominated, at least numerically, in that space and used it to build images of themselves as self-builders.

**Articles by and about Self-builders**

Three hundred and three articles about people building their own house from *Earth Garden* and *The Owner Builder*, were examined to identify the author as male, female or a couple, and whether the builder depicted could be attributed to the categories; woman, man, we or group. Where an author could be identified individual men were highly represented. As authors of articles they accounted for 65% of all articles. Women were shown to be the author of 30% of such articles while 5% of the articles were written as if by a couple.

Men are clearly shown numerically as the dominant authority on building whether the tool they wield is the saw or the pen. (See Table 4.4) Looking only at the representations of individuals who are clearly depicted as either male or female, a male author discusses a male builder four times for every time a female author discusses a female builder. Women do show their self-build competence through authoring articles but in their role as self-builders a great deal less. This lesser representation of women does little to promote the competence of women undertaking self-building; it makes it appear that as a skill-set or area of knowledge, it is the domain of men.

The actual processes at work that produce this situation are more complex and likely are a result of editors of the magazines actively recruiting male builders to write articles, perhaps using social or professional networks of male friends, acquaintances or colleagues that have formed around shared interests in construction. It is also likely that as women have a heavier domestic workload than men and generally have to work longer hours in the paid workforce if they are to earn the same wage, women will have less time to devote to writing about their interests or accomplishments.

| Table 4.4 Sex of Builders and Sex of Authors of Articles on Building |
|-----------------|---|---|---|---|
| Builder         | Couple | Male | Female | Group |
|                 | 48%    | 35%  | 8%     | 9%    |
| Author          | 5%     | 60%  | 35%    | 0%    |

The question remains, however, if around half the people shown as part of the couple category are women, is this category making women more or less visible as builders? It also
begs questions of the actual situation of the partners. Does building with an intimate partner make it easier for women to gain access to skill development and knowledge? Only 5% of the articles were shown as if authored by a couple, featuring use of the personal pronoun “we”. Given that many of the articles were personal accounts of having built a house, this use of joint authorship would seem to point to the strength of the ideal of the couple in relation to how one undertakes a self-build project; whether it is used in the case of authorship as fact or for appearances. The strength of this ideal is also evident when looking at the builders represented, where in almost half of the articles the builder is depicted as a couple.

The frequency with which certain types of authors wrote about gendered or grouped builders indicates that very few couples are authors. Authors wrote about couples as builders 87% of the time; the only other builders they described were male (see Table 4.5). This implies that the couple as author could be telling the story of their own self-build project. Stories by men were also predominately about men as builders; being the majority of authors, this results in the greatest proportion of articles being male authors writing about male builders. Women wrote about women more frequently than men or couples wrote about women. However, women wrote mostly about couples and then men as builders and their own gender.

Tallying the number of builders depicted in both magazines we see that just under half (48%) of the houses were shown as built by couples, 35% were depicted as built by a man, 8% and 9% respectively were depicted as built by women and groups (see Table 4.4). The material gathered from the magazines shows there are few, and usually only minor, differences in the portrayal of builders by gender or couple status.

The articles showed the builders using a wide range of technologies and strategies to meet their housing needs, many discussing the implementation of two or three of these solutions (see Table 4.6). The approaches fall under the broad categories of: timber (used structurally and for cladding), earth-based technologies such as mud-brick and cob, straw bale systems, stone walling, the re-use of building materials, alternative energy solutions including the use of passive solar design, and the re-use of existing buildings.

The use of different materials could potentially be based on differences in male and female bodies. One example of this from self-build folklore was a supposed preference among Australian self-build men for building in mud-brick. The size of mud-brick generally used in
Australia both puddled and compressed, is very large and very heavy. The mass of such bricks makes them very difficult to handle, especially at height. The secondary sex characteristics of males, bigger frames and larger muscle mass, makes that technology more amenable to them. As the larger, heavier mud-bricks became the acceptable standard the possibility of making lighter weight more compact mud-bricks that were safer and could be more readily built with by more people, diminished.

Table 4.5 Authors Representations of Builders by Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Couple built</th>
<th>Male built</th>
<th>Group built</th>
<th>Female built</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Couple</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The figures suggest that women are less likely to be depicted as using alternative energy technologies or straw bale systems and are most likely to be shown reusing building materials, building in earth and stone. (See Table 4.7) Indeed, they appear to favour earth-building technologies more than any other technologies. Conversely, however, they were shown to write about earth-building methods less than any other technology. As authors their favoured building technologies, stone and re-used materials were their favoured topic. They also wrote, as frequently, about timber technology and building re-use.

Table 4.6 Authors’ Representations of Technologies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Timber</th>
<th>Earth</th>
<th>Straw</th>
<th>Stone</th>
<th>Material re-use</th>
<th>Alternate energy</th>
<th>Building re-use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As authors, there was little difference in the frequency with which men addressed the different technologies, with the exception of earth-building technologies which the articles show them utilising much more frequently (see Table 4.6).

There are also only small variations in the frequency with which male builders used the various technologies identified, with the exception of straw bale, which was much less used (see Table 4.7). The low number of builders shown as using straw bale technology reflects how new the technology was to Australia when the magazines were published, its higher use by groups may reflect that many were just learning about it at the time. That no women
outside of groups and couples were shown to be using this technology may be due in part to
the relatively few articles published about women building at the time the articles about straw
bale began to be published. Women did, however, author a sizable proportion of the articles
about this technology. Somewhat conversely couples, who were the most frequent users of
this technology, were not shown to be writing about it.

Table 4.7 Types of Construction Utilised by Builders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Builder</th>
<th>Timber</th>
<th>Earth</th>
<th>Straw</th>
<th>Stone</th>
<th>Material re-use</th>
<th>Alternate energy</th>
<th>Building re-use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Couple</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Couples are also shown to build with the range of technologies with a very similar frequency,
the one exception being that they were a lot less likely to be shown re-using an existing
building. As authors, couples discussed straw bale more frequently than any other
technology, there were also, however, many fewer couples shown as authors; this could
indicate that while building worked well as a collective process for couples, writing about
building was less so. Overall the technologies discussed in the articles seemed to bear little
relationship to depictions of any particular builder or author.

The fitness of a particular technology to the purposes of a woman undertaking self-build,
such as discussed by Carr (Carr 1985) is an important aspect to consider when that
technology is not one that has been accessible to women. The exclusion of women from the
construction industry makes building technology quite alien to them in many ways. Critiques
of technology say that politics are embedded in technology and that a technology serves the
politics of the class that develops it (Dickson 1974, p.116). This is particularly the case when
it comes to self-build housing (Ferrero et al. 1996). It may take some time for appropriate
technology to emerge. The prevalence of building methods such as straw bale, passive solar
design and recycled materials, utilised widely by self-builders, reflects political divergence to
a certain extent in some alternative communities. According to the figures presented here,
however, straw bale, with its large, unwieldy components, seems not to be a technology
preferred by women.
Another example of the development of an appropriate technology in the material considered is the pronounced preference among men for earth-building technologies. This may reflect a convergence between a simple and inexpensive technology and a male’s greater capacity to lift loads of soil or the large, heavy, mud-bricks popular in Australia. At the same time the widespread use, among self-builders, of mainstream construction technologies in more traditional settings reflects a desire to capitalise on traditional aspects of home ownership such as maximising equity and resale values.

Clearly being shown as an author or builder in an article about self-build indicates some degree of competence and authority with regard to building. For women this is displayed to a lesser extent only due to the lower number of depictions. In order to consider the issue of whether women are shown to have competence or authority when it comes to building, it is necessary to look in detail at the articles depicting them as builders. The relatively small number of articles makes this approach feasible.

**Women Self-builders in Articles**

Across the 30-year range of publications examined there was usually one article a year that detailed the experiences of a woman or women building their own house. Thirty-two such articles were found, a few others were mentioned in indexes but proved elusive. The number of the articles written by women totalled 20, a further nine were written by men and it was not possible to determine who wrote three of the articles. None of the articles were written by couples.

In all but one of the articles, the women were named. It is important to acknowledge these women. In sharing their stories they risk possible misunderstanding or ridicule to make women self-builders visible. They included: Abigail Heathcote, Aileen, Anna Ashton, Chris Banks, Clair Hogan, Darj Sumner, Di Elliffe, Edna Walling, Honor Couts, Jan Oliver, Judi, Julie Baigent, Julie Stack, Kay Tongo, Kehry Frank, Kerry Wise, Linda Andrews, Lisa Yates, Liz Caffin, Margaret Rennard, Marian Von der Decken, Marlene Castrique, Maureen Corbett, Megan James, Nina, Ro and Kerry, Ruth Cilento, Sall Sullins, Sister Helen and The Sisters of the Church. Of these women at least one third have become well-known for sharing their knowledge about building with other women in their communities; together they hold significant knowledge about women’s self-build housing which should be recognised. It would
not have been unreasonable to expect a compilation of their stories to have been published by either *Earth Garden* or *The Owner Builder*, but, unfortunately, this has not happened to date.

One third of the articles described the women in some way; some with epithets that reassured the femininity of the woman: “A graceful person… [she] makes things look easy” (Smith 1978, p. 28); “not a spectacular woman, just a well-adapted one.” (Howe 1989, p. 25). These confirm the struggle to integrate the roles of being a woman and builder. This was also hinted at less directly with expressions like naïve, uncomfortable as an owner-builder and strong-willed. The legitimacy of women as a self-builder was clearly in question and their particular roles as housekeepers, gardeners or manager of household finance was contrasted with the heroic efforts of a self-builder. Those comments are particularly interesting as they imply a passage from the lesser type of work, usually done by women, to a more important type of work, usually done by men. In one article the women who built were described as “expert builders… [who do] commercial work now” (Smith 1982). Gaining commercial work signified the women were more legitimate as builders. Two descriptions which stood out as potentially offering a critical insight into gendered roles in self-build were one in which the woman describes herself as feminist and an article which stated that the builders were “two very interesting and creative women whose actions would astonish those men who hold the view that a woman’s place is in the home and not building it” (Elias 1981, p.5).

Almost every article cited a reason why the woman was building herself a house. The common practice of building a shed before building the main house was indicated by five of the articles which described the current project as temporary accommodation in two cases, storage space in two cases, while one said it was practice building. The most common reason cited was simply the woman’s need for housing. The most often reported reason for this need was the unsuitability of current housing due to a lack of space generally or the need for space for a specific purpose. Elaboration on this theme included: the current house being very masculine, being left living in a shed after the death of a partner, the imminent arrival of a baby and destruction of the previous home. Two women were cited as needing a studio, one was said to be in need of personal space, another a retreat, while another talked of starting a new business. What might be called lifestyle considerations were also well represented as motivating women to build their own houses. At the top of the list numerically were the desires for a farm or country lifestyles, or setting up new communities, then equally
represented were the want to be in touch with nature and practice conservation, to work toward achieving self-sufficiency and community education. Among other motivating factors were: undefined emotional needs, a need to make a home that was more in tune with the woman’s hopes, to have a sense of ownership of the home and one woman was reported to have said she was helping another woman achieve her dreams.

Time as a motivating factor was also a strong theme in the articles. For one woman, it was the pressure of “four years living in an unlined cow bails” (Hogan 1995, p. 80). In three instances mention was made of the particular point the woman was at in her life. One was quoted as saying simply, “it’s about time” (Andrews 1988, p. 17). Another talked about retirement and another was experiencing her “first years of freedom from family obligation” (Howe 1992, p. 21). Further to those, one woman was said to have mentioned a “a growing urge … to have a place of [her] own” (Andrews 1988, p. 17) and another that she hankered after an earth house for herself for years. Read together the articles gave a definite sense of women builders as having perhaps delayed building for some time and that this may have been due to responsibilities to others.

Looking at who the articles purported the women were building for, showed the large majority of women were building to house themselves, while around a third made mention of relationships to the other parties to be housed. These included, children in seven instances, partners in four instances, while three articles talked about friends, guests and visitors. Two women were also shown to have mentioned renting out part of the houses they were building.

As one might expect in magazines which publish instructional articles for the self-builder, the articles gave detailed attention to aspects of the processes and materials of construction. Consideration of the design of the house in terms of spatial arrangements was not discussed to the same extent as the bulk of the articles, though there are some indications that the women considered this and the qualities of the spaces they made. It was not an aspect they were depicted as excelling at.

Materials the houses were made from included: inexpensive, salvaged and second-hand materials, timber structurally and for cladding, fired-bricks as flooring, stone walling, and about half the stories mentioned the use of mud-bricks. Common design features reported were: the use of passive solar design and having lots of light in the building. This was
achieved by incorporating lots of windows, using whitewash and having the house face north. Women’s competence in this area was well established.

What was most notable in the discussions of construction was the diverse attitudes the women displayed. While one woman said she was concerned that everything line up and be straight; this contrasted with several women who said they made some mistakes and just did things over, using a trial-and-error process and repeating what was successful. Time was a recurring theme. One house reputedly grew over two years while another took eight years to go from being a garden to a fairy-tale home. One woman implied, there was no time to think, just to do, in contrast to another woman who was reported to have built a massive buttress on her house just for fun. Clearly time was a resource managed in different ways, and for at least one of the women discussed, the time taken to build, and tasks undertaken, had to be approached incrementally. “One thing I think I should say is that every time I started to think about building my house, especially in the early stages, as a whole thing, I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t conceive of doing it. I just went on with it, one step at a time, one small thing, one small project for the next week – just going on like that” (Smith 1982., p. 28).

There was mention of the gruelling physical work of building from a woman who by hand moved 75 tonnes of stone to build her house and another who carted standard-size mud-bricks up two floors for gable ends. In another story, the builder said she used smaller than usual mud-bricks to make them more manageable, while another talked of making vaults and domes from regular sized mud-bricks. These examples go against the previously found trend of women avoiding these materials.

The articles talked about traditional and alternative construction methods; not all the activities of the women discussed seemed to fit such neat categories. Examples of this can be seen in the account of a woman who built with hand-puddled mud-brick and yet had the bricks scientifically tested to ensure they met conventional standards, while another woman built mud walls and then stuccoed them in a process that incorporated chicken wire and a mud and sawdust mix. One woman described her conventional stud frame walls while others said they incorporated solar hot water (which was not common at the time), cool tubes, curvy walls, an octagonal floor plan, a composting toilet, a bottle wall and solar electricity. Women employed a wide range of techniques that showed they were not necessarily restricted by
processes found on the traditional building site; as builders they were prepared to take risks
and try new things.

Building design was also approached in a range of ways. Several women were said to have
used professional designers while three others expressed a concern for the layout of the
rooms and how the spaces within the house related to each other, that indicated close
involvement in the design of the house. Without making it clear who designed her house one
woman seemed to be concerned about her security and wanted to be able to see her house
was empty as soon as she entered. This was one of the few comments that mentioned a
specific need to be able to maintain surveillance throughout the house but it brings to mind
other comments from women who had survived domestic violence who then went on to
build.

The articles depict women’s relationships through two pieces of information that seem to be
part of a formula. Firstly, relationships are intimated in discussions of who will be housed.
Two thirds of the articles make no mention of anyone being housed with the builder,
however, only seven articles say the builder had no assistance with construction. Three of the
articles indicated a male partner would be living in the house and six of the 29 articles make
reference to children of the builder. Only one of the women mentions that a partner helped
her build while four others refer to children or parents helping them, while one article stated
that “family” helped. Friends were important when it came to building the house with nine
women reporting they assisted yet only two mentioned them as possibly living in the house.
Five of the houses were reportedly built with the assistance of community members or others
and three articles said people from those groups would live in the house. Another significant
group to contribute toward building the house were those paid to work on the house, others
who had built their own house and a neighbour, none of whom were expected to live in the
house.

Friends took a variety of roles in helping the women build their houses. For some of the
women it was reported that friends shared information and gave advice, while others worked
on the building, and others contributed materials. It was also reported that the parents of one
woman sourced materials and her mum helped raise the rafters, while her father invented a
crane to enable the roof structure to go together easily. The daughter of another woman who
was the subject of an article was said to have reported that her daughter built the kitchen cabinets for her.

There was a paucity of discussion of the women’s prior experience building. It may be that the women were not asked about this, or that few of the women had such. Of those who were reported having prior experience three talked about youthful experiences such as building cubby houses as children. One said her do-it-yourself attitude emerged in her teens and another related that she had always wanted a Meccano set but never received one. In her experience, they were never given to girls. When talking about her cubby-building experience one of those five described herself as a “tomboy” and said she was derided for that. Five other women were represented as having prior building experience. Two were professional building designers; one indicated she studied architecture for a year, another said she attended workshops and acted as an apprentice for a bricklayer and carpenter while another said she “worked for a commercial mudbrick maker to pay for her own mudbricks” (Andrews 1994, p. 8).

It was in reflecting on prior experience, or lack thereof, that some of the authors commented on issues of gender. In other articles this occurred in a less formulaic way, with talk about men and women, gender roles and feminism. There were two direct comments pertaining to feminism. One woman described herself as a feminist and another was reported as saying in a discussion of people who assisted her that her mum was practical, capable and intelligent “but not a women’s libber” (Smith 1978, p. 9). The impact of feminist analyses, however, could be seen in aspects of the articles in the use of gender-neutral language and in that the articles gave prominence to women’s experiences and perspectives.

Some articles represented women as talking about men, women, gender and difference and discussed difference as attributable to social roles. In these comments men were said to have an advantage over women due to their greater freedom and mobility; that women have good organisational and negotiating skills that come to the fore when building, while men are quick to offer advice. In addition, one article quoted a woman as saying that building is “socially imprinted” as a male trade area, implying that it is not the case for women. For some there were benefits to be derived from being gendered female, “women plan more before they build and end up with better spaces [and] are more conscious of the spaces they
live in” (Smith 1982, p.28). These comments contrasted male and female roles and emphasised gender difference. Other comments showed the women as noticing contrasts in traditional gender constructs but then minimising or dismissing them. Some examples of this were where women were reported as saying, “I only weighed 7½ stone. I mention that because I’d imagine that anybody contemplating building a stone house usually thinks of big strong men doing the job. This is just to show that it needn’t necessarily be so” (Baigent 1985, p. 43). “I have been surprised at people being surprised that women build” (Elias 1981, p.8). These comments locate women in a hierarchal dichotomy where competence and maleness are correlated, implying that women are not competent builders. It seemed that overcoming this myth, that a woman cannot build, was a significant, but not insurmountable hurdle.

The idea that one can only be an authentic owner-builder if one builds “hands on” and not just writes the cheques seemed to have wide currency in self-build communities during the time of these publications. There is an extra level of scrutiny for women who build their own houses, if they are seen to have had the input of men on their projects; it may be said to invalidate their status as builders. People might say, “Oh well, they didn’t build it themselves. They had help, all these guys came and helped. She didn’t build it.” (Smith 1982, p.27).

Several of the articles make a point of saying the women laboured on their own houses and that the women built them with their own hands; seemingly responding to the unwritten question of whether they are legitimate in their claim to be a self-builder. The accusation that getting help from either men or women invalidates one from being a builder is of course nonsense. Only a person qualified in many trades could build a house single-handed, or one building outside the regulations. To date no reports of anyone having achieved this have come to light. Only one article counters this notion, however, when the builder is quoted as saying, “I haven’t seen anyone build a house by himself. It’s physically impossible. You’ve got to get people to help you” (Smith 1982’, p.27).

Three comments identified and focused critically on a particular aspect of female socialisation, the assumed dependence of adult females on a male partner. One woman was reported to have said, “impulse says… wait for the white knight to come and rescue you” (Elias 1981, p.7). Another described this idea in more detail saying, “post world war socialization to female in Australia society [led me to] accept that my passage through life
was that I would probably attach with some male at some point in time and the providing thing would somehow be taken care of” (Smith 1982, p.26). The women talked of how they abandoned this expectation when they built their own house. A third article expressed this more fully in the comment, “why I was expecting anybody to build me anything, I’ve got no idea. Well, I mean, that was my conditioning. So the next building… I’m going to do for myself” (Smith 1982, p. 27).

There was some evidence in the articles that women reconceptualised aspects of traditional house construction to accommodate ideas about female bodies, women’s gender roles or both. One woman was reported as saying she made smaller mud-bricks so she could carry them, an idea that would probably benefit many male builders as well. Another woman was quoted as saying she planned the kitchen with direct access to the living room to allow for conversations between the areas. This type of open plan can be seen as a response to the days of women’s isolation in closed kitchens. Another important reconceptualisation of the building process could be seen in the use of analogies derived from activities that are strongly associated with women. Three that appeared in the articles examined were references to “recipes” for mud-bricks and the assembling of materials as being like knitting where you knit a plain stitch and then a purl stitch (Smith 1982, p.28) and the first house one woman built as being like a ‘stitch sampler.’ (Smith 1982, p.27). Not all the women were portrayed as engaged in or enjoying stereotypically female pursuits. One was quoted as saying building beats cooking cakes. Along with cooking, knitting and sewing, around half the articles detailed other pursuits of the women: they spun, gardened, painted, and wrote. Many were said to have been involved in community organisations such as founding local schools and forming environmental groups.

**Conclusion**

The four types of magazine content analysed show women in different and sometimes contradictory ways, while the depictions of men are somewhat homogeneous. A man’s role as self-builder is never disputed, it’s natural and unremarkable. Their right and capacity to undertake a self-build project is unquestioned, their authority as self-builders needs no qualification. The opposite is the case for women.
Writing letters to magazines provides women with an opportunity to develop and show knowledge in relation to building that is not as evident in other parts of the magazines, such as cover images and articles. They appear to choose whether to be represented in their own right, as women, or as part of a couple. They show initiative in seeking a venue appropriate for their needs. Through writing to these publications, knowing their letters will be published, they seek to express and develop competence and authority generally but also as self-builders or part of a couple undertaking self-build.

The magazine’s cover images are somewhat stilted and show the editors preferred roles for men and women. For men it is the role of self-builder or technological expert. For women the situation is much more complex. Complexity in this case does not necessarily give a truer representation of women, however, it does give insight into the social forces at work. The femininity and desirability of women in the cover images is maintained by posing them in appropriately feminine settings such as gardens and interiors but also with a quick change of prop they can appear at home in a self-build project leaning against a shovel in an almost manly pose. The separate domains of men and women are maintained but sometimes the women are, as one interviewee put it, more “adventurous”.

The articles about building provided a great deal of insight into women’s experiences. Women were more likely to write articles about women building than any other group of authors, though the small numbers of women writing such articles means that depictions of women as self-builders are still very low. Couples feature most heavily as self-builders; almost half the articles are about couples and couples are the authors. This implies that women building with partners may gain their support primarily within the partnership but have their sense of self as a self-builder subsumed within that of the couple.

Women self-builders were also, for the most part, depicted as single, sometimes with children but almost never as having partners. Mostly they were shown to have the types of relationships with their friends, communities and families that supported them in the process of building. That none of the articles were written by couples supports the idea that women subsume their role within their relationships, perhaps to gain access to skills, as part of maintaining and strengthening their relationships, to maintain their feminine attractiveness, some dependent aspect of femininity, to manage their partner’s masculine self-image or to
strengthen their sense of being part of a family with a partner and children. In doing so they hide the extent to which women do in fact build.

The articles depicting women building their own houses clearly identified women as self-builders. They were shown as still feminine but competent with the technologies of construction that they used and sufficiently skilled to build a house. They developed strategies to learn the skills to build. They considered the complex relationships between human needs and technological possibilities and adapted technologies to their needs. They demonstrated a grasp of energy management and employed sophisticated responses to design problems. They successfully employed financial or time management strategies to achieve their construction goals. They reconceptualised construction as an activity for women, for females, at which they could excel.

While the women depicted in these magazines may lack access to forums through which to develop agency, competence and authority as builders they also manage the extent to which such forums may do so. This chapter shows that they do these things by making themselves available as subjects of photographs and articles and as authors of letters and articles, they build positive and affirming concepts of the female builder and claim those ways of being for themselves. Some women break these moulds and build and develop knowledge and skills.
5. Housing the Self

When you undertake to build your home and you’ve got the time to do it, it’s an expression of who you are. And I realize that because I lost my whole identity. It wasn’t just the house but my whole existence of twenty years was wiped out [by the fire]. I found for a long time that there wasn’t any way of expressing who I was or what I was doing. It was awful. So I realized how much is invested in building your own home. It’s fantastic. It took twelve years. I used to lie in bed at night thinking, “Oh, yes, I’ll just do this, this, and this,” and visualize it and get up the next day and see whether I could actually put that into practice. It was great. – Marcie

I come from a building family, my dad built our family home. My uncle involved me in his building projects. – Bernice

By late 2003, around two years after publication of the last of the magazines discussed above, analysis of the completed questionnaires from 50 women and 40 men who had built a house for their own use commenced. It is likely that some of these respondents read or were featured in the magazines. In this chapter I detail their responses to a set of questions and discuss the range of responses among and between these men and women of varying ages and backgrounds.

The process of designing the questionnaire, calling for research participants, collecting and processing the responses was outlined in Chapter 2 of this thesis. In designing the research Holland’s study of Sydney owner-builders was recalled. Holland utilised a random selection but failed to recognise the lack of female participants, indicating a bias in the sample frame (Holland 1988, p. 242). While the sample in this study was also not representative, steps were successfully taken to recruit women and the resulting material presents a broader view of Australian self-build housing than has been published previously. The use of open-ended questions in this self-administered questionnaire also permitted respondents greater latitude to reflect on their experiences and describe what was of importance to them.

The Questionnaire

In approaching the development of a new questionnaire to investigate people who built their own houses, the first intention was to eliminate the gender bias found in Holland’s questioning of Sydney-based male owner-builders. Further, in some cases the questions mirrored Holland’s questions, but tried to extend and pick up subtler gendered differences.
For example, rather than just ask about occupations to gauge the extent of building knowledge, questions in this case asked about the larger issues of developing a sense of oneself as a builder throughout their life and especially outside the profession and away from its anti-woman culture that Chapter 3 revealed so starkly. These carefully framed questions drew responses about building and how as an amateur home-based activity it impacted and incorporated relationships, and how sex, embodiment, and building interacted to shape experiences.

The development of the questionnaire used in this project is outlined in Chapter 2 of this text which sets out a full description of the entire study. It included questions about household configuration, about the identity, background and motivation of people who built their own housing, how they learnt to build, what they built and the process of building. Initial questions were limited to those who would elicit relatively straightforward responses such as age, sex and the time of life in which construction took place. (See Appendix A.) Respondents were also asked about their occupation while building and currently, and also what level of formal education they completed. They were also asked to think about their heritage background and sense of self and identify any ways in which this may have contributed either positively or negatively to competence in building. The very first question, however, was intended to draw from respondents answers about what motivated them to build a house for their own use.

**The Respondents**

In total 459 questionnaires were sent to individuals, and 95 completed questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 21%. Of the completed questionnaires returned 90 have been included for analysis. Five of the completed questionnaires were excluded as the houses discussed were built outside the timeframe for this research or were not built for the use of the builder. The sample then includes a total of 40 questionnaires completed by males and 50 questionnaires completed by females. This level of response from women verifies my assertion (Denigan 1996, 1998) that women readily identify as builders in the self-build context.

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2 Respondents were given a choice to indicate that they were male or female with no other options given.
Though the questionnaire was framed in such a way as to gather responses from individuals, in some cases it was difficult to discern who had actually completed the questionnaire, as it was ostensibly completed by a couple. In each instance at one point or another in their responses the person actually writing the responses indicated which partner they were. There was a total of 13 questionnaires completed in this manner. Ten of those questionnaires were completed by women and three by men. The majority of these respondents ceased answering questions as if from both partners by the third of six pages. As was evident in the representations of self-builders in the magazines, women in particular presented the self-build process as one undertaken by a couple.

The issue of who in fact built the houses under consideration was raised long before analysis of the questionnaires commenced. Several of those who received questionnaires requested an additional copy for their spouse or themselves to complete. While this ensured that the contribution of both partners to construction of the house was recorded, it makes it difficult to establish how widespread this concern was among the respondents.

Six respondents answered every possible question with a response from each partner. This practice seems to indicate that some of the participants strongly identify building as undertaken in partnership with their spouse. Indeed, one respondent commented next to a later question, “We are a team.” It is safe to say that for a not insignificant number of couples who self-build the work of both partners is important to the recognition of that work. In Chapter 4 we saw that some self-builders do subsume their individuality within the construct of the couple, hinting at the importance of the house as instantiating their relationships and building as a way of relating.

