

Self Build Street and Residents

Interview Transcript 01/02/17 – Resident of Walters Way

A student approached Walters Way:

I am looking at whether self-build projects can facilitate increased levels of participation and social cohesion for my masters dissertation project.

I wish to speak with someone at Walters Way who might have been involved with the project from the initial stages (or who could offer an insight into how participation amongst residents and social cohesion has changed over time).

A long term resident of 20 years, not an original self builder but has done extensions and renovations to their house was interviewed.

A summary is here:

Interviewer: Can you tell me how you are associated with Walters Way?

Participant: I've been a resident for 20 years here, I bought the house from the original self builder who lived here for 10 years after they completed the house. They wanted to have a change of scenery, they had lived in London all their life and wanted to live elsewhere in the country. I was at the time looking to buy a house and I had seen a Segal house at the Centre for Alternative Technology and thought "oh that's a very interesting house" then thought nothing of it for a couple of years. I went to an event called London Open House, that is more like London Open Property, where properties / buildings / offices / government buildings that are normally closed to the public, opened up one weekend in the year to demonstrate architecture. I went and had a look at the Segal property that was featuring in the event and there was an advert for this house for sale and I thought "well I'd better go and have a look" and I'm still here.

We still see the original owners, they come back once every year or two and have a look around. I still regard the house as their house, I'm just kind of looking after it being a custodian, because they put in so much time and effort, 18 months of self building in order to build the house. If it wasn't for them I wouldn't be living in a lovely place here. I'm very grateful and respectful of them.

Interviewer: Are many of the original self builders still living there?

Participant: 3 out of 13 are still living here. So after 30 years that's not too bad ratio. There was an elderly couple who moved out about 2 years ago, they were just too frail. We've actually had a fair number; from what I can see those look like they'll be remaining until they get too old. One or two of the original self builders are now quiet, they don't like to get too much involved in the self build scene, they've done their time.

Interviewer: Do you know much about the initial process? (*Interviewer explains research project and focus and why Walters Way is important to study – how has self-build influenced social cohesion and participation initially and since then*).

Participant: When I was buying the house I didn't really know much about the initial process for these type of houses. I certainly know about self build schemes but they are more the traditional brick schemes where brickies start on house number 1 and then the brickies start on house number 2 and then the plasters start on house number 1, then the electricians go in, and then by the time you get to house number 20 everyone

is really tired and still waiting for it to be built, whereas this process is very different, in that each person can pretty much work on their house and just requires some help on occasions, so perhaps that means not everyone gets too tired by the end. So when I was in the process of buying the house I went to Segal self build site in neighbouring borough for a day and help erect the frame of a house.

There was a large amount of work done in getting people together to run the project, getting funding, engaging with Councils/ local bodies/local authorities and Government Departments. I'm not too aware of the detail of that, but that was 1980 and processes have changed now. Now in 2017 One of the sons of the original self builders is running a project to do another self build scheme in the same borough. It is called RUSS.

Interviewer: In terms of the years you have been there, has participation and social cohesion changed over the years in your experience?

Participant: This type of self build, the initial getting the main frames of the buildings put together, you do need the help of the other self builders to do the main erection, but after that you can work on your own house at your own pace. There are other parts where you will ask your neighbours to come and help. You're not quite in each others pockets but you've got that relationship of helping each other. And that's kind of existed here onwards. It's also a private road so you've got a company and we have AGMs. So from the initial self build, I would say that there's quite good social cohesion was developed as part of that. Walter Segal liked chatting to people and getting them together and that has continued. The majority of the residents are very friendly and it continues. Some people have now moved in, as they really want to live in this street because they've heard about it and it suits their aspirations and life style. I think it's got perhaps even stronger over the last decade. We do have a good group of people. Generally, it's very good, we have a lot of socials, sometimes more formal, you know each person bring a dish and we share, to impromptu, are you around this evening, come round let's have a drink, or if it's a summers evening, sit outside or something like that. The kids all play outside, they all interact. I would say there's a very good level of social cohesion.

Interviewer: You mention that there can be tensions, in terms of overcoming something like that, is that done formally say through the management company or more informally?

Participant: The only management we have in the street is to manage the private road. It's not like a Co-operative housing set up, there's nothing formal. My partner says "it's like we're one big family" you occasionally fall out and you just sort of patch things up in due course. You get that in society.

Interviewer: How often would you say you come together for formal activities?

Participant: Well we have an AGM once a year and then we just have social activities, I think once every two months. We had a couple of things at Christmas and Easter. We also have a large street party in the summer where we invite friends and family, put bands on, BBQ and things like that. The rest of the activities are more adhoc, there's children's birthdays, you know come round for some cake and a glass of wine. We do quite a lot, a good portion of our social life is with our neighbours.

One failing of this particular estate, not of the self build process, but of the estate design was that there was no provision for a communal space, even a small one, like perhaps the size of a car parking space where you could put a picnic bench/BBQ. Or perhaps something bigger where you could have a workshop with power tools. That's my biggest criticism of the whole thing, it would be good to have somewhere we can all gather.

In the summer we just hang out in the street on the tarmac, it becomes a social space. I strongly feel that having good consideration for having some kind of communal space, it doesn't have to be that large, just somewhere where people can come and meet up. Like in London with all the big houses that have a square, a village green or something like that.

