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## **What are homes made of? Building materials, DIY and the homeyness of homes**

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### **Biography**

Rosie Cox is Reader in Geography and Gender Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. She has a long standing interest in the home, particularly the production of gender, class and ethnic inequalities within domestic relationships. She is author or editor of a number of books including ‘The Servant Problem’ (2006, I.B. Tauris), ‘Dirt: New Geographies of Cleanliness and Contamination’ (2007, I.B. Tauris – edited with Ben Campkin) and ‘Au Pairs’ Lives in Global Context: Sisters or Servants?’ (2015 Palgrave).

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### **Abstract**

This paper considers the meanings that are attached to, and outcomes produced by, the things that houses are built from. It reflects on the meanings attached to the

‘robustness’ of building materials for people who carry out DIY. DIY is important to some people as a way to build relationships and perform a culturally valued identity. For interviewees in New Zealand working on their own homes was an important aspect of their lives and more malleable building materials allowed such work and had positive connotations and produced feelings of homeyness in contrast to more robust ‘permanent’ materials. The paper thus raises questions about how the built material of home relates to our feelings about it as well as highlighting the diverse practices and relationships which – literally – construct homes.

## **Introduction**

It would be easy to assume, as many double glazing companies do, that homeowners want homes which are easy to maintain and not influenced by the elements. Indeed there is a well established literature that explores how ‘home’ is made in western contexts as a space which effectively excludes the dirt and chaos of the outside world. However, this paper suggests that this assumption demands consideration as not all homeowners want their homes to be made from the most robust or lowest maintenance materials. Homeowners may prefer instead to buy older homes and to keep original windows for their ‘character’ much to the disgust of the double glazing sellers. Or they may want to have homes made of materials that can be worked on and changed through DIY (Do-It-Yourself) as is examined in this paper. Emma Power (2009) has explored the relationship between feelings of ‘homeyness’, and the rupturing of the borders of home by non-human species (in this case possums) in suburban Australian homes. Power demonstrates that a certain level of permeability (to some things, at some times) can increase, rather than decrease the ‘homeyness’ of

a house. Rather than destabilizing home, and causing feelings of anxiety in human residents, ruptures in the material fabric of home which allowed certain kinds of flows with the outside, could increase feelings of belonging

In this paper I use Power's thinking about ruptures in the materiality of home, to explore deliberate human responses to the fabric of homes. I focus on DIY activities amongst homeowners in New Zealand to examine the ways that building materials allow or invite responses in terms of both actions (renovations, repairs, remodelling etc) and feelings of homeyness and unhomeyness. Homeyness can be thought of as a feeling of belonging, comfort and security; the ability to feel 'at home' within a space, be that a dwelling or a nation. Unhomeyness is the feeling produced when such a sense of belonging is absent or disrupted, perhaps through the threat of displacement or violence or through a lack of physical comfort or the inappropriateness of the material or social arrangements to a desired or culturally acceptable way of life. While a home which is robustly built and not affected by the elements seems like a logical object of desire, this paper suggests that some people may opt for homes which are made from less robust materials if those materials are familiar and if this means they can work on their homes themselves. While DIY is an unwelcome chore for some, it is a favoured activity for others and people chose to carry out DIY because it builds their sense of identity and their relationships with others. In New Zealand practical capability is particularly culturally valued (Bell 2001) and this paper suggests that home building materials need to fit with such cultural values and social practices in order to make homey homes.

The paper begins with a discussion of building materials and their relationship to identities, drawing particularly on work by Ayona Datta (2008; Datta and Brickell 2009) with Polish builders in London who narrated a sense of gendered ethnic identity through their knowledge of building and higher standards of housing which contrasted with British men who were (implicitly portrayed) as less masculine through their inability to work on their own houses and their acceptance of homes which were both shoddily built and were not built or repaired by the men themselves. Datta's work reveals the ways in which housing standards are embroiled in gendered ethno/ cultural hierarchies. Following from this I briefly outline the history of house building in New Zealand, to show how house building materials are part of a colonial history which is gendered as well as racist. The fabric of homes was looked to by the colonial authorities as a way to designate 'British' values and to help create 'proper' roles for white men and women. This history is important in shaping the context within which New Zealanders carry out DIY today and it has produced a society in which practical skills are highly valued and wooden houses on large plots have been regarded as the most appropriate homes. I then turn to the literature on DIY to discuss how carrying out DIY is part of some people's relationships and sense of identity. Rather than being just a way to make improvements to a home, DIY has important emotional and cultural aspects which mean that people may welcome opportunities to work on their homes. I then outline the methods used in my study before turning to my findings. I show that DIY was important to my participants as a way of making houses into homes. Carrying out DIY confirmed participants' relationships, their sense of belonging at home and their feelings of ownership over their home. Following this I argue that DIY was important enough to some people that they favoured owning a home made from materials that they could work on themselves over one which was

