



SELF-BUILD: A MAN'S WORLD?

The construction industry – which remains dominated by men – has a lot to learn from the world of self-build and renovation, where women are taking the lead in projects. **Debbie Jeffery** explores the different skills offered by the sexes, and changing attitudes

In today's über politically correct society, even publishing an article which discusses the roles played by men and women in self-build could be considered offensive and controversial by some. After all, the very nature of building a one-off house means that each project is as unique as the people who live there. What's more, for every example illustrating one viewpoint there will always be another that counteracts it.

Men do not automatically concentrate on the physical building work and the installation of a swanky home cinema — leaving their partners to tackle the interior design and swoon over Aga colours. Stereotypes

no longer seem to apply in the world of self-build and renovation, and a quick straw poll of recent case studies in *Homebuilding & Renovating* showed that women are just as likely to be found driving a dumper truck while men take on the accounts.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

There's no sugar coating the fact that construction is one of the last industries dominated almost entirely by men, and women are still shockingly under-represented. The gender imbalance appears to be alive and well in architecture too, according to research showing evidence of widespread discrimina-

Women at Work

While only 1.2 per cent of our site workers are female, women are bucking the trend when it comes to building and renovating homes

tion and unequal pay in the profession. The proportion of female architects has actually dropped from nearly a third to just a fifth in recent years, but other sectors fare even worse. Just 1.2 per cent of site workers are female, and there is still perhaps a lingering assumption that building work is a 'man's job'.

This macho culture may be sadly outdated, but one particular group appears to be bucking the trend. Increasing numbers of self-builders are either single women or women in

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a partnership who choose to take the lead in building a home or a renovation project. Others work alongside their partners, sharing the responsibility and the workload.

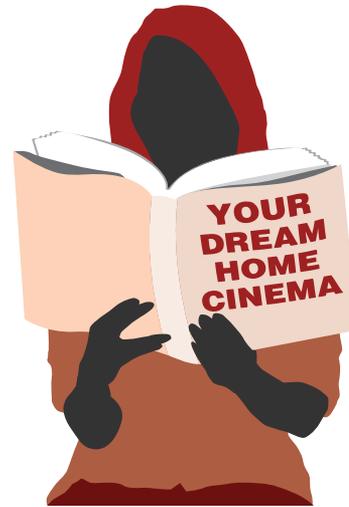
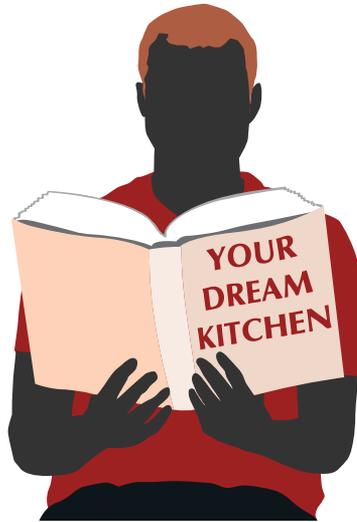
The internet has been instrumental in bringing about this shift, and women are even more involved at the research stage as a result. Online resources and websites have opened up a whole world of additional knowledge, as well as providing a quick and easy means of checking details and comparing prices.

TV role models such as Sarah Beeny, Julia Kendall, Kate Faulkner and Naomi Cleaver have helped pave the way. And often – once knowledge and confidence grows – a number of female self-builders will go on to forge careers as project managers and property developers — not to mention serial self-builders.

Female home ownership has also grown, with one in five households now owned by single women, while ‘bachelor pads’ are on the wane — with the current housing market meaning that young, single men are often precluded from stepping on to the property ladder.

DIY MISCONCEPTIONS

Women have long been active in improving the home and garden, but now they’re also comfortable handling power tools and taking on larger physical jobs. According to recent research conducted by B&Q,



77 per cent of the women surveyed were happy to get involved in DIY, suggesting that women are gaining confidence in areas stereotypically carried out by men.

Three out of four women claimed to make all of the major DIY decisions in their home, and rising numbers are enrolling on training courses to learn skills such as plastering, decorating, plumbing and tiling. Some want to save money by improving their own homes, while others are opting for career changes or setting up businesses after being made redundant.

On the flipside, fewer men are perhaps taking on these tasks. Research also found that a quarter of men do not feel comfortable changing a lightbulb, while a third stated that they don't have the basic skills to replace a blown fuse or wire a plug, and nearly half admitted that they are unable to bleed a radiator.