The most notable difference between this group of respondents and those who participated in Holland’s research is the gender makeup of the group. Holland wrote that “all but two of [his] 185 respondents were male” (Holland 1988, p. 149); while over half of the 90 people whose

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Women’s Networks and Contacts</th>
<th>Newspaper and Internet Public Notices</th>
<th>Victorian Office of Housing</th>
<th>Habitat for Humanity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>21</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaires distributed</td>
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<td>157</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
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responses are discussed here were women. As detailed in the description of this study, described in Chapter 2, the recruitment strategies devised for this project were by design very different from those used by Holland. They were designed specifically to include a more diverse range of participants, not just in terms of gender but also to include other categories of people involved in self-build. Table 5.1 sets out the number respondents recruited and the number of questionnaires distributed through various strategies. It is important in a study such as this to devise and implement strategies to include women and respondents generally whose experiences reflect the widest range of possibilities.

The strategies utilized recruited people from a diverse range of socioeconomic backgrounds. It included those who were registered owner-builders or were building without required building approvals and people who participated in self-build programs such as those run by the Victorian Government’s Office of Housing and the international Non-Government Organisation (NGO) Habitat for Humanity. This, and the distribution of questionnaires to women with whom I had contact that had expressed an interest in self-build, resulted in a broad range of experiences being reported.

Respondents were asked what age they were when they commenced building. Responses showed a similar pattern for males and females and when graphed the ranges were also similar to the age ranges of participants in Holland’s study. Among respondents to this questionnaire 27 of the female respondents lived in a household without children while 22 lived with children; likewise 15 men lived in child-free households while 26 of the men shared their house with at least one child. The implication is that for women involvement in a self-build project was slightly more likely if they did not have a child or children living in the household, however, men were much more likely to be involved in a self-build housing project if a child or children was a member of the household they lived in.

The presence of children in a household also seemed to impact the age at which a person was likely to build their own house. A greater number of women who had children as part of the household built earlier than women without children, while none of the men who were over 55 years when they commenced building had children living with them. Further to this the majority of women with no children built between the ages of 36 and 45 while the majority of
women who had children living with them commenced building their houses between the ages of 26 and 35.

In some respects, these respondents are comparable to participants in Holland’s 1977 research. There were, however, aspects of experience with self-build housing that Holland did not consider, such as the size and composition of households and aspects of the roles of household members in the building project that will be examined.

Chapter 2 discusses the problematic assumptions made about households in Holland’s study, namely that there was a “head of household” and that his “sampling process yielded conventional households with the owner-builder as the conventional male “head of household” (Holland 1988). It is evident that registered owner-builders are mostly men, however, it is not evident that Holland indeed asked respondents what the term “head of household” meant for them, or any other questions about their household management or family living arrangements. The discredited concept, as used by Holland, is one that had been imposed on households by demographers in the past, without regard to the ways households functioned and without reference to the views of members of household (Castles 1986). The term is no longer used. An investigation of these issues is outside the scope of this study; however, they must be kept in mind when considering the living arrangements of respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Female</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex of Partner if Applicable</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Household without children</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.2 Number of Households with Children by Sex of Partner

One of the first things to emerge from the material about self-build was the very wide range of household configurations. Twenty-five of the respondents were men who lived with a female partner at the time they built and the households in which they lived included between one and five children, while 15 of the respondents were women who lived with a male partner and had between one and five children in their households. Both men and women in households with children and partners of the other sex, what Holland may have called
conventional households, saw themselves as qualified to complete a questionnaire for this study and thereby identify themselves as the builder of their own house.

People responding to the questionnaire answered a number of questions that give some insight into the range of living arrangements; they reported a diverse set of relationships and their household’s configurations. Half of those who responded lived in households with children, 18 of those respondents were women in partnerships with men and 25 were men in partnerships with women; five sole parents who built while not in a partnership responded to the questionnaire; one was a dad living with his child while the other four were women who had one, two or four children. Thirteen women who had no children and were in intimate partnerships with men while they built completed a questionnaire, as did 12 men who were partnered with women whose households did not include children. Nine single women and one single man, all with no children returned a completed questionnaire. Six of the respondents indicated they were lesbians who were in partnerships when they built their houses and one man who identified as gay wrote that he and his partner were building their own house. A summary of these figures is shown in Table 5.2. What we see is a diverse range of households wherein Holland’s “normal” makes up less than half of the sample.

Some respondents indicated that their children, and or partner, were not part of their household. When one considers this factor, 13 different household compositions could be identified, considering only whether a child or children where present and not taking into account the number of children residing in the household. Half of the respondents, 45 in all, lived in households with children. Twenty of the households had two children in residence, 12 of the households had three children, six households had one child, five households had five children and two households had more than five children.

Thirteen respondents, eight men and five women, indicated that their children played a role in building. This role varied with age. Kent, for instance, reported that his adult son, an electrician, helped him while Preston said his young children participated in building as part of their play. The range of tasks children took part in included: fetching and carrying, sieving soil, painting windows, laying blocks and mud-bricks, holding gyprock and cornice, priming and painting, gluing and grouting tiles and rendering. Oliver wrote that his daughter “assisted
as her age made possible” while Kent’s son participated “in all aspects of building”. This implies that it was possible to parent and undertake construction at the same time.

In the responses detailing the tasks of others who shared the dwelling and contributed to the self-build project, only one mentioned the need to have children cared for. Will described the efforts of his ”spouse” in minding the children as a contribution to the building project. The time freed from this parental responsibility enabled him to build. Two other male respondents mentioned that their female partners cooked and kept them fed, a task that not only kept up their sustenance but also saved them from having to prepare their own meals. In total only five respondents, all male, indicated that household tasks, traditionally seen as women’s work and in these cases performed by women, were seen as contributions to the building process.

In other instances, respondents wrote of their partners as having a role as an assistant or labourer, and there was a gendered pattern in this characterisation. Of the 38 male respondents who had female partners 11 described their partner as labouring or assisting them to build, while only five of the 30 female respondents who were partnered with men described their partner’s contribution in those terms. While there seemed to be some contradictory remarks in their responses, two of the women who were partnered with men described themselves as an assistant or labourer to their husband. This characterisation of women who participate in building as “labourers” or ”assistants” implies that the women were not in fact building, were not builders and minimises or hides the role and contribution of women. Once again the builder-boss/labourer-assistant hierarchal relationship prevalent in the construction industry can be seen reproduced in the amateur building scenario. This pattern of hierarchal dualisms is a recurring theme in the material.

Another pattern of gendered roles was evident in the comments of respondents related to the tasks that women were reported to have participated in. Sixteen men and three women reported the women as being mainly involved in design of the house or interior, purchasing of supplies and selection and application of finishes such as paint and tiles. In total, 25 of the male and 21 of the female respondents wrote that their partner contributed to building the house with them. Of those only 10, eight women and two men, gave the impression that this was a task shared, saying that they “built together”.

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Other family members were also reported to have contributed to construction of the house, this included friends, parents, siblings, in-laws and ex-partners. A significant group, 20 respondents, reported that they lived and built alone. Among these were five males who had female partners, two women with female partners, 12 women who were not partnered and a man who was also not partnered.

Building and Being Yourself

Respondents were asked if there was anything about themselves, their heritage, background or culture that made a positive or negative contribution to their competence in building. The responses varied from no response, to one-word responses, with the majority, 68 people, writing lengthy detailed passages. Many more women than men gave detailed responses to this question, however, this was also true for the questionnaire in general where women wrote an average of 39 words per question and men wrote on average 27 words per question.

The questionnaire and this question in particular, was clearly approached very differently by men and women, which for Griffiths may be indicative of women’s relative vulnerability (Griffiths 1991). Women’s vulnerability in this regard stems from their social exclusion. Exclusion from fora in which to develop skills useful in self-building, formal educational settings where men learn to build and from informal spaces where the capacity to build is recognised, such as hardware stores and often other self-build sites. That vulnerability may also account for women’s more prolific letter writing in magazines related to self-build. In publications they are often not identified as builders. As a result they are then more likely to seek recognition of their interests, efforts and achievements in opportunities such as completing a questionnaire, in that way utilising an opportunity to find validation. Likewise, always being cast in an assistive role may make at least some women seek recognition for their efforts as a self-builder in their own right.

Six respondents did not answer this question while a further 16 answered simply no, none or not really. Of those who gave no responses or answered no, four were female and 12 were male. While these responses appear clear-cut two other responses leave lingering questions. In the first of these the respondent answered no, and then went on to give detailed examples of family experiences that were clearly an influence on her. Similarly, another respondent answered, “Not really” and then recounted a family history of building, citing an example of
a self-build project in the generation previous to hers. That left a balance of 4/50 females and 12/40 males saying there was nothing in their heritage and background that contributed to competence in building. This suggests to me that for a sizable number of men, to be a competent self-builder is normative, it comes into being without any specific or identifiable background influence.

The detailed responses confirmed that for many women, and some men, particular aspects of heritage and background influence their competence as builders. Aside from the question of background, this section also considers responses to questions about ethnicity and any other ways the respondents describe themselves, such a sexuality, family background, class, gender and sex and other factors that might contribute to their sense of self, in order to explore how a self-build project might relate to or be an expression of the respondent’s sense of self, as what seemed crucial in aforementioned influences was their impact on the self and the way the self was constituted. Especially significant were: the gendered and embodied self, the relational self and the self in a cultural context.

Almost one quarter of all respondents, 22 in total, chose not to give an answer about their ethnic origin or said that they did not see themselves as part of an ethnic group and also did not describe an identity, or answered that there were no particular ways they would describe it. In looking at the answers that were given by the remaining 68 respondents it may be possible to put this silence into perspective. Such silence is not surprising as often those who enjoy benefits as part of a privileged group often don’t notice the basis of the bias or the operation of that bias. Men, for example, often seem unaware of sexism and the benefits of it that they receive, such as receiving higher rates of pay than women for doing the same or similar work. This was the case in terms of sexual orientation also where respondents did not notice their own heterosexuality, just as the non-disabled did not comment on how societal bias against people with disabilities benefitted them. As is perhaps typical in Australia, a large group did not seem to be aware of their ethnicity.

Some respondents chose to describe themselves in a quite idiosyncratic way. The most numerous descriptions expressed aspects of the personality. Five respondents made reference to their creativity, another five described their spiritual beliefs and five said they were hard working or disciplined, another four made reference to their intellectual capacity while others
described themselves as independent. Among the other terms describing personality traits that did not fit into these previous categories were: determined, patient, thrifty, inquisitive, idealistic, philosophical, adventurous, accepting, adaptable, sociable, ordered and honest. There were some obvious patterns of gender in these responses; only women described themselves as practical or independent, four of the five people who indicated a spiritual aspect of their identity were women, three of the four who described themselves in intellectual terms were men.

Ultimately much more material was contributed by respondents than can be discussed in this chapter. The questions on the sense of self, heritage and background and motivation elicited the most detailed and lengthy responses and also presented an opportunity to explore an intersectional analysis of the practice of self-build in Australia. Such an approach “emphasizes the simultaneous importance of race, gender, class (and sometimes additional dimensions, such as age and sexuality) in formulating questions and looking for answers about gender” (Kramer 2005, p. 186). With an eye to an intersectional approach the following analysis considers the four aspects of the self which were expressed in the self-build process. The aspects were: the embodied self, the gendered self, the relational self and the cultural self.

**The Embodied Self Building**
Primary and secondary sex characteristics result in small bodily differences between male and female bodies that have been used to justify the exclusion of females from construction trades and professions. Chapter 3 is replete with examples of how this was achieved. The greater capacity of the male body to grow taller and develop more muscle is an ideal used to attribute weakness to females. The capacity of the female to be pregnant supposedly also makes her weaker, more prone to injury and more vulnerable generally, especially when pregnant. In previous chapters there was only an example where pregnancy was mentioned by a female self-builder. Rather than limit her capacity to build, it appeared to have no impact on her building activity. That none of the questionnaire respondents mentioned pregnancy indicates it is not a significant aspect of the self as embodied that impacts the experiences of self-build.
Likewise, none of the male self-builders mentioned seeing themselves as tall and strong as being key in successfully building their own house. There were two previous instances where women talked about being strong, and one where a woman mentioned believing she was not strong enough. Similarly, only one person mentioned any kind of negative impact due to her female body. She said she lacked strength, and that lack compounded a lack of knowledge. It was the only case in 50. It seems none of the remaining 98% of women had any trouble conceiving of themselves as strong enough to undertake self-build.

For a group of women being embodied as female provided a positive sense of self that assisted them to more readily avoid the ideas of a female body as limited. All of those who identified as lesbians also included the word feminist in their self-description indicating that they saw themselves as part of a political and cultural group that is proudly female, pro woman and has developed political analyses of gender. Their embodied sex was central to their sense of self and a source of strength and power that seemed less susceptible to notions of the mythical female weakness that stopped women from building.

A final aspect of embodiment that was mentioned came by way of two women who mentioned disability caused by their bodies’ different capacity for sensory perception. For one it related to vision and for the other hearing. While this was mentioned, it was only in passing and there was no mention of the capacity to build being impacted. Even having a sense of the bodily self as different or impaired did not present an obstacle to self-build for these women.

**The Gendered Self Building**

Women’s views of themselves throughout their life, as well as at the time of building, had an impact on whether they saw themselves as competent self-builders. That sense of self was formed in many different areas of life, and yet it impacted their capacity to build.

Thirteen women mentioned specific gendered experiences having a negative impact on their building competence. Three women mentioned that their education as girls left them unsure about some very basic skills and knowledge that they felt they should have. Some of the basic skills mentioned were, knowing how to hammer a nail and how to cut a straight line. One of these respondents said that she soon learned these skills while another wrote that it was hard to get these basic skills.
Several women also reported past difficulties building or working with men in relation to building that impacted their competence. One woman reported that, as a woman, she was always cast in a supporting role, forever “having to be an apprentice”. Another said, “Men think their way is the right way; I had a different way that worked just as well.” When it came to working with other building professionals, Gerrie, a young woman with disabilities who built her own house, gave an example of a gender-based difficulty, “People had no faith in my ability because I was a young woman. They laughed. People didn’t take me seriously. Trades people were rude and patronising.”

Three women wrote of the gender relations in their childhood family like they were something to survive or overcome. One indicated that there were “clearly defined and separated male and female roles” while another described herself as having “survived the pressure to marry” Hareen gave a fuller explanation of the impact of such roles and the pressures to conform to gendered expectations when she wrote, “I survived the ‘girls should just get married’ upbringing and I am a product of tenacity.”

While Hareen developed tenacity to survive the pressures on her to live according to the gender expectations of her family, for Natalia it was the inability of her parents to live according to socially prescribed gender roles that led her to abandon expectations that she would be able to rely on such roles in her own life. She wrote, “My father was not responsible with money so I took the attitude (being the oldest of four and the only girl) that no man would necessarily provide for me, so I guess I have to do it myself.”

This capacity to thrive in the face of adversity was also mentioned by Caron. She described the gendered experiences that helped her develop building competence as her “lesbian identity, many years as a single parent [being] independent, thinking outside the square, [and being a] strong independent mother.” This description gives the impression of an individual not restricted by convention, who finds opportunity rather than adversity in meeting a set of needs that are not typical. Caron also specifically mentioned her lesbian identity as something that led to her increased competence, but does not go into detail on why this was the case.

Childhood also offered opportunities to cross gender boundaries. Karen’s comments, for instance, show that from childhood she was interested in activities that were not in line with the expectations for her gender and she came to identify herself with the term “tom-boy.” She
wrote, “I was a tom-boy, thus tried lots of things, built forts etc., and have always had a practical bent. I went farming for 10 years so did lots of physical work. [I am] confident with my own strength and physical abilities.” Karen’s story indicates that her childhood identification with a role that accounted for being a girl interested in activities that were seen as more proper for a boy allowed her to develop her skills over the years and develop positive attitudes and confidence in her skills and abilities. While it is not clear how such sentiments were expressed in her childhood, if indeed they were, Rachel reported that she was “of the generation which believed in… women’s lib, I always had the sense that I could do anything.”

Similar ideas were expressed by two other respondents; one wrote that when she became a feminist nothing could stop her and the other said that the “influence from women's/feminist movement… gave me a belief that I could do it.” The later responses suggest that through involvement in pro-woman movements, these women developed more confidence. It was a confidence they drew upon when building.

Such confidence, however, proved to be a more difficult quality for other women to cultivate and other aspects of their heritage, background or identity continued to be a negative impact on how they saw themselves and therefore their competence with building. Clearly influenced by feminism and ideas about gender socialisation Juliet wrote that, “The building industry is a male-dominated arena so women don’t move with the same confidence and don’t acquire some of the basics.” In this passage, Juliet explains how she understands her own lack of confidence. It is as if the male domination she speaks of meant that she was excluded from gaining knowledge from men, that she would need that knowledge to come to her from women so she could learn the basic skills. This same lack of confidence could be seen in two other comments; one respondent reported that it was difficult for her to trust her math-thinking and the calculations required for building, while another wrote that the project was “daunting when one knows just how much you can’t do.” The kinds of skills mentioned were taught in the pre-apprenticeship course discussed in Chapter 3; the comments bring home how the exclusion of women impacts them right throughout the build.

Three women made comments that indicated positive impacts upon their building competence from gendered experiences. One of the women, Sheryl, said that people were in
awe of her. She wrote, “I'm in a minority when I build, a certain curiosity factor helps me to get information.” In this way Sheryl’s femininity was an advantage as the extra information she obtained helped in the development of her sense of herself as a competent self-builder.

The Relational Self Building
A large number of respondents describe ways their relational self was expressed through self-build. There were 11 women and five men who made statements about their relationships with partners and former partners, children and other family members, family generally and their neighbourhood or community. In several ways the self-build project itself seemed to be used to actively define family. Three respondents mentioned that they wanted to build a “family home”, intending that it be passed on through future generations. These people were motivated to invest their labour to ensure a family legacy intended to survive well into the future. Bernice wrote, “I come from a building family, my dad built our family home. My uncle involved me in his building projects.” Bernice was familiar with the idea of the “family home” but also building was something related people did, she and several other respondents indicated that they were motivated by the understanding that labouring together was, through the very process, instantiating a family.

Garry, in another example, said building their own house was an “expression of commitment” between himself and his partner. Similarly, Rosalie indicated that building was a process through which her relationship with her partner was created and maintained, writing that “it was, and is, a living project that we share in.” In the same vein, Caron mentioned that starting a new relationship with her female partner and building a house were parts of the same process. She said:

   My partner had always had the desire to build her own mud brick house. It was partly a huge adventure at the beginning of a new relationship. For me, it was a plunge in to the unknown.
   – Caron

Self-building was not always an expression of the relational-self for every lesbian in the study; some did not mention this aspect of themselves being engaged. Just as many of the heterosexual women were also silent about this. Given how strongly self-build was portrayed as relational for women in the letters and articles of the magazines in Chapter 4, it is surprising that more women did not speak about this when given the opportunity to raise it themselves.
The relative silence on this issue indicates two things. One, that there is a high degree of idealisation of coupling in the magazines, whether this reflects the ideals of those writing or the editors, or both, it is difficult to say. The other is that for women being systematically denied access to construction knowledge, as was shown in Chapter 3, a male partner can be a source of knowledge, as discussed in Chapter 4. He may indeed function as the only way she has found of accessing knowledge of construction. In this way, female exclusion from the construction industry enforces female dependence on males and fosters a hierarchal aspect to the relationships of the heterosexual self-build couple that confines her as the less knowledgable assistant or apprentice and confirms him as the more knowledgable boss or master. The relatively large number of unpartnered heterosexual women and lesbians who completed this questionnaire shows that there are indeed other ways for women to access knowledge of building and that not all women are expressing a relationship with an intimate partner while engaging in self-build.

While only six people, four women and two men, mention their role as an intimate partner, four mention their role as a parent and a further two mention a general familial relationship. Women make up a majority of those describing their role in relationships as an active part of the process of self-building, being nine of the 12 who describe themselves in such ways.

The focus of men was mostly the object, the house; the women seemed to be more focused on the construction of the house as a process of relating. There were two exceptions to that. The idea of investing in relationships within a community by building a house for one’s self and or one’s family, was one that motivated two men. Brent said he had researched the mud-brick community earlier in his life and “loved the sub-culture and cooperation” while Quon wrote that he liked the idea of “knowing the neighbours before he moved in”; something he understood his self-build project would allow him to do.

For one woman, who had just left a relationship where she was subjected to violence, building a house was also about redefining her family, and the ways they related to each other, in a “happy and healthy” way. It was about moving through a process, from being part of family with two adult members to a low income one-parent family in a new community. This woman was investing in relationships with her children and community, relationships
based on her “belief in women’s equality with men in all areas,” which she instantiated through the process of building and substantiated in the house that she built.

While many respondents wrote of relational aspects of their heritage, background or identity that included elements recurring in more than one theme almost half of all responses mentioned the influence of family relationships. While most responses indicated general ways in which family life contributed to a sense of self and equipped them to undertake a self-build project, common experiences stood out.

Some respondents wrote of building as something their family did, while others identified their family’s farming background as influential and another group mentioned that gendered patterns or experiences in their family life was an important factor for them.

There were many different ways in which family members modelled skills or attributes that were recounted as contributing to the building competence of the respondents. For both male and female respondents’ family members were important role models, they mentioned their parents, mothers, fathers, grandfathers and grandmothers, an uncle, brothers and sisters. The male respondents mentioned their fathers and grandfathers predominately and their parents to a lesser extent while the female respondents mentioned male and female role models equally and wrote of a greater range of relationships between the role models and respondents.

Eighteen respondents, 12 women and six men, wrote of family members who modelled characteristics that were not directly related to building and yet proved important in the development of the respondent’s competence in building. Bernice, for instance, said her “father was a fix-it man” and that her uncle included her in his work while Ellen mentioned her grandmother who had “many handwork skills including woodwork and gardening.” Nigel wrote fondly of the idyllic childhood his parents endeavoured to provide:

My parents… [were] part of the 70s move ‘back to the land’. Both parents worked very hard in going country. We drank goats milk, raised chickens, pigs, beef, grew veggies, cut wood. The program Good Life always reminds me of my parents. – Nigel

Not all the stories of familial modelling were happy tales. Several respondents wrote of negative parts of their heritage, background or identity that made a negative contribution to their competence in building. Rachel provided a hint of her upbringing, saying she came from a “troubled family”. Franz also cited negative influences that he attributed to his father’s
attitude to the trades, “he was firmly of the view that you don’t interfere with the skill area of others,” thus he was not brought up with what he called a ‘have a go’ attitude. For Franz this became a barrier to developing competence in the wide range of skills he felt a self-build project requires.

One respondent wrote of events in her life where positive familial modelling was lacking; yet somehow, through undertaking a self-build project she turned this into a positive factor that contributed to her sense of self as a competent self-builder. Cara said:

> I grew up in a dysfunctional family. I feel that I have always had responsibilities from a very young age, so therefore I matured more quickly than those children in healthy family upbringings. I think that was a positive for me in building my own home. You need to be responsible and committed to build your own home, even with lots of help. – Cara

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<th>Table 5.3 Attributes Modelled for Respondents by Family Members.</th>
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Forty-four of ninety respondents mentioned the influence of family in development of competence in building. Employment patterns within the family seem to be of particular
importance, farming and construction stand out among those. Six respondents wrote of a family background in farming as significant in their development of competence in building. Hyram’s comments illustrate how familial modelling in a farming family proved important to him:

I was raised on a farm. I learnt to make do and find solutions to problems with what is on hand. My grandmother was a creative person and found innovative uses for everyday things to decorate her garden. My grandfather had building skills even though he was a farmer. – Hyram

Turning to familial modelling of building, a total of 13 respondents indicated the importance of this to the development of competence in building, and only one of these respondents reported that their role model was a female who built. Putting this issue in context, almost one in five male respondents indicated that familial modelling of building was important to them while for women the figure is around one in 10.

Table 5.3 sets out the descriptions of attributes respondents wrote were modelled by male, female and indeterminate family members, the attributes mentioned and broad categories into which these attributes can be sorted. Further, while it was clear that it was predominately women who mentioned female role models and they were usually described as modelling particular personality characteristics and skills, both male and female respondents mentioned male role models and these were discussed more in terms of their skills and employment backgrounds.

The kinds of attributes modelled by family members reflect patterns of employment prevailing in the lives of their parents and grandparents, rigid gendered patterns. Orla’s comments illustrate this situation particularly well:

The male involved in the project has a building background and qualifications. His father was a builder and his grandfather was a master craftsman... my own father was a builder and the three of my brothers are in the building business. – Orla

Relationships provided opportunities for people to both learn a sense of self, useful in self-building, but also to express a relational sense of self as a self-builder. This could be a somewhat cyclical process.
The Cultured Self Building
Many women also mention how their cultural background either exacerbated their difficulties or enhanced their capacity to cope. Sometimes their status as a cultural outsider fostered in them a greater resilience and at other times it was a burden that made things more difficult.

Two women mentioned issues that indicated that the culture of their class impacted on their competence in building, and gender was also a contributing factor in that experience. Lilly, for instance, said that she grew up with the “DSS” (Department of Social Security) around and said she wanted to make her money do something good, to show people that you can live in energy-efficient housing in the bush. She also mentioned that she had been afraid of making a financial mistake, perhaps based on her memory of living under “DSS” purview. Another woman who lived on a very low income and built her own house reported that she had already lived without electricity, bathrooms and privacy, experiences she described as “outside the normal Australian comfort zone,” and was prepared to give up those things while building.

In these cases, welfare-class culture seemed to be a resource that could be used to justify certain hardships while building or building differently. That these sentiments were expressed by women was unsurprising, as they are more likely to experience poverty due to the relative disadvantage of lower wages and disproportionately greater financial and other responsibilities for children. (Swain & Howe 1995) It seemed that to be welfare-class for women could carry a suspicion of some kind of moral deficiency or guilt and an imperative to live beyond reproach rather than an understanding of being part of an economic and political landscape of variable privilege controlled by those with excess wealth was internalised by them. Perhaps it simply came down to developing a sense of self-determination in a world where they had little power or influence except to lead exemplary lives. Whatever the case, lifelong economic hardship in Australia and the culture it fosters, was part of life for these women and they used it develop a sense of self that helped them build.

For Cathy aspects of her cultural background also proved positive in developing competence as a self-builder. She wrote that being an American, she was part of a “can do” culture and had a strong work ethic. Franz on the other hand said that as his father was not raised in Australia he was never taught to have a ”give it a go” attitude that he ascribed to “many Australians”. For him this was something to overcome during his self-build project. Rick, on
the other hand, said that his heritage was of assistance in developing competence, stating simply that he was European born, of Jewish birth, perhaps this is also a resource that provided him with increased resilience. In these ways the culture immigrants brought with them to Australia impacted the view of the self and the capacity to self-build.

It was difficult to prompt the participants to think of culture as part of their experience when the concept of ethnicity was not well used by them. In total 55 people, more than half the respondents, gave no answer or answered “no” when asked about membership of a particular ethnic group. This set of responses and non-responses, included six people who did not answer, one who said the question was not applicable, one who said, “not really”, one who said, “No, born in Australia,” one who responded, “not really” but that he had a Yugoslav granddad and a German granddad and another 44 people who answered just “No”. Among this group there were 29 women and 25 men.

It is common in Australian vernacular speech for the word “ethnic” to be seen not as relating to a racial or cultural group but as a marker of belonging to a non-English speaking or similarly “foreign” racial or cultural group. Ethnic, a supposedly more polite term, has become a direct substitute for the pejorative foreign. This is, of course, a misuse of the term. In discussing my own ethnic background, I make reference to my mother who was an immigrant from the Netherlands arriving in Australia in her teens and my father’s family who can be traced back to Celtic roots in Ireland, Scotland and Cornwall, arriving in Australia between 1840 and 1860. There is also my great, great, grandfather, the mysterious John Williams, also known as Juan de Larum, reputed to have been born in Lisbon, who illustrates that one’s ethnic or cultural background may be a mystery.

