

## Building a self: community self-build and the reconstruction of identity

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Adam took a last drag and crushed the smouldering butt beneath his concrete-spattered boots. He was standing just out of the line of sight of the office window, leaning against the portacabin that everyone on site called the café. It was a decent setup here, cups of tea and bacon rolls. It was good not to have to always be worrying about what was in the fridge, and what to buy that wouldn't go out of date before he remembered to cook it. And to make sure to put enough aside to buy the food in the first place. And pay rent. He sighed. It had been three years since he left, and he still struggled to get all this stuff straight in his mind. So much easier when they just took it out of your money, and you went and got your food. And the money in your pocket was your money, not rent, and bills, and all that stuff. Three years out, and he was still finding it hard to remember it all. Didn't even learn it in school. He frowned. Didn't learn anything in school, did he? Apart from how not to be there half the time. He wasn't in a very good place today, and he appreciated that Justin and Len seemed to understand, and were giving him some space. He was grateful to them, he was happy to admit that. But he just couldn't deal with anyone today. Things weren't as bad as they had been, he wasn't so angry, so out of control, not since he'd been down to Tedworth House. He was looking forward to the end of the project, when he could shut the door of his flat, and be just him. Him and his missus. Stability, that's what he wanted. And control. He'd done a few of the training courses on offer, but there wasn't anything that really floated his boat. He wanted his own business, didn't want to be under the thumb of some boss-man

ordering him around, talking to him like a child. He was stubborn like that. Always had been, always would be. He straightened up and trudged back through the metal railings onto the site, pulling his work gloves from the back pocket of his jeans and putting them on.

## Challenges to identity

Throughout their lives, people find themselves needing or wanting to rethink their sense of who they are, to perform 'identity work' (Lawler, 2014, 52). Changing career, becoming a parent, or retirement, all are life events that might cause someone to feel that some aspect of their identity has evolved, changed or been lost. Sometimes these changes are anticipated and desired, and sometimes they are unwanted and unexpected. Becoming homeless is one such challenge (Snow and Anderson, 1987; Boydell et al., 2000; Butchinsky, 2007); another is substance addiction (Best et al., 2016). Some changes are linked to institutions, such as being sent to prison and subsequent release (Harvey, 2013; Coffey, 2012); or joining the armed forces, and later making the jump back to 'civvy street'. In some traditions, events like these and their consequences have been framed using language like 'biographical disruption' (Bury, 1982) or identity 'turning points' (Karp, 1996). From other perspectives, particularly those that contest the idea of an essential 'self' that drives the performance of identity, coping with the effects of these events may be seen more as a continued process of self-policing, to force a fit with social norms (Foucault, 1979; Rose, 1999).

Identity, then, is a slippery term, with a meaning that is at the same time simple and obvious – an identity is who someone is – and theoretically multifaceted and complex: it is 'not fixed, but ... not nothing either' (Hall, 1997, 33). Different traditions would variously define an identity as something we develop as we go through adolescence (e.g. Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1980); as something we navigate in reference to social groups (Tajfel, 1982); as something we work on through reflexive choices as a sort of life project, deciding 'What to do? How to act? Who to be?' (Giddens, 1991, 70); as something we perform (Goffman, 1956) as a fluid, evolving process (Butler, 1990). In this chapter, I have drawn upon the definition proposed by Steph Lawler, who calls in turn upon Ricoeur's narrative interpretation (1991) to conceptualise identity as 'something produced through the narratives people use to explain and understand their lives' (Lawler, 2014, 30). And the reason we tend to view an identity

as a single thread that weaves through a life is not because there is some sort of essential 'self' residing beneath the surface, but because we are continually telling and retelling these narratives, producing the self as something stable that continues through time.

David lowered his newspaper, and looked around warily. He had moved his table slightly to one side so it didn't block his way if he needed to move quickly, and from his vantage point in the corner he could see right along the bar to the front door. He ran down his mental inventory of the people in the room: Jon was behind the bar, looking relaxed after the lunchtime rush. The elderly man, who kept shuffling out for a fag, was still sat in the other corner nursing his pint. And those two. He didn't recognise them, and they made him uncomfortable. Why were they sitting wearing long coats in this weather? It didn't make sense. Unless the coats were hiding something. Time to go, just to be sure. David folded his paper, finished the rest of his half in two gulps, proud of his self-control, and stood up to leave the pub. He pushed open the door and paused in the doorway to scan the street. He waited for a couple of people to pass – he couldn't cope with anyone walking behind him, it made him too anxious – and set off for home.