Interviewer: Just going back to something you said earlier, you said that the social cohesion had improved over the last 10 years, can you pinpoint why that is?

Participant: I think because we had a couple of new people into the street who are really enthusiastic. There's one young couple who wanted to come and live here and they put on events and get stuck in. There's a couple of other recent residents who again got stuck in and are a part of the street. There are one couple who keeps themselves to themselves, but you can't expect everybody to be outward going. It's not a street if you wanted privacy and complete peace and quiet you wouldn't want to live here. We've just got people here now who really value what we've got here.

Interviewer: Do you think then that the self build project attracts a certain type of people?

Participant: Certainly doing self building, people have got to have the confidence and capability in order to take on such a project, physically and also time wise, so there is an impact that has your lives. You've basically got to tell your mates you're not going to be around for a year or so. Thus you have to be of certain character to do that. According to a recent survey, about 45% of people said that they were interested in doing self-build, or self-projected managed build. So that's quite a high percentage of people wanting to take control.

Interviewer: Yes, I read about that survey, I think it's easy to tick a box and not understand the reality of it.

Participant: Yes, so perhaps could whittle that number down by some degree but that's still a good proportion of people. Walters Way the buildings look slightly odd, they're timber frames, they're pre-fab, they're an eye sore, once was suggested "a bunch of hippies live there", we've had all of that in the past. But because they are slightly different here, it does attract a certain type of people. Not everyone would want to live here, because of the old thing of "brick is best" and certainly not because they could easily burn down. As they are slightly unusual it does attract certain people who are happy to accept different accommodation. The type of people we have here are quite diverse, in their jobs. We do all walks of life here. I'm glad that we do have a wide diverse number of people here. If it was just one type that wouldn't be good and it shows that people from all walks of life can embrace this type of architecture, living and idea of self build. That's the positives of having diverse people.

Interviewer: All the houses are privately owned aren't they?

Yes, when the scheme was set up, Lewisham Council had lots of odd pockets of land that they didn't know what to do with and they wanted to get some housing. For this particular scheme and another one, the houses were built with the view that the owners could rent them or buy them. That was part of the set up. Don't forget that we were in the era of Thatcher and council house sell offs. The subsequent schemes, they were just you build, then you rent fairly cheaply. There was no right to buy.

Interviewer: So do you think self-build facilitates social cohesion and participation?

Participant: It certainly helps in bring people together and then results and then hopefully those people will hang around and other come in and continue that cohesion. There's no reason if done properly if other housing set ups can do that as well. From co-operative housing to perhaps even large house builders building decent houses, to have a community in the place that is constructed. Having a community is great, but it's not the golden bullet to solve everything in society.

Interviewer: If you have anything else which you'd like to add please do.

Participant: With long term impacts, when the self build is completed, although there is a long standing joke that a self build project is never finished, you just move in and finish a bit off and things like that. But when the main build comes to an end, it's to have things in place to keep the residents together so they don't retreat into their homes and shut the door. Because when we moved in, the first AGM we went to, everyone was complaining that we never did have a party to celebrate finishing off. And the next AGM, we never did have a party, and the next AGM, we never did...So why don't we just have a party? What do you mean? Well, we've got a BBQ...I've got someone who can play music, well bring them along. Right OK. So me and my partner facilitated the first street party, by just gathering up people to go and do something. That's been a great success each year. You do need certain social things to occur during the build but then to continue and go on, and enable people to have the confidence to do social things. Another event one neighbour was how are you going to feed loads of people? it's winter, I replied Jacket potatoes, beans and cheese. They replied Oh gosh that's really easy isn't it. Yes!

In one sense you've got to enable and build the scheme with practical skills to build the house, but also ensure that they have the social skills to create events and do things, to continue the interaction between people. One neighbour had opened their house for the London Open House for a number of years and due to circumstances they no longer wanted to do it. So I said OK I'll do it, I'll open my house up, let a couple of hundred people through the house and talked to them all day. I felt I had the confidence to do that. Another resident has done it, but not everyone has the confidence to do that. Giving other residents recently a bit of reassurance and support, they've opened up and enjoyed it.

So, ensuring that people have those social skills. Everybody thinks that they're good in social situations, but sometimes you need to ensure that those skills are there and that the confidence is there to go forward in the community.

Interviewer: The choice of participation is also important, like you said, you have some residents who want to be involved in every single social activity, so maybe choice is important to social cohesion as well?

Participant: Yes, lets refer to schemes to get more children out playing in the street. There is an organisation based in Bristol called "Playing Out" about enabling people in streets to close the road off for a period of time and getting kids to come out and play, Adults to socialise. A lot of that is getting the neighbours onside of the idea, participating and enjoying the social thing, rather than going in and closing their front door. That's very interesting and I've been following them for the last 5/10 years. We've always had kids playing in the street and Bristol is quite good at having street parties. That's again enabling people and giving them the confidence to go and do it. So saying to some one go and put on a high-vis jacket, stand at the end of the road and stop any cars coming. Oh what me? Yes, this is what you need to go and do it, buddy up with

someone else, in the end we had a good time, we had a good chin wag and confidence has increased. It's enabling people in environments to go and do things!

Interviewer: Thank you. *Closes interview.*

END OF INTERVIEW

When one person doesn't get on with a neighbour, it is tried to be resolved, but that's just the way things are.