Nobody is born with the skills that make a good self-builder – these talents are learnt – but are there

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particular areas in which men and women tend to excel? Barbara Jones runs an all-female building company and believes that men can become very focused and single-minded, whereas women are able to step back and view the project as a whole — both qualities are important when taking on a large-scale project such as building or renovating a home. “They also have the advantage of feeling able to ask for help or advice, whereas men tend to view this as a sign of weakness,” Barbara says.

The benefit of self-build, though, is that you decide who you work with and how your site is run. It's a wonderful opportunity to set the ground rules and ensure that both partners are fully involved in what ▶

Battle of the Sexes?



IMAGES: SIMON DENISON

can become a highly stressful process. Often, the best person to run a self-build project is the one with the most flexible schedule, or the greatest amount of free time.

Juggling the multitude of details necessary for project managing a successful build requires resourcefulness, management skills and a great deal of planning. None of these are particularly male or female traits; in fact, getting the best from your designer and builders is an art that is available to both sexes. You don't need physical strength to build a house – that's why you employ a

builder and hire machinery – but you do need to set out with a positive attitude, the capacity to learn and the determination not to allow sexual stereotyping to prevent you from taking on the role you desire.

ATTITUDES

Those women who choose to manage a build, or partake in the physical labour, are often as capable as men, but perhaps start off at a disadvantage by being thrust into a male-dominated environment. Women can even be excluded from the decision making by subbies who would ▶

You don't need physical strength to build a house... but you do need a capacity to learn and determination

SMART HOME TECH ISN'T JUST 'BOYS' TOYS'

Gadgets are definitely not just for the boys. Despite working to a relatively tight budget, Sarah Pepworth transformed a two-bed bungalow into a five bedroom home – complete with a new first floor – in six months for £200,000. What's more, she incorporated a number of high-tech gadgets and luxuries, including a hot tub, a dedicated gym, and remote-control window blinds. Lighting scenes can be set at the touch of a button to suit the time of day and a multi-room sound system, with iPod docking and integrated speakers, makes the house perfect for children's parties, entertaining and family gatherings.

Sarah finished on budget due to her meticulous research and planning. "I soon realised that I needed to take charge and trust my own judgement, rather than just blindly accepting what people told me," she says. "Project managing the build allowed me to keep a close eye on the budget, and to make all kinds of savings by buying online and setting up trade accounts."

Battle of the Sexes?

prefer to talk to a man – any man – instead of the woman who will be paying the bills.

Bridget Beresford understands what it's like to be a lone woman running a self-build project. When she decided to build a new family home while her husband was working overseas, she realised that it could prove to be stressful. Bridget tackled everything herself, from speaking at the planning meeting to overseeing the build, and getting the job finished when she was left living in the weathertight shell with her young daughters.

A teacher by profession, she has also worked as an instructor to Royal Marine recruits, but admits that communicating with the builders proved a challenge. "They often wouldn't listen, and I resorted to pretending that Mark had phoned from Baghdad with certain requests, because they seemed happier taking instructions from a man," she says.

THE LONE SELF-BUILDERS

Another 'trend' is the rise of the lone self-builder — it's highlighted by the significant percentage of projects *Homebuilding & Renovating* feature



which are completed by men and women working alone. Jo Pattinson, for example, grew up watching properties being constructed by her family's building company, so it's no surprise that she decided to continue the tradition and work in the business herself. Jo more than doubled the value of a traditional 1930s house, extending and remodelling to create a glamorous home for herself and her daughters. She purchased materials and was on site regularly to organise trades and deliveries, opting for luxurious, high-spec interiors.

Electrician Robin Cochrane also worked alone to build his bold riverside home — constructing walls, pouring concrete floors and build-

ing the roof. He also made virtually every piece of furniture himself, including the dining table, beds and bookcases. "From start to finish I pretty much built the whole house," he says. "I did a lot of research using Google and read up about each stage of the build. I got a price from just about everyone in Britain for everything in the house and haggled a lot, which saved at least £20,000."

Regardless of whether you work alongside a partner or opt to go it alone, self-build and renovation is well and truly an endeavour which benefits from the skills and qualities of both sexes — perhaps it's time our commercial housebuilding and construction industry took note, too. ■



WORKING AS A TEAM

One couple who worked well as a team were Richard Compton and Fiona Hoey, who built a luxurious oak frame home, clad externally in brick, in West Sussex. Richard has a demanding full-time job as an IT sales director, but he and Fiona collectively project managed the build and took responsibility for the budget, sourcing materials and co-ordinating trades. "I'm good at knowing what I want, but Fiona tends to analyse what we actually need," says Richard. "We rented a cottage nearby so that we could be on site as much as possible, and this gave us more control over the day-to-day running of the build."