made from more robust 'permanent' materials. A homey home was not one that was the most impervious to the outside or one that would need the least maintenance but was one which allowed people to achieve a sense of belonging and satisfaction from working on it.

### **What are homes made of?**

Academic research on the material cultures of homes has often been concerned with interior design and furnishings, showing the meanings and relationships that are produced and conveyed in the choosing (or not) of home décor (See Miller 2001, Gorman-Murray 2008, Attwood 2005 for example). Building materials have, by contrast been the concern of 'housing' studies and architecture, rather than research on 'home'. The materials used to make homes produce not only their physical appearance, but also qualities such as thermal and sound insulation, dramatically affecting experiences of being at home. Materials also allow, demand or encourage very different amounts of maintenance and renovation, giving home owners quite different opportunities to work on the fabric of their homes.

The material properties of homes can be valued for social and cultural as well as practical reasons. Yi-Fu Tuan (1977: 144) argued over thirty years ago that: 'enchanted images of the past are evoked not so much by the entire building, which can only be seen, as by its components and furnishings, which can be touched and smelled'. Homes feel homey when they evoke feelings of comfort and familiarity and those feelings come from building materials as well as interior design, layout and furnishings. People adapt to and adapt the physical construction of their homes as

part of home making practices which ‘bind the material and imaginative geographies of home closely together and exist over a range of scales’ (Blunt and Dowling 2006: 228). Such practices are about the practical and physical aspects of home as well as about the emotional. Through making homes in ways which are meaningful to us we structure our relations among ourselves, between ourselves and others and between ourselves and our environment (Blunt and Dowling 2006).

A study by Ayona Datta (2008) of Polish builders working in London reveals the importance of building materials to the meaning of home and to the articulation of difference. She argues that we can find a ‘more nuanced material geography of home – as an assemblage of *building elements* under different contexts which, [...] allow scrutiny of cultural differences and otherness.’ Her interviewees spent time in, and creating, homes for other people to live in as a way to accrue capital to build homes for themselves in Poland in the future. Within this context she argues (2008 p520) that her study ‘simultaneously capture[s] home as a field of meaning, as a political economy of labour and materials, as the locus of un/inhabitation and as a device for articulating difference.’ The study highlights that homes are built as well as lived in; produced as well as consumed.

Datta’s participants narrated ideals of home and of masculinity that were related to the robustness of Polish housing compared to British standards. Her interviewees contrasted the quality of building between Poland and London – focusing on the robustness of Polish homes and the flimsiness of British ones. The (small) size of British homes was also contrasted with larger, detached homes in Poland that were seen as offering both more comfort and different (better) possibilities for family life –

such as space for extended family. One interviewee described British houses in the diminutive as ‘houselets’, commenting (p526):

I think it is [pause] maybe because we have the winters, different climate and you know, but [pause] there is this difference that we build a house there and we build a ‘houselet’ [diminutive] here. The walls are insulated from the outside with Styrofoam, which makes us warm in the house in the winter, and we are cool in the house in the summer. Here, when the roof heats up, it is unbearable in the house, and back home, it is beautiful, pleasant. So the difference is massive and our building is much, much better.

The warmth and comfort of homes occurred repeatedly in comments from these Polish builders showing the links between building technologies and the corporeal experience of home dwellers. Notions of warmth and comfort also, implicitly at least, suggest a greater degree of ‘homeyness’. Datta’s interviewees explained their plans to build future homes, in Poland, using superior techniques and materials, things which would simply be unavailable (due to cost and lack of space) in London. Building a (robust) home in Poland was narrated as a ‘natural’ act for Polish men who are differentiated from English men who ‘just go and buy’ (p528) a house. A ‘home’ could only be a ‘home’ if it was robustly built. These discourses of ‘standards’ in building were part of wider re-tellings of a place in ethno/cultural hierarchies that the Polish builders took part in and which situated them as superior to British workers, especially British builders (See Datta and Brickell 2009).