Another group of respondents who considered this question, 23 in number, answered with various phrases that situate them as white Australians. The range of responses in this grouping included nine people who said they were an Aussie or Ozzie, Australian, Australian by choice, or a Dinkum Aussie, four more used terms that included the word white with a qualifier (European/Irish descent, Non Aboriginal Australian, wasp, and Caucasian Australian), two others said Caucasian, one using the qualifier Australian, four wrote Anglo with various qualifiers (Australian and Boring Anglo Saxon), another three responded by
indicating how many generations their families had been in Australia and a final respondent in the Australian section said he was the offspring of white colonists.

Based on the responses to this question it is my assertion that the question was perceived as asking about the degree to which respondents see themselves as Australian. I take the lack of an answer or the answer “no” to mean that either the question was confusing or that the respondent saw there being no question about their Australianness, the second set of responses was an emphatic yet still at times qualified statement of Australianness. Apparently, none of the respondents identified as having Indigenous Australian heritage.

Twenty-seven descriptions were given by respondents which fall into what I have termed cultural categories; they identify distinct groups of people who share similar attributes. The most numerous of these, with ten responses, were those where respondents identified as being part of a national group. Six people indicated in some way that they were Australians, while three respondents identified themselves as immigrants.

A final grouping of 14 respondents referred to a place of origin other than Australia. The places referred to were located in the U S, Europe and China. This third set of responses showed a diverse and more sophisticated interpretation of the impact of one’s ethnic background, respondents used terms like “immigrant” and “origin” and talked about their country of birth, languages spoken and having chosen where in the world they would live. Of those 14 people only the three above mentioned their cultural background as a part of themselves that impacted their self-build experiences. The same is probably true for others, and the repeated use on the previously discussed magazine covers of male self-builders posed just like the -settler- bushmen in McCubbin’s paintings, indicates folkloric Australian bush culture as part of self-build in the minds of some.

The impact of workplace culture on self-builder’s sense of self and its use as a resource in building was not shown in the material collected. Only eight of the 54 people who described themselves included a term that was related to their occupational status. The terms included were: retired and semi-retired, unemployed, self-employed, journalist, childcare worker, part time worker and tradesman. Of the eight who described an occupational status, half were male and half were female. Even though this line of questioning did not demonstrate the link
between work culture and a sense of self as a self-builder it does show that occupations matter to women as much or as little as they do to men.

The cultured self, the part of the self that is shared with groups who understand and or share specific values, practices, languages, origins, or behaviours, is developed through self-build communities. Those communities exist to a greater extent than the particular questions from the questionnaire, discussed in this chapter, were able to show. The continued publication of the magazines discussed in the previous chapter, which document the successes of individual self-builders, points to large and healthy self-build communities in Australia, with distinct cultures and shared ideas of the self.

The aspects of the self referred to above were not neatly divided parts of a person’s sense of self. There was a constant interplay of aspects. For example, while lesbianism was in part about the embodied female self it was also, at least for the lesbians in this study, about a way of relating, woman to woman, to someone of the same gender. Lesbians may also share a culture of behaviours and values. The relational self, the gendered, the cultured self and the embodied self all came into play. Some mentioned, for example, that gendered patterns or experiences in their family life was an important factor for them in developing the sense of self as a self-builder, others talked about gendered cultural expectations, of relationships.

Ideas of the self are complex, influenced by all kinds of experience and developed over many years but they are central to a complex and challenging task like self-build. It is important to keep in mind that while different aspects of the self may be brought into play they are integrated within a whole person.

**Further Self-build Motivations**

Turning first to the question of motivation, when respondents were asked to report on factors that motivated them to build a house for their own use, they all indicated that more than one factor was important, however, among those listed four distinct sets of responses could be identified. These broad themes, listed here in order of frequency of response, can be headed: economic factors, issues of design and or construction, ideas about self-fulfilment and housing need. The further sub-themes which emerged, that identify important aspects of and distinctions in these concerns are discussed in the first part of this chapter.
**Economic Factors**

The most frequently mentioned factor motivating people to build their own house was economic. Among the responses sub-themes were also identified, these were: the need to keep overall housing costs down, the desire to participate in alternative economic systems, a lack of money for other options, the ability to gain a bigger or better home for the same money, not having to pay for the labour of someone else, that the respondent could build as they were able to afford to do so, and that through self-build they afford a house designed according to their needs or desires. Other factors were also mentioned by some individuals, to which I shall return to later in this section.

The idea that the overall cost acquiring a house could be minimised was quite prevalent with just over a quarter of respondents, 10 women and 17 men, using phrases involving cost savings, affordability, and saving money. Cory said, “We thought it would be cheaper”, while Bernice reported she believed that “to employ a builder would have cost so much more”. Just under half of the men who completed the questionnaire, but only one fifth of the women, believed this to be the case.

Women reported several economic motivators that were not mentioned by the male respondents. Nine of the women indicated that they wanted to participate in alternative financial systems or practices. For some this was expressed in terms of avoiding what were perceived as negative economic relationships. Bree mentioned avoiding contributing to bank profits, while for others self-build permitted them to make a positive contribution to an alternative economy, such as by “buying into a new community”. Likewise Fran asserted, “we are not dropouts, but rather choose a lifestyle not dedicated to mortgages and the rat race.”

Another of the sub-themes identifiable only in the responses of women was their reported lack of money for options other than self-build. Seven of the ninety respondents used terms such as, limited finances, no capital, and lack of money; while Tarryn said simply, “we had no money”. Delia explained her situation at length:

> Following heavy financial losses after the death of my husband I found myself, at age 46, single and with no prospects for employment or financial security. The thought of living until old age in urban, low-cost housing, subsisting only on a pension, was abhorrent. I needed to feel secure and independent. I wanted to live in a semi-rural area where I could be "close to
nature”. Building a home through the then Ministry of Housing Self-build Scheme, seemed to be the only option for me.

Four other women gave responses that also indicated difficult financial circumstances were ameliorated by taking the self-build route to housing. The specific common factor in those responses was the assertion that they could control and schedule the stages of the process, from purchase of land, through building and occupation of the house, taking the next steps as they could afford to do so. Irene summed up this motivator saying construction of her house was, “spread over a timeframe to suit [her] ability to pay.” Given that women’s earnings still lag behind those of men by around 20% and that many more women spend years out of the paid workforce while raising children, means that women face greater financial hardship than men.

Further to these, two unrelated men reported that the ability to tailor the self-build process to individual time frames, allowing them to make changes as the project progressed, to design as they went, motivated them to take on a self-build housing project. Kent described this as the flexibility to make changes as the house was being built.

Whilst the responses of the women above indicate at best difficult, and at worst dire economic circumstances, there were other respondents for whom this was not apparently the case. At least six respondents reported that self-build offered the opportunity to acquire a bigger and or better home for the same cost, more “bang for the bucks”. Eva wrote, “we were able to build a larger home than what we would have been able to purchase”, while Rick was more specific about how this scenario played out saying he and his partner got “a bigger, better home with better quality fittings made affordable by the labour savings.”

The ability to make savings through the use of one’s own labour was mentioned specifically by five respondents, who used terms such as, “reduced expense,” and wrote that they did not have to “pay for labour.” Among the five was Sheryl, who reported this was one of the motivating factors for her. She wrote that “costs were less building myself than employing others.”

Another four respondents wrote of how the self-build option allowed them to acquire a house designed the way they wanted within the limits of what they could afford to pay. All of these respondents, three women and a man, indicated that they wanted to have among other things,
a passive solar house, oriented to the north and allowing for optimal seasonal performance. Quynh put this well when she said, “[self-build] enabled us to have a passive solar home built within budget to our detailed requirements and standards.”

Likewise, three respondents indicated that the site they chose for their house was remote or isolated and that the cost of employing a builder or tradespeople to come to the remote location, should they have been willing to travel, was cost prohibitive. Morris pointed out that his “remote-ish location made getting trades people difficult.” That also meant he incurred higher prices for trades.

Economic factors motivated respondents to build for themselves in several other related but distinctly different ways. Two respondents reported that at the end of the building process they would be, by design, ”debt free”. The one remaining economic issue identified as motivating a respondent to build a house for their own use was stated in plain terms, that the house was to be an asset in facing retirement, perhaps militating against the loss of income occurring at that time.

In looking back over this discussion of economic factors that motivated respondents to build for themselves, only one clear gendered difference emerges; based on the responses, more women faced greater financial hardship, with self-build being perceived as their only option to obtain housing, also affording them the ability to build when money was available.

It also appears that the development of economic alternatives, moving away from housing finance as a profit-making concern and toward choices that they perceived enhanced their local communities was a strong motivator for women, more so than men. This difference in responses indicates a gendered pattern of wealth and approach to housing; it points to different values held by women and men. It could be that, in addition, when it comes to considerations of financial matters, men may be more reluctant to express sentiments that could imply some inadequacy on their part. This is likely the case if they see themselves as the breadwinner within their household.

**Design and Construction Issues**

There was little difference in the frequency with which male and female respondents reported that issues of design and construction motivated them to build their own house. Control over
the design and construction in order to incorporate features important to the self-builder and to build within the constraints of time and budget were equally important to both women and men. This may be surprising given that women are not as widely seen as self-builders.

Respondents listed a range of issues that relate to design and construction as motivating them to build their own houses. These included the requirement for non-traditional design or construction related to energy use or environmental concerns, to have more control over the building timetable, processes, outcomes and financial aspects, to achieve a better-quality home than commercially available, to include a specific design feature or use specific materials, to have a house that was individual or not boring and that the respondent was unable to find a builder who could understand the house plans they required.

Most frequently mentioned by respondents, by 14 out of the 90, was the requirement that design and or construction of their house had to be more “environmental”. Respondents expressed a range of concerns from the use of recycled and environmentally friendly materials and building practices, to having a low energy requirement and efficient use of energy. While these environmental concerns were not spelled out by all the respondents some demonstrated sophisticated knowledge of building design, clearly stating that the house had to be designed and built according to passive solar principles.

Looking further into the background of these self-build people, only four of the 14 reported having been employed in building or construction. Joyce, one of the four, articulated these detailed environmental concerns when she said:

[I was motivated by the requirement to have] control over the type of environment I live in, with the ability to use factors such as passive solar design, environmentally sound materials and environmentally sound building practices with a minimum impact upon the surrounding area. – Joyce

The general issue of control was mentioned as a motivating factor by 10 respondents, five men and five women. They wrote about a wide range of issues, control of the process, making decisions and choices, doing things the way they wanted them done, avoiding a lack of control, financial control, choosing trades people, and control over the whole project. Will summed up these sentiments somewhat when he said:

[Our] last house was built by a builder. We didn't like the lack of control/poor workmanship. This time we wanted to do it our way. I enjoy doing everything myself. [I] thought too that it might save a few dollars. It made us responsible for materials used. – Will
The comment above is also indicative of another issue that motivated these self-build people, ten of whom said they were not satisfied with the quality of construction available commercially. One half of those people wrote that they could build better and of the 10 only one had a background in the construction industry.

Nine respondents wrote that they wanted particular materials used in the construction of their house and that this is what motivated them to build for themselves. The types of materials mentioned included: unconventional or alternative materials, mud-bricks, straw bales, stone and other materials of their choosing. A further five respondents indicated that there were specific design features that they required their house to have, some of these were: a house suited to the landscape, a house for solo living, a kit house and a house that allowed for wheelchair access.

Previously the issue of the timeframe of building was mentioned as something that self-build people wanted to control, however, five others talked about time in different terms. Several mentioned that they simply had the time available and that this was what motivated them to build, while others said that self-build allowed them to build according to an extended timeframe, building in stages according to their ability to afford the next phase. Omar said, “Having retired from the farm, I had the time and inclination to spend on the project” while Joyce wrote, “I was able to build my building as I wanted, in the time span that I wanted.”

The remaining factor relating to design and construction that motivated respondents to take on self-build were: wanting an individual design and that the designs of commercially built houses were boring. These respondents spoke about the difference between what was available and what they wanted this way, “We want something with a bit of flair and character,”; “Our home is a slightly different design.” Further, Ellen said, “we liked the idea of being involved, to shape [the house] ourselves in unique ways.” While Orla wrote, “None of the available houses on the market appealed; they were only unimaginative, mediocre project homes. All existing houses were ugly brick and tile.”

**Housing Need**

In total 15 respondents, 11 women and four men, wrote of having a housing need that motivated them to take on a self-build project. The relatively large number of women
experiencing housing need shows the impact of greater economic disadvantage in women’s lives.

Of these, five women and two men indicated that their housing need was caused by living conditions that were unsuitable. Three people mentioned their current living arrangements were unsustainable as the cost was more than they could afford while the remaining wrote that the house itself did not meet their requirements or was in disrepair. Tarryn reported that she “lived in a rundown farmhouse which needed a lot of money to make it comfortable” and Edward said, “I had limited funds, was on a pension and needed somewhere to live; the existing housing was too expensive.”

A further six respondents, four women and two men, reported that an aspect of their location motivated them to build. For one it was the lack of houses to rent in the area in which she lived, and for the others it was a matter of having land with no house or lack of a suitable house on the land upon which they lived.

One further aspect of housing need was reported by three women; it was their need for a house with a secure tenure. While the first reported that she liked the idea of setting herself up permanently in a low-cost home, the other two reported that incidences of domestic violence in immediate past relationships left them in insecure housing situations. Alice said she needed “something that could not be taken away,” while Rachel wrote that she was “trying to claim a sense of my own self-worth and power, a sort of security for myself and two small children.”

As with economic factors, housing need appears to motivate more women to participate in self-build than men. Two factors unique to women contribute to this. The first is the relative disadvantage women face in the labour market, with wages for women still well below what they are for men, despite decades of equal pay legislation. The second is widespread incidence of domestic violence in Australian communities, which often results in homelessness for women and children, a factor that was mentioned indirectly by the two women above as motivating them to build.
Ideas about Self-Fulfilment

Many of the respondents, through writing about what motivated them to build, indicated aspects of self-fulfilment that were addressed by building their own house. The issues raised were broad and overlapped, with the most frequent responses indicating self-build was for them about investing in relationships and personal satisfaction. Similar matters were discussed above in the section entitled Building and Being Yourself. The second set of ideas that motivated self-builders were: ideas about growth and learning, self-reliance and taking responsibility, rising to a challenge, self-expression, and having a sense of purpose. The respondents wrote they were motivated by the personal satisfaction they anticipated from fulfilling these personal goals.

Nine women and five men spoke in various ways about how the personal satisfaction they anticipated motivated them to build. They wrote in terms of the sense of adventure and achievement, of joy and the satisfaction of building, that it was a great challenge and something to be proud of, that it would be fun. Kerry’s response typified those of the people motivated by ideas of personal fulfilment. He wrote:

The idea of living in a house that I created, including many different, surprisingly, pleasing, comfortable, energy-efficient, aesthetic elements specific to my requirements, is a beautiful thing. The thought of the finished house fills me with excited expectation. – Kerry

Opportunities for personal growth and learning were identified as motivating factors for four women and two men in total. The men gave brief responses that said simply they were motivated to learn new skills, however, for the women there was a lot more involved and the underlying issues seemed of greater importance. Delia recalled that she found herself at a turning point in her life: “with no prospects… [and] needed to feel secure and independent.” In two cases women wrote about violence in previous relationships and indicated they were motivated to build their own house as a way of reclaiming or re-establishing a sense of herself that had been lost as a result of those former relationships. Rachel wrote that she was “trying to claim a sense of [her] own self-worth and power,” while Alice said she “needed to do something that could not be taken away.” Women who have experienced violence at the hands of an intimate partner often had their perceptions of home as a safe and nurturing environment challenged, disrupted or destroyed. Their capacity to feel at home and meet their
own needs for housing was limited. For women with the personal resources to call upon, self-build became a powerful symbolic and practical way of addressing this.

The idea of personal development as a motivating factor was expressed more fully by male respondents in other ways, however. Six men and two women reported that they wanted to rely on their own skills to build a house. This group was made up predominately of men who worked in the building industry. Preston was an exception. He described himself as motivated by a philosophy of self-reliance and that being an impractical academic he wanted the challenge. Another who wanted the challenge of building their own house, Doug, wrote: “I wanted to prove to myself I could do it.”

Other factors that motivated people to undertake a self-build project were the creative drive for self-expression, the need for a sense of ownership of the house, the sense of purpose they anticipated and the desire to be an example to others. These were minor themes expressed by one or two of the respondents.

Men and women, at first glance share common motivations for undertaking self-build. However, looking more closely it is evident that there are gendered differences in the way matters are conceptualised and the specific factors informing common motivations. Women, for example, experience greater financial hardship and increased likelihood of their lives being marred by violence. Both factors are central to their increased vulnerability to homelessness. Secondly their status as outsiders to the construction industry makes it less likely they will have the same access to skills and social networks that are essential in the self-build process and face a much more difficult path to the self-fulfilment some self-builders crave.

**Conclusion**

Men and women have a range of motivations related to diverse backgrounds and experiences, however, building a house for your own use is at its most fundamental an exercise in self-expression. Self-builders want a house that reflects their individual needs and allows them to be themselves.
At first glance what women and men are doing in building together for themselves may appear to be the same even when they are working on the same project. It may be, however, that their actions carry completely different meanings.

This chapter showed that women build in a diverse range of relationship settings; with and without children, without partners, with female partners and with male partners, however, self-build may not necessarily be an expression of their relational self. In this case the evidence presented here contradicts the idealised view presented in the magazines analysed in Chapter 4, which very strongly correlated women’s dependence in heterosexual relationships with self-build. Why the magazines, or indeed any media, present idealized views is an issue for others to discuss.

The 40 men who completed this questionnaire on the other hand, were all, with only one exception, engaged in relationships with an intimate partner or had responsibility for children while building. For men self-build would seem to be very strongly linked to relationships, and be an expression of that part of themselves. It may be something they are not able to articulate, not conscious of or are articulating in built form rather than with words. It may be that in the process of learning building skills they have also picked up the culture of the construction industry, that advocates stoicism for men, in which case denial of feelings or at least silence about them, is the norm.

Self-build for women is also mediated by social inequality. They are more vulnerable to housing need and have less economic resources to bring to bear. These factors and that they are excluded from construction skills development, place a great deal of pressure on women to depend on male partners in order to undertake a self-build project. Given the range of relationships women are engaged in it seems like they do not accept such dependence and have found other ways to do self-build.
6. House Making and Housekeeping

*Paul:* Pauline was the fetcher and carrier and the cleaner uppa, she did the painting, brushing up. The success of stonework depends on the finish.

*Pauline:* And if I wasn’t around it didn’t get cleaned up properly.

*Paul:* I was usually on the scaffolding and Pauline would put rocks up on the scaffolding, put cement on the scaffold. I did the laying, most of it and then Pauline would come along after me and brush. We brushed the joints of the stonework clean (Archer 1982, p. 3).

We lived about 20 minutes’ drive away and we’d come home at 9 or 10 at night each weekend. Dennis would get into a hot bath with a beer and the paper while I’d cook a meal. It was expected that the wife would do that sort of thing. But in a sense I was as cold and as shaken as he was – Ann (Archer 1985, p. 47).

This chapter is a detailed analysis of an online survey of people who built a house for their own use. (See Appendix C) The participants were drawn from a broad range of sources from across Australia, and included people who self-built as individuals, whilst part of a couple, both with and without children in their households. At least in that regard they present a diverse range of self-builders. Calls for participants were widely published in newspapers and relevant specialist newsletters and journals. Recruiting sufficient respondents was a difficult process, one with which the relevant state based registrars largely refused to cooperate. (See Chapter 2 and Appendix B.)

The survey itself was developed after all the other material was gathered and it was based on issues that emerged while gathering that material. One factor was that when interviews were scheduled with an individual in the field, regardless of whether the individual was male or female, their partner almost always came along to the interview. This provided an unanticipated opportunity but was also potentially inhibiting for all concerned. The presence of their partner could have influenced what the interviewee said in a number of ways. Some may have been more willing to give emphasis to their partner’s role in building or they may have been reluctant to reveal things about their partner which may have been shared had the partner not been present.

At the time the interviews were conducted there was little available to guide a built environment researcher with concerns about the ethics of particular situations, so a cautious approach was taken and questions that may have been divisive or controversial were avoided.
Later as on-line environments became available, they seemed more private and potentially safer spaces, individuals building as part of a couple could be more safely questioned further. In particular the survey enquired into the division of household tasks, sharing responsibility for children and the management of income earning. It was also possible to find out about the way power was shared, the breakdown of tasks and phases of construction and the difference between desired and actual roles within the build. The survey also provided an opportunity to probe issues that became evident while processing the material from the magazines analysed in Chapter 4, and the questionnaire analysed in Chapter 5. The survey also made it possible to look into the extent to which couples assisted each other and acknowledged each other’s contribution.

The Survey

The survey addresses five areas of relevance to the broader questions posed in this research. Conducted during 2013 and 2014 the survey set out a series of questions covering five areas of interest. In particular, the survey asked about demographic factors; development as a builder in terms of skills and identity; life while building; and building with a partner. It was hoped that the survey would give indications of some specific self-build processes, such as particular skills and aptitudes individuals bring to self-build, educational factors that assist people to develop the skills and interest to self-build and how the responsibilities of everyday life are managed while building. Particular attention was paid to how those with children shared their responsibilities, how building with a partner impacted the process and how the process of building impacted relations with their partner, and how people perceived the complex decision-making processes.

As it was a convenient sample it was not possible to proceed with inferential statistics. Analysis of the material using comparisons of percentages provided a basis from which to move forward. In that way it was possible to analyse the responses, address the themes and provide insights that came from those surveyed. This process gave a sense of something otherwise missing from the record and the other research methods employed in this thesis, a solid comparison between the attitudes and perceptions of men and women undertaking self-build. A detailed discussion of the design and implementation of the survey and methodological considerations is contained in Chapter 2.
The Respondents

The sample included 44 women and 75 men who ranged in age from 18 to 79 years. For men the average age was 57 and for women 49 years. When looking at the respondents by partner status and sex it became evident that more males (9%) were living alone than were their female counterparts (2%). This echoes what was found when looking at the material collected via the questionnaire discussed in Chapter 5, where of the 50 women and 40 men who completed it, nine women (18%) and one man (2%) lived in single-person households. That this difference was evident in the earlier data, confirms that women are less likely than their male counterparts to be living with a partner when undertaking self-build. The material implies that for men, their roles as partners and or parents are likely major motivating factors in their decision to undertake self-build. For women living with or without a partner seems to play little importance in undertaking self-build.

The survey asked the respondents their age when completing the survey, and also their age when they commenced building. The figures are directly comparable to data from the questionnaire discussed in Chapter 5 and Holland’s 1988 research (Holland 1988, p. 150).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 7.1 Age at Commencement of Building</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<tr>
<td>16-25</td>
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<tr>
<td>26-35</td>
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<tr>
<td>36-45</td>
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<tr>
<td>46-55</td>
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<tr>
<td>Over 55</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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*(Holland 1988, p. 150)

Commencement of building took place at a wide range of ages for both men and women. This differed from the men Holland studied, 41% of whom built between the ages of 26 and 35 years. Holland said that males of a certain age were at a time in their life where they sought single-family homes and that the features of the Sydney housing market led them to undertake self-build in particular ways. Around half of the respondents completing this
survey had built their most recent house in Victoria, with New South Wales and Western Australian participants being quite numerous. Several respondents were from Queensland and the Northern Territory. The Australian Capital Territory, South Australia and Tasmania were not represented at all. Clearly such a broad range of respondents would lead to a sample with quite different characteristics; assuming location indeed impinges on the age at which one self-builds. As far as life stages, age and housing need goes, it is difficult to see a person being inclined to undertake self-build at a particular age before retirement age. Respondents were also asked if they had ever owned a house before they or their partner built their own house. 83% responded in the affirmative, however, no significant gender difference was suggested by the proportions of responses.

The large majority of respondents, and/or their partners, had only built one house for their own use. Only one quarter had built two or more, with one person having built four houses. The figures confirm that women were less likely than men to be involved in building a second or subsequent house for their own use. The questions pertaining to experiences building with a partner were answered by 27 women and 55 men. The responses to those questions are discussed later.

From this we can understand that there does appear to be some differences in the circumstances of men and women who self-build. Their family patterns with regard to children and partners have strong similarities for the majority but there is a suggestion that perhaps around 10% to 18% more women than men who self-build will do so on their own.

**Developing Self-build Skills**

A number of issues were considered in looking at the development of building skills among those who built their own houses. Unlike what emerged from the questionnaire this material showed that the modelling of self-build by family members and friends was apparently not as important as simply knowing others who had self-built. Only 31% of those who built their own house reported that a member of their family, or their partner’s family, had previously self-built. Likewise, just over half of the self-builders said that friends and acquaintances had built their own house; it was the 81% who said they had known of other people who had built their own house that showed this to be of more importance. It also seemed more important for
women, 88% of whom indicated they knew of someone who had self-built, compared to 75% of men.

The survey included a set of questions designed to find out about the relative importance of various sources when it came to gaining skills or knowledge about building. Two sources of knowledge - the respondent’s partner and other people who had built their own houses - were of much more importance to women than to men. The difference between the men and women on this issue was quite marked; 79% of women indicated that their partners were moderately, very or extremely important sources of knowledge while 63% of men said their partner was not at all or only slightly important as a source of knowledge. Both men and women predominately rated family members, friends and people they knew through work as not at all or only slightly important as knowledge sources. The majority of men (52%) and women (70%) indicated that high school and other courses were not at all important. These figures correspond to what was found in the analysis of the magazines; that women sought knowledge and recognition of authority in informal places such as through the magazines considered earlier. Responses to this question do indicate that the self-builders in this sample, men and women, use different pathways to access knowledge of building. This is not surprising. Indeed Chapter 3 showed that formal avenues to learn building skills are closed to women. Later in this chapter the experiences of couples who built together is discussed.

Notwithstanding the answer to the question above about the usefulness of high school and other courses, women in this sample indicated they were more likely to have participated in school-based courses, or non-school activities that involved manual skills such as metal work, wood work, shop, textiles, fibre, sewing, cooking, home economics, art and crafts, etc. Only 68% of men did such courses while 80% of women indicated that they had. Being physically active in high school through involvement in athletics, swimming, drama, team sports, dance, cycling or gymnastics was equally important to men and women with 67% saying they undertook those activities. Respondents were also asked about their interest in a range of opportunities to learn building skills: 52% of the male respondents indicated they never considered undertaking a craft or construction hobby course while 34% of the women thought about doing a course with 36% completing one or more such courses.
Self-builders give little indication of a desire to become professional builders. When asked if they were ever interested in short courses in construction, for example, concreting, woodwork, bricklaying, tiling, an overwhelming majority (82%) responded that they neither thought about it or, while it may have crossed their minds, they did not act on the thought. The answers were slightly different when respondents were asked if they ever wanted to do a construction trade, such as carpentry, plumbing, electrical, drafting, or building inspection: 90% of women and 75% of men said they never thought about it or did not act on any thoughts they had. There was very little interest in formal construction courses such as the one discussed in Chapter 3, particularly among women, as only 5% of the women and 22% of the men completed such a course. The gendered difference when it comes to trades is quite marked. The difference between men and women was not quite as marked, but still evident, when it came to degree courses in construction such as architecture, engineering or project management. A very high percentage of women, 94%, never thought about or did not act on their thought of undertaking such a course. This situation only applied to 78% of the men with 15% of the men completing one or more such courses. Self-building then seems unlikely to be an expression of a frustrated desire to become a construction professional. Women seem only too aware of the treatment they are likely to receive should they enter construction trades.

Respondents were also asked about how involved they were, and how highly the y desired to be involved in the physical part of building their house. Responses were chosen from a five-point Likert scale; which ranged from not at all involved, slightly involved, moderately involved, very involved and extremely involved. The men were much more involved in the construction of more parts of the house than were the women. The parts the men were more involved in included setting out the house on site, making footings, slabs or putting in stumps, building the wall or roof structure, cladding and finishing the exterior, hanging doors and installing windows, plastering, tiling and finishing floors. The parts where women were extremely involved were the more visible parts of the house such as landscaping and finishes. In those areas where women indicated they were involved, at least 30% of the women were extremely involved. In some way this confirms what was seen in the content of the cover images of the magazines but the fact remains that women are still grossly underrepresented when the number of such images are compared with the numbers of women involved in self-build.
When it came to interior cladding and finishing, applying interior finishes like paint and window coverings and landscaping, there was much less difference between the percentages of men and women who said they were extremely involved in those processes. Interior and exterior cladding and finishing seemed to be areas where gendered differences in the level of involvement were less marked and where women desired more involvement. Overall the differences between the actual and desired level of involvement were small and inconsistent within and across genders. There seemed to be little desire among the men or the women to be more involved with the different aspects of building than they were.