The hostel wasn't much, but it was better than sleeping under a bridge. And when he'd been to see the council about housing after he was released, all they'd done was ask him if he used drugs, if he was pregnant – he shook his head in disbelief at the memory – or if he'd recently entered the country.

'I've served my country,' he'd said, 'doesn't that make a difference?'

'I'm sorry,' the advisor had said. 'You aren't a priority.'

His probation officer hadn't been able to help either, so he'd tried the British Legion. He didn't want handouts, he wanted his life back, he'd told the advisor.

## **Homelessness and ex-Services personnel**

Most transitions out of the armed forces are successful, but a minority of people have difficulty adjusting to civilian life (Forces in Mind Trust, 2013). Estimates for the proportion of ex-military who experience

homelessness have varied considerably, in part because of differences between research methods, sites and what definition of homelessness is being used (Dandeker et al., 2005). In 2015 in London, the charity St Mungo's counted 452 rough sleepers who had served in the armed forces, of whom 142 were UK nationals. This equates to around 3 per cent from the UK, and 6 per cent including other nationalities (CHAIN, 2016). These figures have remained consistent since 2012 (CHAIN, 2016, 27), but would not cover those deemed homeless under a broader definition: living in hostels, 'sofa-surfing' or living temporarily in a hostel or bed and breakfast hotel (Johnson et al., 2008).

From a different perspective, a study conducted by the National Audit Office (NAO) in 2007 concluded that of those who had left the forces in the previous two years, 5 per cent had 'been homeless' (2007, 33). But in the same study the NAO reported that 15 per cent of Service leavers, when asked about current living arrangements, were *not* living in their own home, with relatives, renting privately or living in social housing, which would indicate that they have in fact been homeless in the broader sense. The same study found that 5 per cent of Service leavers had experienced problems with alcohol, 2 per cent received psychiatric treatment as an outpatient, and 1.4 per cent had problems with drugs (it seems very likely that the same person may experience more than one of these issues, but the report provides counts by issue only). Evidence available in the UK suggests that homeless people with an ex-Services background are likely to be older (Riverside ECHG, 2011; Tessler et al., 2002) and to struggle more with alcohol and physical disability than with drugs and mental health problems (Knight et al., 2011; Dandeker et al., 2005). While it has received some attention in the media, prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has been found to be relatively low: 4–6 per cent among personnel returning from Iraq (Sundin et al., 2011). Delayed-onset PTSD, which may be associated with other life stresses (Andrews et al., 2009) – becoming homeless would be one such, we can assume – was found to have a prevalence of 3.5 per cent (Goodwin et al., 2011).

These findings are consistent with the research into the issues facing homeless people generally, a group that has diverse and complex needs (Sumerall et al., 2000). People who are homeless are likely to need support with mental health, physical illness and substance addiction. They are also likely to have experienced family problems and abuse; been long-term unemployed; not completed their education; had a history of offending; or many years of institutional living (Pleace and Quilgars, 2003). Homeless ex-Services personnel generally follow the same routes

into homelessness as the general homeless population, with sources of risk being broadly the same between these groups (Montgomery et al., 2013). Routes to homelessness include vulnerabilities and difficulties prior to enlisting, like spending time in care, having difficulty settling down in their younger lives, or being in trouble with the law prior to enlisting (Lemos, 2005; Mares and Rosenheck, 2004). Significant life events, such as bereavement, financial crisis (see also Johnson et al., 2008) or family breakdown (Doyle and Peterson, 2011; MacManus and Wessely, 2011) may also be a trigger.

‘I want to work,’ David said to the British Legion advisor. ‘And I have to get away from that halfway place. I know I’ve made some mistakes. I’m not blaming anyone but myself. It was a struggle for all of us, coping with my problems “up here”’ he tapped the right side of his head. ‘She couldn’t cope with it; I wasn’t the same person. We’re always away, always away, you know? And then you come back and then you live together 24 hours a day, you fall off the wagon, they can’t deal with it. Five guys I knew when I come out, and within a year of them being out, all their women left them. I still saw the kids, mind, it broke my heart each time I had to leave ’em.’

The British Legion advisor nodded sympathetically, and handed David £70 of shopping vouchers to help tide him over.

‘There is something else you might be interested in,’ she said. ‘We’ve got this self-build project going on, up by the river, would you like ...’

‘What’s it about?’ interrupted David, cautiously.