Datta’s work highlights the intertwining of building materials and the physical experiences of home in the construction of gendered national identities. In contrast to

the quest for warmth and robustness by Polish builders, Julie Cupples *et al* (2007) found that residents of Christchurch in New Zealand rejected the idea that homes should have modern central heating systems because they saw heating as ‘wussie’. Cupples *et al* (2007) argue that they found the ‘frontier spirit’ alive and well during their research and manifested in masculinist notions that wood stoves are the most appropriate form of heating for homes, despite the fact that air pollution caused by such stoves was responsible for high levels of respiratory disease in the city. As Cupples *et al* comment (p2892) ‘Even when faced with physical discomfort from inadequate heating and with ill health in the form of respiratory illnesses, many New Zealanders fail to act – reworking and performing a neo-colonial and highly gendered “she’ll be alright” attitude’ (see also Klocker 2014).

Whilst, for Datta’s interviewees, the robustness of house building technologies was a crucial element in their ability to be seen as ‘homes,’ for New Zealanders, the malleability of homes allowed actions (renovations, changes, adaptations) which were part of home- making processes and which are bound up in a specific cultural history of home. .

### **What are homes made of in New Zealand?**

Narratives of the ‘robust’ Polish home, the flimsy British home and the wood stove at the heart of the New Zealand home show that house building materials are implicated in specific gendered and ethno-national identities. In New Zealand the building materials used for houses reflect not only the relatively wide availability of wood and shortage of stone for building but also a Colonial and post-Colonial history that has

positioned wooden, single storey homes on quarter acre plots as part of the ‘New Zealand dream’.

House building and maintenance in New Zealand is the outcome of a local history that has both produced, and is understood within, specific gender, class and racial/ethnic contexts. Colonial authorities, in New Zealand as elsewhere, often sought to dictate the forms of cities and within them important buildings. Architecture, is therefore inflected by colonial history (See for example Lochhead 2000; McNaughton 2009) but materials are much more difficult to order into existence and the lack of stone for public buildings was lamented by the colonial authorities (Lochhead 2000) while the use of wood for houses was seen as a source of moral laxness. Tennant (2000 p26) for example, quotes Bishop Neligan, the Anglican Bishop of Auckland, writing in 1907, who commented that ‘British family life’ (and godliness) were lacking in New Zealand, and such values were not likely to be present ‘while houses were erected in such non-permanent materials as wood.’ As Tennant (2000: 26) states, ‘the material fabric of the house combined with its internal administration to determine individual behaviour, community integration and imperial greatness. As the Bishop’s speech emphasised, housing structure and design were sometimes seen to undermine the moral dimension of the home, and Neligan equated impermanence in building materials with impermanence in human relations.’

In contrast to the Bishop’s despair at the use of wood for housing, the wooden house was in some ways a building block (pardon the pun) of the colony and an important attraction to European settlers. Advertising materials promised emigrants the possibility of home ownership on a sole breadwinner’s wages – i.e. that only men in a

family would work. Thus New Zealand offered the chance for both home ownership, and a way of living in that house that was much harder to achieve in Europe but also widely understood to be ideal (Cooper 2008). For Pākehā settlers the ideal was not only to own a home, but for men to *build* their own homes and provide for their families needs. Thus ‘New Zealand masculinity was formulated at least in part around a strong form of the breadwinner norm’ (Cooper 2008 p261) which itself was (in part) bound up in the physical provision of housing.

From the mid 1930s the New Zealand government supported the idea that the ideal ‘family’ home was made of local materials – wood and tiles – through the programme of building state houses in the suburbs. These houses were intended to set the benchmark for the ‘right’ way to live through their situation, form and level of fittings. An example was even sent to the 1950 Ideal Home exhibition in London as a way to encourage migration from the UK (Skinner 2000). After the Second World War large suburbs were built made up of mostly timber-framed, single storey, detached dwellings on quarter acre plots of land. Between 1954 and 1964 207,700 such houses were built with government support (Mackay 2011) and the three-bedroom, single storey suburban home on a large plot became the ‘typical’ New Zealand home (Perkins and Thorns 1999; 2001, Morrison 2012). Later in the 1950s as demand for new houses grew but their cost was increasing faster than increases in male wages, the government attempted to push builders and families commissioning houses to build with materials other than wood and brick because they were cheaper (Shaw 2000), however, alternative materials were not popular with purchasers and wood remained the standard for New Zealand home building.