In summary, the responses to these questions suggest that formal non-trade education has more effectively equipped men with the skills, knowledge or attitude necessary to undertake self-build, and has not been as effective for women. This implies that the messages that construction is not for women reach them even without engaging in the construction industry’s formal education system. That is a barrier to be overcome for women who decide to enter with formal construction training. For the most part the self-builders responding to this survey have no interest in gaining qualifications in or working in the construction industry; this was overwhelmingly true for the women.

Further, in this sample, men desired to be, and actually were, extremely involved in building the structure of the house, twice as much as women. Women desired to be and actually were extremely involved in the more visible aspects of the house, on both the interior and exterior. Only in the area of landscaping did women desire to be and actually were more extremely involved than the male respondents. On the magazine covers women were more often depicted outside in the later years of material considered.

**Developing a Sense of Self as a Builder**

While 77% of those answering were personally registered as an owner-builder of the house they or their partner built, the gender of the respondent did not seem to be linked to answering affirmatively or negatively. (See table 7.2.) This may reflect current legislative requirements that both partners in a couple who self-build are required to list their names on registration documents. This was somewhat contradicted by the responses to questioning whether their partner (if they had one) was registered as the owner-builder of the house they built. Only 31% of the males said their partner was registered as an owner-builder while 54%
of women said their partner was registered. This could indicate that more of the women built more recently, since the requirements that both partners be registered.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
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<tr>
<td>Registered Owner-Builder</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>78%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partner registered</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>54%</td>
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Of the respondents who used home finance to build, 42% of men and 29% of the women indicated they were a primary applicant on the loan. Of all the respondents only 8.6% said their partner was the primary applicant on the loan and the balance said they were not sure of the arrangements. 47% of all respondents did not have a loan and this was roughly equal for men and women. With the exception of men reporting more frequently they were the primary on a loan, issues of home finance showed little difference in response when gender was taken into account. If being the primary applicant on the loan and the registered owner-builder on the project are factors in strengthening perceptions of who can be seen as a self-builder then it is slightly more likely men would be identified as such.

One particular set of responses points to a major difference between men and women. Respondents were asked how frequently they would use specific terms to describe their role or experience building their own house. Overall there was a clear pattern of differences in the terms the men and women used to refer to themselves. The strongest response to this question came from the males; 92% of whom said they would never refer to themselves as an assistant to an owner-builder, and only 66% of women said the same. The majority of the respondents recognise and reject terms that imply a hierarchal relationship between people building their own house, with men being 25% more likely to do so. The gendered pattern of the responses implies that perhaps a quarter of the men are rejecting not the hierarchal relationship but what might be seen as a less powerful role in a hierarchal relationship.

Given the previously equal reports of registration by men and women (see table 7.2) and that 69% of the men said they would always refer to themselves as an owner-builder, compared to 56% of women, very, very few of the men who assisted their partners to build and women were less likely to reject the role of assistant. Likewise, 88% of the men said they would
never refer to themselves as the partner of an owner-builder while markedly less (20% less) of the women indicated they would never use that term. Similarly 83% of the men said they would never call themselves an owner-builder’s labourer while only 66% or the women rejected this term.

In another question exploring the development of a sense of being a self-builder the survey listed 11 attributes and asked respondents to indicate on a Likert scale how important it was that a person, who says they built their own house, to have those attributes. The strongest responses recorded were: 85% of all respondents said it was not at all important that such a person be male, 80% indicated that it was not at all important for someone to have been paid to work on a different building project in order to be identified as someone who built their own house. More than half also said it was not at all important whether they had done a building course and 35% said it is not at all important such a person should have been a registered owner-builder.

While experience and skill gathered the strongest positive indications, over half of the women indicated that a person who describes themselves as having built their own house need not have a muscular build, while the majority of men rated this aspect as moderately important. Further, 95% of women but only 73% of men said it was not at all important that such a person dress like a builder. These differences in attitude to the appearance of physical strength and professionalism were the largest single difference between men and women in considering the attributes of someone who built their own house.

In chapter 4 of this thesis content analysis of selected popular journals catering to the self-build community showed that men are more likely than women to be depicted as builders on the covers of those magazines. The magazines provide cover images that confirm men’s roles as builders in a self-build situation. Given that women do not so readily require the visible cues of musculature and builderly attire to be able to perceive someone as a self-builder then they may well interpret many more of the women depicted on the covers as self-builders than might be expected. Clearly this difference shows that these men would be less likely to perceive women as self-builders if the women dress according to their own ideas about what makes a builder and do nothing to emphasise their own musculature. In contrast, Ibáñez, while discussing construction workers in Spain, says that in order to decrease negative
experiences on the job, women construction workers have decided not to wear “low necklines, tight fitting clothing, jewellery, make-up, manicure, high heels… thus avoiding an overtly feminine appearance” (Ibáñez 2017, p. 45). If the cover photos are a reliable indicator the self-build construction site would seem to be a place where women perceive themselves to be self-builders and present themselves according to their own ideas of what a self-builder is rather than in line with industry-based standards. They appear to be satisfied with appearing to be amateur builders and do not mimic professional standards of dress.

**Life While Building**

Building a house for your own use while keeping up with the demands of everyday life is not an easy task. Within a household it requires cooperation, organisational skills and well-developed communication if the project is to succeed. Respondents were asked to go into some detail about household tasks and the time spent on them during the period they were building their own houses. The questions asked about days during which someone in the household was also earning income and days on which they were not. This section discusses and compares men and women’s responses.

Respondents were asked to consider a typical day while they or their partner were constructing their house, when at least one of them undertook some income-earning activities. When it came to organising the build – ordering materials, coordination of tradespeople and planning, there was little difference between men’s and women’s responses, with 73% of all of the self-builders spending between one and three hours on such tasks. Responses elsewhere suggest that those tasks were split along gendered lines with the males having more involvement in coordinating trades people and the women shopping and ordering materials. That work for women highlights how self-build confounds the historical shift in women’s home-based work from procuring home made to store bought goods as described by Matthews (Matthews 1984, p. 72). Looking at the reported time spent building and assisting others build – cleaning up the site, packing up, fetching and carrying – there were some small differences at the extremes. A small percentage of women said they did not undertake these activities at all and roughly the same proportion of men said they spent more than seven hours engaged thus.
Two particular household tasks were important in maintaining links within communities and presented opportunities to give and gain social support. The first of these was volunteer or community work. Some examples of this type of activity were school canteen, library or helping to organise a sporting or social club. The second, if socialising, could be having a drink with friends, participating in or watching sport with friends or going out for dinner. In households where self-build was being undertaken high proportions of men (71%) and women (64%) did not take up volunteer or community work. Likewise, opportunities to socialise were not apparent with almost one third of respondents reporting they had no opportunity to socialise and 54% of all respondents spending under one hour socialising. There was only a very small gendered difference in opportunities to socialise or undertake voluntary community activities, which seemed to be quite limited for both men and women.

When it came to income-earning activities, which included studying, working for wages and running a business, a different picture emerged. There was not a great deal of gendered difference in the spread of the hours spent earning an income except on the extreme ends. In this sample 24% of the men indicated they did not earn any income and 24% said they spent more than seven hours earning an income. This is somewhat contrasted by the 44% of women who spent more than seven hours on income-earning activities. This suggests that in self-build households there are more women in full-time paid work and fewer men.

Responses to questions about the task of caring for children or relatives – driving people places, helping with homework, care giving, etc., did show a marked difference. Fifty percent of the women and 40% of the men said they did not care for children or relatives at all. Almost half of the men said they performed this task for less than three hours while one third of the women indicated they spent more than three hours, with some women spending more than seven hours caring for children or relatives. The material showed very clearly that in households where it was required, the task of caring fell predominately on the shoulders of women. A similar picture emerged from the data in relation to household tasks – mowing, cleaning, making meals, laundry, etc., 50% of the men reported they spent under one hour completing household tasks while 58% of women spent more than one but less than three hours on household tasks. Of all the tasks in a self-build household only these two, caring for children and housework, showed a marked gendered difference. This implies that women did this work on top of the responsibilities they shared with their partners and may be evidence of
a “second shift” (Hochschild & Machung 1990, p. 6). This kind of gendered disparity has been well documented in Australian homes for decades (Pringle & Winning 1998, p. 135).

Overall the picture of work in self-build households is one where, in addition to sharing the work of building, women spent more time earning income, on household tasks and undertaking caring work. Around 85% of both men and women are spending less than an hour socialising on days when they are earning an income. Both men and women seem to have little opportunity to give or receive social support on work days.

On the days when women were not engaged in income earning activities the figures suggest that about 10% more women do no volunteer work while an even smaller number of men do a couple more hours of volunteer work on their days off work. There is an increase in both men and women socialising on the days when an income is not being earned, with about 10% more of both men and women spending between one and three hours socialising and there is a corresponding drop in the number who spend up to an hour socialising. Social connections established through volunteer or community work, such as the school canteen or library, while helping organise a sporting or social club, and while socialising, such as having a drink with friends, participating in or watching sport with friends, or going out for dinner are neglected avenues of support. Very few people are using time away from paid work as an opportunity to maintain social relationships. This may increase the importance of paid work as a place to receive social support.

Around 62% of all respondents spent up to three hours preparing to build on a typical day when no income earning was done and the proportion of men and women in this group was roughly equal. While the differences were small there was a 12% increase in the number of men completing between three and seven or more hours preparing to build the house.

Looking at the responses with regard to building and assisting others to build, income-earning activities were apparently a major factor, one that ate into time which might otherwise have been spent on building the house. Non-income-earning days were quite different, not just for preparing to build but also in actually building.

The number of women building for between one and three hours a day fell from 50% on a non-income-earning day to about 17% on an income-earning day. For men the figure fell from 55% on a non-income-earning day to 26% on an income-earning day. There was a
corresponding increase in building activity, with the number of women spending between three and seven hours building rising from 25% to 42%. For men this figure rose from 29% to 37%. The number of women reporting they spent more than seven hours in the day building rose by over 30%, while around 20% more men reported the same. Very clearly, for self-build people, a day away from earning was a day spent preparing to build and building, especially for women. This demonstrates the commitment women have to building and their enthusiasm for the process.

Regardless of whether a respondent was earning an income, half the women and around 40% of the men did not spend time caring for children or relatives in their daily routine. For the men who did have the task of caring for children around 80% of them spent only up to three hours engaged in that task, while over 60% of women with that task spent between three and seven plus hours thus engaged. In considering time spent on household tasks, over 20% more women than men reported spending between one and more than seven hours on housework on a day off. The degree to which women spent more time on such tasks does not seem to change markedly on days off, when both men and women spend less time on such tasks.

Clearly the income of women plays a key part in supporting self-build activities during the time the house is under construction, more so than men’s income it would seem, and women spend more time doing that paid work. In addition, the work of keeping up with the household tasks, and caring for family members also fell disproportionately to women, regardless of that she was also doing a higher proportion of paid work. For all parties there was also a clear choice between paid work and time spent building or preparing to build. Women - even if they are building - remain strongly connected to what are seen as more traditional roles of caring and home duties.

**Self-build with a Partner**

In the previous section a clear relationship was identified. For women, a day away from income earning meant an increase in building activity. This, more so for women than for men, may reflect differences in household structure. More women than men in this study live in a household without a partner; 75% of the women surveyed were partnered while 88% of men lived with a partner. The material collected via the questionnaire, analysed in Chapter 5, showed a similar picture with 74% of the women being partnered and 95% of the men.
Those with partners were asked to respond to a series of questions about their relative contributions to building and tasks related to maintaining a household. They were asked to think of a typical week and combine the hours they and their partner spent on the tasks below, the combined hours equalling 100% of the hours that task took to complete each week. Further, they were asked to estimate the percentage of the total hours they and their partner contributed to that task in a typical week.

The first of these questions asked respondents to consider their income-earning activities, working for wages, running a business, and the like. Twenty-nine percent of both men and women indicated that they spent equal time on income earning. One third of the women said their partner spent more time earning than they did, while just over a third said they spent more time earning than their partner did. The men on the other hand did not report such an even spread of experience. 44% of the men reported spending longer earning an income than their partners and only 27% said their partners devoted more time to income earning than they did. Looking back at the time men and women reported spending on a range of household tasks in the previous section, a different scenario unfolded. If the survey had been completed by both partners from each household this difference could be attributed to a difference in perception. As that is not the case there must be a range of circumstances in particular self-build households. However, when questioned about time spent on activities undertaken on a day when income was earned and when no income was earned, there was a clear choice between earning and building; women spent more time earning income and men spent more time building.

Responses about the use of time on maintaining social relationships were less polarised. Around two thirds of all respondents reported that both partners spent equal time socialising. Taking time to go out for dinner, having drinks or watching sport with friends was not the preserve of one gender over another. When it came to time spent on community activities, volunteering or attending to school duties such as library or canteen, 48% of the women and 36% of the men said this was shared equally; when not shared equally those tasks disproportionately took the time of women, so said 47% of men and 30% of women.

Similarly, self-build practitioners indicated men and women made different contributions of time to housework and caring for family members, such as laundry, mowing, cooking,
cleaning, driving people around, watching kids, helping with homework and caring for other family members. Seventy-five percent of the men said their partner did more housework than they did but only 66% of the women said they did more housework than their partners. Fifteen percent of the women and 10% of the men said such tasks were shared equally. Close to 30% of both men and women shared caregiving tasks equally: 67% of the men said their partner contributed more time to this task than they did and 48% of the women said they did more of this work than their partners. It is very clear that women devoted more time to housework and caregiving each day and men to building and preparing to build.

What is not clear is whether women took on men’s share of responsibility for housework and caregiving in order that the men had the time to build or there was some other imperative? The results of this question about use of time within households suggests that the female respondents, women who identify as having built a house for their own use, have a slightly greater occurrence of more egalitarian households. On the other hand, the men who readily identified with having built a house for their own use are more likely to be from a household with slightly stricter, and more traditional, gendered divisions of labour, where the women took majority responsibility.

The partnered self-builders were also asked how they described the way they worked with each other in the process of building their own house. Six options were provided; respondents were asked to indicate how frequently they may have used each option. One option received an emphatic set of responses: 85% of women and 89% of men indicated they never said “I did not build at all.” Further, only around 12% of men responded that they always said “my partner did not build at all”. This group of self-build people are saying clearly that a very high proportion of them were involved not just in preparing for the build, project managing, choosing finishes and fittings, painting or landscaping, the more peripheral jobs often seen as not-building, but in the hands-on construction of their own houses.

Conversely, 47% of men always said their partner “did not build at all” and 20% reported they sometimes said that. It cannot be assumed that both partners in the household took the survey, and indeed there is evidence that they did not. It also appears there may be some reluctance on the part of the men in the sample to acknowledge the role their partners played in construction. It could also be that the role of their partners, and or their perceptions of the
roles, changed over time. Meanwhile 89% of women reported they never used the phrase “my partner did not build at all”.

Around a third of all respondents only infrequently or sometimes said “my partner and I both worked on construction independently.” This low numbers stating they worked alone underscore that the majority worked together. That point was reinforced by the 44% of men and women who reported always saying, “we worked together as equals.”

In order to provide an alternative to the concept of working as equals respondents were also asked to consider whether they saw and described their role as one of assisting their partner. The most frequent responses were negative ones. 37% of women and 67% of men said they never said, “I assisted my partner while they built”. Women’s responses to that question differed markedly, 40% of them reported they frequently indicated they helped their partner to build. Turning the concept around somewhat, garnered a set of responses that showed a similarly gendered pattern. 74% of women said they never said “my partner assisted me while I built”, while 42% of men used such a phrase only infrequently. These subtle distinctions of phrasing and patterns of usage clearly indicated that, if there was an assistive role in the partnership it was most often filled by women.

Two factors previously identified in this chapter could be contributing to this. One is that women’s primary access to skill development was through their partners and they had greater responsibility for household and family work and so had less opportunity to develop the skills that might enable them to have a leading role in construction of the house. Broader social issues like women’s subordination, the power men are able to access in a patriarchal society and traditional gender roles are probably also factors that would contradict an assistive role for men and a leading role for women. This is particularly so with a pursuit like building from which women are still very effectively excluded and as self-builders are continually exposed to the culture of the construction industry to which that exclusion is consistently reinforced.

In order to explore further the interactions between partners working on self-built houses, respondents were asked about how they and their partner approached decision making with regard to both building the house and other aspects of life. They were asked to indicate how frequently their own situation aligned with the following scenarios: my partner made the decisions for us, I deferred to my partner when making a decision, my partner and I made a
decision together, when making a decision my partner deferred to me, and I made the decision for my partner and me.

When speaking about life generally 83% of men and 62% of the women infrequently or sometimes said “my partner made the decisions for us”. When it came to decisions about the house there was little change, 78% of men and 67% of the women said “my partner made the decisions for us” only infrequently or sometimes. The marked gender disparity was also evident among people who never said “my partner made the decisions for us” in other aspects of life, 9% of men and 30% of women, grew to 16% of men and 28% of women, when decisions about building were considered. These figures suggest building provided opportunities for some men to have greater parity around decision making. Is it possible that some men, rather than increasing their engagement by taking on more household and childrearing responsibility are increasing their sense of power within the home through self-build. Something similar was reported of the North American 1950s DIY boom (McKay & Perkins 2016, p. 4). It seems like women’s greater responsibility for children and chores, comes with more scope for decision making, but confirms a less rewarding role, whereas self-build offers women the opportunity to learn new skills, express creativity, take up a new challenge and extend themselves in a direction from which they have been excluded in the past.

Respondents were also asked how frequently they would say “I made the decision for my partner and me”. Women’s responses were roughly consistent regardless of whether the decisions were about building or other aspects of life, around 35% said they would never say they made a decision for their partner and themselves while close to half responded they would infrequently to sometimes would.

Around 70% of both men and women said they infrequently or sometimes deferred to their partner when making a decision regardless of whether the decision was related to building or some other aspect of their lives. When that question was reversed and respondents were asked whether when making a decision their partner deferred to them, the results for men and women were somewhat different. Whether the decision was about building or some other aspect of life, women’s responses were roughly the same, with the majority saying their partner only infrequently or sometimes deferred to them. The men’s responses indicated they
believed their partner was more likely to defer to them on decisions about building than if the decision was about another aspect of life.

When it came to aspects of life not related to building a house there was a gendered disparity when the respondents said “my partner and I made a decision together”: 29% of women and 36% of men said they sometimes made decisions together, 33% of women and 55% of men said they frequently made decisions together while 30% of women but only 6% of men said they always made decisions together. The greatest number of men said making decisions together happened frequently. When it came to decision making in relation to building there was greater parity between men and women but only because the incidence of making decisions together dropped dramatically to where 81% of both men and women said they infrequently or only sometimes made decisions together. Building would seem to have been a divisive factor for partners who more usually made decisions together.

Approaching decision making from another perspective, respondents were asked how involved they were, and how involved they wanted to be in deciding about a range of aspects to do with the house. Areas of decision making were: the area where you would live, the actual block where you built your house, the type of house you would build, the materials the house would be built from, the layout/plan of the house, deciding what to work on next, what to spend money on, fixtures and fittings like light fittings or the bath and sink, interior finishes like paint and window coverings, selecting the tradespeople and their work, and landscaping.

For just under one half of the aspects of construction both women and men achieved the level of involvement they desired and there was little difference between them in those levels. This was the case when it came to: the actual block where they built their house, the type of house you would build, the materials the house would be built from, the layout/plan of the house and deciding what to spend money on. For the remaining areas a more variable situation was indicated.

Women indicated they were slightly less involved and also slightly less interested in being involved in the decision about the area they would live. They were even less interested and involved in deciding what part of the construction to work on next and selecting the tradespeople. Diminished interest in both of these could be accounted for by knowledge
deficits due to the gendered nature of the construction industry and past experience as well as perhaps a tendency to defer to the male partner on such matters. The order in which aspects of construction are undertaken is knowledge experienced builders might have and a lack of knowledge about this might make women feel less able to participate in decisions about it. Similarly, when it comes to organising and selecting tradespeople, who are for the most part male, men are more likely to have social contact with tradespeople and through their circle of male friends or have developed critical evaluations of local tradespeople. This would enhance the ability of men to confidently select people to work on the house.

Both men and women showed a lower degree of involvement and attached less importance to decisions about fixtures and fittings. This could correspond to budgetary constraints limiting the choices available, or shared taste. In two areas of decision making women showed greater desires to be involved and higher level of involvement. Men showed less desire and attached less importance to decision making about these areas. The areas were: landscaping and interior finishes like paint and window coverings. These do correspond to some of the most visible or decorative aspects of the house and may be seen as what comes after construction is complete and is therefore the domain of women. Perhaps it is seen as corresponding to a “homemakers” role?

What is considered to be construction and what is not, often seems to correspond to the perceived sex or gender of the person performing the task. Interestingly, earlier in this chapter, it became evident that women were less concerned than men about appearances, saying that it was not at all important that a self-builder dressed like a builder. There is no clear sense that appearances are the main concern. It is more likely that as women are not perceived to be builders, what they are doing is not perceived to be building. Just as with the issue of landscaping versus gardening, discussed in Chapter 4, it is likely that a man working in a garden is called a “landscaper” while a woman doing the same task will be called a “gardener”.

**Conclusion**

It is difficult to tease out the patterns of decision making within couples. However, some aspects are clear. Women’s lack of access to construction knowledge and experience puts them at a disadvantage in both decision making and participation in self-build. Men’s greater
access increases their capacity to be involved in self-build and increases the likelihood women self-building with them will do so in an assistive role. Women seem to take on additional responsibilities to facilitate men’s involvement in self-build through family, domestic and income earning responsibilities.

Clearly gendered divisions in households around who does which tasks and how much time is committed to various activities still exist. Women in self-build households take on even more work and it appears they maintain a disproportionately high responsibility for children and housekeeping. Their very marginal access to the construction industry does limit their capacity to be fully and equally involved in self-build decision making and construction but conversely self-build allows women greater access to the opportunity to build.

We see again the power of the construction industry, with its hierarchies and matey relationships, continuing to restrict women’s capacity to build. Self-build seems to offer challenges to that located as it is at the margins of the industry. There are also signs it may be enough, that women don’t necessarily want full and equal involvement; it certainly doesn’t seem possible unless the men in their households share equally in domestic and family responsibilities and the construction industry starts to welcome women and dismantle the macho culture of building sites that was seen in the material from Chapter 3.

Men, as insiders to the industry, are more versed in its hierarchal culture and position themselves in hierarchy above their female partners, consciously or not. This might be in addition to the ordinary subordination of women that is still a prevalent in women’s every day experience in a culture where they earn only two thirds of the male wage, undertake more hours of home based unpaid work than males, contribute many more hours to the care of their children than male parents and are subject to endemic male violence in the home.

Examination of the magazines in Chapter 4 showed that an idealised view of self-build was a heterosexual couple where the woman’s role was subsumed into the idea of the couple. Chapter 5 confirmed that in fact self-build is undertaken within a variety of households and women play an active role in building. Further, the online survey that was the source of material for this chapter shows, that for men to be able to undertake self-build, the support of a partner is very important economically, both in terms of the income the women bring but also in terms of the unpaid labour women contribute that keeps the family and the household
running while he builds. Further it confirms that women contribute much labour to the actual construction through many hours spent preparing to build and actually building.

That all bar 3 of the 40 males completing the survey have female partners shows men undertaking self-build are dependent on a female partner bringing in money, and to keep the household running, thereby freeing them to build. This is very much less the case for women, who build in a variety of household settings. This is somewhat of a revelation. Men find it very difficult to actually do self-build without a partner to carry their financial and domestic weight. In undertaking self-build men rely on women. Is self-build a case of women indulging a man’s desire to take time off and play at building? Are women funding men’s tinkering?

New focuses on the processes involved in building and its relationship to task and home, as well as paid work responsibilities, connects also to gender and the self with a lot of re-affirmation going on of more traditional roles even though the job of building your own house is non-traditional. However, there are spaces where women attain more power, confidence and play an active role in the self-build space. The survey also confirmed that women are able to accommodate being seen in an assistive role, while men are less able. And also with decision making, women by virtue of contributing labour on household matters make the majority of decisions. Self-build increases the extent to which men may make decisions in the household; not by a lot because there are areas of the build about which women make the decisions, in the finishes and fittings.
7. Building Houses and Relationships

People had no faith in my ability because I was a young woman, they laughed. People didn’t take me seriously. Trades people were rude and patronising – Gerrie.

Yeah. I was pretty young, I was only 23, and I hadn’t done much in life at all, just left a long-term, horrible relationship, and next thing I’m in a caravan with five puppies and builders are coming and going and all this stuff is happening and I’m studying, it’s like, ‘fuck!’, you know? And I look back, I don’t know how the hell I did it. It was almost like being driven mad and not really knowing (laughs) – Vanessa.

Between 2000 and the end of 2003 field interviews were conducted with self-builders, at 29 locations around Australia. The interviewees were drawn from those who had completed the questionnaire discussed in Chapter 5 of this study. The methodological issues informing this process were discussed in Chapter 2 of this study. While two of the recorded interviews proved impossible to transcribe due to technical problems with the recordings, 27 interviews have been analysed. The sampling method employed to select participants for interview was purposive, the aim was to give voice to lesbians and gay men, to single men, but mostly to women, particularly where self-build women had formed communities of interest. In other words, to centre the experiences of those who in some studies have been outliers. Given that the typical self-builder was a straight man living with a female partner and almost always with children, it was important to include examples that diverged from that norm. Such example allow a broader understanding and alternative explanations.

This chapter is a detailed exploration of the often unique ways women approach self-building, the way women conceptualise the self in relation to building and how they experience and express sex and gender. This chapter builds upon previous chapters, reinforcing some findings and uncovering subtle nuances in others. The resulting material addresses gaps in previous research by giving voice to women, documenting their self-build experience, and connects to notions of building and rebuilding the self. It builds an account that sits alongside the existing record, one that documents the story of men and male self-builders.

The literature of self-build describes the experiences and practices of men. Notably the work of Holland (1988) which presents that practice as natural for men, and presents women’s
absence as in line with traditional family life. The literature shows that regardless of the discipline or terminology, women’s involvement in self-build has been marginalised or ignored by academia, and in the field women have been told by their spouse to just stay out of the way and in one UK example, their involvement was prohibited.

The Interviews

Field interviews took place in the homes and building sites of self-builders. They were asked a range of questions about themselves and the project they had undertaken and were also given the opportunity to make additional comments they considered relevant but were not already included. Sample questions are included as Appendix D.

Both men and women spoke about their experience of self-build, how they saw themselves, how their sex and gender contributed to their experience in obvious ways, the impact of their relationships on building and vice versa. They also talked enthusiastically about learning to build and the development of skills, the influence of their heritage, family and background and how their ideals and beliefs found expression through building a house for their own use.

This chapter builds upon the themes that have emerged in other chapters. The interviewees talk about themselves in terms of personality, gender, sex and embodiment and how those and other aspects of the self were reflected in what they built and their experience of building. They talked about building with reference to relationships with partners, children, families and communities. What became clear in the material was that self-build women, and some self-build men, are involved in deeply personal processes with the aim of shaping and reshaping themselves, their lives and the lives of people they love, which includes their communities. These personal agendas were missed by Holland, and other researchers who focused on males and cast self-build as equivalent to the work of a professional builder. While the product of a self-build may largely be indistinguishable from an industry-produced house, the self-builder and professional builder are engaged in very different undertakings.

The Interviewees

One of the unanticipated features of the interviews was that for all but one of those booked with male participants, their partner attended and participated fully in the interview. For the
interviews booked with women, only in one instance did a partner attend and participate. Consequently the material presented additional opportunities to gain insight into the relationship dynamics of the self-build process. As a result, the voices of 33 people are represented in this chapter, 23 women and 10 men.

People who undertake the process of building a house for their own use are not a homogeneous group. The ways they described and express themselves included reference to particular attributes that differed in importance from person to person. The attributes mentioned included: personality characteristics, physical attributes, and ideas about gender and relationships. Discussed to a much lesser extent were sexuality, politics, spirituality, culture and ethnicity.

