

# **The Self-Build Housing of Men and Others: Researching Gender and Vernacular Architecture in Australia**

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This paper highlights questions of women's roles in the creation of vernacular architecture and applies that emergent critique to women's self-build housing research in Australia. The paper draws on preliminary results from the author's own research.

Holland's 1979 research into Registered Owner-builders in the Sydney area, which used a sample that was 99% male, allows comparison to be drawn with a sample of male and female owner-builders from across Australia. The preliminary results of the author's research showed substantial differences in levels of education of males and females, other differences in the amount of construction undertaken and time taken for completion and small differences in the range of ages and average age at the time of construction. When women build, they do so in a range of circumstances and their experiences are different from those of men.

Preliminary analysis also shows the contingent nature of people's self definition as a 'builder'. Men more readily identify with this description. For women the picture was more complex and framing by the researcher would seem to be at least as important as the individual's own attitudes.

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What is needed is a sense that gender *matters*, that it acts in powerful and compelling ways, that it can reveal important aspects of the history of the built environment that otherwise would go unexplored. ...gender is not an optional

category, ... if we are to reconstruct the story of the ways humans have created and experienced their built environments.<sup>1</sup>

Feminist theorists have observed that in western cultures women and men have different levels of direct involvement in, and roles in the production of, the built environment<sup>2</sup>. This difference has been theorised in relation to professional built environment arenas including architecture, town planning, engineering and the building trades<sup>3</sup>. Gender differences are also evident in the uses and meanings men and women make of the built environment<sup>4</sup>. These studies of built environment professions and trades examine the production of the built environment in professional arenas, however outside the professions others build, engaging in processes to give form to environments that meet their needs and desires. My focus will be upon housing built not by professionals, by ordinary men and women.

Academic initiatives from a number of fields have used various terms to describe the efforts of non-professionals to build their own housing. Such projects are described variously as: 'self-build' housing, 'self-help' housing or 'owner-builder' housing, and they figure widely in writings on vernacular architecture. These can be roughly categorized by the way in which they contextualise the their subject.

The term 'self-help housing'<sup>5</sup> is generally applied to self-build housing when it forms part of an official housing policy as implemented by a government agency or philanthropic organization to provide housing for disadvantaged groups or individuals, more commonly in a development or international aid context. Discussion of these policies critique the relative power positions of the donor or funding body in relation to the builder, not however necessarily in relation to gender; little attention is paid to gender relations within the culture of the builder themselves.

A considerable body of material can be found internationally on the practice of 'self-build housing'<sup>6</sup> written by academics, practitioners and proponents of self-build housing. Much of this material is published in English, most of which details practices in North America, Europe, and Australia. The bulk of this material concentrates on the act of construction and attendant technical issues.

In Australia the more common term applied to people who build a house for their own use is 'owner-builder'. In formal terms an 'Owner-builder' is an individual who has registered with the relevant state based authority, they are almost always engaged in the construction of their own dwellings. Most Australian states have a process of registration to regulate the activities of owners builders which increasingly have come to include compulsory courses that may cover both the administrative and construction aspects of building. In the states where registration is available it is mandatory and has implications with respect to

building permits, insurance and finance. In everyday terms however, an 'owner-builder' is any person who constructs their own dwelling, with or without registration.

This paper is concerned with the practice of self-build housing. I use this term in order to include people who contribute labour to the construction of a house, that they then live within, who may be other than a legally registered owner-builder. Self-build housing is a process whereby ordinary people contribute to the vernacular landscape.

The study of vernacular architecture has involved looking at the built environment activities of people active in arenas outside the sites of power. Dell Upton described vernacular architecture as "the other"<sup>7</sup> to what is often called high architecture. Studies of vernacular architecture identify building traditions related to culture. They then describe and analyse the particular physical environment as the basis of their analysis of culture. Vernacular architecture has been positioned by a majority of theorists within the field of material culture studies, and in this context develops rich historical accounts of peoples from many cultures who build their own housing. Material evidence is the basis of these accounts, which pay detailed attention to regional difference and ethnic diversity. Cary Carson recently dubbed the field "architecture as social history"<sup>8</sup>.