Housing tenure has also been important to New Zealand's housing history. Home Ownership (with or without a mortgage) is considered both the norm and most desirable form of tenure. Home ownership levels are high by international standards and home ownership has consistently been associated with positive virtues (Perkins and Thorns 2001). Ownership has given people relatively high levels of control over their dwellings and enables activities such as DIY (Perkins and Thorns 2003). In turn research has found that there is a strong relationship between housing tenure, collective identity and the way New Zealanders create a sense of home (Perkins and Thorns 1999).

The social circumstances of European settlement in New Zealand, the opportunities for home ownership, the design of houses and the materials used for house building encouraged (and indeed often demanded) high levels of input from homeowners who could build and repair their homes in a way that was uncommon in Europe (Perkins and Thorns 2003). Thus the history of European settlement in New Zealand is not separable from a particular housing history that defined white New Zealanders, particularly white New Zealand men, as responsible for the physical provision and upkeep of their homes. It is within this context that New Zealanders live in and work on their homes today. DIY in New Zealand is therefore a particularly rich area for investigation, bound up as it is with colonial history and discourses of family, gender and nationhood.

### **DIY, Home and Identity**

Homes and the work undertaken on them are important to New Zealanders' identities and relationships. Whilst figures are hard to come by it is suggested that New Zealanders are more likely to be involved in DIY projects than any other population in the Western world (Mackay *et al* 2007; Morrison 2012). As Perkins and Thorns (2001 p43) comment, "The significance of particular forms of home-based domestic work, do-it-yourself maintenance and building, has meant that many New Zealanders have developed a special type of relationship with their houses which has seen them continually renovating and changing the physical shape of house and garden."

Existing research on DIY and home maintenance suggests that working on the home is an important arena for the negotiation of identities, particularly masculinities, and relationships, as well as being a way to gain a home which better conforms to the household's needs and desires. DIY is not necessarily undertaken to save money, and not always or only to produce a particular end result, but also because the act of carrying out DIY produces and confirms valued identities and relationships (see Cox 2013; 2015a, 2015b). Steven Gelber (1997) has argued that in the early decades of the twentieth century in the USA the rise of DIY was a key component in men's renegotiation of their place in their homes and 'part of the definition of suburban husbanding' (1997, 67). Household repairs and maintenance were free from any hint of gender-role compromise and allowed men to reassert their masculinity at a time when women's entry to the workplace made that space a less definite source of masculine identity. DIY was not undertaken to save money but as a way to be a proper man and a good father. Andrew Jackson (2006, 61), writing with reference to the rise of DIY in Britain in the twentieth century, found that 'household repairs and maintenance allowed men to stay at home without feeling emasculated. They

replicated and reinforced work values and gave a sense of psychological fulfilment. Because jobs around the house had an economic value attached to them, they also carried the legitimacy of masculine skilled labour.’ Similarly Gorman-Murray (2011) found that an increased focus on home repairs can be a way for men to negotiate anxiety produced in the world of work following the Global Financial Crisis (see also Wolf and McQuitty 2011 on the USA). In his classic study of self provisioning on the Isle of Sheppey Ray Pahl (1984) showed home maintenance activities to be an expression of a particular, valued, identity. Self-provisioning was a result of relative affluence rather than poverty as only those with their own homes and resources to buy equipment could do DIY (see also Nelson 2004; Shove *et al* 2007 and Williams and Windebank 2002 on the need for resources to carry out self-provisioning) and his work locates DIY within class and gender divisions, a very specific history and material circumstances.

Within the New Zealand context of a commitment to home ownership and self-provisioning and the cultural celebration of ingenuity and craft skills (Bell 2001), working on the home has particular resonances. Michael Mackay (2011) describes New Zealanders as actively producing a ‘DIY’ed’ home as an outward expression of their identity; as a practice to adapt the home to the changing requirements of household members and a s way of actively enjoying the home as a site of productive work (cf Mansvelt 1997 on DIY as a form of active leisure for retirees). The home and the act of working on the home become part of an iterative process whereby self and desired home are made together (Mackay 2011), albeit within the context of globalised media and industry influences (Leonard, Perkins and Thorns 2004).