**Self Builders**

**Personality Characteristics**

In previous chapters self-builders have used a variety of almost exclusively positive terms to describe their personalities. In the interviews, it was the female self-builders who mentioned particular character traits that contributed to having the ability to undertake a self-build project. In contrast, none of the males interviewed did so. Among those traits mentioned were being an achiever, a natural thinker, visionary, independent, organised, self-sufficient, thrifty, patient, idealistic, confident, and being someone who took responsibility for herself. Only one identified a less positive trait, that of being nervous. Several described themselves as practical, determined, adventurous, and having a “give it a go” attitude. This tendency shows that a positive self-image is important for women who undertake self-build. These are not the usual traits one might associate with a builder as such, who might describe themselves as crafty, good with their hands, well-developed spatial awareness, strength and dexterity, manual aptitude or even creative. These are the characteristics of women facing a challenge.

**The Body and Building**

Women – not men – described their physicality as central to their self-build experience and identified differing aspects of their physicality in accounting for that. The most common example cited by the women, especially in comparison to men, was their perception of themselves as not strong when it came to doing certain parts of the build. Marcie said, “I
can’t do certain things because I’m not as strong as a man, and that pisses me off.” Renée said that as a female she did not feel particularly fit or capable of doing building work; several of the women said a lack of strength meant they had to wait for their male partners to be available so they could work with them or have them do certain tasks. This situation was a source of frustration not just on a day-to-day basis but, for some, it caused delays in the whole project:

I’m frustrated because there’s so much stuff that needs to be done by him which I cannot do. So I end up sitting here waiting, again. Although I’m sitting in this house, I find it really hard to look at the things around me that need to be done and I can’t do them and he’s out there doing, doing, doing to generate an income. We only have one day a week that he builds here. The house won’t be finished in ten years’ time like that. I find it really hard to not come down on him and say, “We have to really change this arrangement somehow, because I could do more,” which I can’t because I’m pregnant anyway (laughs) and it puts a lot of pressure on our relationship – Meg.

This was the only example of where a woman identified incapacity caused by pregnancy as limiting her ability to build. It was not clear whether Meg experienced a concurrent medical condition that may have been a factor in her cautious approach. In spite of being medicalised, pregnancy is not a disability, disease or illness and only requires females to know and work within their capacity, just as a male should. In contrast Karen, who was also undertaking self-build said, “I was very much involved… even though I was pregnant at the time.”

The physical attributes required to use power tools came in for special mention. Clair said power tools seemed always to have to be used in difficult places and in postures that made them harder to use. Meg described them as ‘male-orientated’ and expressed frustration with her difficulty handling “heavy awkward power tools”.

Another woman spoke about her body as limiting. Sally reported she started building at 43 and was only just moving in at 51. She felt that her age was a factor in how difficult the work was and the degree to which she experienced joint damage and muscle aches:

The physical lifting and the carrying and the rock work when it got over my head was very taxing. And the woodwork was even worse, putting rafters up and things like that. It had to be done so I had to do it. Just the lack of experience in things like this was a disadvantage, but nothing that couldn’t be overcome, really – Sally.

It may well be, however, that building with rock, especially at height, would be a strain for any person. Several strategies were mentioned by women to get around their perceived lack of strength. After talking about painfully reaching her physical limit with particular tasks
Meg underscored the importance of choosing appropriate technology for the build, noting the straw bale building method was accessible to her. She said:

The bales are not too heavy. I’ve built a large part of the walls, helped building them. I’ve worked on practically everything, do all the painting, the work on the floor, so there’s parts in this whole process which are really possible for women. It’s still a hard job, physically hard work, but I felt I could do it. – Meg.

Rachel reported that it was doubt she had the required strength for parts of her build that prompted her to pay someone to put up the frame of her pole-frame house.

In contrast to comments about lacking strength one woman talked about being proud of her strength. Joyce said, “I could lift bags of cement with no problem after the bricklaying was over. I worked out every day, crowbarring, carrying, [it was] really heavy physical work.”

The issue of how gender, socially constructed ideas about one’s apparent sex, and sex, bodily attributes as related to reproductive capacity, comes sharply into focus in the comments of these self-build women.

**Gendering Building**

While some women felt their female body was an impediment, others found reason to comment on aspects of gender roles; that is, the behaviours they were supposed to assume by virtue of having a female body. This was most evident in whether and how they identified as a builder.

It was very clear that there was a constant struggle in the minds of many of those interviewed to see women as builders. In a passage above, Meg first describes herself as having built walls and then amends that description to having helped build them. Gary and Claire talked further about this concern. Gary said, “I guess it’s a concept where you’ve got to know what a builder is. We say we had a builder help us build this place, because it’s true. We had a builder come and help with the foundations and framing [because]” “You needed a hand?” Claire interjected. Gary continued, “You need someone to help, you know, but if you can get someone experienced to do those tasks, then that works, it’s great. In that situation, though, the builder was taking the responsibility, but we were helping. I guess we were… labourers.” The distinctions in this case are between a builder as a construction professional who builds for a living and who is a boss of labourers, a person who builds things, and a labourer or someone who helps a builder. Gary went on to say, “We were doing the tasks they wanted us
to do. I guess that’s the scary part. We don’t like to be considered a labourer, but in reality that’s what we were… It’s not supposed to be a derogatory term, but I guess that’s what we were.”

The first two of those descriptions are heavily gendered as masculine and carry a connotation of a builder as hierarchically above his helpers or labourers. For Gary, being male and building elicited an obvious discomfort in being lower in the hierarchy. He notes that it is almost insulting to be called a “labourer”. Meg’s comment demoting herself from being a builder to “helping” a builder shows her repositioning herself mentally in relation to her husband. The unwritten rules of hierarchies among those building are tended to constantly by self-builders, even though, or perhaps because, they are marginal to the industry that fosters that hierarchy. Professional status, experience, strength and maleness accords a person seniority. When seniority is not accorded it challenges the self-image and implies powerlessness, inexperience, weakness and lack of masculinity. For females, generally being seen as less strong, being lower in a hierarchy in relation to males, identifying as inexperienced with building and being perceived as feminine rather than masculine makes it more likely they will adopt and/or be cast in the role of someone who “helps” a builder rather than as a builder.

In talking further Gary said, “You really were a labourer, as much as it was your house and your ideas and you were responsible for the plan and you knew it inside out and all that sort of thing, you were relying on those guys then for how it was to go together.” He is clearly identifying his awareness of why he was managing his perceived role in relation to the professional builder he employed. Meg’s story though shows that such management is part of relationship maintenance women tend to do while building their own houses with male partners. This theme is explored further in a later part of this chapter discussing building and relating.

Marcie provided an interesting anecdote that highlighted other ways women approached building that appear at odds with the industry:

I had some pretty funny situations happening on the site. We’ve had women here that have never picked up a hammer… and they were so happy that they’d actually contributed something. They were like “Oh, wow, I can do this!” [and] “Oh, wow, it’s up, doesn’t it look fantastic!” – Marcie.
In Marcie’s example, the work was less hierarchal, sharing power being one of the objectives. The build consciously celebrated a helping role and recast it as a source of strength and power and yet the common theme among self-builders of how fulfilling it is to build is still evident in this scenario. Likewise, in talking about the role of the professional builder on the self-build project she undertook with her partner Ray, Heather said, “I think on the building site I could anticipate things that were needed and I’d have them there ready for the person who was helping us…” Rather than adopting the view dominant in the culture of the construction industry in her mind, Heather positions herself and her builder as people who are mutually assisting each other, somewhat like the women in Marcie’s recount.

Some involved in self-build did make specific reference to females building. Allan and Renée for example, had this to say: “Friends of ours in another town built a house two years ago with the husband/father, being completely uninvolved except emptying the dunny now and then. The wife/mother being completely the manager of the project.” “And builder,” Renée interjected. “And physically hands-on,” Allan agreed. “But I think that her builder and her were given confidence by our experience here.” Allan was slower to acknowledge the physical work of building the woman did and added a qualifier: that she built with a professional builder. This kind of statement was made frequently by men. When a woman was identified as a builder the speaker would quickly add that the woman had help. Such qualified statements were not made about males who built, yet it is self-evident that no one builds alone. With the possible exception of the dwellings built without council approval, all builders call upon the services of trades people and building material suppliers to contribute to the house. Marcie had no difficulty acknowledging that; she said, “Yeah, I’d say I built a house with a lot of help. I don’t take all the credit at all.” This was echoed by Amy who said, “It wasn’t a totally woman-built house. Men did help. I had lots of male friends and relatives put energy into it.”

Some women did seem hesitant to identify as builders and were not confident about their building skills. Natalie exemplified this when she said, “I’ve never seen myself as being super-skilled as a builder, like I said. I just had this huge determination, and I would ask someone to show me or whatever.” Gracie also downplayed her skills and experience saying, “I probably haven’t learned a lot. I’ve learned about [the product] Hebel, I’ve learned about
how it all goes together. I’ve done some, but not much.” Ray, on the other hand, reported he overcame a lack of confidence about his building skills. “I’d always felt that I was absolutely useless practically. That would be my self-image, that I was basically useless practically. And then I found myself doing things that I didn’t believe I could do.”

The connection between experience and confidence was touched upon by Karen, who put things in terms more centered on women’s traditional knowledge. Comparing building a house and giving birth, she said, “What it is, is creating and giving birth to a bloody big house. And feeling confident. You need to feel confident with your hands and your body, for sure.” Confidence in building was a learning open to both men and women. As women, unlike men, are still largely excluded from knowledge about building, conceptually reframing building in more familiar terms may be essential to make that knowledge more accessible and increase confidence. Meg even went so far as to suggest somewhat romantically that women may have traditional and perhaps innate knowledge of building that they are able to reclaim:

Absolutely. I hate being dependent. And I found it frustrating that’s the way we have to build a house these days… my understanding is that it was the women who actually were responsible for the shelter [in traditional societies]. It makes a lot of sense to me, because I find that when we had rendering parties here, people coming up to help, and also with my friends, it’s a lot of women who get their hands into the mud with no problems whatsoever and enjoy it. You get in a certain state of mind when you do this. Putting the render onto the wall, there’s a specific way of feeling that is connected with it that I think is very female in its approach. I find that everybody I talked to enjoyed it, and the women were the ones who tend to come back and do it again. Yes, I find that combination of actually building a house which goes beyond my physical capability is a contradiction to this feeling of wanting to do it. You know what I mean? And I found that with all the regulations that we have, there is no way you can actually build a house with your hands these days and live in it. You’ve got to go to Africa or somewhere where it really doesn’t matter so much. And I guess women still do it there– Meg.

For Meg the sensual joy of building and the communal character of the build are the core components of what she calls a “female approach”: an approach that is friendly to the female body, even enjoyable and provides an opportunity to build community among women. This issue of community building is important in several ways, both as an intended outcome of self-build and also in relation to learning about construction technology. For women who are not trained to build using the methods of the construction industry a forgiving process like rendering with a low-technology mud mixture is accessible and its efficacy is rewarding. It also affords women the opportunity to learn a construction technique from other women, an unusual opportunity that was highly valued by the women who had experienced that scenario.
It would be one of the few validations of the female capacity to build. For the typical construction trainee, such as those observed for Chapter 3, learning from someone of the same sex was an everyday experience.

For women to build goes against gender norms in contemporary Australian society. It is still remarkable to see a female on the tools on a building site, as they are still effectively excluded from construction training. Echoing other interviewees, Gracie and Larry’s story is quite typical of a time when women’s exclusion was just starting to be addressed at secondary school level. Gracie recalls:

I went to a school that was just going co-ed when I started, so they’d just built a brand-new tech studies building, so yes, I did do woodwork and a bit of metalwork. I learned it at a very basic level. I’m sure there would be people now who would have more of an opportunity to follow that if they’re interested. And there’s certainly a lot of women who have done on their own, built homes, renovated, done the whole bit… [When] Larry had time off work, and on those two days he was building, I was working those two days. And then come weekends, we still had things that had to be done. Might just be the kids needed to go to swimming, and it was better for him to [build] than it was me to do some of the things, because he already had the skills. For me, it would have taken me longer because I hadn’t learned them – Gracie.

Gender norms are powerful forces in shaping people’s expectations, Natalie made a connection between her expectations of life and her attitude to building. “You think you’re going to meet someone and get married, but I never really had that. It never really set with me. But building my own home, it was like, if you want to live here, that's what you have to do.” Natalie shows no great sense of loss that she did not meet relationship norms but when it came to living her preferred lifestyle, she readily discarded norms that would have stopped her from building. In her area she knew a lot of women who had built their own houses. No doubt that modelling made it easier for her to do the same. She also pointed to other factors in her life that helped her do what she wanted in spite of gender norms. "I’m the only girl and the oldest. I never had easy relationships with men. I’m staunchly independent… physically strong… [and] I was raised to be sporty."

These stories of female and some male self-builders are replete with examples of people rejecting traditional gender roles. Rachel gave this example, “at school in 1970, women's lib was just starting to hit Australia and those ideas were around and from that the young people that hung out with me had very much an ethos of that, if a man can do it a woman can do it too.” Traditional gender roles didn’t suddenly die out with the advent of the women’s
liberation movement though. Amy’s retelling of her experience shows that even in 1980s consciously alternative communities, these traditions persisted.

I can recall that for a lot of women, not just in the community that I lived on, but in general for this area for the people just starting, it was bloody hard, they lived very, very basically and kids came along one after the other and it was tough living, and a lot of women had it pretty hard, and I think I had it pretty easy in comparison. I was ready to get in there and give it a go too and for some women it was just too much, just the thought of picking up a hammer was not their thing they tended to just leave it to the men and took ten times longer that way – Amy.

Heather talked in somewhat comparable terms, “I did cross some of those traditional gender boundaries. If there’s something that needs fixing, I tend to do it.” For Karen rejecting traditional gender roles was a habit of a lifetime. She said, “It’s part of who I am. I’ve always thought, when I was a little kid, just because I was a girl, it didn’t mean I couldn’t do this, that, or the other thing. I could do it just as well as boys. And how come I wasn’t allowed to play football? I could do better drop kicks than most of the boys who were out on the oval. So there’s that gender stuff that’s been there for me for a very long time.”

Quite a few of the women interviewed spoke about being independent, or specifically rejecting dependence, as going against gender roles. Amy again, talking about purchasing building supplies, put it like this, “I don’t play the gender game. I won’t be girlie enough to make them want to come up and help me.”

Some examples of crossing gendered boundaries were more subtle and involved mocking and subverting stereotypes. Morris gave a hint of this strategy when he talked about “nagging” his architect to finish his plans. Persistence is usually only labeled as nagging when referring to women. Amy went so far as to identify with a gendered stereotype, of being a “bossy bitch”, owning the insulting stereotyped image of a woman in charge in contrast to female norms and also unattractive and unfeminine. Claire and Gary, in a conversation peppered with laughter, reflected on their experience and on the way they divided some tasks neatly by persistent gender-based stereotypes. Claire said:

I think it’s a gene (laughter). Yet to be identified. Like he was saying, they must envy the women that can have that patience to be sanding and painting and sanding and painting. Because ultimately, that’s the end appearance of what you’re hoping that that room or that wall or whatever will look like. So that’s where you’re tending to focus and have your idea. But once again, there must be that gene where men don’t really care what colour the wall is or what the room looks like. – Claire.
Some of the discussions of stereotypes were less irreverent and underscored the difficulties women faced and the disadvantages encountered. Joyce, a single woman building on her own, mentioned how she found the image of a macho building culture to be quite accurate and “sometimes it was quite awkward”. Gracie, who built with her partner Larry, seemed less uncomfortable with that culture and indicated she could use female stereotypes to turn it to a positive. “It was a plus, sometimes. I guess if you wanted to… you could play on it and get [men] to do things for you, but that’s not the idea of the whole thing anyway.” Morris showed an awareness of the impact of sex and gender in recounting this story:

When we first started … people were starting an owner-builders’ club locally. A woman came… she was building a house herself. She was absolutely exasperated. They were talking about the local building surveyor, and she said, “He doesn’t like women, he doesn’t like owner-builders, and he doesn’t like bloody mud bricks!”

Building surveyors were commonly described as anti-owner-building in the self-build community so frequently that to have a supportive building surveyor was remarkable.

Clearly for the female self-builders their bodily sex and socialised gender became central to how they saw themselves and made sense of their experience as self-builders; some of the men who observed women’s experiences or otherwise developed a critical awareness of how sex and gender operate also became conscious of their own sex and gender.

References to their sex and gender were the most common aspects of themselves that these self-builders talked about. The interviewees also mentioned other aspects of themselves that featured in their experiences, namely their sexuality, relationships, ethnicity or culture, politics and spirituality.

### Building Against Sexual Norms

Comments about the way sexuality formed part of the self-build experience were not common, yet they pointed to widespread experience. They stood out in sharp relief against a heteronormative background. Lesbian culture, such as in the land dyke and women’s land communities (Corinne 1998, p. 1; Shugar 1995, p. 92; Stein 2004, p. 55) (Hall 2016) offers resources for lesbians to use in other aspects of their lives not directly related to their sexuality. The same is true for heterosexual people, who are less aware and more advantaged in a supportive culture. Marcie noted:
Having to deal with homophobia constantly, I think it does help equip some women to go on to more challenging areas… Like I’m not surprised when I go into a hardware store and get treated like an idiot. I think lesbian culture has helped me deal a little bit more with how men are in the world and about how they treat women in non-traditional areas – Marcie.

Another couple, Sean and Morris, talked about their method for dealing with homophobia at that bastion of straight white manliness, the small rural hardware store.

Usually Sean and I go [to the hardware store] together; sometimes I go, but they haven’t been so bad lately. But I get those questions. When I go to pick up things, it’s always, “Do you want option A or option B?” [It’s become] a little joke we play with each other. We’ve always got to figure out in advance what the type A and the type B are gonna be – Morris.

While second wave lesbian culture (Haggerty & Zimmerman 2000) was a resource women used to counter the negative impact of everyday sexism, that same sexism also placed barriers to both lesbian and other women who were assumed to have male partners doing the building and that women were assisting them by making the trip to the hardware store for example. Marcie articulated this “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” situation that women can face:

In the early days it was very difficult for two women to go into a town like the one close by and be treated seriously. It was only after a number of years, when we kept showing our faces in the door and they realised that we meant business and that we did want to buy their things and that we weren’t buying them for our husbands or partners, and no, I can’t go home and ask him exactly what I need because he doesn’t exist – Marcie.

For heterosexual or bisexual women building while in relationships with men the advantages were clear; often men were accessible sources of building knowledge, training and labour and provided women with access to men’s trade networks. Of course, this often came at a cost, that being the increased likelihood that the women might have to take sole responsibility for wage earning, increased responsibility for care of children and other family members and/ or household tasks to free the men to build. There was also an increased risk that male violence could become an issue in their lives. There was some mention of violence in two of the interviews. As mentioned in previous chapters women reported that self-build was the strategy they used to rebuild their sense of self and their lives after a violent relationship, building in both psychological and material senses.
Expressing Culture in Built Form

In building, self-builders also drew upon and expressed a variety of cultural resources. Women readily articulated the connection between cultural resources and self-build. The resources they mentioned originated in Australian sub-cultures or class backgrounds, nations and places outside Australia and from distinct spiritual traditions. These cultural aspects of the self were resources that on the one hand fueled a sense of being able to build, and on the other a rationale for building in a particular way.

Two of the interviewees clearly articulated cultural values originating in spiritual traditions that they expressed through self-build. Karen talked about the Christian concept of “stewardship of the land”, while Natalie said the culture of her community was:

Buddhist influenced. It’s sort of been going about twenty-five years, very much based on the principle of voluntary simplicity. We say the community owns our homes, even though some paid for them to be built – Natalie.

Those who could be described as part of an “alternative” Australian sub-culture fitted into three distinct approaches. First, was the “communal” approach which saw the involvement of many people in the community, sometimes with sporadic intense building sessions or a series of different individuals involved in distinct phases at various times with the work coordinated as much as possible or practical by the self-builder. Cathy gave one example of this approach to construction and Joyce talked about how the approach applied to design:

I've never wanted to work alone. Some of the work I've done on my own but most of this has being built with friends, on a swap-labor basis, and in fact I think that's how probably 99 percent of the owner-built homes have been built, with friends. You would call in all you friends and they would bring their tools then you’d have a full array of tools, and friends bring skills, what I have tended to do was acted as a laborer, not now because I'm too old and it hurts too much, but when I was younger, I labored on other people's buildings and then often there would be someone who had actually refined the building skills of how to do those things, you know, exactly what kind of joint you need for what purpose, and the more engineering side of it, and knowing the actual specifications that were required to make a thing work – Cathy.

The original roof was quite complicated because it had two different levels. It was just beyond my technical capabilities. A friend of mine drew up a much simpler version and made modifications to the plan. So there is a surprising amount of expertise in a community like that that you don’t realise until you actually start to scratch the surface in need, things can be done – Joyce.
The second approach was the “local” approach, the interviewees talked about local trades people, practices and materials related to each other in what could be emerging as local vernacular traditions:

We just took it for granted with a lot of naiveté at the time, but in fact, building, it wasn’t just a matter of choosing to live in this eco-village where you had to build around that, but the fact that there were two builders around, both of whom made it possible for us to be the de facto owner-builders, the fact was we had this link with the school that brought the contractors in – Allan.

I would go to visit people, because I was living by a community where a lot of people had built their own houses, so I spent a lot of time looking at the roofs and things and checking how things were done – Rachel.

A third approach could be called the “self-sufficiency” approach. In this approach self-build is seen as one part of an idealised small holding type of lifestyle where the family would move to the country, grow their own produce, keep animals and craft wares for their own use:

I think one thing that I touched on that perhaps has had a bigger influence than I mentioned is just reading Earth Garden magazine. It constantly reinforces that it can work, you can do it. All those really positive things about building for yourself and actually moving from the city – Heather.

These alternative sub-cultures had clear overlaps with each other and with mainstream Australia but also had strong communities with social and media resources available for self-builders to draw upon in building and to continue developing new cultural traditions.

The class background of self-builders also informed and was a resource that they drew upon and no doubt expressed in their buildings. The legacy of working class and welfare class life was not just a do-it-yourself approach and familial modelling of successful self-sufficiency but also the idea that one could survive adversity and build a better life that seems to have enabled some to overcome fear and rise to the challenge. Interestingly it was women who spoke out about this:

So I was living in a tent [with the kids] and getting some money together [to build], as I had no money, I was just on the pension–Rachel.

I got confidence from childhood stuff, not in actually building, but just in having to get on and do things yourself, fairly working-class in England. My dad used to mend our shoes. There wasn’t a lot of building stuff, but they did the painting and the decorating. I had a grandmother who was competent at doing things. My mother made all our clothes. That sort of self-sufficiency at a certain level was part of it – Laurie.
Some of those interviewed who had emigrated expressed through self-build concepts related to their first culture, such as an “American can-do attitude” or an “English stick-to-itsiveness”. Meg and Laurie though described self-build as one of the new opportunities of immigration. While self-build does have a long tradition in parts of Europe, its identification with Australia for these immigrants allowed them to step outside what was familiar and undertake a challenge they may not have contemplated previously:

But then Australia’s different. In Australia I did meet people who’d built their own houses – Laurie.

I don’t think one particular person, but we’re coming from Europe. I’m Dutch. Cory is Eurasian. So we have lived a long time in Europe. So that’s the combination, the European way of thinking and expecting a kind of quality in the way things are built and constructed and then experiencing that it’s actually possible and allowed here to do this yourself – Meg.

Australian mythology does harbor still a figure of the heroic colonial man, alone, building an entire house from scratch out in the bush. It lingers in the minds of Australians, perhaps encouraged by McCubbin reprints (Whitelaw 1991, p. 78, 92) and some engaged in self-build measure themselves and other self-builders against this myth. Marcie clearly articulated this cultural image was part of her sense of self and one she took pride in being able to express:

I’ve felt comfortable being in the bush, so as far as living in the bush and surviving, my bush skills have always been good. But not my building skills. Give me a chain saw and a piece of wire and I can put a shelter up – Marcie.

The identification of the male bush hero has a long history in Australia and has also been subject to extensive feminist critique. Schaffer, for example, examines films such as Picnic at Hanging Rock and Crocodile Dundee and the poetry of Henry Lawson, as evidence of the longevity and dominance of such ideas (Schaffer 1988).

**Relationship Builders**

Just as McCubbin, man builds as an expression of his relationship with his wife and the Australian bush. Many of those involved in self-build talked about building as a way of relating to people and the house as an expression of a relationship. This is not a new idea. It can be seen in the assumption that an adult male residing in a house is the “head of the
household”. The phrase “a man’s home is his castle” is also an iteration of this idea. It implies that having a home makes a man the owner of a house and the ruler of all who reside there, that it is a sovereign domain where usurping powers have no place. In those few words relationships between intimate partners, parents and children and their relationship with their communities are described. This patriarchal hierarchal dichotomy sets a default “gender order” (Pilcher & Whelehan 2004, p. 61). When women build they often deliberately seek to, and perhaps sometimes unconsciously, instantiate a different gender order.

Some of the self-builders described how through both the process and product of building, they were relating to those around them. This included their relationships with intimate partners, in parenting and other familial relationships and relating to other individuals and communities around them. Noreen, speaking in idealised terms, said that she and her partner were expressing, through building, a universal love of human kind. “I think it reflects more our view of life, our wish for freedom and space and the warmth and love for each other and love for fellow human beings.” Most commonly the interviewees expressed relationships with intimate partners. Through self-build women are taking power into their own hands. In building and rebuilding houses and relationships women subvert a gender order that had rendered them powerless and passive.

Building Partnerships
One concept that recurred in the interviews of the self-builders was that of “building together” with intimate partners.

I think it’s a great achievement, and it’s great if you can do it together, because it can be, a very separating thing or a very uniting thing… It was an important thing for us to do – Renée.

As a couple we decided, yes, we could live here. So we did. Louis died six and a half years ago, but we built it absolutely together – Fran.

And then when I was 25 I met someone and we built a house on the back of a truck and we did that much more together – Rachel.

In discussing her relationship with another woman Marcie said, “It’s great to go through the whole building process, it really is. It’s just one little problem after another, and you’re solving it together.” This concept was used by women regardless of the sex of the partner. The sense of joint triumph created by building their house together brought a lasting resource
that was utilised by the women to celebrate and reinforce the relationship and exemplify its positive qualities. The stories were quite like birth stories in that often the painful parts are left out or glossed over, or otherwise diminished, when situated in relation to the arrival of a new baby or completion of the house. Renée’s comment illustrates this: “Looking back to those times, I have a rosy glow around it, of course, and I’ve forgotten all the trauma and horribleness. But it feels now like it was a great thing to do, because it really helped us make a go of it.”

Self-build provided many other opportunities for those in intimate partner relationships to express or celebrate them. Noreen, for example, talked romantically about the privations of the accommodation she shared with her husband while building. Meg talked about the frustration of the elastic build schedule, but it was not entirely clear whether this story would go on to be one of triumph over adversity for the couple.

Fiscal management was another potential stumbling block for self-builders in relationships. For some it was tension caused by the need to earn to pay for the build and the need to build and get out of less salubrious living arrangements, and for others there were issues around prioritising what should be built with the available finds. Noreen’s comments stood out in contrast, “It’s not such a hassle. And we had joint finances all our married life, so that was no great problem, either. He left the finance to me.” Pearl, who built with her husband Sam, started the self-build journey after 20 plus years of a robust marriage, a relationship that had allowed them to build up experience, capital and assets that made the journey smoother:

We had access to the funds that we had from our previous property, consequently we weren’t necessarily doing it as maybe a young couple with the kids who did the traditional live in the caravan, slosh around making mud bricks and all of this sort of thing so was a different sort experience – Pearl.

That experience was expressed in their construction process as well as in the fabric of the building. Their capital as a couple allowed them to build individually as well as together. Pearl proudly showed me parts of the house that were her idea and that she worked on alone, she was equally proud of the whole project, but various parts had their own meaning, depending on who had built them. Her features spoke of personal triumph while the larger house was a testament to her relationship with her husband:

Sam and I worked as a true partnership in this project. A neighbour always said she couldn't get over the way that I could predict which tool Sam would need next. And when we been
working together for years on things and I would be watching carefully what Sam was doing of course I could pre-empt what tool he was going to reach for next. I mean if he was drilling a hole for fixing the timber and his hammer had been put down a little ways off, of course I know he was going to need it. It is not so much a matter of mind reading as it is really a matter of being observant – Pearl.