‘You give a minimum of two, two-and-a-half days a week to the project, and at the end you get a flat to live in. A brand new flat,’ she said. ‘And you’ll be given help while you’re doing it, training courses, help with your CV. What do you think?’ David had thought that sounded great. If there wasn’t a catch. So he’d taken the piece of paper with the mobile number of someone called Mark, and given him a call.

‘Come down the site tomorra,’ Mark had said, after they’d chatted for a few minutes. ‘We’ll have some details off ya, and see how things go from there. Alright?’

## Supported community self-build

The next morning, David trudged up the main road from the footbridge, past a row of terraced houses with brightly painted front

doors. A noise made him jump and look around for the source, but it was just a young bloke slipping out of his door for a smoke. Discreetly, David looked him up and down, but he didn't see a threat there. The only thing out of the ordinary was that the young smoker was wearing socks, and the pavement was wet. David shrugged, and turned left into a side street. Left again, into a narrower street, a brick wall on one side. He could be over it, if he had to. Very faintly, he could smell bacon frying.

Four months later, David was on site most days. They gave him a cooked breakfast every day, as long as he turned up on time. That was worth the 40-minute bus ride, standing room only. But he was out of the hostel, they were going to let him move into one of the flats from their first project, and they'd arranged for him to see a counsellor about his anxiety. He'd done the basic training offered, site safety, industrial ropes – that had made him nervous, but the other lads had been encouraging – and he had various plant licences, like forklift and forward-tipping dumper, coming up. It was good; he liked the work, though he mostly kept himself to himself on site. Some of the 'squaddies' annoyed him.

In 2011, the government's housing strategy changed the terminology around self-build. Self-build became 'custom build' (DCLG, 2011) and a typology of seven different types of custom build was identified. This project fitted the description of a 'supported community self-build group' (Wallace et al., 2013, 7). With this model, a social landlord or independent self-build organisation helps individuals learn the skills to build a group of homes together as opposed to custom builds led by developers, or projects initiated, organised and managed by individuals. In this project, the build was initiated and organised by a social housing association in partnership with a charitable organisation; the latter recruited a group of 10 individuals known as 'self-builders', who worked on site, undertook training and moved into the properties as tenants of the housing association.

The narratives and analysis presented here are based on interview data from a study to investigate the personal, social and economic impact of supported community self-build scheme for ex-Services personnel in housing need. The project had a number of distinct phases: preparation, recruitment, build and post-build. The preparation phase included organising funding for the project; forming a coalition of partners; finding and purchasing suitable land; obtaining planning permission; appointing a contractor; and all the other administrative tasks required to get a social

housing project off the ground. In 2013, a site suitable for a development of 10 units was identified, and work scheduled to begin in early 2014. In the autumn of 2013 there were some issues with planning. The time it took to get the various issues resolved and revised plans submitted and approved was much longer than anticipated and as a result the start date had to be put back to January 2015.

Recruitment happened alongside this: publicising the project in various ways, visits to ex-Services support organisations and hostels, meetings, phone calls, conversations. The criteria were that participants must be ex-Service; homeless or in temporary accommodation; and unemployed, underemployed or in insecure employment. They must also be free of drug and alcohol abuse and willing to commit to working on site for the duration of the build process. In April 2014, once a stable group was recruited – though this proved an unpredictable and changeable process – a residential team-building activity took place. Due to various factors, including the delay in starting the project, several of the original recruits drifted away and had to be replaced in the autumn of 2014. A contractor was appointed, and the ground was broken in January 2015.

## **Working with people living chaotically**

The contractor was responsible for the group of 10 self-builders day-to-day, keeping records of attendance, running the café and distributing food parcels donated by a local charity. The self-builders worked with the on-site trainer to develop a personalised learning plan and were supported (and funded) to undertake training, which ranged from basic courses that were low cost, sometimes free, to more expensive courses in heavy plant machinery likely to result in greater employability. During the project, three self-builders left or were asked to leave the project, and their places were taken up by others. One violated the terms of his probation and was returned to prison; another was unable to overcome a substance addition; and the third got into debt and disappeared.

Jimmy propped his rucksack against the low wall then sat on the cold ground, leaning back against his bag. He rested one elbow against his knee and cupped his fag with the other hand to shield it from the wind. His hand shook. He felt bad, but what was he supposed to do? He'd got into some bother, and he'd taken out a loan to give him some time to sort it out. Enjoying being flush for a change,

he'd had a bit of fun over the bank holiday (who wouldn't?) and ended up in a bad way. He'd borrowed a bit off Charlie, just for a few days, to keep things going, he'd said. But now, some serious people were on his case, and there was no way he could pay them what he'd agreed, and Charlie. He felt bad about that. When things were more sorted, maybe he'd come back. He didn't like to think of leaving Charlie short. It was the drink, always the drink that started it. Some of the lads on the project had talked about the drinking culture in the army, but he didn't really blame that. Some people come out of it alright and some people just go downhill, if they've got tendencies. And he supposed he had tendencies.

