



Commissioning as the cornerstone of self-build. Assessing the constraints and opportunities of self-build housing in the Netherlands



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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the relationship between self-build housing and the wider planning and housing regime. Although there is growing policy and academic attention to self-build housing, there is a lack of understanding of the institutional and regulatory conditions shaping the prospects of such housing provision. This paper takes the case of The Netherlands and scrutinizes how institutional dynamics over time have made lower and middle residents dependent on densely organized consortia of municipalities, housing associations and developers. These norms of land development appear to be at odds with the logic of self-building. Through exploring evidence in a pilot study of a municipal self-building scheme in Almere, the authors suggest that making self-building the cornerstone of a resident-led land development strategy, also for low- and middle-incomes, implies a reconfiguration of the actors' positions in housing provision. This entails a commissioning role for residents in the institutional domain of social and commercial developers.

1. Introduction

Self-build housing, which entails residents obtaining responsibility for, and control over, the development of their own dwelling, is being increasingly promoted as a means to provide housing, though it remains quantitatively and qualitatively understated. Underlying this is an assumption that dwellers' control of housing production has the potential to improve individual and social well-being (Turner, 1972). Stimulated by economic liberalization and the decentralization of service provision, there are growing expectations of a more active involvement of citizens in the production of urban environments. Still, in sharp contrast to the recognized position of self-organized forms of housing provision in housing systems of the global South (Pasternak and D'Ottaviano, 2018), self-building remains only partially acknowledged by governments in advanced capitalist economies (Hall, 2014; Harris, 1999). For example, in the Netherlands in 2015 the share of self-build in newly built housing amounted to only 1415%.¹

In spite of growing attention to the stimulation of self-build housing, it continues to constitute a peripheral means of housing provision for low- and middle-incomes in advanced capitalist economies. Similarly, the position of self-build housing remains insufficiently investigated in the international housing literature (Duncan and Rowe, 1993). This is striking in the light of the positive effects self-building can have on the accessibility of housing for low- and middle-income groups and the

diversity of housing stock. Resident involvement in procurement may contribute to housing that is more affordable, of better quality and more attuned to residents' needs (Parvis et al., 2011). Institutionalized systems of housing provision inhibit the substantive right citizens ought to have in order to exercise control over urban space (Alexander, 1979; Scott, 2012). For self-building, impediments in terms of capital, regulation and land release remain considerable (Wallace et al., 2013). While factors of planning and governance are crucial in terms of enabling self-build housing for low- and middle-incomes, these remain under researched (Lang and Stoeger, 2017; Lloyd et al., 2015; Tummers, 2015). This raises questions about the institutional drivers that underpin practices of self-building, as well as the constraints and opportunities of self-build housing for low- and middle-income groups in urban areas.

The objective of this paper is to investigate the relationship between self-build housing and the wider planning and housing regime. To enable in-depth investigation, this paper empirically focuses on the case of self-build housing in the Netherlands, a prosperous and urbanized setting where self-build housing occupies a marginal position. Dutch planning and housing systems are characterized by comprehensiveness and a large degree of government regulation. Since the Second World War, housing has been provided through close-knit consortia of municipalities, housing associations and large developers. It is against the backdrop of this historical legacy that the Dutch government has sought

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¹ CBS. 2017. Newly built housing; permit issued per commissioner.

to stimulate self-building since the late 1990s. Although some municipalities have been successful in doing so, the overall share of self-building remains limited. The historical context of the Netherlands renders the recent ‘turn’ towards self-building especially interesting.

To conceptualize the general research question, it is first necessary to demarcate the quintessence of self-building, which may take different operational forms and is also subject to various interpretations in the academic literature. First, we will outline the centrality of the notion of ‘commissioning’ to the operationalization and definition of self-build housing. Second, we establish the opportunities and constraints for low- and middle-income groups in a historical dependency on organized consortia of municipalities, housing associations and developers. The dynamic context of self-build housing governance is understood in terms of changing institutional conditions (the constituting norms, rules, and procedures). Third, we investigate the governance of self-build housing through the strategic example of the Homeruskwartier in the city of Almere where self-building is part of a large residential development scheme. In sum, the paper investigates what institutional and regulatory arrangements exist with respect to self-build housing and how these affect the constraints and opportunities in self-building practices.

2. Establishing the centrality of commissioning in self-build housing

Definition and operationalization of self-build housing require precision as much confusion derives from contested usage of the term to refer to different forms of housing production and living practices. The bespoke nature of self-building contributes to further conceptual ambiguity. Besides, analytical definitions often overlap with popular terms that vary across national and even regional contexts. The main challenges in conceptualizing self-organized forms of housing provision appear to lie in determining the nature of the agents and the extent of their role: are residents a singular or plural entity and what is the extent of their engagement?