Karen gave an example of other ways labour was divided in relationships between people undertaking self-build:

I just said, “Oh, well, don’t worry, we can do this bit.” Which is quite nice. I think Mari actually liked that. She hadn’t done as much, not that I’ve done much building, but she hadn’t done as much. So she’s been very happy for me to do the organising stuff – Karen.

Having a partner with more experience proved to be a reassurance when the relationship was going well.

Several of those interviewed talked about the pressure from outside the relationship, which they internalised, to live up to societal expectations of relationships. For Natalie having a boyfriend meant that he was expected to build with her and she found herself buying into that expectation:

Because he would have felt some… it wouldn’t have been easy for him, he would have felt some responsibility, “Maybe I should be helping her more, she’s my girlfriend.” But he was pretty burned out. I’m sure that wouldn’t have been easy for him. And I probably had that “He’s my boyfriend, he should be helping me” thing. I probably had some of that going on – Natalie.

…a few years later I had another child and the child’s father built a house for me, but I was very much involved in that, even though I was pregnant at the time, and had a little baby – Rachel.

These examples shine a light clearly on the expectation that males in relationships with females, not just male parents, are expected to provide for children and the mothers of the children, in ways females and female parents are not expected to.

“Man, the provider” wasn’t the only relationship trope apparent in self-build relationship narratives. In talking about the building process some of the women offered stories through which they conceptualised their husband and placed him in a life story that rationalised self-build and celebrated him as a “self-made man”:

My husband has the skills. He trained as an electrician. He learned how to wire a house, so I guess you have to know about house-building. He grew up on a farm, too. It doesn’t always mean that they’ll be good at building, but in his case, it certainly helped. His family, his
father and brother, did a lot of building their own sheds and that sort of stuff. That certainly helped him. And we … he built our house – Dee.

Very fortunately my husband had always been a handyman, as a farmer he was innovative. He never relied on tradesmen to do things. He might not have been trained in a trade but he would nut out how something had to be done and go ahead and do it. Consequently, he had a lot of skills, self-taught. He went to high school, he didn’t go to trade school, like technical school and his skills came from hands-on experience in his years as a farmer– Pearl.

Clearly the self-build achievements of their husbands were a source of pride for these wives; the husbands, however, did not tell similar tales of their wives.

It is likely that the less successful examples of self-build were self-selected out of the research, however, the ‘horror stories’ were sometimes intimated at, but specifics were rarely given. “I remember the nightmare stories. They all seemed to be couples too,” said Vanessa. One of the interviews with a single man did reveal an example where the relationship foundered, and he relinquished the house to his former partner, even though by his account, she was not happy with the house. The new partner of the woman refused to allow her to participate in the research.

On the other hand, Laurie mentioned that she decided to undertake self-build after the breakdown of a relationship. She said, “We’d separated by then, and when the kids were finished with school, I decided to build my own house.”

Some interviewees talked about self-build and violent relationships. They described self-build as a way of rebuilding themselves, the house serving as an expression of their safety, security and independence:

I think also since the violent relationship I really wanted to do something major to restore my self-esteem, to make myself and my family to feel more secure, and we needed a house, so I was very driven. I’m going to build this house, I am going to do it no matter what – Rachel.

I’d just left a man, prior to moving to the land I had had in at times violent relationship for about six years. There’s a lot of baggage that came with me, so a lot of emotional shit probably went on for a few months. He kept hanging around, and I wasn’t sure, I thought maybe he might change – Vanessa.

That women chose the challenge of self-build to rebuild themselves, to rebuild their confidence and feeling of being safe, did not make the task any easier. If anything, the challenge added to the level of stress in the increased importance to make a success of self-build. The process of building was extremely significant to these women. In overcoming the
challenges and hardships of building, they refuted internalised negative self-talk that may have accumulated during the previous relationship and stated emphatically in the fabric of the building that they would not tolerate abuse. They created their own safe places using the master’s tools; they were women rejecting relationships with violent men through building, a process usually undertaken by men.

**Mothers Building**
The most common way of relating overtly expressed through building, was that of mothering.

But how is building at the same time mothering? How might the built form instantiate mother-child relationships? For some of these self-builders, house layout, room sizes and how spaces relate to each other, among other features, were expressions of how the people within should relate, from a mother’s perspective: kitchens not walled off from where children might play allowed for more interaction. And bedrooms just big enough for sleeping children for example, allowed larger shared areas where mothers could watch the kids.

We really questioned about having the bedrooms so small. I don’t think I would have been quite so courageous about putting the kitchen right in the middle of the house. And I think more closed areas, because noise is a problem in the house, especially with the three kids – Renée.

More open planning, however, had its drawbacks. There would be no acoustic privacy for when separation was required if activities were incompatible.

It was mothers, among the interviewees, who spoke about their own safety and the safety of their children. Heather mentioned that self-build houses are building sites and that a near miss with her young child caused her to be a very careful builder. Renée talked about her child needing a more confining house to help overcome a disability that left him with few boundaries. Rachel’s take on safety was related to the impact of domestic violence. In building a house for her children she was providing a safe environment but also imparting practical skills and modelling resilience and self-sufficiency for her children. “I remember working at night, holding the torch in my teeth. I was desperate, I was really desperate to do it… I really needed to do it for myself and the kids and to show that I could do it myself with nobody else.” For Renée, her message to her children was clear; you could not be safe or secure in a violent relationship. You could be safe and secure if you did it yourself, like mum did.
Some of the mothers interviewed were also very conscious of the way that as self-builders they modelled different roles for their children. Heather spoke about this in some detail:

Our oldest daughter, when we were building, she was down here with us quite a lot of the time. We laid mud brick and her bedroom, it was the first one we laid. She was involved in fetching and carrying to a limited extent and painting her own windows. But also what’s been really important for the kids is even though we haven’t got as much building skills as we’d like to, what we’ve been able to show our children is that they can do things themselves. They say, “Oh, gee, mummies can do these things. My mum built this. My mum can do this - I can do this. When I grow up, I’m going to build such-and-such.” I think it’s a very good thing for the kids to see – Heather.

While many self-builders struggle to complete their houses, several mothers presented this in a positive light saying their houses grew with them. As their families changed so did their houses. Cathy said, “That's really how my house grew, it really grew rather than got built I think.” Natalie indicated that through self-build she could manage change within her family. “Even with my son, this was going to be his room. It’s much more practical for him. At one stage it was going to be separate up there. Then I thought it would be good teenage space. So it just keeps changing.”

The relationship between the processes of self-expression through self-build and parenting are complex and mediated by the relationships with those involved in those processes and outside them. Gracie, in this straightforward example, had to manage arrangements with her partner, Larry, in order to engage in self-build with her children:

Larry had the time off work, it wasn’t impinging as much on our family life as perhaps somebody who could only do things after work or on the weekends and so therefore was not with the family. And so a lot of the time, not a lot of the time, but some of the time, the whole family would be here and the boys would be helping build – Gracie.

These complexities, however, were keenly felt by women and more so by those who were marginalised by factors other than just sex or gender. As a single mother, Rachel had to navigate class issues of poverty and the moral judgments that often go along with both being on a low income and single-motherhood. The stigma of poverty persists and crosses cultural boundaries (Cudd 2014, p. 204) and young single mothers face additional stigma (Swain & Howe 1995). The myth that young women have children, so they may collect benefits from the government is far from reality (Kelly 1996, p. 425; Swain & Howe 1995, p.207). It is difficult to find a more challenging “job” than being female, raising children alone and on the poverty line, except if that mother is also building her own house:
I think from being a single mother I developed a kind of thick skin to what other people thought of me. I learnt very early when I was a single mother that there were two kinds of people in the world. There were people who would accept you whether you are socially acceptable or not and then there were people who would find it difficult. So I tried to take no notice of what they thought or said or whatever. And from that I sort of learnt which places people would be friendly and treat me as a human being rather than a woman or as a woman builder – Rachel.

For these women, experiencing the gendered poverty and violence that often comes with motherhood, and the unrelenting workload associated with life as a female parent, building offered multiple opportunities. It was not just a solution to the material need for housing but also a chance to express maternity outside the proscribed patterns and model a broader range of female-affirming roles for their children. Self-build was also part of a process of rebuilding or building a new sense of self that incorporated the characteristics of a builder that was modelled by male builders - courageous, strong, resilient, resourceful, capable, skilled and self-sufficient - but also with the qualities of a caring mother keeping her family together, with the determination and creativity to face the unfamiliar and make a success of it. In a way they renovated and extended the concept of mothering. Indeed the potential benefits for single mothers prompted at least one self-build rehabilitation project (Zillmann 1995).

**Building Families**

Though they did not stand out as strongly in the interviews, self-builders also expressed a range of other familial relationships through building. Sally spoke in a general sense, for example, of a prevailing attitude in the family that she was able to express through building. “I was raised as an achiever. They always, encouraged me, I don’t know how to explain it, really. Everyone in my family just has that big drive to do things.” Fran said she grew up being told by her parents she “could do anything.” Some mentioned their siblings or an aunt or uncle, or a grandparent, but most frequently these self-builders talked about their parents:

My father was there. When I first started building, he helped me lay out the foundations… I’d have to say, he just kept mentioning two qualities all the time when we were busily working away on the footings. We did all the footings ourselves. He’d just work away, patient, keep at it, steady, taking it slow. I know it’s a really slow job, but if we just be here four or five hours every day, it’ll get done – Joyce.

Expressing relationships directly such as by building with a parent is a straightforward example. Some builders also expressed relationships more broadly with families through things they learned in childhood and recalling specific enduring memories that resulted in unique approaches to building and the house itself. Clearly building opened opportunities for
people to rebuild or strengthen relationships, and for women they could relate from a new position of strength.

**Community Builders**

Self-build may appear initially to be about the actions of an individual focusing on their own needs. In many cases, however, those needs include being part of a community. Self-builder’s concepts of community are not uniform. For some it is a locational community, for others a community of interest, an intentional community or a cultural community. In addressing community while building self-builders may draw on and express their community backgrounds and or produce houses through which they relate to other members of potentially overlapping communities.

The interviewed self-build women and the partners they build with, relate to their communities in distinctly different ways. The first is exemplified by Larry and Gracie, who opened their house to the public for those in the local community interested in solar houses and sustainability, and have had hundreds of visitors come to view the house and meet them. “We’ve had our house open twice now. The first time was a fundraiser for the local school. We had 200 people come through in the day.” Visiting self-built houses is a common preparatory step for those wishing to self-build and those undertaking the practice do so expecting interest from the general community. Indeed, the popularity of self-build in Australia spawned at least one international conference which in turn inspired more self-build in Australia.

The self-build conference must have been 1983, right about then. It was a pretty exciting process to be involved with, and we felt that we had some political backing, but it really didn’t translate into any kind of effective action with the council – Joyce.

As Joyce pointed out, there are limits to this informal community’s enthusiasm.

In communities where self-build is very common, other patterns of community relationships form. Going further than in the previous example a recognisable community of interest may form through the sharing of knowledge and practice; building your own house may become a way of entry into a community and building together may become a group activity and sometimes a social activity. Cathy, for example said, “There were some girl friends who were also building, and we demolished an old farm shed and got more boards out of that. It was
really about being more of the social exercise for the actual building exercise in a lot of ways.”

Marcie pointed out that, “It was about doing it yourself back in the early '80s, when a lot of people were making huge lifestyle changes. It was about building your own accommodations out of whatever you could grab.” Self-build became incorporated into a way of life and by joining cooperatives, self-builders become neighbors forming close physical communities. They pooled their meager resources and bought what was often non-productive farm land. “It followed from the Aquarius Festival and what was happening. There were farmers selling off their excess land, so land was affordable,” Natalie said (Fisher 2007, p. 49). Here and in other parts of Australia the “co-op” movement was also taking hold (Cock 2009). Fran also described how she became involved in forming an intentional community:

[We were] a group of friends, we kept in touch, a group of friends that we’re a community together, and we were all based in the city we decided to buy land in the country. So initially 16 or 17 of us bought this land for a song – Fran.

According to interviewees, who participated in the processes, some of the most far reaching consequences have been changes to state legislation and local council practices that regularised and legalised cooperatives through multiple occupancy tenure and brought informal self-build housing into the fold. The new ways self-build people related, as co-ops and intentional communities, have been brought into the mainstream. Though self-build fostered changed ideas communities did not always address the specific needs of women, however.

**Building Women’s Community**

There has been, however, another extremely significant aspect of the way women related to their communities that stands out. The women from these alternative communities in one region came together as a community of women. They did so to teach each other to build, to provide opportunities for each other to gain experience building in a female-only environment, thereby allowing women to develop skills in a space uncomplicated by male-female power dynamics, but also allowing women to have leadership roles as builders within the community and develop within that community and the broader region a culture where women building alone or in women-only environments was unremarkable.
We’ve had women here that have never picked up a hammer, but they helped. We had women hang up ropes. And they were so happy that they’d actually contributed something. They were like, “Oh, wow, I can do this!” We put up some huge posts, because it was a custom construction with timber frame walls. We had huge big beams to get up on top of the posts, and they were heavy. We had scaffolding up. We wait for ten more women and we’d have the big lift-up. They were like, “Oh, wow, it’s up. Doesn’t it look fantastic!” I love teaching women. I’ve started teaching them how to use the chainsaw. It’s so empowering – Marcie.

Marcie’s experiences were mirrored by Cathy, Vanessa, Rachel and Natalie, who pointed out that this was all part of a broader period of change for women in the area:

That was a time when there was lots of political stuff happening in the area with women. We all needed to get together, you know that big demonstration? And women were building their own homes. They might have had partners that would help them, but there were still some women that were role models that were doing it themselves at that time – Natalie.

The roles of helper or assistant are still evident in these examples, but they are not rigidly patterned as female helpers and male builders and they demonstrate how highly accessible building became for women. These achievements stand in stark contrast to the norms of the construction industry.

Rachel mentioned that she was part of “a community of homebuilders [and] obviously if you didn't have a house when you came to this community you had to build one.” For Cathy the concept of community included a fluid membership which resulted in a more diffuse building and more open cast of builders. She said, “There were extras around and they were keen to do something, and that's really how my house grew. It really grew rather than got built, I think.”

Social movements like the ‘counter culture’ and feminist movements often favoured alternative technology and social change, which brought about changes to building processes, practices and products. They did not always work within established practices for bringing about those changes. These same communities in which women flourished as builders did have an “outlaw” streak that may have assisted women in denying conventions and defying traditional gender roles. Cathy gives a hint of this where she says, “Buying land as a group: number-one you can afford it, and number two, you have a support group. You were not forced to comply with council regulations and that sort of thing, [you were not] flying in the face of convention, all alone.”

It has not been possible to say definitively that this community of women developed a women’s building vernacular; it would seem a likely outcome should this community endure.
The changes in the lives of individual women were profound and lifelong. In some ways Rachel’s story exemplified this. She described her childhood family as dysfunctional. She became homeless after escaping domestic violence and went on to build her own home. Somewhat timid, she grew into a builder with strong community ties and the capacity to find technological solutions to building problems within her community:

I was living in a tent and getting some money together, as I had no money, I was just on the pension, I would go to visit people, because I was living by a community where a lot of people had built their own houses, so I spent a lot of time looking at the roofs and things and checking how things were done. I have never been the sort of person to ask a lot of questions. I sort of looked and found my own answers rather than asking. But if I couldn’t figure out how they had done something, after checking it out thoroughly, I might ask and people would tell me – Rachel.

Learning about self-building was an economic necessity for Rachel and became a shared interest that allowed her to find a place of belonging within her community; she developed as a person and a self-builder.

Through building, the interviewees found ways to express their political selves and instantiate their political ideas in built form. What stood out most were those whose construction practices, and therefore politics, differed from the mainstream. The substantial number of self-build women in the original sample and the close proximity of a large group of self-build women hinted at some very interesting politics going on in that region. These comments from Rachel and Natalie both credit the influence of the women’s movement on their house-building projects. This shortened term, describing the expanding 1970s women’s liberation movement, provided “undoubted cultural and political innovations” (Grahame 1998, p. 53) that supported women in stepping outside the bounds of acceptability.

It was an interesting time… there was lots of political stuff happening in the area with women… and women were building their own homes. They might have had partners that would help them, but there were still some women that were role models that were doing it at that time – Natalie.

I have some skills because I was born in 1952, at school in 1970 and women’s lib was just starting to hit Australia and those ideas were around and from that the young people that hung out with me had very much an ethos of that if a man can do it a woman can do it too – Rachel.

For Dee, it was not just the political act of building but in building she was making femaleness have form in a built landscape that was populated solely by “male” forms:
I find that it’s more of I suppose if you were going to put it into gender roles, I see it more as a female type of building [straw bale construction]. Part of it is visual, it’s very curvy, but it’s also more personal and generally more creative. It allows you to put more of your personal self in it, I suppose. I’m not saying it very well. It just seems to me that it’s not so much the straight up-and-down lines of conventional buildings. It’s got more heart. Those aren’t the right words (sighs). It’s more… it’s just more like a primitive sort of society, when women were acknowledged more. When they had more influence – Dee.

This type of political self-expression also led some self-build enthusiasts to not only build when it was not socially acceptable that they do so, but their politics led them to build differently. References to terms like “alternative”, “conservation”, “environmentalism” and “green” in the interviews indicated that at times somewhat unconventional construction practices and technologies being put into use by these self-builders were the result of conscious decisions and authentic expressions of these individual politics. Eventually, through persistence of self-builders like Cathy who “was involved in starting up a number of multiple occupancies back in the ‘70s”, working with government, planning laws were changed.

As the political shifts these self-build women were expressing have filtered through to mainstream construction, many of the technologies and construction techniques self-builders have utilised have been incorporated into mainstream methods. Mud-bricks, strawbale, solar panels, passive solar design, recycled materials, a concern for green building products, and low-energy buildings are all now part of the “sustainability” movement embraced to some degree by government in Australia at all levels. They were put into practice by self-builders decades before. Brent’s comments on this social shift suggest it was a generational change in political thinking:

In the ’70s, there was an explosion of that kind of alternative culture and people doing different things, and all that happening in the early ’70s. That kind of empowered me. I’ve carried that all through my life – Brent. What may have been a political push for some has translated over the years into cultural changes and though women were at the heart of those changes, the construction industry has not significantly changed to welcome women into the sector to the degree required to achieve change in its culture.
Conclusion

Analysis of the interviews reveals a wide range of experiences and motivations and shows that women describe those experiences in unique ways, quite different from the men described in published accounts. The range of experiences indicates diversity among women even when ethnically they are mostly of European descent. What seems to some like a feature of their own culture can be seen in the context of this group of interviews as common in many cultures; the “give it a go” attitude is just one example.

In the case of women, we can see that through building women challenge societal expectations and express many unique aspects of who they are. Their stories show that they come up against and sometimes stop at personal boundaries but also push and cross boundaries using building as an opportunity to grow and change their lives. Physical limits are there, as they are for all humans. In this group, more women found their way around those limits than were stopped by them.

Women with disabilities noted the sceptical regard they were held in previously when they talked of building their own houses. This also held true for some women who did not have disabilities. Those who are labelled and marginalised, have additional challenges, bearing as they do the burden of inadequate social policy and harmful stereotypes, however, at times their shared experience led to the development of sub cultures that equipped them with further resources. Being lesbian or gay for example seems to allow access to cultural resources that were useful on the self-build journey. The same could be said of those women identifying with certain political or spiritual affiliations.

Self-build seemed to provide a strategy to not only house one’s self but also to traverse categories and labels applied by others and overcome some types of exclusion, particularly exclusions based on embodied difference, such as faced by females. There is, however, a note of resentment that the technology of building is a male one that is exclusionary. Female bodies are not accommodated by the technology. The instances of women having assistance from men to overcome a bodily limitation struck an odd chord. The women gave an impression of feeling inadequate that they had assistance, whereas the women who worked in an assistive role with men did not attribute this to men’s inadequacy. This points to the underlying feature of the hierarchal relationship between men and women in patriarchal
culture. For women the need for help can reinforce a notion of being less, while for men having a woman as an assistant confirms hers as a lesser role and his as a superior, supervisory one.

Building is a process through which women express themselves and create a world that more closely instantiates what they need and desire. While individuals to some degree express it in unique ways, through building women can be seen to be flouting what is expected of them as women. This is something their male partners also could do, in the degree to which they support or accommodate their female partner’s desire to build. Negating the choices of women individually and collectively, the construction industry constrains women’s opportunities to build and restricts their involvement in building, both through its success in maintaining the culture of the industry which alienates and excludes women.

The culture of the building industry is indisputably patriarchal and the industry serves as a major reservoir of patriarchal culture for broader society. With varying levels of intention and awareness, women as self-builders, build new cultural resources that speak of women’s strength and skill. Through building houses for their own use they express a much fuller sense of self than prescribed gender roles allow.

The experiences of those marginalised by the construction industry have much to tell us about that industry. What is important to understand, however, is the majority of self-builders do not wish to be part of the industry. They are not motivated by the desire to become professional builders nor by the desire to build to generate income. Their building activity is hallmark by self-expression and a desire to create and reinforce ways of living more in line with their own values and beliefs. It is in looking at women’s self-build activities that this became clear; women as outsiders express themselves relatively free of the industry’s culture, without the constraints of the proper way a builder should behave, and in this way, women lead the self-build movement. What obscures understanding of women’s leading role in self-build is a lack of capacity to see women as builders, as discussed in Chapter 4. The material presented in this chapter illustrates the true role of women in self-build, and the men who build with them.
8. Houses Home-made by Women

Examples from the survey of the wife’s role include: keeping the accounts, ordering materials, mixing mortar for bricklaying, digging holes, making tea, minding the children, and keeping out of the way! (Holland 1988, p. 190)

I was living in a tent and getting some money together, as I had no money, I was just on the pension, I would go to visit people, because I was living by a community where a lot of people had built their own houses, so I spent a lot of time looking at the roofs and things and checking how things were done. I have never been the sort of person to ask a lot of questions I sort of looked and found my own answers rather than asking. But if I couldn’t figure out how they had done something, after checking it out thoroughly, I might ask and people would tell me – Rachel (Field interview).

This original research focused on the experiences of women who built a house for their own use, a phenomenon that had not been subject to in-depth study prior to this. The literature showed significant biases and omissions which lead to theory that misrepresented women, where they were represented at all. Glassie, a leading vernacular architecture theorist said, “man builds the house, woman builds the home within,” ignoring women’s roles in building their own houses. Holland, author of the only significant study of Australians who built their own houses, presented it as an undertaking of men. Through methodological bias Holland excluded women from his research and then mischaracterised the relationship between self-builders and the construction industry.

Three hallmarks of original research are evident in this study. By directly asking Australian women about their experiences of building their own houses the voices of a previously undocumented group of self-builders were heard. Their testimony was used to develop new theory that incorporated a gender-based understanding of experience. By examining the ways women self-builders engaged with the construction industry this study contradicted existing knowledge. Finally, through the application of feminist method a new solution to the problem of gender bias in construction focused research was found.

This chapter briefly recaps the previous research and reiterates the purpose of this study. The main body of this chapter summarizes and presents the new knowledge and theory this study produced, examines the limitations found and highlights opportunities for further research to
advance each of these areas of knowledge. Toward the end of the chapter final conclusions are presented along with a brief personal reflection on the conduct of the study.

**Previous Research**

The academic literature describing self-build housing discusses women in only extremely limited ways. It ignores their exclusion and pays little heed to their attempts to be involved. The work of Holland, published in his book *Emoh Ruo* (Holland 1988), which looked at the experiences of Sydney owner-builders, contains conceptual and methodological biases that excluded women and used stereotypes to justify that exclusion. This seemed to be widespread practice among researchers documenting self-build in various parts of the world.

Most depictions of self-build, regardless of the term used to describe it, do not give adequate attention to women’s experiences. Studies of self-help housing projects in developing economies and a handful of published accounts of women’s vernacular house building traditions are the exceptions. In spite of that women’s skill and experience were generally overlooked by scholars of the vernacular. Other brief accounts of women’s self-build in developing economies show the importance of a feminist approach, including political or economic analysis, framed in the broader global context.

In Australia, Holland’s work is still the most in-depth study of self-build. It is deficient in that its excludes women as participants and Holland failed to recognize and rectify his sampling process. It became a study of the experiences of some men which homogenised men as a monolithic group in much the same way men in the construction industry were portrayed as a uniform. Holland was himself a product of that industry. He reproduced its culture in his depictions of self-build, by excluding women and failing to notice their exclusion, leaving the reader to think women do not practice self-build, when in fact, they do (Denigan 1996). His comfortableness in the construction industry lead him to present it as a benevolent force in the self-build experience.

That literature left the reader wondering what women did while male owner builders were busy building a house, indeed the lack of documentation of women’s lives as even the wives of self-builders was responsible for the scale of the gap in the literature. The obvious answer was that the women were also engaged in self-build and that for some reason the research
methods used to focus on self-build in all its variants, had rendered them invisible. It was this gap in the literature that this project addressed, and research strategies were devised to avoid bias, correct method, and greatly expand conceptual framing to begin the address that gap.

**This Research**

In order to address the gap, it was firstly necessary to understand the housing context in which self-build took place. To understand that context it is important to step back and consider powerful cultural patterns of thought.

Reflecting on the prevalence of hierarchal dichotomies is particularly important as they formed compelling and persistent ways of organising the world both spatially and socially. Thinking based on hierarchal dichotomies has been fundamental in the social divisions that privilege one group of people over another, one place over another. Such privileging is evident in the ways people and built environments were, and continue to be, organised. The immediate post-World War II period in Australia saw many of the current urban spatial forms laid down. Hierarchically arranged spaces were premised on the power of individuals and idealised families and the roles of the adults and children within them. (Matrix Group 1984; Watson 1988). Respectable, Australian, middle class home life was private, ideally happened in the leafy suburbs in individual family homes with a “head of household” who relaxed at home on his weekend. It was supposed that women - the opposite sex - stayed home and didn’t work. What they did was for love and their duty, done without real skill because it was natural for a woman. Any money she managed to bring in was devalued as just pin money (Traflet 2008); her labour was not seen as work, as it was accorded no economic value.

These were ideals ingrained in the social and spatial landscape. Home and work places for men and women were supposed to conform to these hierarchal dichotomies that prescribed what mattered and what did not. Men, professional builders, built the houses, women consumed them and made them into homes. This scenario of ‘male housebuilder, female homemaker’ was an ideal to aspire to.

With a more critical look at the housing context in place what remained was to develop a more appropriate research strategy. Successful feminist research projects had given voice to previously unheard women and provided many examples of useful techniques and
approaches. Utilizing standpoint theory to centre women as experts on women’s self-build housing was crucial, a mixed-method approach allowed multiple sources to be explored using a variety of methods to collect material. Using grounded theory to analyse the material allowed the rich and detailed picture of women’s experiences outlined below to be built.

**Building New Knowledge**

In the following section research findings are summarized, policy and theory implications are presented, limitations discussed and opportunities for future research outlined. The material is organized under the main headings: researching self-build, self-build and the construction industry and women’s self-build. As with much research there were many interesting questions that the researcher did not have the capacity to peruse, often due to time or resource restrictions. It is hoped that this project marks a renewal of interest in self-build and through what could and what could not be explored, points the way for future research.

**Researching Self-build**

Using feminist approaches such as focusing on women’s experiences, exploring sexual divisions of labour within the home and concepts such as gendered stereotypes, lesbian culture, sex-based violence and hierarchal dichotomies, along with a feminist mixed-methods approach this research located women who built their own houses and documented and explored their experiences. It showed that while women self-builders appear in popular culture accounts of self-build very regularly that contrasts with academic literature. Women’s interest and participation is in self-build undeniable given that women made up almost half the editors of the magazines featured, almost since their inception.

This work, an original contribution to the field, also added to knowledge on the reflexive use of feminist research and method. Given the methodological problems with Holland and the general absence of women in self-build housing scholarship careful attention was paid to maximizing the inclusion of women, to gather sufficient high-quality evidence from which to develop analysis and contextualise women’s self-build practice.

Further, significant absolute numbers of female self-builders were identified in the questionnaire and survey. Material was gathered from first-hand experiences via a long-form questionnaire, the success of which was in part attributable to the sampling method. For
female participants, a snowball technique was implemented at the start of the study, before
the questionnaire had been fully developed. The same list of potential respondents was also
used to recruit participants for fieldwork. This ensured a good response among women; no
difficulty recruiting male participants was anticipated at that stage.