He hadn't really wanted to leave the army, but he'd hurt his back in a training accident. When he came out, he moved up north looking for work, and found a decent sales job at a bathroom company. Managed to save a bit, and decided to have some fun. Went travelling, met someone, got into the free party circuit, and dabbled in some harder stuff. When that relationship broke down, he'd come back to the UK and started his own business fitting bathrooms. There were periods of sobriety where he lived a normal life, three months, six months. And then it'd be a nightmare for six months, before he pulled himself back from the brink. But Jimmy had never thought of himself as your classic alcoholic who needs to drink every day, maybe that's why it took him so long to try and make some changes. He could go months without a drink. Well, weeks, maybe. And left alone in a room, he could probably drink without any problem. But when he drank with certain people, there were consequences; one drink would turn into a three-day binge, and ... problems. He'd lost his licence, smashed his car up. Eventually, he'd lost his flat and had to move into a room in a shared house. Lots of partying, lots of drugs. He'd got into some bother, there'd been some violence, some involvement with the police, and they'd thrown him out. He'd ended up on the streets, using, and then in a hostel for veterans. That's where he'd heard about the self-build project. He'd had been suspicious at first. He'd said, 'No, I'm not a builder.' But one of the lads on the project had said, 'You don't really have to be, you just have to be willing.' So Jimmy had thought, why not? It was a chance. He'd started to get some help for his addictions. Proper help, not just promises to himself. He started doing the programme, for the first time in his life doing something, actions rather than just saying, 'I want to stop'. But he couldn't seem to stop, and they couldn't have someone on site that was still using heroin.

Len had offered to arrange treatment for him, send him to some farm somewhere in the middle of nowhere. He didn't like the sound of that. Mark had taken him to a caff, bought him lunch, and told him about the project that was getting going in Plymouth. Mark had said it'd help to be away from all the bad influences. Maybe it would. Maybe. He had Mark's number. The coach doors slid out and open with a hiss, Jimmy pushed himself to his feet and slung his rucksack over his shoulder. He climbed the narrow steps, found a seat, stowed his stuff on the rack, and settled in as the coach pulled out of the bus station and headed towards the motorway.

The self-builders tracked to the end of the project ranged in age from early thirties to early fifties. Their experiences were largely consistent with those described in the research literature: many had become homeless through relationship breakdown, and were experiencing (or had experienced) mental health difficulties, including PTSD and addiction to alcohol or drugs. One was a rough sleeper, one alternated between sleeping in his car and sofa-surfing. The others were sofa-surfing or living in temporary hostels. Six had some form of employment, one of whom had a permanent job; the remainder were claiming Jobseeker's Allowance. Two self-builders had problems with their physical health, experiencing pain. Neither was registered disabled when the project began. Construction was completed in late 2015 and the building opened officially in December. The self-builders were assisted in moving and settling into their new accommodation, each received a grant of £1,000 for furniture and household items. They became tenants of the housing association, able to access support from the association's community team.

Ryan looked up from the schematics he was checking, and sipped his tea. He was a few weeks into his level 3 diploma in electrotechnical services. He hadn't thought he'd be able to do that course, because it was so expensive. But he'd sat down with Justin, the training manager, and they'd sorted funding. It had taken a while to get the budget approved, and he'd had to chase for it. But it had come through eventually. And as it happened, the sparks needed a bit of extra help, so he was shadowing the senior electrician on site, helping with paperwork and other basic stuff. He loved it. He loved every day. Working in construction, the lads, the banter on the site, it was familiar and comfortable. He'd enjoyed his time in the army. Loved the adventure, the travelling and the excitement of that life. It had been his routine, his life, his wife, his family. Everything. All he'd had to do was keep

his mouth shut and do his job. But it had all been taken away in that one moment. They'd all known what they'd signed up for. Give them an enemy, they'd fight, hands down, tooth and nail. But he'd come along, straight on his forward section and three of his mates, including his best mate ... no. He remembered what they'd said, getting caught in a friendly fire. That's everything OK is it, a friendly fire? Ryan closed his eyes and took a deep breath in, held it for a few seconds, then let it out slowly. He didn't need to go there.