This process of identity making through DIY is also part of relationships with others. People may choose to carry out home improvement projects, or to carry them out in particular ways, so as to reinforce relationships and communicate them to others. Carey-Ann Morrison (2012) found that DIY projects are important to heterosexual couples in New Zealand as a way to establish their relationships. Couples could spend time together planning and carrying out DIY and also saw the changes they made to their homes as a manifestation of their relationship. DIY has been found to be significant within parent-child relationships (Cox 2015; Jackson 2006) and taking part in DIY projects can be a way for friends to bond. Working with friends on home improvement projects is common amongst young New Zealanders, particularly men (Cox 2013, Mackay *et al* 2007; Mackay 2011).

These cultural and emotional aspects of DIY suggest that people may welcome opportunities to work on their homes, as well as using DIY to achieve a particular finished outcome. DIY is not necessarily a cheap alternative to employing trades people, nor always an unwelcome but needed chore; DIY activities can be embraced as a means by which to realise valued identities and relationships and to make a homey home. For people who embrace DIY in this way, homes need to be made of things which allow homeowners to work on them.

## **Methods**

Research was carried out in New Zealand between 2007 and 2011. This involved interviews with homeowners and professional handymen and archival research examining home improvement and design magazines, newspaper articles and print

advertisements from 1946 – 1980. This paper draws particularly on the interviews with homeowners.

Thirty homeowners were interviewed in the cities of Auckland, Dunedin, Hamilton and Wellington. They were asked what home repairs/renovations they paid for, what work they and other household members did for themselves, how they made decisions about who should do tasks and who else might help them with such tasks. Whilst interviewees were sought systematically through personal contacts to give maximum variety in terms of household income, age, lifecycle stage and household size they still represent a specific ethnic and socio-economic sub-set of the New Zealand population. Interviewees ranged in age from early 30s to 70s and had household incomes in the fifth to tenth deciles for New Zealand (that is, they were in the better off half of the population, as most homeowners would be, cf Morrison 2012). All the homeowner interviewees were Pākehā (white, of European descent, this group made up 67.6% of the population in 2006 (Statistics New Zealand 2013) and have higher rates of home ownership than Maori or Pacific Islander groups in New Zealand (Perkins and Thorns 2001)). The majority of households contained two adults with or without resident children; three of these were lesbian couples. Four households were single people (two men and two women). The interviews were carried out with whichever members of the household agreed to be interviewed and these were relatively evenly split between men and women. In six cases both adult partners were interviewed together. Interviews were transcribed and then coded using both ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ codes – that is some codes were identified in advance based on the aims of the project and the questions asked in interviews, others emerged during the analysis from listening to interviewees and reading transcripts. The themes discussed in this

paper largely emerged during the research process; the importance of materials and the ways people related to the materials in their homes took me by surprise and made me look in new ways at my interview data.

I am not a New Zealander and my position as a white, female, non-Kiwi may have contributed to the success of interviewing as a technique for this project as I provided a seemingly unthreatening and ill-informed audience for people's accounts of their DIY. Interviewees were patient in their explanation of the activities they engaged in and materials that they used. They tolerated my questions about practices, such as painting roofs, which were new to me but commonplace to them. Interviews in homes often included some element of interviewees showing me the projects that they were telling me about, pointing out materials, tools, books, or ads for products they were interested in and many of which I had not seen. My unfamiliarity with the material and cultural context revealed some things that an insider might take for granted, but it of course left other things hidden and misunderstood.

### **DIY and the homey home**

The people I interviewed in New Zealand have, between them, done a huge amount of work on many different homes. In this section I examine how they have responded to the materials of their houses to create a sense of home and how homeyness or unhomeyness are related to those materials and to people's ability to work on them in the way they desire. I explore the ways that house building materials allow or invite specific responses in terms of both actions (renovations, repairs, remodelling etc) and

feelings of homeyness and ‘unhomeyness’ and how DIY activities fit with valued relationships and sense of self.