In the case of the on-line survey, recruitment difficulties became somewhat of a limiting
factor, it proved challenging to recruit the desired number of participants. Notice in real estate
and public notices sections of newspapers did not readily speak to those who practice self-
build and the cooperation of the authorities was not forthcoming. Self-builders are regulated
by different statutory bodies in each state and territory of Australia. Registrars have not
allowed research subjects to be drawn from their registers, citing technical problems or
privacy concerns; they were unable or refused to find methods to notify registrants about this
project, despite the obvious advantages of research that could flow on to both registrars and
owner-builders. There is scope for future research should an agreement be drawn up by, for
example AHURI (Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute), and signed by state and
territory registrars to cooperate with scholars researching self-build and owner-builders. It
could set out how to implement research and protect the privacy of participants. Given the
exhaustive NEAF (National Ethics Application Form) process all Australian university-based
scholars abide by and that medical research with human subjects is still able to be undertaken
within the NEAF framework, it seems bizarre that privacy legislation is cited as preventing
research into the experience of registered owner-builders. The reticence of registrars in this
matter is in line with their mandate. that of restricting owner-building. Should this change
state-based registrars could be involved in the development of research programs, with
appropriate accredited research institutions. The opening of registrar files would allow a more
systematic and comprehensive sampling frame and probability analysis to be applied.

At all stages of the research there was a strong tendency among coupled participants to
include their partner. This highlights that, in practice, most self-build is undertaken by
couples and has a high rate of female participation. For some this was answering the
questionnaire with two sets of answers or requesting an additional copy of the questionnaire
or bringing their partner to the interview. Responding flexibly to those requests and allowing
for the inclusion of both parties was a departure from the way couples had been dealt with in
self-build research previously. Without that flexibility, less would be known about women’s
experiences and the dynamics between couples. This was the first inkling of the importance of relationships in the self-build process, a theme that was dominant in depictions of self-builders in magazines popular within the self-build community. Indeed, building as a way of relating was one of the main themes identified in women’s experiences of self build, being able to identify that as a key theme speaks to the strength and utility of mixed-method research. The role of women in those couples should not be underestimated, their participation in the paid workforce and their labour within the household underpin the feasibility of the project. This shows how inextricably linked house-keeping and house making are. The importance of self-build in the lives of those couples and individuals should be understood not just as a housing strategy, or a relationship building exercise but also opportunities for gendered self-determination and self-expression.

The participant observation of trainee builders shone a light on a range of issues. The fieldwork in that case was very traumatizing and may have been considered too harmful to the researcher, from a work health and safety perspective, if its nature and intensity was known in advance. While it came at some cost to the researcher it provided deep insight into women’s interactions with the building industry, in particular illustrating the prevailing attitudes of tradesmen and builders to women generally and self-build women in particular. In future however, more support should be provided to a lone researcher to avoid being isolated in such a setting.

The historical arc of this project began with the inception and rise of popular culture magazines focusing on self-build. It continued through the peak of interest in self-build, where it was actively supported by State run programs from the 1980s to around 2005, when it fell out of favour and those programs were wound down. Future research could focus on charting women’s experiences in the new, restrictive regulatory climate. In particular the ways in which women may be characterized as the partners of the individuals registering as owner builders, or as co-owners of properties on which self-build takes place and how their capacity to self-build is then limited and played down. The success of this study in documenting women’s self-build experiences suggest the methods and strategies used could be replicated with beneficial effect.
The Construction Industry and Self-build

With the rise of the women’s movement, patriarchal privilege and the ideology which supported and maintained it was exposed. Alternative social movements, some of which featured self-build, also challenged some aspects of that ideology. The construction industry however, has persisted as a male workplace and remained somewhat impervious to those social changes. It has maintained a culture that alienates women and a system where women’s housing is provided by male builders.

The self-build experience is deeply influenced by the culture, practice and technology of the construction industry. While many who undertake self-build use alternative technologies most will also, at the same time, use conventional methods and in doing so interact with people steeped in the culture of the industry. Through those processes they absorb some of that culture. From the first steps, in registering as owner-builders in their own right or by default because they are members of married heterosexual couples where the male is registered, females will have their involvement in the build limited by the culture and practices of the industry, and they are excluded very much more than their male self-build associates. At each point where women interact with the industry their participation is controlled and minimised. In terms of opportunities to gain experience building, self-build is more accessible to women than the construction industry in general. In recent years, however, such access to construction knowledge as women found through self-build, has been eroded by the Australia wide increase in pro-industry regulation of owner-builders designed to contain all owner-builder activity.

While the formal teaching of construction focuses on skills and competence, a body of knowledge is passed on informally. The informal curriculum grounds the student in the culture of the industry – a culture where hierarchal dichotomies are brutally enforced, “book learning” is frowned upon, manliness is cultivated, and women simply do not belong. Based on my observations, that culture, steeped in centuries of master-apprentice precedence was enforced through the abuse of students; indeed, in that context it seemed that to be abusive was to be a man and to be a man was to be a builder.

As students jostled for the highest place achievable within their hierarchy of builders they employed the cultural skills they learned and became abusive to each other. In that environment, abuse was a vehicle by which to step up the hierarchy. The male students did
their utmost to avoid abuse through conformity. It was best not to stand out. Aside from the fact that conformity was a difficult contortion for a woman within the construction industry, at times it was safer not to conform. Sometimes being different or apart was the only way to isolate oneself from the risk-taking and abusive behaviour. For a woman, the challenge was to juggle safety with the opportunity to gain skills. Learning the skill was otherwise enjoyable and not impeded by a female body or a woman’s gender.

At times a sense of self, as developed by living in a female body or being a woman did present obstacles. Women are more likely than men to experience the male violence prevalent in Australia; simply being female is interpreted by abusers as coinciding with physical weakness that leads females being targeted for violence at higher rates than males. This alone increased the likelihood of being targeted for violence or abuse. The bravado and macho behaviour encountered in the all-male environment of construction education only served as a reminder of those issues. Whatever the cause, the hierarchal culture of the construction industry encouraged male construction students to engage in abusive psychological harassment of female students that did and does brutalise women and push them out of the industry. This is a foreseeable outcome borne out in the very low presence of women in the industry.

Are those responsible for recruiting and training apprentices unaware of the failure of construction education to include women? Bringing more women into construction is clearly not high on the industry’s agenda; indeed one could argue that the current system persists because it successfully keeps undesirables out. The use of inappropriate teaching materials, such as by Pease (Pease & Pease 2005), were not the only tools used to reinforce the exclusion of all but heterosexual white males. The manner of teaching, the threats, intimidation, humiliation and displays of dominance, showed students how this was to be achieved. To ensure their own place in the industry students climbed the hierarchy to take a role in enforcing the exclusion of those deemed unsuitable. They used the tools of the culture to position themselves as successful and competent. In this way, the culture was passed on and became tradition.

The evidence showed that this self-perpetuating culture of the industry impacts women involved in self-build in a variety of ways. Perhaps most importantly women experience a
great deal of difficulty in seeing themselves as builders and lack access to opportunities where they may learn to build. This increases pressure and dependence in their intimate relationships with men as those relationships become the main forum where women learn to build. Where those male partners have been inculcated to the construction industry, the women may encounter negative attitudes or power struggles in trying to have their spouse teach them about building. They will almost certainly be cast as an assistive role. If the relationship was not initially hierarchal it may well become so while building and the women will be at the bottom of the hierarchy. Further, in dealing with builders, suppliers and tradespeople they will most likely be subject to at least mild discrimination, harassment or abuse, not just as women, but particularly as women with aspirations to build. This may manifest overtly in behaviours that alienate women or more covertly, such as when builders, suppliers or tradespeople refuse to take instruction. Conversely, women sometimes were admired for their willingness “to have a go” or were interpreted as helpless or a “damsel in distress,” and building workers would go out of their way to help a woman. But this experience of being helped was not necessarily positive. Some women reported that it meant the task was taken over, an experience they described as “disempowering”. The scarcity of women involved in construction also lessened the chance that women could help and support each other, learn from each other, and develop processes and or technologies particular to women’s needs, favoured them politically or suited their female bodies. When they were able to do this as self-builders, the practice flourished.

Women’s exclusion from formal opportunities to learn to build not surprisingly resulted in their higher reliance on informal opportunities; around three quarters of the women who responded to the survey reported that their families or partners were their source of building knowledge. Though more accessible they were probably also less effective ways of gaining knowledge. Men reported a contrary experience.

Self-builders reported little interest in becoming professional builders. Of all the potential opportunities to undertake professional or even hobby-level courses in construction, women consistently showed lower levels of interest than men, who themselves showed only very low levels of interest. Given that self-builders have an interest in developing their own knowledge of construction it appears that the culture of the industry is an alienating factor in those preferences. Also, the types of knowledge and aspects of construction that interest self-build
men and women vary. Women were more interested in the more visible aspects, both internally and externally. Landscaping, for example, was of major interest to women. However, it seemed that when women undertake the practice it is identified by the less professional-sounding term, “gardening”.

The construction industry’s hostility to women must play a role in women’s lack of interest in particular aspects of construction. Likewise stereotypes of women’s weakness and unsuitability, beliefs evident in the young men observed in the construction course, has spread to young women. Those attitudes have likely been internalised by the women as much as they were taken to heart by the men, and the parts of construction sold to young people as suitable for males and are deemed unsuitable for females. Unless they venture into forbidding territory, the young women would never know the ease and fun of wall framing. Of measuring, cutting timbers, checking out notches in the wall plates to accommodate studs, of assembling the frame on a flat floor and nailing the members into place, and then, with a team of cooperative people, raising the frame, bracing and securing it. Undertaking such tasks with a group is well within the capacity of the human body, male or female, yet is something very few women get to experience. When opportunities of that nature are routinely available to young women they may be able to consider, unhindered, whether construction is something they may wish to pursue, as a professional or as an amateur.

For women involved in self-build the responsiveness of the construction industry is a pressing issue. This study showed the culture of the industry, evident in their interactions at all levels, from trades to suppliers, to be a barrier to their participation. It parallels the problems women experience working in the construction industry. Sadly, the obvious scale of the issues has not prompted industry leaders to find solutions to women’s exclusion. The market however has demanded woman friendly construction services, and access to woman friendly knowledge. Two local examples that demonstrate this demand are the success of female electrician, trading as She Sparks (www.shesparks.com.au/), and the female carpenter, operating as Handygirl (www.handygirlaustralia.com.au/). While small in scale such interventions signal change emerging from outside the locus of power, phenomena ripe for investigation.
This study highlights the need for suitable, large-scale programs to open the construction industry to women. Current practices would seem to be completely inadequate. Recruitment and retention programs could attempt to bring female students into courses in sufficient numbers to ensure a critical mass and successful completion of courses. Recommended strategies include: regular single sex training intakes for females such as is already the case for males, scholarships for women to learn to build and train in associated trades, transport and childcare subsidies for female construction students and workers, the development and support of peer networks to link and support females in trades and assistance to establish viable businesses.

Programs aimed at cultural change within the industry may not only foster the inclusion of women in greater numbers but also improve the mental and physical health of male construction workers. The development of pilot programs and ongoing development of cultural change programs could benefit from researcher presence to gauge the impact on the women involved and evaluate the initiatives. This was not a study focused on women as insiders within the construction industry, as such comments about the industry come from an outsider perspective. The perspectives of an outsider are no less important for an industry that offers services to the general public, however the comments here should be read in conjunction with studies that include women with other perspectives when developing new research and planning interventions.

**Women Self-building**
The persisting remnants of the ‘male housebuilder, female homemaker’ theme in the ideology outlined above were undermined by the material in this thesis documenting women’s self-build efforts and gendered aspects of self-build. Self-build reflected women’s efforts to live differently within or change those social and spatial patterns is new knowledge, undocumented until this study was undertaken. It debunked the first of the hierarchal dichotomies to present itself in the literature, that men self-built and women did not. Three fundamental areas of knowledge about women’s self-build housing were developed during the course of this research; redefining home-life and work-life through self-build, relating to others through self-build and women building and rebuilding the self.
Home Life, Work Life and Self-build
In the dominant patriarchal ideology home and work form a hierarchal dichotomy that separates and prioritises work life over home life. Work is associated with the city, what men do, economic activity, week days, public life, daytime activity and stress. Home is associated with the suburbs or country; it is a place of women and children, the weekend, private life, sleep and relaxation. This ideology with its particular patterns of home and work, alluded to by Holland as normal, stopped him from seeing how self-build may defy those conventions. The material in this research shows a different picture, a new setting, allowing the development of new theory.

Self-build household structures showed a diversity that challenges the norm. Of those men who completed the questionnaire, around two thirds lived with children. For women, it was less than half. Children in their households also seemed to prompt women to undertake self-build 10 years earlier than women without them. Holland’s assumptions about the existence of a single “head of household” who was male, obscured the range of configurations within the home. This study showed that both men and women self-built alone, as single parents, while in same-sex and heterosexual relationships, without children and with a few or many children in the household. Diversity of household composition does not in and of itself challenge the home-work divide, but it does indicate that there is no one way to describe the households.

Unfortunately, the on-line survey showed that women in the families of heterosexual couples, were left with the majority responsibility for household tasks, for the care of other family members and that these responsibilities increased when a self-build project was undertaken. For women in those households not only did their unpaid workload increase but their time in paid work also often increased too. Some men recognised, however, that this extra workload taken on by women was what enabled the self-build project to go ahead. Perhaps this had been foreseen by some women, and it contributed to the increased likelihood of women in households without children being more likely to build than other women.

The financial nexus between home and work went unremarked by most self-builders. There was no sign that women’s increased income earning and the cost savings of relieving their partners of caring responsibilities, rather than hiring a caregiver, were planned or formally factored into the economics of self-build housing provision. Male self-builders spent less
time caring for their children even though those same men reported that having children was a key factor in their motivation to undertake self-build. It seemed that for men self-build was more in-line with a breadwinner role rather than a parenting role *per se*.

Home life and work life distinctions seemed to blur in the creep of work culture into the home. In taking on the role of self-builder men often slipped into the mindset of the professional builder, adopting the culture of the industry. He became the master and the female partner his apprentice. She became the assistant, who laboured for him. That aspect of the old patriarchal ideology, which still has currency in the construction industry, reasserted itself during the self-build project. At times, it seemed that for the self-build man the project was less about a couple building together, and more akin to him working on the weekends.

While the workplace outside home has become less of a male domain and the necessity of paid employment for both parents in two parent families is almost undisputed, work that is done in the home is still disproportionately a woman’s duty and not recognised as work. For women involved in self build, the distinction between paid work and unpaid work seemed irrelevant, and self-build increased the demand to undertake more of both.

The economic value of that housework is still widely unacknowledged, in part because it’s done in the home. Self-build, the home-based production of housing, illustrates the absurdity of that situation. The evidence from this study supports the theory that housework was given no economic value because it was associated with women and yet self-build was given economic value in part because researchers such as Holland champion the activities of men. Further, as a home-based economic activity self-build translated into employment outside the home for very few women; only two examples were cited throughout the study. Conversely, while recognizing that the construction industry generally has more entry points for men, it was much more common for self-build men to gain employment in construction. It must be noted though that overall, very few involved in self-build were interested in construction employment. This is important new knowledge in the context of a regulatory climate that treats self-builders as disreputable contractors trying to avoid the laws that apply to professional builders.
Relating to Others and Building
Conventional notions of building are premised on construction as a professional occupation. An occupation undertaken by stoic males doing work devoid of emotional content, as modelled for the young men observed training to be builders. Clearly hegemonic masculinity was already well-practiced and underlay the awkward but ruthless sexual signalling that relegated women to some domain outside the building site as recipients of sexual attention, whether it was welcome or not. It was difficult to conceive of such interaction as intimacy given the brutality with which it was discussed. Tenderness seemed a foreign concept. It was as if one’s capacity to objectify and degrade women improved one’s standing as a builder. The heteronormative relationships between the young men were competitive yet fraternal but without the aloofness modelled by the all-male teaching staff, and they were also obviously celebrating a freedom to behave in ways not permitted in a secondary school setting.

The evidence of women building together was derived from diverse sources. It indicated they related in quite different ways. Perhaps as employment was not part of the dynamic and professional expertise was not on the line, such situations were more relaxed. There was no sign of competition. The women seemed comfortable to share knowledge without judgment, freely expressing delight in gaining their first experiences of building and constructing something that did not exist before. Perhaps a very small part of the triumphal feelings of the women stemmed from their status as co-conspirators united to overcome their exclusion from knowledge held and guarded by the men of the construction industry, but most often they expressed only satisfaction in their personal achievements.

Intimate partner relationships were the most common relationship between people documented building together as part of this study. The evidence showed a phenomenon whereby the context in which building took place also seemed to influence the perceptions of the relationship and was mirrored by a process where ideals of the relationship influenced perceptions of the build. The stories of husbands and wives, and partners building together as couples, generally exemplified positive qualities and often recounted problem-solving together, celebrating and reinforcing those relationships and their achievements. They seemed a lot like birth stories where the painful parts were glossed over and forgotten.

Where financial issues presented stumbling blocks for some, for a financially successful couple it seemed that circumstance made the build smoother. Self-build was an investment in
a relationship, financially, but also symbolically. The house became an avatar of the couple, representing their relationship to the world. Time and again there was mention of self-build horror stories that resulted in the breakup of the couple. Yet I met so few who lived that experience that it began to seem more like a cautionary tale, designed to warn against a failure to put in required effort or perhaps be too critical of one’s partner or the progress of the build. Alternately, the less successful self-builders may have elected not to participate in this project.

Managing their partner’s perceptions of each other and the build was part of the routine relationship-maintenance tended to by women during a self-build project. Self-builders modelling their building on industry practices risk negative impacts on relationships when attitudes to women are learned while learning to build. The tendency for male self-builders to refuse to take an assistive role while working with their female partners indicates it is likely this happens widely. Some women though were proud of their skill as an assistant, for example, passing the right tool at the right time. This seemed to be the case whether the “master” was male or female; one of the few female “masters” mentioned her pride in leading and teaching her partner.

This new knowledge, that building as undertaken by female self-builders, is a practice in which relating to others is central, could be a new way to build. It certainly seems at odds with the current practices of male professional builders. It indicates there are ways forward to reform the profession that could make it more diverse and inclusive and perhaps responsive to diverse communities.

For many, the act of building was a way to relate to their loved ones, both in the process and product of self-build. Aside from coupling, mothering was most frequently mentioned in that context. In building, some of the self-builders recounted inspiration from their mothers and other family members and a desire to emulate them. More often though, it was mothers expressing that through building they enhanced their relationships with their children and bettered their children’s lives by building a family home.

It was hoped an on-line survey would revealing statistically significant findings in relation to the ways in which partners negotiated and made decisions about the self-build project. This was not to be the case however. As discussed in Chapter 2, none of the state or territory
registrars notified their registrants about the research; this meant that there were insufficient participants to use probability analysis to explore the survey responses and thus enable that type of numerical analysis of data. This did not prevent robust analysis of the responses, but it did highlight an unwillingness on the part of registrars across Australia to allow scrutiny of self-build practices. This confirmed concerns about the purpose of the registration process as one designed to reduce, contain and possibly eliminate owner-building in Australia. (See Appendix B for further discussion of this issue.)

Contrary to Holland’s findings, self-builders were clearly engaged in processes of change within their own lives and often within their communities. Some were part of alternative communities who shared visions of social alternatives including anti-capitalist, green and/or spiritual agendas. Others were building a new world one house at a time where they might have a better than marginal life, including lesbians and gay men, single parents, women alone, immigrants and poor families. All of these self-build people, however, shared a vision of the world where knowledge of construction and the right to express oneself in built form was celebrated rather than restricted to an industry or to an elite or to just one sex. Unlocking the knowledge and practice of building is an issue of justice.

Building and Re-building the Self
For women, the potential to see one’s self as a builder began in childhood. When other family members built, grew or made things, whether it was a grandmother crafting textiles, an uncle who could fix things, mum sewing or dad building a shed, if the family modelled such skills, girls and women would see themselves as capable, as skilled. While the modelling of skills was important, females were particularly influenced in their self-development by women who modelled particular personality characteristics; for males, it was men who had certain employment histories. Even in their youth, the emphasis for males was on work which brought in an income. Farm life also offered an environment and or lifestyle that fostered the sense of self necessary to become a self-builder, more so for males than females however.

For some, even family troubles provided an opportunity to develop characteristics such as maturity, responsibility and commitment that in some way equipped them to build for themselves. Women in particular made a resource of something they survived or overcame in their earlier years. The resilience they cultivated within themselves enabled them to successfully undertake self-build.
Interestingly some also reported that childhood was a time when they could cross gendered boundaries, perhaps beginning a habit of a lifetime. For other women those boundaries remained until, in adulthood, they encountered the women’s liberation movement or feminism. Those encounters left the girls and women with confidence, strength and belief in themselves. For other women feminism allowed them to think critically and recognize the dilemma they faced as women who wanted to build, to see that the building industry was male-dominated and prevented them acquiring the basic skills and knowledge, and that their education had left them without the knowledge to hammer a nail or saw a straight line.

Contrary to the stereotype, a female body did not limit a woman’s sense of her capacity as a builder. One woman did feel the need to limit her activity while she was pregnant, but others climbed onto roofs and carried on building as usual while they felt it was safe to do so. Physical strength was mentioned more frequently. Some worried they were not as strong as necessary. Others mentioned building their strength as they built their house. One woman even reported being stronger than most of the men she encountered and hid her strength so as not to show them up. Women with disabilities, young women, pregnant women, older women: there was very little in the wide range of female bodies that caused women incapacity as a self-builder. In fact, the capacity of the female body to give birth, with all the fortitude and endurance required, became an oft-used metaphor, that of birthing a house.

Female bodies only became a liability due to the attitudes of others. Aspects of embodiment that were constructed as deficient or damaged, having a body that was targeted for violence or a body with disabilities, were somehow reconstructed in developing the capacity to self-build. Vulnerabilities that were imposed by those with predatory and ableist mindsets did not in fact limit women self-builders who spoke about those issues; self-build seemed to provide an opportunity to see the embodied self anew and as capable of achieving goals.

One experience the women shared was of men challenging their sense of self as a builder. Perhaps in response to this, women’s ideas of how one presents oneself as a builder differed from those of men in some respects. While both men and women agreed skill was the most key factor, more men said a builder should be muscular and dress the part. Women attached much less importance to those things. The struggle to see women as builders was also
experienced by women themselves at times, but for the most part they expanded or contracted
the way they defined a builder to include people like themselves.

The female partners in heterosexual couples were almost always cast by their partners in an
assistant role during self-build, the women showed no inkling of being insulted by this,
though it was a role that males rejected for themselves. Women more readily accepted a less
powerful role in the hierarchy of builders, perhaps unwittingly or due to training and skill
deficits. There was evidence that, in fact, rather than buy into hierarchal notions, in their own
minds women involved in self-build saw the process as working with others, even if that
other was acting in a professional capacity, as equals, mutually assisting each other.

While men routinely pointed out that a woman had help in building her own house -
particularly if it was help from a man - such qualifying statements were not made about men.
It is self-evident, however, that no-one but the most reclusive off-grid enthusiast builds a
house alone, because for a house to meet building regulations, qualified tradespersons must
be involved. The idea of a woman being helped or rescued seemed to be connected to ideas of
female weakness and dependence. This definition of femininity was explicitly rejected by
some women, no doubt because it went against notions of independence and strength that
enabled them to build. From a different perspective, it could be said that the novelty of being
a female self-builder could garner a woman extra help, information, a discounted price or
good deal particularly if the self-builder concerned played to stereotypes of femininity.
However, not once in the research was a male who obtained “mates rates” accused of playing
up his masculinity. Women were subject to scrutiny and judgments, by both men and women
that seem ludicrous if applied to men.

There was evidence, however, particularly coming from the participant observation of trainee
builders that the masculinity of men building was heavily policed. This kind of policing was
also applied to gay and lesbian self-builders, who subverted gender-based and
heteronormative expectations and used the resources of lesbian and gay culture as strategies
to counter homophobia and build their sense of self as builders. Meanwhile, women in
relationships with men were often able to access men’s knowledge to learn about building.
Intimate relationships with men did at times come with an additional challenge to a woman’s
sense of self as a builder. Women endured the perpetual role as assistant that did not reflect the level of skill or knowledge they had.

The material showed that fundamentally self-build was a transformational process for women. As survivors of violence or abuse learning to build and undertaking self-build were processes which allowed them to develop a new or renewed sense of self as powerful, as strong and as independent. Likewise, when that sense of self was challenged by relationship breakdown or children leaving home or their confidence undone for some reason, women demonstrated their resilience and redefined themselves. They took the opportunity to not only build a house, the fabric of which became a beacon of safety and security, but to refute personal and societal messages of weakness and victimhood and any internalised negative self-talk. They rebuilt their sense of self. This idea, that a major creative challenge can be used by women to rebuild their sense of self, is important in a society where gender-based injustice is commonplace. Whether the challenge need be of the scale of self-build is not clear.

This study should be seen, in part, as addressing deficiencies in Holland’s study but also broadening understanding of self-build beyond the narrow project of valorising self-build practitioners. It delved deeper into the background, characteristics and experiences of self-builders to shed light on how and why they undertook the practice, how it changed them and their understanding of the self. It explored the significance of female embodiment, particularly gendered aspects of embodiment such as surviving male violence, age and procreative capacities and touched on impairment and disability. It explored household gendered patterns of family life and relationships, and how they were expressed in building. It described broader social aspects of self-build as it pertained to patterns within built environments, work and the construction industry. Consideration of the built form was only addressed peripherally. This was a deliberate strategy to keep the scope of the study to a manageable scale. Holland’s assumption about the universal nature of male experience reflects a centuries-old tradition in the discipline of architecture. This research presents new insights into spatial aspects of the female self. In the discipline of architecture for example the self is generally considered to be male and the male form as the yardstick of architectural space exemplified by the theories of architects such as Le Corbusier. (Le Corbusier & Pierreufe 1948)
In the context of published theory, the timing of this research fits well. Renewed attention is now being paid to understandings of the self, as evidenced by the appearance of collections like Leary and Tangney’s *Handbook of Self and Identity* (Leary & Price Tangney 2012). The gendered connections between embodiment and the self are also only recently being theorised by scholars of philosophy such as Lennon in *Embodied Selves* (Gonzalez-Arnal, Jagger & Lennon 2012) and Tietjens Meyers’ examination of corporeality and the self (2014).

Females have been excluded from opportunities to gain the physical skills of building, women’s involvement in self-build is consistently minimised or attributed to males and the builder is socially constructed and embodied as male. In spite of those barriers women develop a sense of themselves as builders and the capacity to build with a female body. How do women do this? How did they make sense of this process? Clearly there was an intention and a goal, the process remains difficult to identify and document. How does the presence of men impact this process if at all? Does survival of sex-based violence change the women’s attitude to building and other non-traditional activities? As the self, including the embodied or spatial self, are theorized further, more can be done to support women undertaking these complex processes. How and why do certain ideas about the self foster new embodied experience and enable women to overcome powerful social constructs that might otherwise limit them?

Questions about female embodiment and how it contributes to the lived experience of women were highlighted as central in understanding women’s construction as an activity that is approached, carried out and experienced bodily. Opportunities to further investigate that experience are available. The plethora of women participating in ‘Ladies DIY Workshops’ on weekends at major national hardware retailers are further testament to women’s hunger for construction knowledge and a desire to pick up tools and build something. Such workshops have become a Saturday morning staple in recent years. The women participating are well placed to speak to the processes of learning construction skills while experiencing female embodiment and the shifts in gender norms in recent years may have helped facilitate this.

As noted previously some evidence of women’s self-build activity does exist, scattered in magazines over the last 45 years. Those stories could easily be brought together as an edited volume anchored within feminist analysis that sets out the context of the stories and their
significance. It would be interesting to question women about their perceptions of themselves before and after reading such stories to ascertain their impact on the perceived capacity to build.

Further, the field work conducted for this study allowed documentation of a number of houses self-build by women to be located and photographed. Working with the women self-builders on a collaborative print or web-based publishing project could offer opportunities to document their activities more broadly and publicly. Such a project could include an archival component that could be taken much further. Women’s self-build housing has been under-researched in Australia, especially given the substantial number of houses built using this method, this study marks the start of work to address that deficiency.