When he'd come out, it was a big shock to his system. He couldn't handle it. He'd been in hostels, trying to get jobs. He'd found it hard to cope with noise, people, crowded places – he was a broken man. There'd been some trouble, drinking, a crisis, police involvement. He'd been in custody when someone from the British Legion had turned up and they'd put him in touch with the project. Len had understood what he'd been through and got him into the health system, got him into counselling, helped him find somewhere secure to live. He owed him a lot. Ryan took another gulp of his tea and turned his mind back to the schematics.

## **Military and post-military identities: the literature**

There is a considerable body of research into military identities. In what has been called the 'classical' tradition of military sociology (Woodward and Jenkins, 2011, 254), researchers have been most concerned with how best to manage identities in pursuit of military objectives. On the other hand, interpretative approaches pay more attention to individual subjectivities, with a particular focus on gendered identities and military masculinities (for example Atherton, 2009; Higate and Henry, 2009; Woodward, 1998). In more recent research, it has been suggested that military identities can usefully be conceptualised not only as attributes that can be mapped into sociological or military categories, but as practices emerging from within the narrated lived experiences (as per Lawler, 2014) of Services personnel. Woodward and Jenkins (2011) found identities constructed around skill, competence and expertise; kinship and camaraderie; and relations to the operations or sphere of Service (e.g. Iraq, Northern Ireland) in soldiers' narratives. The narratives of the self-builders chimed with their findings (including the observation that personal meaning can be inscribed in absence as much as in presence: such absences were also in the self-builders' narratives – such as one of the self-builders who went into Ryan's narrative shying away from talking about

the loss of his friends). But the self-builders were no longer soldiers, they no longer felt that their skills and professional competencies were needed, or recognised as such (another self-builder's ability to 'do his job' in the army – and this was a euphemistic absence in his narrative, we both knew to what he was referring – involved skills not required in civilian life). Loss of comradeship was painful, as was the feeling that 'civvies' neither fully understood nor particularly appreciated the service given and sacrifices made (as with David's housing advisor at the council).

As well as military identities during Service, the consequences for identity of the transition from military to civilian life have been the focus of some attention. Herman and Yarwood (2014) studied what they regarded as successful transitions, and found that while some respondents had come to terms with their new identities, others were 'stuck in a liminal space' (2014, 53) which led to feelings of isolation. It has been suggested that the relatively high rates of homelessness among Service leavers might be related to this sense of being neither one thing nor the other: too institutionalised (this was a word used by several self-builders, including several of those whose experiences went into the Adam and David stories), or too damaged by their experiences to truly fit in with civilian life but no longer having a place in the military either. So they may seek a transitory lifestyle similar to the one they had in the forces (Cloke et al., 2002); rough sleeping, for example, has been linked to knowledge of outdoor survival techniques and physical fitness (Higate, 2000). A high proportion of ex-Services personnel have also been found to stay in the area near to the military base at which they served (Riverside ECHG, 2011). Taken together, this body of literature suggests that identities constructed through the experience of military service can be hard to give up, particularly when a person doesn't have a stable place to live, where they can maintain the aspects of their identity that seem important to them: their sense of themselves as independent, capable, masculine men with skills that are useful; and they are used to thinking of those skills as useful, indeed vital, for the security of their country.

## **Community self-build and the reconstruction of a post-military, post-homeless identity**

'Where do you want it?' Adam grabbed the heavy plant pot with both hands and lifted it off the ground. He'd been walking across the car park when he'd spotted Charlie struggling to drag it across the ground.

'Should've moved it to the right place before I put the compost in and watered it!' said Charlie. 'Thanks.'

'No problem, no problem at all mate,' said Adam. He perched on the low wall of the communal garden that Charlie had made.

'So, how's it going?' asked Charlie. 'How's work?'

'Yeah, you know. Boss is alright, I'm just keeping my head down, d'ya know what I mean? But it pays the bills. Well, most of 'em...'

Adam's drinking was under control now, he was in a much better place all round. But he was still struggling with his money. He'd called Justin last week, to see if he could lend him 50 quid, but Justin couldn't do it, because the project had finished. So things were still a bit chaotic, a bit hand-to-mouth. His job was casual, labouring on another site with one of the contractors from the build, so he didn't always know how much he'd have in his pocket at the end of the week. But the Housing Association were good landlords, Laura had always been there if he needed advice or help, and he knew that as long as he did his best and kept them in the loop, he'd hang on to the flat. He didn't want to lose it; it was his stability. And once he got going with his own business, being his own boss, everything would balance out.

