

## Episode 101

### 5 Common Traits of Self-Builders

The show notes: [www.houseplanninghelp.com/101](http://www.houseplanninghelp.com/101)

**Intro:** In this podcast we're going to be exploring five common traits of self-builders, with Dr Michaela Benson, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. Michaela has spent the last three years working on a research project called 'Self-Building – The Production and Consumption of New Homes From the Perspective of Households'.

I started by asking Michaela to tell me a little bit about herself and how she developed an interest in self-build.

**Michaela:** Okay, so I'm a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Goldsmiths and I've been doing a project for the last three years which is all about self-build in England. And it's a project which has looked at everything from thinking about how this features within the housing and land economy, all the way through to a series of case studies with individual self-builders, interviewing them, spending time with them in their homes. Trying to understand the process from their point of view, their motivations, who they are really. And that side of the project has been focused very much on practices of home making. The processes they go through to develop a home through self-building.

**Ben:** And why? Why did you want to do it on this area?

**Michaela:** Well this is an area of academic research which is very very small. It's obviously something which is of great popular interest. Obviously we've got Grand Designs in the UK which is a TV programme which has very very high viewing figures. And yet really on a level of understanding housing in this country, we don't really have very many publications in that area that could helpfully inform you know future developments of that field, or talk to the reasons why there's such a small number of houses built that way in this country.

So it's really building on that knowledge, but also trying to break away from this kind of quite homogenous image we have of people that build their own homes, and try and see where the diversity actually is within that, in terms of perhaps the houses they build,

their routes into it and their routes through it really. So that's really what I wanted to get to the core of, understanding that diversity.

Ben: How many self-builders did you meet over this period and what type of houses did you see?

Michaela: So the project included interviews with twenty individual self-builders. I then followed that up with case studies with sixteen of them where I went to visit their homes. But I also have done work with about five group projects over the course of the three years where I've been tracing their progress, often through that process, so I've got people who haven't even yet found land but also people who are just about to start to build, and another group who have just finished in March 2015.

So I went to, as I said, sixteen homes and spent quite a lot of time with those people, being shown around, them showing me through their archives of all the materials, if they'd already finished that is, of the whole process, or spending time with people who were building while they were building.

Ben: I've just had a look around your exhibition, that will have finished by the time this podcast goes out, but what it does is characterise a few of the houses that you've seen, and that's why I thought this could be interesting and could stimulate a bit of discussion as we go along, because we can compare notes. So we've called this episode "Five Characteristics of Self-Builders". And I haven't seen your list, I can perhaps guess a few of them on there! But do you want to start us off?

Michaela: Yeah, I think the thing that really struck me about the people who were undertaking this, was quite often they had two different sorts of skill sets. So that might be within a couple, that one had one skill set and the other had another, or it might be within an individual working on the project.

So you had people who were very practically minded. They'd either trained in some kind of practical skills, so quite a lot of the men, I think I mentioned this to you earlier Ben, were engineers and they'd done the work of you know electrical engineer or something like that. But it was also notable that these were people who had quite good organisational and managerial skills, which I think was actually a really really important element of a build where quite a lot of people do decide to project manage themselves. And I think their reasoning behind taking on the project management is because

they know they have organisational skills or abilities that they can put to work in that scenario.

So they're often people who've managed other people as well. And I think that's the side of the equation that we don't always hear so strongly. We know very very well that quite a lot of self-builders have some practical experience but we don't necessarily know that the organisational and managerial skills, which I think are just as important actually, are actually at play there. So those are kind of two of the characteristics that I would say are there.

Ben: And this is something that could develop, because you certainly had at least one case study of a serial self-builder?

Michaela: Yes definitely. I mean that case study was a man who when he was a child, he'd lived on an estate in the south east of England, which the whole estate was actually developed through self-build. It's quite an innovative estate. It had started in the 1930s being sold off, and so he'd watched his parents first build their house and then build a house for his grandparents. I think that they actually had contractors in to do that, but that, he explained to me, inspired in him a lifelong interest, actually in how things fit together, how they work. And so all the way through his own housing career he has done large scale renovations on properties and now he's doing a conversion of a derelict engine house in Cornwall for a tin mine and he's doing a lot of the work on the inside of the property himself. He's had to have a stonemason to do the outside but he's doing that work. And it's included things like abseiling down a chimney to clear all of the rubble out.