In recent years the role of women in vernacular architecture has been briefly addressed and the field appears to frame the beginnings of what could be a rich history documenting the everyday lives of ordinary women who self-build. McMurry outlined the main questions to be considered in the study of women in vernacular architecture by asking, "to what extent and on what terms, were women active participants in vernacular design [and secondly] has the vernacular landscape affected women's daily lives?"<sup>9</sup> Sample Bernstein and Torma in their paper *Exploring the role of Women in Vernacular Architecture* observe that, "The role of women in the design, construction and use of vernacular architecture is little understood ... few researchers have asked women themselves appropriate questions concerning their involvement in architecture and it's creation."<sup>10</sup> Sample Bernstein and Torma also pose the rarely articulated question as to "how ... dynamics within the family affect roles and consequent... participation in the architectural process?"<sup>11</sup> In addressing these and other questions Williams and Young suggest that "Within historical studies of vernacular architecture, oral history provides one of the best means of reconstructing ethnographic context."<sup>12</sup> While these authors refer specifically to historical studies their questions are equally applicable to research of more contemporary vernacular environments.

Research exploring the roles and experiences of women in vernacular architecture is scant, though some scholars have noted the participation of women or raised questions about them. Glassie notes that there are

...traditions in which women do the building. Women dominated architecture in central North America before the European conquest. Africa offers numerous instances of women who build and of women and men who build together. But in many places men build the house and women build the home within it.<sup>13</sup>

Glassie's proposition that gender roles account for the lack of women who build their own homes was contraindicated by Margolis<sup>14</sup> and later Harris<sup>15</sup> who note that the input of women they observed is significant, being as much as 30% of building labour per home, yet neither names her as a builder of that home. If gender roles are an issue it is in terms of who is identified as a builder and not necessarily who does the building.

Self-build has long been an important strategy by which Australians have gained housing. In 1951-52 owner-built houses accounted for 33.27% of all dwellings completed that year. By 1960-61 this figure had dropped to 24.31% and in 1970-71 this figure had declined further to just 11.81%. Within the following decade however the incidence of owner building rose again to reach 25.94% in 1980-81. These Australian Bureau of Statistics figures are reproduced from Graham Holland's 1988 book on his research with owner-builders entitled *Emoh Ruo: Owner Building in Sydney*.<sup>16</sup> This book remains the most substantial published research on owner building to date and is a thorough scholarly exploration of the financial, legal and technical issues faced by a particular group of owner-builders in Sydney in the late nineteen seventies and early eighties.

My research analysis and builds on the work of Holland, broadening the range of self-build experiences considered. To gain participants in my research I wrote letters to the editors of major Australian daily newspapers, suburban newspapers, rural and regional papers and special interest newspapers and journals. These letters were sent to one hundred and eighty four email addresses gained from the online directory of Australian newspapers compiled as part of the Open Directory Project<sup>17</sup>. Information about the research and calls to participate were also placed on a handful of world wide web notice boards which catered to the interest of self-builders.

A copy of the questionnaire was also sent to sixty seven women from South Australia, Victoria and Queensland who I had made contact with through my participation in various non-professional courses in building for women. Questionnaires were also sent to several women who had contacted me after I provided information about the research to an on-line list. Other women, who contacted me after hearing about the research or were referred to me by acquaintances, were also sent questionnaires. At the time of writing two hundred and fourteen questionnaires have been sent to individuals and seventy one questionnaires have been returned completed. Responses have come from five states including fifty eight different postcodes.

Preliminary analysis was carried out to construct profiles of the respondents for comparison with existing research. The profiles were constructed using the completed questionnaires that fitted the time frame of the research, being that the respondent was the builder of a house constructed after 1970. This process yielded fifty six respondents. Information included in the profile was drawn from eleven questions contained in the questionnaire. The questionnaire set out to find what type of housing was built, by whom and within what time period. Questions also explored the motivations for self-building and asked about sources of building skill as well as demographics and household structure of both male and female builders.

The data with respect to sex, partnered status and parental status is presented here as figure 1. It is immediately obvious that the majority of the respondents are male. Where as in Holland's sample females make up 1% of the sample<sup>18</sup> here they are 41% of respondents. The majority of respondents, a total of 84%, reported living with a partner at the time they were building and 47% of all respondents shared their household with children. Male respondents who were partnered and living with children made up 36% of the total while only 9% of the sample were females living in such a household.

The household represented most numerous in the sample is of a male builder with a female partner and who worked in a trade at the time of construction, and who reported that he had personally undertaken between 80-100% of construction and that the house was built within one year. However, though this profile corresponds closely to the profile of Holland's sample, no one household that could be said to typify this sample. This sample includes several household configurations including: a sole parent household with a female parent present, male-female couples with and without children, single person households, and a same sex partnership. Single person households made up 14% of the sample and in more than half these cases the respondent was a woman. Construction was reported to have occurred either over a period of up to two years or over a much longer period of between seven to twelve years. The majority of these respondents reported that they built more than 80% of their house.