This paper defines self-build housing as the practice where people, individually or as a group, *commission* the production of housing for their own use. The extent of resident involvement may vary from fully self-building their own homes to sharing design and construction responsibilities with other parties. Admittedly, self-build as a term is a slight misnomer as physical labor can be contracted out and often is. However, the term self-build housing has high resonance and, as such, is preferred over other terms such as self-provision. By emphasizing commissioning, self-management and control over production become key dimensions of self-build housing. Unlike definitions that underline formal ownership of land and means of production as necessary conditions the definition taken on here is sensitive to the numerous ways of organizing self-building practices. For example, in some cases land is formally owned by a housing association or developer, but residents commission the production of housing in accordance with their residential standards. On an operational level, this definition directs attention to the commissioning actor in house building.

The active involvement of residents in different stages of housing development has been covered by concepts such as self-promotion, self-development and self-managed housing development (Clapham et al., 1993). Duncan and Rowe (1993, p. 1331) organize these all under the term of self-provision to indicate that “the first occupants arrange for the building of their own dwelling and in various ways participate in its production”. Resident contribution to production varies and may include the involvement of external parties such as specialized companies or architects. In order to further differentiate collective self-organized of housing from individual forms, terms such as co-housing or collaborative housing have been introduced (Czischke, 2017; Fromm, 2010; Jarvis, 2015). However, in some cases authors tend to emphasize particular living practices rather than the production of housing. An example in case is Fromm’s (2012, p. 364) definition of co-housing as

‘collective resident-led autonomous housing with shared facilities’. This forecloses the inclusion of individual forms of self-building, which may not necessarily accentuate specific living practices. As we are interested in different forms of self-building as a means of housing relative to housing developed by speculative housebuilders or housing associations, we underline both dimensions of production and consumption.

Self-build housing has distinctive benefits over turnkey housing provided by developers or housing associations in terms of affordability and quality. First, as residents have to opportunity to draw on their own social capital and sweat equity building costs can be substantially lower. In Belgium, self-builders often draw on specialist expertise provided through networks of friends (De Decker, 2008). In addition, there are no shareholder profit margins nor marketing costs. Hence, self-building enlarges the opportunity for low- and middle-incomes to obtain housing. Economic advantages extend to the larger society as self-build housing is less prone to boom-and-slump cycles that affect speculative housebuilding. Second, as the residents are actively involved in procurement, the built product will reflect qualities other than just the exchange value pursued by large commercial builders (Tellinga, 2002). Self-builders build in pursuit of the qualitative needs of their households. This leads to housing that is often of higher quality or more energy efficient (Barlow et al., 2001). Undoubtedly, the choices made by self-builders may not always be rational and could also be made on emotional or psychological grounds (Brown, 2007).

Above all, self-build housing presents a profound opportunity to increase the accessibility of housing to low- and middle-income households. Housing markets in advanced capitalist economies face recurrent crises of supply. At heart of this crisis of undersupply lies the fundamental contradiction between use value and exchange value in housing production (Aalbers and Christophers, 2014). Self-building exposes this fundamental tension by providing a means of housing development that harnesses the potential of residents to deliver more qualitative and sustainable housing (Ward, 1976). Having users define the standards of their own homes through reinvesting the money that would otherwise be used for developmental profit margins presents an opportunity to increase the standard of construction and increase housing supply (Bower, 2017).

Although a single comprehensive explanation is lacking, the existence of self-build housing has been related to structural drivers such as welfare regimes, regulatory conditions and historical pathways (Barlow and King, 1992; Dol et al., 2012). The recent resurgence of self-build housing and other forms of citizen-led urban development has been brought into relation with the global financial crisis, which triggered civic action in light of market and state failure (Mullins and Moore, 2018). This strand of literature emphasizes self-building as a new means of community-building and antipodal to marketization and socio-spatial polarization (Fromm, 2012; Hamiduddin and Gallent, 2015). Other explanations relate the promotion of self-building to neoliberal ideas, such as freedom of choice and market solutions to housing dilemma’s (Lloyd et al., 2015). Still, self-building is not associated with one political ideology per se and has often persisted without any notable support at all (Harris, 1999). Examples of countries with notable self-building sectors in Europe are France, Germany and Belgium as well as parts of Southern and Eastern Europe (Soaita, 2013). Recognizing the unique benefits provided by self-build, there has been considerable interest from state actors to the enablement of such initiatives.

The key challenge remains how self-building can become viable as a means of housing provision for low- and middle-incomes in urban areas. Despite considerable attention, self-build initiatives remain peripheral in housing systems for these groups in many advanced capitalist economies, including the Netherlands. Institutional support has been identified as a key condition to enlarging the potential of self-build, most notably through overcoming barriers in terms of risk, land, capital, and skills (Minora et al., 2013). However, the relationship between self-build housing and its regulatory context remains under

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