So I think it can in some cases it does that. I don't think that it does, it depends a little bit on the motivations behind it. There are people who will say "I would love to do this again", and there are other people who see it as a one-off. So I think that you saw that we had the autonomous house.

Ben: What do you make of that couple? Close friends of mine! They're a bit odd aren't they?! [Michaela laughs.]

Michaela: Well I think it's very very clear that they had a passion for a particular thing which was to build this low energy house, and the only reason that they built a house for themselves was exactly to do that. So from that point of view you could see why they wouldn't want to do it again, because they've built the house that they set out to build and the one that they want to live in for the next 15 years until, you know. [Michaela laughs.]

Ben: There's something funny that you perhaps don't know Michaela, that they were looking at a plot up in Scotland. I think they got seduced on a holiday up there and were looking at it quite seriously for a while but then exactly what you said, finally thought we've spent ages, this is exactly how we want our house, why would you move, unless it's something to do with a job, which obviously Mike and Lizzie are retired now so they don't have that either. So that's quite interesting just to see that they obviously didn't rule out doing it all again, but when they actually thought about it, no. [Michaela laughs.]

Michaela: Yes, and I think that can happen. So I've got another couple who have built a beautiful Passivhaus in the Wiltshire countryside and she said that this is her home forever. And he said, "oh, I wouldn't mind doing it again". So even within couples there's still those conversations about the future of you know, their housing futures as they go forwards. I think that's probably quite normal though in some respects. [Michaela laughs.]

Ben: You mentioned project management a little while back, and it was to do with being organised. Now I don't think that I would ever want to tackle the project management myself. My wife is very organised so I was thinking perhaps she could do this. However, does that mean that people, almost from a financial point of view, get pulled into doing the project management or it's the challenge?

Michaela: I think it's something that people believe they can save money on. And I think that's really really important to bear in mind. I think it's something people look at and they think, hmm, actually I could do that. Sometimes they do it very very well and it works out very well. And at other times it becomes a bit of a challenge because sometimes I think people don't realise quite how much work it is. Because it is.

It's not just, it's not just the budget, it's not just managing the budget. It's also making sure that you have your procurement lined up in the right order, that you have your trades lined up at the right time. So there's lots of timing issues that come into play there. And I think people sometimes fall a little bit foul of that and that can make things very very stressful if you don't have the right person on site at the right time for example.

But that said, I think with good knowledge and understanding of how the construction of a house actually happens, you can do it quite well. It's just that when you think about building a house you

might think you know there are obvious things that you'd think about, but actually thinking about the order in which they work is not always quite so clear, and it's not knowledge that ordinary people have of course. So the times when it's worked exceptionally well have been exactly when people have had very very clear understanding of how construction works. So people who've worked in related industries, so people who've worked in planning for example, they're very very clear about the order of things. So that's what I would say about that.

Ben: Shall we move on to your second trait?

Michaela: Yeah, I think that the other thing about these people is that they're not novices. Quite often they have undertaken quite extensive renovation or extension projects.

Ben: Oh dear, I don't like the sound of this! [Both laugh.] For my own one.

Michaela: So what was really notable is that there seemed to be a group of people who were involved in the project who were of a certain age, probably 50 plus I would say, who'd worked their way up through the housing market, precisely by taking on properties where they'd had to do a huge amount of work. So they built up their property assets that way, but they'd also built up their practical experience of working on houses.

And I think this is really interesting actually, from a sociological point of view I find this very very interesting, because it speaks of the role that property assets play in self-build, number one. And it speaks of the role that working on properties and becoming confident with working on properties plays within self-build.