'Coats on! It's cold out there,' called David, standing by the solid front door with its smart row of buzzers. It was almost a year since David had walked anxiously up the little access road, surveying the terrain and planning out escape routes in his head. Now, he was taking the girls over to the park for a blast on their scooters, get a bit of fresh air. He'd found a job working shifts. It was OK, best thing was it fitted around his time with the kids. It was a bit of a struggle financially; David thought the flat was pretty expensive for where it was. But they were all happy there; it felt like home. It sounded like home, too, he thought ruefully, as the girls shrieked and whooped as they ran down the stairs. He wanted to stay there, put down some roots. He waved to Adam and Charlie as he passed them, still chatting in the little garden Charlie looked after.

Ryan's key made a satisfyingly solid sound as he unlocked his front door. It had been a busy day on site, and he just wanted to chill in his own space. He shut the door, cutting off the sound of David's girls playing in the stairwell. He'd hoped to stay with the electrical contractors who'd worked on the project, but it hadn't worked out. Not because they hadn't wanted him, something to do with not getting a contract or something. So he'd looked for other

work and found a position with a small firm. He was getting on well with his boss, he reckoned he might like to keep up his training, maybe do a day release studying something like building services engineering. Now he had a solid base and decent salary. He'd be out collecting for the British Legion on Poppy Day. And he'd started working with the Legion, giving talks in schools about their work. There had been tough times and good times, but he was looking forward to the future.

The study found that many self-builders had been able to remake relationships, particularly with their children. And that working together for many months on site had given them back a sense of comradeship. Not the same as what several called the 'brotherhood' that they had felt in the military, but nevertheless they liked having a shared sense of belonging because of their common past, and because they had worked together on the self-build. And the stability offered by the project – the prospect of secure housing and the training available – helped them find employment, an important way for them to feel as though they were self-sufficient, and not 'scroungers' (a term used by one of the self-builders drawn on for Adam) reliant on handouts. Several found employment in the building trade, discovering that the masculine, tough and practical nature of construction work and the 'banter' on site suited their sense of who they were. Being part of the self-build project did seem to effect some improvements to the self-builders' emotional well-being generally. For those with serious difficulties it represented the first steps towards seeking support and gaining a more solid base from which to recover from trauma or addiction, rather than full recovery. And they spoke of feeling pride and a sense of achievement, increased confidence and willingness to trust. Other emotional responses included feelings of contentment and having put down stable roots at last. Self-builders who completed the project seemed to rebuild – quite literally – their identities as part of the process.

... it gave [me] my life back. If I didn't go on this project I'd probably still be where I was at, in hostels ... in the woods ... and I still think I'd be doing that or jail or in a nut house... (Self-builder)

## Summary of research methods

Three rounds of recruitment to the project were monitored, and participant observation of recruitment meetings and the two-day team building

session was conducted. Interviews were conducted in March, and for replacement self-builders in May 2015. Interviews with the project team and with three self-builders from an earlier project and site visits took place between January 2015 and July 2016. Final interviews with self-builders took place by telephone in July 2016, seven months after they had moved into their new properties. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Not every self-builder agreed to be interviewed at every stage of the research, for a variety of different reasons, but every self-builder was interviewed at least once and observed at some point during the process. The university's ethics committee approved the research.

Arts-based research (ABR) is a methodology that deploys artistic and literary practices as part of the research process (Knowles and Cole, 2008; Leavy, 2013, 2015; Barone and Eisner, 2012). Four semi-fictionalised narratives were plotted as part of the study to highlight how complex and varied were the experiences. To create them, first, during the open coding phase of the analysis, all the data relating to an individual's life history, their training and experiences on the project, and their status at completion was coded as a 'narrative event'. Next, for each case, a life map was visualised, with each narrative event in sequence. There were 14 life maps in total. For each, a general typology of narrative events was developed. Some examples are: 'homeless as a result of relationship breakdown'; 'criminal conviction'; 'substance addiction'; 'regular presence on site'; 'worked towards personal goals'. Once the general typology had been matched to each map, personal information was removed, leaving only an anonymised sequence of events. With these diagrams, four typical stories were identified and, with these as the basic narrative structure, creative reinterpretations based on a combination of the life histories captured in interviews (with identifying details changed, including their names) and the researchers' own experiences, recorded in fieldnotes, of the places and people involved (for example, walking to the building site and noticing the young man standing outside his door smoking, wearing only socks) were written.

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