Looking closely at the data large differences appear among households that at first appear similar. In the case of partnerships between male and female couples for example, where no children were present construction frequently took place over a period of between one and two years, but also of periods of between three and eight years or more. In these households, where the respondent was female, she reported building between up to 80% and under 10% of the house. In the same circumstances more than half the respondents reported building 90-100% of the house while others wrote that they constructed under 10% and up to 50% of the building.

An examination of the age range of males represented in the sample shows a close correspondence with Holland's sample,<sup>19</sup> in terms of the proportions of ages slightly more of my sample fall in the upper end of the range. (See figure 2) The ages of the females in the sample ranged to the same degree as the males but they were younger by an average of seven years and a higher proportion of women fell in the middle of the range than was true for men.

Among the respondents included in my sample there is a stark difference in the educational achievements of men and women as set out in table 1. There is a concentration of males who completed their schooling in the secondary levels that contrasts with the high incidence of females who had a post secondary education. In percentage terms 77% of females had a tertiary qualification compared with just 43% of males.

One factor that may have influenced this is that female participants were actively recruited for the research. Recruitment occurred through online networks and the researchers personal contacts, which may have been more likely to yield respondents with tertiary qualifications. Respondents were sent colour-coded questionnaires that indicated how they were recruited to participate so that factors such as these could be monitored. After the ten respondents recruited in this way were identified and removed from the sample 72% of the remaining females had a tertiary qualification. Whether or not the targeted respondents are included, for females there is clearly some relationship between the propensity to identify as a builder and the level of education.

There are also clear correspondences between the males in my sample and Holland's sample. (See table 2). Holland reported 32% of all respondents coming from building trades, in my sample 27% of males were employed in the building trades at the time of construction.

As with many areas of employment in Australia the building industry is highly gender segregated, and Holland suggests that the absence of women as registered owner-builders is a "reflection" of the lack of women in the building industry<sup>20</sup>. While it is unclear if the two female respondents were employed, and if so in what industries, that women are almost absent from Holland's sample is evidence it cannot reflect patterns of female employment. The much lower level of educational achievement of males in my sample, in contrast with the female respondents, corresponds to the high incidence of employment in trades, which is also evident in Holland's sample.

Questions about current employment and employment at the time of construction drew responses that indicated a difference in attitudes toward work and building between males and females. While the responses of males were usually an occupational title such as

electrician, the responses from females were often more descriptive, indicating the duties they performed. Several of the women indicated that while they were building they saw this as their job. One female respondent listed her occupation as parent, a designation that does not fit in any of the categories used by Holland.<sup>21</sup>

Holland drew his respondents from Builders Licensing Board Register of owner-builders.<sup>22</sup> This amounted to selection of the legally registered owner-builder as the builder of the house and did not allow other members of the household to be recognised or included in the study as builders. It is unclear who in fact contributed what proportion of the labour required to complete the house. What the process did identify was a propensity for permits to be issued to adult males, whom Holland assumed to be the “the head of household.”<sup>23</sup> A correlation between the role of owner-builder and head of household is not demonstrated and the extent to which the respondents saw their household arrangements this way cannot be determined.

A sample drawn from the Register could have included women if it was considered whether the partner of the registered owner-builder, or indeed other members of the household, may also have worked on the building. But is this merely a case of attribution? Has the work of the female partner been attributed to the male partner in much the same way the work of the female architect married to a male architect was once routinely attributed to him or did none build but the registered owner-builder. The sample selection method Holland employed precluded women from identifying as builders, regardless of their role, and conferred on them the status of wives of builders, rather than builders in their own right.

Exploring whether respondent's had family members who had been owner-builders Holland presents evidence of cases where the Grandfather, Father, Father-in-law, Brother, Brother-in-law or Uncle had been an owner-builder.<sup>24</sup> Female relations can only have been included in the category of “Others” however it is possible that this category was intended more for other male relations such as cousins or those with more complex relationships such as step relations. This appears to confirm the gendered nature of the role, to be an owner-builder one had to be male.

Among the responses analysed to construct my preliminary profiles I saw evidence that respondents were concerned about who was identified as the builder. Some questionnaires were completed in handwriting that was different from the signatory of the consent forms. This occurred twice, and in both cases a male, who had a female partner, signed the consent form. Another questionnaire, completed by a female, showed her responses were carefully recorded alongside the responses of her male partner. In two other cases a respondent requested two questionnaires so that her experiences, and those of her partner could be included.