It also tells a very very interesting story that parallels the history of the middle class expansion in Britain of social mobility. Because quite often these people had come from very, well either lower middle class backgrounds or working class backgrounds and were very very clear about that. They might in some cases they were the first people in their family to go into home ownership. And I think that this is very very interesting, from my point of view anyway.

So they'd gone through these stages where you know, maybe 20/30 years ago they could do all of those works on the properties without having to worry about risk assessments, health and safety, accreditation to do your electrics, all of those kinds of things. And they'd become very very comfortable with their ability to do those

things. So that's led quite a few of the people that I've worked with to the stage where they're building their own houses in this way, or at least doing some of the work fitting out the properties that they might have had contracted to build.

Ben: If I understand you, you're almost highlighting this older generation who are self-building, so what does that mean then for us as a nation when really I feel a lot more younger people should be doing it?

Michaela: Well I think, so my perception of this, my understanding having done this project, is that it's very very difficult. There are very very few young people who do this. That's the first thing to say.

And part of that is to do with the way that everything relating to self-build, but also to do with housing at the moment in this country, is organised. So it's very very difficult to go into self-build unless you already have considerable property assets, or savings I would say.

So for example there were some people in the project who did have some savings, or some money that they had managed to accumulate through some property ownership in the past. But they'd had, for various reasons the housing trajectories might have been disrupted. Those types of things. And they were finding that it was quite tricky so they'd have to take out a self-build mortgage for example, and they were struggling with those.

So quite often I was finding stories of people, you know, really finding themselves in quite tricky financial situations for a start, and finding that, you know, the money had to come from somewhere to pay the people who were on site. So people juggling credit cards, and this is not, I'd just like to be clear, this is not because they weren't clear about their budget, it wasn't because they were unrealistic quite often, it's to do with the fact that the cash flow on a project often requires more money at a point in time than you actually have in the bank at that moment, because of the draw downs on the mortgage. So I want to be really really clear about that.

So maintaining a cash flow is very very difficult, which means that people who don't have significant assets behind them can struggle quite a lot because the actual mortgages that people take out don't seem to work terribly well with the procurement stages. So that's something I've highlighted in the report. But obviously this is all relevant to thinking about younger people, because without significant assets behind you it can be very very tricky. As it is with

all housing in this country to actually get into self-building. So that's, I'm not sure whether that's fully answered the question, it probably hasn't.

Ben: Well let me just pose another one, that it's not just money, it's time. And I remember reading one of the case studies that you had in the exhibition where they said it felt like we'd put our lives on hold for a year, two years.

Michaela: Yeah I think that's really really important, and so in that case that you were talking about, they had because they were working full time, at least at the start they were working full time. And so the work that they were doing on the property was taking place in the evenings and weekends. At some stage he was made redundant so he had more time but they didn't have any money. So that created problems and I think that's one of the issues with the project management as well. People are often doing it around full-time jobs.

And it is incredibly time consuming and so I think in a situation where you need to work full-time this is very very tricky in terms of freeing up the time that you would actually need to either actually do the sweat equity that you need to do on site or even just an individual house could be very very hard. So yes, time and money I agree.

Ben: Ready to move onto number three?

Michaela: Yeah. So I think that one of the other things that I found really fascinating, I can remember walking around several houses actually, and being shown the intricate detailing of cupboards and wiring. And it's, you know you're laughing and I can see, [both laugh] but I think that this was it showed the kind of attention to detail that some people have.

Ben: Involvement, are you talking about?

Michaela: Involvement, yes. They'd reel off a list of different things, this, this, this and this wiring does and they're very very proud of it as well. But part of it is in demonstrating that they know how things work. I mean, do you know what goes on behind your walls?

Ben: Oh yes, yes, no, not at all. [Both laugh.] I'm learning every time I chat to someone I learn something new, so that's it. But I don't ever intend to be doing this. [Michaela laughs.] There are people who can do it fully. I won't be showing you my wiring.

Michaela: But there is, for some people there is a fascination in knowing exactly how things work and being able to demonstrate that you know how things work.

Ben: It's engineers.