Emma Power (2009) has showed that porosity to the outside is sometimes critical in the construction of homes which feel homey. Her work focuses on the making and rupturing of boundaries between the inside and outside of home and on the creation of liminal spaces which allow homeowners to tolerate and even embrace nature within their homes. While it would be possible to think of some DIY as a rupturing of the boundaries of the home, I focus instead on the process of working with the materials which make the physical boundaries of the home to show that sometimes the ability to manipulate the fabric of the home is more desirable than having a home which is robustly impermeable. While some of my interviewees wanted homes which required little maintenance or were made from materials which were as weather-resistant as possible, others did not and they wanted homes made from materials that they could work with both because they welcomed the process of working on their homes and because those materials represented homeyness to them. DIY was important enough to some people’s sense of identity and to their relationships for them to favour a home that they could work on over one which was built from less permeable materials.

For many of the homeowners I interviewed, the malleability of traditionally constructed wooden houses was bound up with their ideas of homeyness. Rather than ‘home’ being defined as a fortress or ‘castle’, homeyness could be found in permeability, mutability and even flimsiness. This did not mean that people worked on their houses unrelentingly, or that they welcomed every leaking roof or rotting

window frame, rather they made choices about how to work on their houses which situated home maintenance activities within their relationships and their sense of self.

*DIY makes houses into homes*

One of the most important aspects of working on homes that arose during interviews was that carrying out the work and changing houses to better suit inhabitants' needs made houses feel like homes (cf Mackay 2011). Carrying out DIY tasks confirmed participants in their relationships, sense of belonging and their feeling of ownership. Many interviewees talked about the satisfaction they gained from 'putting their stamp' on a place through the work that they did and the changes they made. For many of my interviewees a house didn't feel 'theirs' until they had changed some element that was particularly important to them (often paint colour inside or out, or putting in a new kitchen) and this process of making a home made DIY enjoyable. Homeowner 12 explains.

Interviewer: When you do all of this...this stuff to the house, do you get a sense of satisfaction from it? Is it enjoyable?

H12: Definitely. Especially when it's finished. I can get quite frustrated if the process is long and boring, like the...the actual sanding part of the floors, but, um, seeing it...something finished afterwards certainly is, and I think it also helps make your home feel more like it's your home, you know? You've got your own stamp on it. [...] I'd come from only ever renting, so we were actually in a house that I've done something, you know, on my own that was, you know, my colours, my choice, you know, with both the walls and the colour stain on the stuff on the door.

One way in which this sense of ‘belonging’ was expressed was through notions of ownership, Homeowner 12 goes on:

H12 actually, when we did our first thing, which was the painting of the other room, because for a long time I’d even say, you know, “we’ve got to pay rent.” You know what I mean? Like, it was still stuck within that mindset and so it was almost a transitional thing, feeling, like, a sense of ownership.

Interviewer: OK, so that you felt...so, when you painted that room, you felt like you...you owned the house?

H12: It was ours – yeah, it was our room, our place, you know, we can do stuff like that. That was about, um, 18 months after we’ve moved in as well [...] I knew we owned the house [...] like, um, you know, “we’ve got to make sure, you know, we’ve paid the rent”, yeah, it was just funny, and then...[yeah]...it has changed to “mortgage” now.

This quote suggests that the actions of working on the house and changing its appearance had quite a profound effect on Homeowner 12’s relationship to her house, finally allowing her to feel that she owned it. Working on her home was enjoyable and something that enabled her to make it into a home. Mackay (2011) describes this process as a possession ‘ritual’ through which homeowners develop a sense of possession through personalising the homes that they have bought. Morrison (2012) has also commented on how for the heterosexual couples she interviewed DIY could

be about making a home feel their own and expressing their joint ownership and with that their relationship.

For Homeowner 17, who had recently finished a self-build project, this sense of ownership and making a house his own was also explicitly tied to 'being a Kiwi', reflecting the history of homeownership and self provisioning which was part of European settlement of the country.

Why do we do it? I guess...well I did it...more for my wife, who wanted...who wanted to put her own special mark upon what it was that we had. Um, so there's definitely some ownership kind of situations there and specialness of...of making our mark. [...] I wanted to have some place I could call my own, I guess. So having ownership and title of a patch. So yeah, I'm, I'm the archetypal Kiwi bloke in that sense [...] I mean, ownership of a home gave us the plot, gave us the title [yeah], gave us the piece of land, so yes, we're homeowners like...66 per cent of New Zealand.