This preliminary analysis indicates that where an opportunity is provided for people who have built a house for their own use to come forward women do identify as builders of their own houses. Women who identify as builders have backgrounds and experiences that differ from those of their male counterparts, and sometimes to a great extent. A woman is less likely to be partnered, where she is in a partnerships she is very much less likely to have children. Women identifying as builders are less likely to have an employment background in the trades, are much more likely to have tertiary qualifications, and will be on average seven years younger than their male counterparts. How these differences manifest in the vernacular landscape is yet to be seen.

Women do indeed see themselves as having a role in the creation of vernacular architecture and that role has been obscured by presumptions about who builds. Moreover this preliminary analysis shows that this methodology brings out some answers to the questions raised about women by scholars of vernacular architecture.

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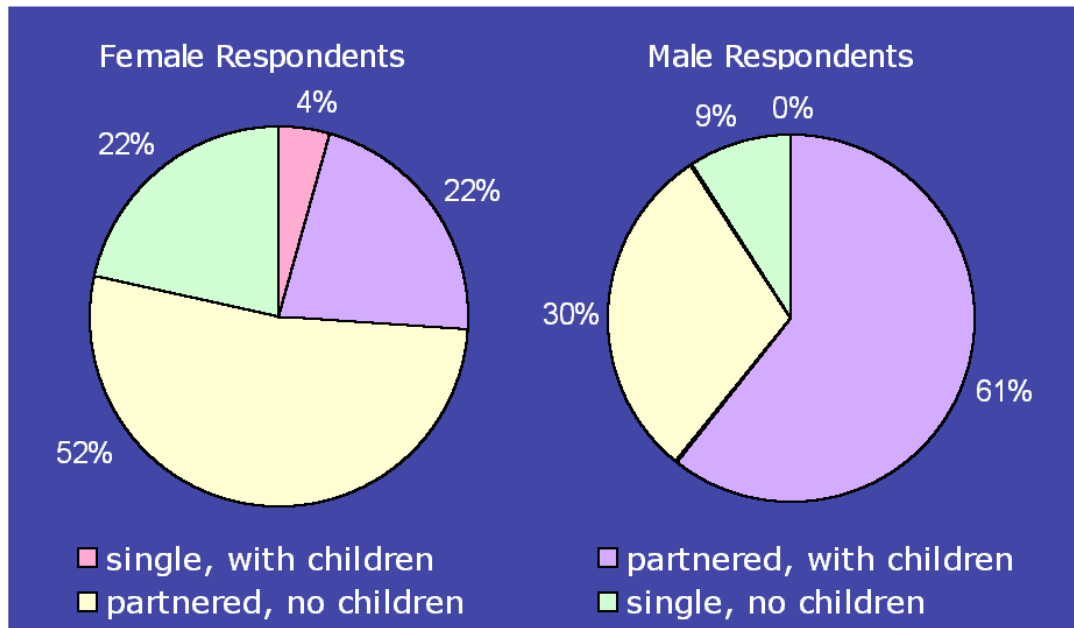


Table 1. Respondents by Sex, Partnered and Parental Status.