Michaela: It's the engineers, yeah. [Ben laughs.] And there are quite a lot of them in the research, and I mean I was delighted on occasion. I mean I can remember this one man who showed me this shoe cupboard that he had made, you know, each of the shelves was exactly the right length for his or his wife's pair of shoes. And there was a pride and a craftsmanship that was involved in that, that you couldn't help but actually admire.

And you know, so you'd go away feeling that people have put themselves into those homes and they really are their homes that they've created in some ways. And I don't want to romanticise it too much. Not everyone does this. Not everyone has the time to actually attend to those details in that much detail.

Ben: Did you have anyone who hired a project manager and did that change things? That it was a much more functional build and perhaps they cut themselves off at a certain level of detail?

Michaela: I did have people that hired project managers, and yes I think that that can resolve quite a lot of the time and detail and things that you need to get involved with.

Ben: You still pick up things though as you go along?

Michaela: Yes, you do.

Ben: You know maybe I will be showing you my wiring I don't know!

Michaela: You never know! And I mean I think the other thing is, obviously in most cases people are very knowledgeable of their limits. And so they don't push beyond that. They will bring people in when they need to and they pursue their interests through their buildings, so if somebody is really interested in energy efficiency then you often hear a lot about it.

But it's also, especially with the energy efficiency, they're very keen to demonstrate what they've learnt through that process, so it's not just building a house it's actually a learning process that they're engaging in. So in the case of one of the Passivhauses that I

worked with, part of that was also about her skilling up. Because she was a planner she wanted to become a consultant in energy-efficient buildings, and so she skilled up through that process. So she developed her professional identity alongside building her dream house, which I think is very very interesting as a way of thinking about things. So all of those things are integral to her, you know she wanted this house to live in but she also thought well if I'm going to do this maybe I should do it so that I can advise other people on how to do it.

Ben: While we're on energy efficiency, is that a theme that you might have noticed in these self-builds? I'm fairly much pushing it, you've mentioned Passivhaus a couple of times which is great, are people starting to get it? Do you think more than perhaps if they were just buying a house?

Michaela: Yes, I mean these houses are often more energy efficient than a house that you would buy off the shelf so to speak. They're all guided by the same building codes as a normal off the shelf house, but often they're one step further.

What I would say about it is that although there are people who are driven very much by the idea of saving the planet, and there are people who do that, for quite a lot of people actually the primary motivation was to do with saving money. Future fuel bills. So it's kind of off-set a little bit against the cost of installation of those technologies, but yes. Things like better insulation, mechanical heat ventilation, all of those things are often ways that they are thinking through, okay so the fuel prices are going up, what am I going to do to mean I can stay in this house when I'm an old aged pensioner and I probably don't have very much of an income. So they're thinking to the future. So the energy efficiency becomes a way of future proofing their houses for themselves as well.

Ben: And comfort? Is that a figure in the equation?

Michaela: It does! Obviously houses with no draughts are more comfortable than houses with draughts and they're very very proud of the fact that they've managed to get these very nice airtight houses. So although there weren't a huge number of Passivhauses in the project, certified Passivhauses, quite a lot of them were operating at a very very high level of energy efficiency.

I remember a lovely family that I worked with, who had only recently moved into their house and I went round to see them a few months after they'd moved in and it had been the man who'd been really

really keen on all of this energy saving technology and his wife and his girls were there when I went round to see them. And they were just so excited about the fact that they had this electrical meter where when they had free electricity the tick came on and they put on the oven, they put on the washing machine. So living with those technologies was really exciting them and learning to live differently was really charming. It was a lovely example of how different their life had become as a result of living in this house.

Ben: Let's move on to point four now.

Michaela: Point four. So I think the important thing to say about a lot of these people is they are very very determined. Even if you have sufficient money and time to do this, this is quite difficult. So they really do have to push it through themselves. They really are people who are going to do this no matter what. And they are pushing and pushing and pushing to get to the end of that project. So they're motivating themselves all the way through. And it can be a very unmotivating process. It can be a demotivating process. So they really are pushing themselves through. They're very actively pursuing this, because they have to because otherwise it won't happen.