**Conclusion**

As identified in this chapter there were a range of limitations that challenged this research: personal limits of the researcher, limits of participants, limits imposed by construction industry regulators and limits within methods, disciplines and theories. During the conduct of this study major, unforeseen, delays occurred. They stemmed from illness and resulting disability which also forced international relocation and enrolment at a different university. At unpredictable intervals health issues continued to force difficulties and delays. Fortunately, this did not prevent the study from being concluded successfully.

By documenting women’s self-build housing, this study created new knowledge in an area of women’s activity that had been largely ignored. It details a practice by which ordinary women shape built environments. This was accomplished by centring the experience of women who self-build, focusing on the female self within the self-build process and identifying the issues that contribute to women’s invisibility. The study explored the development of the self as a female self-builder, the meaning of self-build for women and the relationship between self-build women and the construction industry.

Reflecting on the methods employed in the study leaves no doubt about the robustness of the conclusions. Centring the female self within the self-build process highlighted the importance of exploring the lived reality of intersecting oppressions in relation to the self from the standpoint of women. The mixed-method approach and transdisciplinary location and the
inclusion so diverse sources allowed thorough cross checking. While the numerical analysis could have employed a stronger method had more respondents been found the trends identified using simple percentage analysis were supported by material from other sources. By linking disparate strands of literature to what is known about women and housing, the importance of women’s self-build housing and woman’s development and expression of self as a builder became clear. Building for them was a strategy to house themselves, to grow, to relate to others and be themselves in the face of entrenched social forces that denied they had the capacity to do so.

When considering the phenomena of self-build, it would be wrong to say that women are absent. They are present, however unless they conformed to gendered norms, they remained largely invisible in the literature and popular culture accounts. Rather they were shown as the wives of male self-builders or as a part of a couple in which the male builds and the female helps. As women, they were supposedly dependent and as females, weak and their bodies vulnerable and supposed to render them incapable of building. This study also showed that in fact women participated fully in the process, and that for women self-build was deeply laden with meaning.

The gendering of self-build processes was crucial in finding the significance of self-build for women and showed the complexity of the connections between aspects of the embodied self and the process of mediating and creating space. Exploring self as female embodied was particularly important as bodily processes such as building, movement and skill development challenge received definitions and constituents of the self, highlighting that bodies are not just a natural phenomenon; they are socially produced under specific cultural circumstances. Their functionality is shaped by ideals of how females should function, ideals that in the case of building may not be specific to factors such as locality, nationality, culture, and class.

Further it shows that the self exists spatially and that women relate to others in spatial ways, building being fundamentally an agentic process in those spatial interactions. Taking the power to build into their own hands engendered in women a new and or renewed sense of self. In no small part building was about establishing and maintaining boundaries of the self, determining who may relate to them and how. For women, whose boundaries of self were often subject to the intervention of others, frequently without consent, this was particularly
important. It was most obvious in the case of women taking that power as part of a healing or self-reconstruction process after being injured by violence, through building they challenged the norm of female weakness and vulnerability upon which violence would seem to be predicated.

The supposed weakness and vulnerability of the female body had typically been used to justify women’s exclusion from the construction industry. That supposition was clearly an outsider’s view of the female body. It was prescriptive. It illustrated a belief that informed the strategies of predators targeting the weakest for violence. A female body co-occurring with disability correlated to even greater vulnerability and weakness in the mind of the violent individual, as evidenced by the much higher rates of violence against women with disabilities when compared to other women (Woodlock et al. 2014). As women reported building to be a strength building process, efforts to prevent women from building are then an effort to enforce female weakness.

At times, the perception of weakness was internalized by women and often women use the process of building to develop and demonstrate strength, rejecting and disproving that supposed weakness. They built spaces that increased their perceptions of safety as well as their actual safety and to protect the people they related closely to. They built houses and communities to facilitate and celebrate those relationships while developing strength. In doing so they also focused selflessly on the needs of other family members, illustrating that the sense of self as sharing the same space, modelled by females during gestation, does persist. Of course, such shared space need not necessarily be self-built, however when it was these women found themselves better able to live and model female strength.

For a female, developing a sense of self as a builder appeared a somewhat mysterious process. It was accomplished without access to the training resources male builders enjoy and in a culture which was quite hostile to them. Regardless, women gain skills through informal networks; learning from others who had self-built, through reading and letter writing, forming communities of interest and through male partners. It became evident also that women learned during the building process. Often that learning was done while the male partner considered the woman to be assisting him. The men almost always viewed the women they built with as having a less powerful role, but it wasn’t clear that the women shared those
perceptions, it may be that by giving the appearance of having less power women were simply managing the relationship. The few instances that documented where women learned to build from each other indicated a more celebratory dynamic, though they were generally much shorter-term interactions.

That self-build women had an uneasy relationship with the construction industry is an understatement. The explanation that women’s weakness prevents them from building, founded on some kind of human sexual dimorphism, that is the existence of procreative differences between males and females, does not stand up to scrutiny. Neither primary nor secondary sexual characteristics cause a person to be a builder or not a builder. The definition of builder and the industry’s policing of who may build, emphasized differences between males and females in a hierarchal dichotomy that shored up male power while disempowering women. The driving force behind this is the culture of the construction industry and not the supposed physical inadequacy of female bodies. That culture constructed the image of a builder as male, conforming to ideals of manly or masculine behaviour and excluded those with female bodies, who express themselves as women or in feminine ways. That hierarchal dichotomy, as a cultural pattern, disempowered one group while privileging another was a repeated pattern of relationships throughout the industry. It clearly limited women’s opportunities to develop knowledge and gain experience as builders.

The current regulatory framework covering self-build purports to eliminate rogue builders by restricting the practice of owner building. This became another way the construction industry prevented women from building. Having successfully restricted women entering the profession and learning to build at traditional training sites, expensive and overly restrictive registration processes have become further barriers in the face of women’s lesser earning capacity.

Women self-builders make it abundantly clear that they do not desire to become professional builders. While they have built to professional standards, they did not wish to be employed to build. For women building was personal. Building was primarily about housing, but both the process and the product were expressions of the self. They defined themselves by instantiating characteristics of themselves that could be read in the fabric of the building, and by setting out their relationships with others in the ways that people could interact within
those spaces. The construction process was also a means of self-expression, it located the
self, set boundaries of the self. It was also about the embodied self, and defining the female
body as strong, skilled, capable, competent and safe. It’s about rejecting the traditional ideal
of the female, the feminine, the woman’s self as dependent and a consumer.

Women’s practice of self-build is also about the recognition and rejection of weakness and
vulnerability. Through building women embodied strength and the capacity to determine
boundaries of the self in many ways, such as mentally, emotionally, socially, bodily and
spatially. The women internalized strength and located vulnerability outside the self in the
mind of another. In this case it is not simply choosing the preferred side of a hierarchal
dichotomy, but a recognition of the fiction of the ‘traditional’ correspondences. Weakness
and vulnerability do not correspond to being female, the capacity to build does not
 correspond to being male. Both Holland and Glassie misrepresented the role of women in
self-build housing: woman may make the house as well as choose who makes a home within.

Afterword

My own journey through this research comes to its conclusion as my body has asserted a
pivotal role in defining my spatial self, controlling the rate and method by which I may
traverse space, my capacity to interact with others, the volume I might occupy and its
location, my perceptions of my location and of it relative to others.

The levels of iron and adrenaline present in my body have influenced my perceptions of time,
the degree of degradation of my eye muscles controlled my sense of my position in relation to
objects and others, the amount of iron in my blood determined my capacity to move, and the
ebb and flow of uterine processes interacted with all of these to vary my capacity on any
given day in ways that were not always distinguishable from deliberative processes of the
mind.

Various thoughts, actions and emotions belonged to my self, but where in myself they
originated has not been clear. My self, whether functional or dysfunctional, remains complex
and disorderly, my spatial and embodied self refuses to submit to the mastery of a cartesian
mind. For now, they have reached a peace of sorts, these aspects of myself. Perhaps it is now
time for my self to build.
Appendices

Appendix A: Questionnaire

Have you ever built a dwelling for your own use in Australia?

If you answered yes you may wish to participate in this research project about people who build for themselves, either individually or as part of a group. If after reading all the papers enclosed with this survey, and thinking about this material, you decide you would like to participate in this project, please sign and date the consent form, continue to answer these questions, and then return the completed forms in the addressed envelope provided.

Thank You.

Your Contact Details

Name: ______________________________________________________

Telephone: _________________________________________________

Email Address: _____________________________________________

Postal Address: _____________________________________________

___________________________________________________________

NOTE: This page will be removed from the questionnaire after coding.

Office Use Only.

Ref:
ABOUT YOUR DECISION TO BUILD:

*NOTE: If you have built a place for yourself more than once, please describe the most recent house/dwelling.*

What were the main factors that motivated you to build for yourself?

How old were you when you started this building project?

During which year/s did you build?

ABOUT THE LOCATION AND ENVIRONMENT OF THE DWELLING:

What is the postcode of the area?

How would you describe the land on which you built? (eg, steep, flat, hilly, snow country, bush, forested)
ABOUT THE HOUSE/DWELLING:

Please describe the dwelling that you built/are building?

Is the building finished?

How many people beside yourself was the building designed to house?

Who did you share the dwelling with? For each person please specify the following: (if living alone leave blank)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person 1</th>
<th>Relationship to you? (eg, child, spouse, friend, boarder, other (describe))</th>
<th>Gender (male or female)</th>
<th>Number of years older or younger than you? (eg, -7, +2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Person 2</td>
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<td>Person 3</td>
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<td>Person 4</td>
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<td>Person 5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Person 6</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Add additional pages if necessary

Did any of the people listed above assist in building the dwelling? If so how?
ABOUT THE BUILDING PROCESS

How much of the labour do you estimate that you contributed individually to building your house?

Who (if anyone) contributed unpaid labour? Please describe their relationship to you, the approximate proportion of labour that they contributed, and the type of work they did.

Did you pay people to work on your house? Please describe the type of work that they undertook.

Did you pay the usual commercial rates or “mates” rates, or barter or some other system? Please describe the payment system.

Were any of the people you had working on your house tradespeople who held current qualifications in the type of work they did for you? If so which trades?
Were the tradespersons paid?

ABOUT LEARNING TO BUILD:

How did you develop the building skills necessary to build this house for yourself?

What (if any) parts of your formal education or training prepared you to build your own house?

Before you built your own place did you do any courses that you thought would be helpful? (Please describe)

Had you ever worked on any kind of construction, or helped others build houses before you built yours? (Please describe your experience)

Did you build a smaller building before starting on the house? (Please describe)

Before you built your own house, how many (if any) other houses built by their owners had you visited?
Were there other self-built houses that you knew about in your area at the time that you built? If yes please describe the contact (if any) that you had with other “self-builders” in your locality.

Where there any publications that proved useful to you in building? (Please specify)

**ABOUT YOU:**

What gender are you?

What age are you?

Do you consider yourself as part of a particular ethnic group? (Please describe)

Are there any other particular ways you would describe your identity? (Please describe)

How would you describe your occupation while building and currently?

What level of formal education did you complete?

Is there anything about your heritage, background or identity that you think made a positive or negative contribution to your competence in building?
ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Please add any comments you feel are relevant to your experience of self-building.

Office Use Only.

Code:
Appendix B: Registrars of Owner-builders and Recruitment.

All of the Australian State and Territory bodies who register owner-builders were approached with a request that they contact registrants to inform them about the study and provide them with sufficient information that they may participate. A simple email message may have been sufficient. In the two years after the registering bodies were first contacted no response to the request was received from the registrars in New South Wales, Queensland or South Australia. Of the other states, the registrar in Tasmania reported that they were “not able to provide…contact information for previous owner builder applicants.” The registrar from West Australia said they were “not in a position to facilitate [a] request to bring [the] online survey to the attention of owner builders.” Initially the Victorian registrar said simply that they were unable to assist as they were “subject to the requirements of the Commission’s Privacy Policy [and the] Information Privacy Act 2000.” After further discussion, the registrar reconsidered involvement in the project, however, at an estimated cost of $1,300.00 for postage to notify a random sample of owner-builders the recent appointment of a “new Commissioner [they were] unable to commit financially to [the] project. Victorian registrar also stated that they conduct research on owner-builders. Both the Australian Capital Territory and later the Northern Territory registrars referred to privacy legislation to explain why they would not forward information about the research to owner-builders they had registered. The ACT registrar went on to say that:

We, as a Record Keeper, may breach the Privacy Act 1988 by using that information for something not relevant or by using that information for a purpose other than what it was collected for. Our privacy statement on the owner-builder licence [sic] application form does not inform them that we may use the information for the purpose you are proposing that we use it.

After reviewing the Principle 2 of the National Privacy Principles, which stated that:

2.1 An organisation must not use or disclose personal information about an individual for a purpose (the secondary purpose) other than the primary purpose of collection unless: (a) both of the following apply:
(i) the secondary purpose is related to the primary purpose of collection and, if the personal information is sensitive information, directly related to the primary purpose of collection;
(ii) the individual would reasonably expect the organisation to use or disclose the information for the secondary purpose. (my emphasis)

The argument was put to the ACT registrar that the purpose for using the information was not only relevant to their role as registrar, but directly related to it and that owner-builders would reasonably expect to be notified by them that the research was being conducted so that they might have the opportunity to participate. The registrar, however, maintained that they had received legal advice contrary to that assertion.
Appendix C: Online Survey

Self-Build Housing Survey

Caroline Denigan

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Section 2: Developing as a builder (skills)
Section 3: Identifying as a builder (identity)
Section 4: Building, the house and you
Section 5: Building with a partner

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PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT

TO: Australians who have built their own house

Date: November 2011
Principal Researcher: Louise Johnson
Student Researcher: Caroline Denigan
Associate Researcher: Neville Millen
Full Project Title: Homemakers and House Builders: Self-Build Housing in Australia.

To date there have been only a couple of research projects that look at the experiences of owner-builders. While we know some things about their experiences, we don't know how they and their families go about their lives while building their own homes. The existing research considers owner-building or self-build to be an individual pursuit. This research tries to find out how households manage. One of the methods of doing so is through this online survey. This survey tries to find out how people actually manage ordinary every-day demands like earning an income and getting the kids to school while doing a major construction project. The survey also looks at the personal impact of building, such as, how taking on such a challenge might change how people see themselves. Existing research also tends to ignore the input of women in building themselves and in supporting a partner to build. The survey explores these possibilities.

You are asked to complete this online survey. It is a series of straightforward questions about your own experiences building your own house. The questions are all yes/no questions or multiple choice. You will not need to type any answers. The survey may take approximately 30 minutes. Your consent will be assumed by completing and submitting the anonymous survey.

Things to note:
- There is no risk to you in completing this survey. The wider community and other people who build their own homes in the future may benefit from the greater knowledge about self-build generated by this project
- No identifying information is being collected so your privacy and confidentiality are not at risk;
- The results of this survey will be included in a thesis and may form part of other publications. The thesis will be available through the Deakin University Library, online and possibly through your local library. Participants may access results of the study;
- Conduct of this research project is being monitored by Louise Johnson, Neville Millen and Caroline Denigan of Deakin University;
- There will be no payment to participants;
- Publication of this survey online is courtesy of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Deakin University;
- Once you have completed this survey it will not be possible for you to withdraw your data;
- You may contact Caroline Denigan about this research. Her email address is qqq@deakin.edu.au

For a copy of this plain language statement and the consent form click here for a PDF version which you may save.

Complaints

If you have any complaints about any aspect of the project, the way it is being conducted, or any questions about your rights as a research participant, then you may contact:

The Manager, Deakin Research Integrity, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood Victoria 3125, Telephone: 9251 7129, Facsimile: 9244 6581; research-ethics@deakin.edu.au

Please quote project number [2011-224].
CONSENT FORM
TO: People who have built their own house in Australia
Date: November 2011
Full Project Title: Homemakers and House Builders: Self-Build Housing in Australia.
Reference Number: [2011-224].

Have you built your own house?
  yes
  no
Are you over 18 years of age?
  yes
  no
Have you read and understood the attached Plain Language Statement?
  yes
  no
Have you had the opportunity to save a copy of the Plain Language Statement and Consent Form?
  yes
  no
Do you understand that your identity and personal details will not be collected, therefore no information about you will be presented in any public form?
  yes
  no
Do you freely agree to participate in this project according to the conditions in the Plain Language Statement?
  yes
  no

If you answered yes to all the questions on this consent form, pressing enter will redirect you to the survey.
If you answered no to any of the above questions you will NOT be redirected to the survey. Thank you for reading this far.
Section 1 of 5: About you

1.1 How many houses have you built for yourself? ______________ (number)
For the remainder of this survey please refer to the most recent house you built.

1.2 What is your age? _______ (in years)

1.3 What is your sex?
   Female
   Male

1.4 What is the highest level of education that you have completed?
   Primary school
   Some secondary school
   Completed high school
   Additional training (apprenticeship, TAFE courses, etc.)
   Undergraduate university
   Postgraduate university

1.5 In what state or territory did you build your house? If you have built more than one please answer the remaining questions about the most recent house you built.
   ACT    QLD    NSW    NT
   SA     TAS    VIC    WA

1.6 What was your status when you started building?
   Living alone
   Living with children
   Living with children and a partner
   Living with children and other family member/s
   Living with children, a partner and other family member/s
   Living with a partner
   Living with a partner and other family member/s

1.7 What was your status when you finished building?
   Living alone
   Living with children
   Living with children and a partner
   Living with children and other family member/s
   Living with children, a partner and other family member/s
   Living with a partner
   Living with a partner and other family member/s
   Living with other family members

1.8 What is/was the sex of your partner?
   Female
   Male
Section 2 of 5: Developing as a builder (skills)

2.1 Before you built your house did anyone else in your family build their own house?
   Yes
   No

2.2 Before you built your house did any of your friends and acquaintances build their own house?
   Yes
   No

2.3 Before you built your house did you know of other people who built their own house?
   Yes
   No

2.4 How important to you were the following sources when it came to gaining knowledge or skills about building?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Not at all important</th>
<th>Slightly important</th>
<th>Moderately important</th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Extremely important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your partner</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other family members</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Friends and people you knew through work</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other people who had built their own houses</td>
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<tr>
<td>High school, other courses</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Books, magazines, websites and other published sources</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

2.5 While in secondary school did you participate in school-based courses, or non-school activities that involved manual skills such as: metal work, wood work, shop, textiles, fibre, sewing, cooking, home economics, art, crafts, etc.
   Yes
   No

2.6 While in secondary school did you participate in school-based courses, or non-school activities that involved intense physical activity such as: athletics, swimming, drama, team sports, dance, cycling, gymnastics etc.
   Yes
   No

2.7 Prior to building your own house had you ever considered undertaking craft or construction hobby courses?
   I never thought about it
   I thought about it but did not act
   I enrolled
   I completed the course
   I wanted to do more courses after completing the first but did not
   I completed more than one course
2.8 Were you ever interested in short courses in construction, for example, concreting, woodwork, bricklaying, tiling, etc.?
  I never thought about it
  I thought about it but did not act
  I enrolled
  I completed the course
  I wanted to do more courses after completing the first but did not
  I completed more than one course

2.9 Did you ever want to do a construction trade, such as, carpentry, plumbing, electrical, drafting, building inspection, etc.?
  I never thought about it
  I thought about it but did not act
  I enrolled
  I completed the course
  I wanted to do more courses after completing the first but did not
  I completed more than one course

2.10 Did you ever want to undertake a degree course to gain a qualification in construction, such as, architecture, engineering, project management, etc.?
  I never thought about it
  I thought about it but did not act
  I enrolled
  I completed the course
  I wanted to do more courses after completing the first but did not
  I completed more than one course

2.11 How involved were you in the physical part of building your house, and how much involvement did you desire?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of actual involvement</th>
<th>Not at all involved</th>
<th>Slightly Involved</th>
<th>Moderately Involved</th>
<th>Very involved</th>
<th>Extremely involved</th>
<th>Not at all involved</th>
<th>Slightly Involved</th>
<th>Moderately Involved</th>
<th>Very involved</th>
<th>Extremely involved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Setting out the house on the site.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making footings, slab or putting in stumps or posts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building the wall or roof structure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exterior cladding or finishing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interior cladding or finishing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hanging doors and installing windows</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plastering, tiling or floor finishes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Installing fittings, such as the bath and sink</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Applying interior finishes like paint, window coverings, etc.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Landscaping</th>
<th>Not at all involved</th>
<th>Slightly Involved</th>
<th>Moderately Involved</th>
<th>Very Involved</th>
<th>Extremely Involved</th>
<th>Not at all involved</th>
<th>Slightly Involved</th>
<th>Moderately Involved</th>
<th>Very Involved</th>
<th>Extremely Involved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Section 3 of 5: Developing as a builder (identity)

3.1 What was your age when the house was commenced? _________ (in years)

3.2 Did you ever own a house before you built your own house?
   Yes
   No

3.3 Were you personally registered as an owner-builder of the house you built?
   Yes
   No

3.4 Was your partner (if you had one) registered as an owner-builder of the house you built?
   Yes
   No
   Did not have a partner

3.5 If you had a loan from a financial institution so that you could build the house, which of the following applied?
   I was the primary on the loan
   My partner was the primary on the loan
   I’m not sure
   I/we do not have a loan

3.6 How often would you use the following to describe your role or experience building your own house?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role/Expression</th>
<th>never</th>
<th>infrequently</th>
<th>sometimes</th>
<th>frequently</th>
<th>always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Owner-builder</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labourer on my own house</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Builder</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant to an owner-builder</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-builder</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner of an owner-builder</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amateur builder</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner-builder’s labourer</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.7 When you remember building your own house which, if any, of the following expressions might you use to describe yourself? Please choose the 5 words you used the most, and rank them from 5 down to 1, with 5 being the word you used the most?

   Competent     Skilful     Strong
3.8 For you, how important is it that a person, who says they built their own house, have the following attributes?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Not at all important</th>
<th>Slightly important</th>
<th>Moderately important</th>
<th>Very important</th>
<th>Extremely important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have a muscular physique</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Physically built a fair percentage of their own house</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dress like a builder</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a certain level of skill</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be a male</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have done a building course</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a certain amount of experience in building</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack injury or disability</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managed the construction of their own house, but did not physically build it.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have been a registered owner-builder</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have been paid to work on a different building project</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Section 4 of 5: Life while building (reduce text indent below)

#### 4.1 On a typical day while you were constructing your house, when you or your partner DID some income earning activities, how many hours did you spend on the following?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>More than none but less than 1 hour</th>
<th>More than 1 but less than 3 hours</th>
<th>More than 3 but less than 5 hours</th>
<th>More than 5 but less than 7 hours</th>
<th>More than 7 hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organising the build (Ordering materials, coordinating tradespersons, planning, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building and assisting others build (Cleaning up the site, packing up, fetching and carrying)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring for children or relatives (Driving people places, helping with homework, care-giving)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household tasks (Mowing, cleaning, making meals, laundry, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earning income (Studying, working for wages, running a business, etc.)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer or community work (School canteen or library, helping organise a sporting or social club)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialising (Having a drink with friends, participating in or watching sport with friends, going out for dinner, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 4.2 On a typical day while you were constructing your house, when you or your partner DID NOT do any income earning activities, how many hours did you spend on the following?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>More than none but less than 1 hour</th>
<th>More than 1 but less than 3 hours</th>
<th>More than 3 but less than 5 hours</th>
<th>More than 5 but less than 7 hours</th>
<th>More than 7 hours</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organising the build (Planning the work, ordering materials, coordinating tradespersons, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building and assisting others build (Cleaning up the site, packing up, fetching and carrying)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring for children or relatives (Driving people places, helping with homework, care-giving)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household tasks (Mowing, cleaning, making meals, laundry, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer or community work (School canteen or library, helping with a sporting or social club)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialising (Having a drink with friends, participating in or watching sport with friends, going out for dinner, etc.)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section 5 of 5: Building with a partner

5.1 Think of a typical week and combine the hours you and your partner spent on the tasks below. The combined hours equal 100% of the hours that task took to complete each week. Please estimate below the percentage of the total hours you and your partner contributed to that task in a typical week.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>My partner 100%</th>
<th>My partner 90% me 10%</th>
<th>My partner 70% me 30%</th>
<th>My partner 50% me 50%</th>
<th>My partner 30% me 70%</th>
<th>My partner 10% me 90%</th>
<th>Me 100%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time spent earning income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(waged work, running a business, etc.)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time spent building</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(getting materials ready, building, packing up, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time spent preparing to build</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(talking to tradespeople, ordering materials, etc.)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time spent taking care of the house you lived in</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Laundry, housework, mowing, cooking, etc.)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Time spent caring for family members and each other</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(transporting, homework help, caregiving, etc.)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time spent on community activities</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(fundraising, school tuck shop, volunteering, etc.)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time spent socialising</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(having a drink with friends, participating in or watching sport with friends, going out for dinner, etc.)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

5.2 If you had a domestic partner while building your house, **how often** might you have used the following statements to describe the way you worked with each other?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>never</th>
<th>infrequently</th>
<th>sometimes</th>
<th>frequently</th>
<th>always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My partner did not build at all</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I assisted my partner while they built</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My partner and I both worked on construction independently</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My partner assisted me while I built</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We worked together as equals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I did not build at all

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My partner made the decisions for us.</th>
<th>never</th>
<th>infrequently</th>
<th>sometimes</th>
<th>frequently</th>
<th>always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I deferred to my partner when making a decision.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My partner and I made a decision together.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When making a decision my partner deferred to me.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I made the decision for my partner and me.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thinking about other aspects of your life with your partner, during the time that you were building, how frequently might the situations below apply?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My partner made the decisions for us.</th>
<th>never</th>
<th>infrequently</th>
<th>sometimes</th>
<th>frequently</th>
<th>always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I deferred to my partner when making a decision.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My partner and I made a decision together.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When making a decision my partner deferred to me.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I made the decision for my partner and me.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.4 How involved were you in deciding the following, and how important was this decision to you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of involvement</th>
<th>Level of importance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not at all involved</td>
<td>Not at all important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly involved</td>
<td>Slightly important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately involved</td>
<td>Moderately important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very involved</td>
<td>Very important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extremely involved</td>
<td>Extremely important</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Deciding about the area where you would live
- Deciding the actual block where you built your house
- Deciding the type of house you would build
- Deciding the materials the house would be built with
- Deciding the layout/plan of the house
- Deciding what to work on next
- Deciding what to spend money on
- Deciding the tradespeople to complete
- Deciding fixtures and fittings, like light fittings, the bath and sink
- Deciding interior finishes like paint, window coverings, etc
- Landscaping
Appendix D: Field Interview Sample Questions

Could you tell me how you came to have the skills and opportunity to build a house for yourself?

Have there been people who have influenced you in taking that self-build road?

How about doing that physical work? Did that have much of an impact on you bodily or affecting your health?

In reading about self-build, you’ll read stories where someone will say, “Being a woman, this was a challenge because the guy at the hardware shop wouldn’t help me at all,” or, “Because I was female they were falling all over each other to help me.” Some males have reported being mocked for not being ‘manly’ enough, or getting favourable rates from other men they know in the trades. It struck me that sex and/or gender has been a factor in shaping people’s experiences. How might being a male or female, a man or woman, been a factor in your experience?

And in dealing with subcontractors or people who were helping you, how did you find that process? Were you able to get things done the way you wanted them to be done?

There’s always a lot of decision-making in building a house. How did you decided to do things that you might have been a little bit unsure of? Have you had to negotiate about aspects of the build?

Were there any impacts upon your relationships, positive or negative, from building?

The building process is what I’d like to talk about now. I’m wondering about the building, how it ended up, and how you’d initially envisaged it. Is there a difference between those two things? If so how did that difference come about?

Are there are particular features of the building that reflect your principles or philosophies or ideals or beliefs?
What about skills that you might have developed during this process of building the house? And I want to know whether you use those skills still, obviously you do, and also just as a smaller bit, I’m wanting to know whether in terms of employment, have those skills been useful to you?

Looking back, I’m wondering would you do things differently at all in this house? If you started again or if you were doing a new project?

Is there anything you expected I might ask about, that you want to mention?
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