This quote resonates with Datta's (2008) description of Polish men who express their gendered and national identity through plans to build their homes themselves. For Homeowner 17 building a house from scratch evoked a sense of belonging both in his home and in his nation.

Only one interviewee said that her dream was to buy a brand new place that needed nothing doing to it and was painted in bland colours that anyone might like, she was also the only person interviewed who did no DIY herself, she was married to a builder and lived in a house where nothing was ever finished. One other interviewee had,

after many years of renovating houses, opted instead for a low maintenance apartment and she described with joy the moment when the lawn mower was sold when moving from their last house as it represented the end to many years of weekends being spent doing the chores that were needed maintain the more traditional houses they had lived in. For all the other interviewees, working on their house was experienced – often retrospectively – as being about ‘making home’. For anyone who has changed something hated or dysfunctional in a house or looked with pride at a newly painted wall, the fact that completing DIY projects help to make a house feel like a home, will come as no surprise but it is worthwhile to reflect on what this means for the materials that homes are made of.

*What are homey homes made of?*

Not all house building materials demand or allow the same amount of DIY attention and some interviewees moved from talking about the importance of carrying out DIY tasks to reflect on what this meant for the materials their homes were made from. While concrete, aluminium and uPVC need less maintenance, they are also less malleable than wood and tin and fewer homeowners had the skills or tools that were needed to work with them. For some interviewees malleable materials were preferred over ‘permanent’ ones so that they could carry out DIY and because these more familiar materials felt more homey.

Homeowner 10 and her partner, for example, had carried out a large amount of work on their traditionally constructed weatherboard house. She described all the time that maintenance had taken and even explained that they some of the renovations they were carrying out were to change the materials so that the house would need less

maintenance in the future. However, after telling me this, Homeowner 10 went on to say:

H10 But I also wouldn't like to live in a house where you couldn't create some of those changes so I would hate it if we lived in a concrete block house. I think I would be bored by that. I kind of like the fact that you can change the place we are living in.

Interviewer: Right – so you wouldn't be attracted to a brand new place ...

H10 No, It would feel very soulless

For Homeowner 10, despite the time-consuming labour involved in maintaining her weatherboard house, a house made from concrete blocks, which would need less maintenance would be 'unhomey'. Another interviewee described how important the material of the front door was in making a house feel like a welcoming home:

Even, I mean, we have a front door, deliberately a wood front door because our previous home, which was a relatively new home, had an aluminium front door [right]. And the front door, to my wife and to myself really, is something special and so aluminium was just too...too far to reach [right]. This time, when we had a choice, so...so we went to a wood front door. Now that requires, ah, linseed oil and every...well, more often than we're doing it. It should be done, probably, every six months to a year...

This quote suggests that more traditional materials, in this case wood, are more welcoming and communicate the idea of home to those who see them. While a wood front door requires considerably more maintenance than an aluminium one and is not

as impervious to rain without this upkeep, the labour is worth it because the front door is a 'special' part of the home.

Like Homeowner 10, Homeowner 24 described a house that could not be easily worked on or changed as 'boring'. When I asked her and her partner whether they would ever want to buy a house that did not need anything done to it their response was a simple 'no', if you could afford a house that needs no work then you can afford to build your own house and that was their dream. Her partner explained in more detail why he wanted to build a house and how his current home renovation work, as well as being about making their present house their own, was part of a clear plan to allow this to happen one day:

Interviewer: If you had all the money in the world, would you buy a house that was perfect, made with permanent materials?

H23: [Shakes head] Personally, I really want to build my own house in the future. But I can't afford to build my own house straight away. And so I'm going to do this [renovate an older house] once, twice, maybe three times. Until I can acquire enough money to build myself a house on a piece of land that I want.

Interviewer: Why do you want build your own house?

H23: Just for my personal satisfaction. Like I just, it's just something that I really want, I just really get off on having my name on the mailbox, you know. The feeling of something that I've built, I think, would be, could be something that I want, customised, you know.