Ben: Let's ask a wider question at this point then, about enabling it for people that don't want all the stress. The custom-build approach. Do you think that that is something that has to be enabled or spread and how is that going to happen?

Michaela: It's a very interesting question. So obviously in the last three years of my project we've seen the kind of emergence of what's being called the custom-build sector. This seems to cover quite a diversity of different things, from kind of people who just go in and enable to people who project manage and people who build full shells for people then to fit out. So it's quite diverse.

And I think that my advice to the custom-build sector would be that actually what I think that most self-builders need is the kind of emotional support to get through a project. Even if you're just fitting out the inside of your house or somebody is basically building you an off-plan house which is the other end of the custom-build spectrum which exists almost all over the world, except for here. You know, you get to choose your finish and that can be a form of custom-build. They need that kind of emotional support to get through it.

I feel that one of the things that a lot of people underestimated in approaching their self-builds was the importance of managing

social relationships. Not just within the families, but also with all of the people that come onto site. And you can understand if you're building your own house you're building your home, you're highly invested in that and when a series of little things go wrong it's quite painful. And so thinking about how you're going to do the management that's related to that if you're project managing is very very important.

I mean I think it's a thing that not many people have thought about. So I think the custom-build sector is offering some of that by taking away some of those jobs from self-builders. And in some cases is providing that support, because some of the people that are involved in that sector have experience of working with, for example, community projects or regeneration projects where they've had to do those things and maintain those relationships with the wider community, or within groups and things like that. So that I think is really important.

Ben: And finally, we get to the fifth trait.

Michaela: So what I think's really really interesting is when I think about these people, they're often very keen to locate the skills that they've used on site within kind of longer term abilities that they've had.

So you'll get people that will track back their desire to self-build to being a small child. So they will talk about how they played with Meccano as young boys and even if the case. I had a single woman who was one of the self-builders, and she explained to me when she picked me up from the station, that ever since she was a young girl she'd been drawing her house.

Ben: Freaky! I always used to build Lego houses. I didn't build anything else but Lego houses.

Michaela: Just houses. Yeah. So it seems that for quite a lot of people, not all people, there has been a long-term interest in houses and what they look like and how they're going to function. And how they're built! And so this becomes a way of them relating it all back.

Beyond that people were often very very keen to point out how their practical skills had originated with their parents or with their grandparents. And I quite liked that idea of building a genealogy of practical skills, not necessarily self-building, into their stories about how they had come to the point where they could build. So they were often quite reflective on those when they were talking to me, saying you know my dad used to do this and I think I learned from

him this. So they were very very very clear that it wasn't just them, it had come from somewhere else.

Ben: And as we've got to the end of these traits I suppose it would be good to sum up, is it generally a positive experience that people go through by the end? Of course there's going to be a bit of toil in the middle.

Michaela: So I think it takes a little bit of time for them to accustomise themselves to what they have achieved and I think that sometimes the process can muddy that impression.

And so I do have people in the research who were just exhausted by the whole process, and they've moved in and they feel it's a bit of an anti-climax. But I'm sure that as time goes on, as they get more and more distance from that process, they'll realise what they've achieved and they will be quite happy with the outcome. At the same time they can be pleased with the house but unhappy with elements of the process.

So I think I wouldn't want to paint a negative picture that all people are unhappy with the houses they've built. I don't think that's the case at all. I think that close to the project people become quite ambivalent about it. It's often quite pressurised getting to the end of a project, and all of the decisions that need to be made. Somebody told me that they had decision-making fatigue. They just didn't want to make any more choices. But they build houses that they're very happy to live in and they're happy with the way they function. But because they have so much knowledge of the process that's gone into it, it can often come across as though there are bits of it that they're more negative about. But overall I think that people are quite positive about the houses, if not the experience.

Ben: Well Michaela, this has been a lot of fun today. Something slightly different but I still think very relevant. Thank you very much.

Michaela: Thank you Ben.