Homeowner 23 was similar to first-time buyers interviewed by Mackay *et al* (2007) who were working on older ‘doer uppers’ as part of a longer term plan to move up the housing ladder (see also Perkins and Thorns 2001 on the importance of housing as an investment in New Zealand). In contrast to the UK, where older homes ‘with character’ command a premium in the market compared to newer houses that might need less work, in New Zealand, older weatherboard houses which are easiest to work on, are also the dwellings which are cheapest and most easily available to first time buyers and others with limited budgets (Mackay *et al* 2007) meaning that the homes which need most attention are owned by people least able to pay professionals to work on them. Whereas Mackay *et al* (2007) found that their interviewees cited financial reasons as the foremost reason why they undertook DIY projects, the participants in my research were much more likely to emphasise the satisfaction they gained from working on the homes themselves.

Homeowner 23’s response points to this satisfaction that can be derived from DIY or even house building, activities. While building a house himself would restrict the materials he could use to those he knew and is able to work with, his desire to build for himself was greater than to have a house made from more durable materials. He spoke passionately about this dream and also about the satisfaction he derived from what he had achieved in his current house. Carrying out DIY was clearly important to his sense of self as well as about making a more homey home. The relative malleability of the materials houses in New Zealand are traditionally made from made both his current renovations and future plans possible.

Working on homes, or even building their own homes from scratch was important to many of my interviewees. Such DIY activities made their houses feel homely and increased their sense of ownership. The materials their houses were made from mattered, both because they represented what a home should look like, with a welcoming wooden front door for example, and because the materials allowed them to carry out DIY and thereby derive the satisfaction and hominess they got from doing so.

The materials that make appropriate homes are located in social and natural histories. House building materials are things which are reasonably available locally and things which are understood to make appropriate homes. New Zealand's settler history and later government policy favoured wood as a material for homes, in part at least because homeowners were expected to be able to work on this material themselves (Cooper 2008).

The satisfaction that people get from carrying out DIY projects is not inherent in the projects or in the improved homes which they should provide, it is related to the cultural value put on home ownership and on DIY. Studies of DIY (Gelber 1997; Gorman- Murray 2012; Jackson 2006; Mackay 2011, Pahl 1984) show that people do not work on their homes just in order to save money nor, only to produce particular outcomes. Rather DIY is often favoured because it produces and confirms particular identities and this powerful impetus can make choosing less robust materials both logical and homey.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has looked at DIY activities in New Zealand to examine how people's desire to carry out work on their homes themselves may mean that they desire homes which are made from malleable and familiar materials rather than those which require least maintenance or are most durable. DIY can be important to people's relationships and their sense of self. For people who want to carry out their own home repairs and renovations homes may be more homey when they are made from materials which the owners have the skills to work with.

Homes, and the materials which make them, exist in gendered ethno/ cultural hierarchies, they can be used to negotiate and narrate a sense of belonging and homeyness is produced within this context. In New Zealand the combination of particular materials, wood and tin, with a specific history of male manual labour and high rates of home ownership produces a situation in which houses are seen by many as things that can be worked on, as something malleable rather than absolute. This in turn produces a sense of home as something which has been moulded from materials which it is possible, perhaps even relatively easy or desirable for some, to change and with this a feeling of homeyness is related to the (malleable) materials that homes are made from. The specific ways in which materials relate to a sense of homeyness vary between people and places, as the discussion of Polish builders in London showed. Rather than materials simply dictating how people work on and live in their homes, homeowners can chose the materials they want to work with confirming a sense of home and a sense of self while creating homes which reflect their identities.

This paper has illustrated one of the reasons why people may opt for homes which are made of familiar and traditional materials and how strong their motivations are to do so. By linking housing materials to the idea of homeyness and, following Power (2009), showing how a sense of homeyness and belonging can be located in porosity and malleability as well as in the robust exclusion of the outside world from the home, the paper expands the concept of homeyness and invites new ways to think about the relationships between home, housing materials and the identities of home owners. These findings have relevance beyond New Zealand and the paper adds to research which demonstrates the complexities of household behaviour and the context within which changes towards more sustainable lives might be made (see for example Hobson 2006; Gibson *et al* 2013). As Cupples *et al* (2007) have shown householders can be reluctant to adopt new or more sustainable technologies in their home, even if these have substantial benefits for themselves and others and we need to understand how behaviours such as the choice of heating systems or building technologies fit into householders wider social and emotional lives.

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