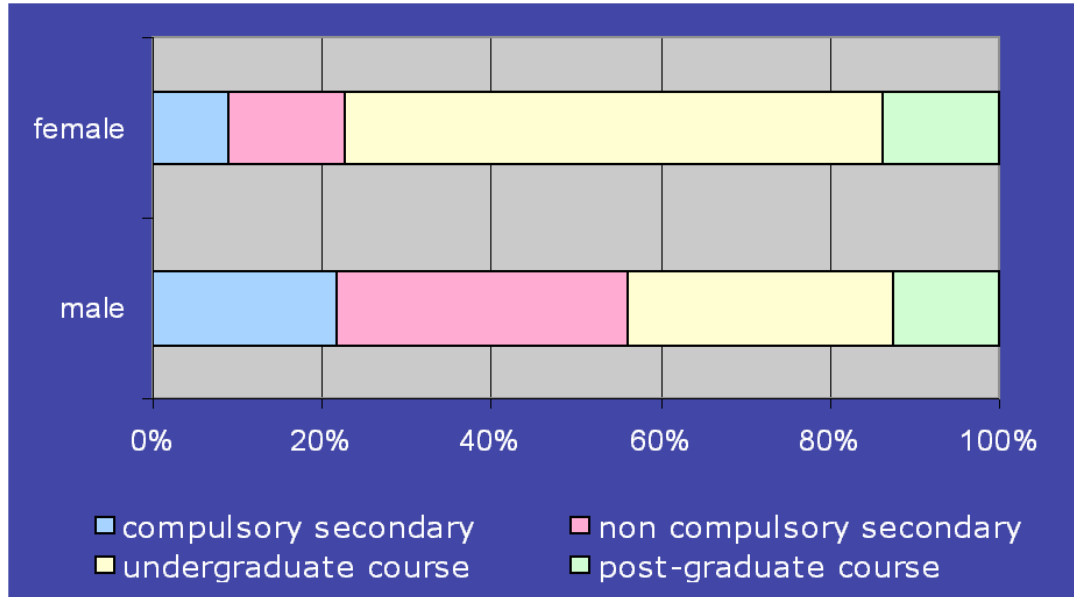


Table 2. Respondents by Sex and Level of Educational Achievement.

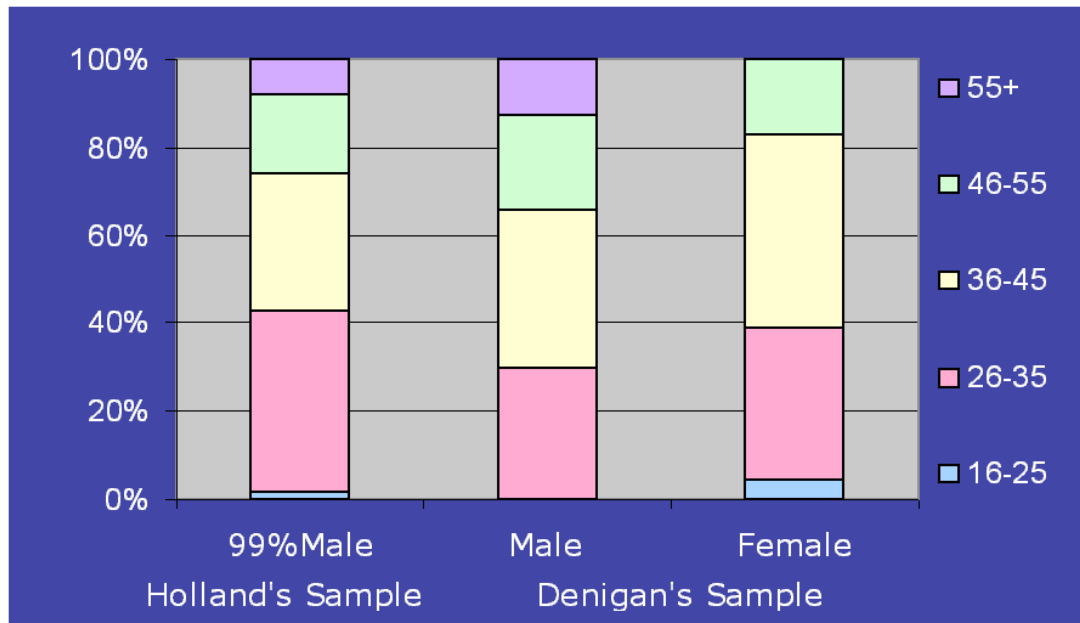


Table 3. Respondents by Age and Sex after Holland.

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<sup>1</sup> Angel Kwolek-Folland, 'Gender as a Category of Analysis in Vernacular Architecture Studies,' in Elizabeth Collins Cromley and Carter L. Hudgins (eds), *Gender, Class, and Shelter: Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Some examples are: Polly W. Allen, *Building Domestic Liberty: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Architectural Feminism*, Thomson-Shore, 1988., Louise Johnson, 'Making Space for Women: Feminist Critiques and Reformulations of the Spatial Disciplines,' *Australian Feminist Studies*, 9, autumn, 31-50., Leslie Kanes Weisman, 'Designing Differences: Women and Architecture,' in Cheri Kramarae and Dale Spender (eds), *The Knowledge Explosion: Generations of Feminist Scholarship*, New York: Teachers College Press, 1992, 310-321., and Sherry Ahrentzen, 'The F Word in Architecture: Feminist Analyses in/of/for Architecture,' in Thomas A. Dutton and Lian Hurst Mann (eds), *Reconstructing Architecture: Critical Discourses and Social Practices*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, 71-118.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Susana Torre and Architectural League of New York., *Women in American Architecture: A Historic and Contemporary Perspective*, New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1977., Fran Klodasky, *Employment Opportunities for Women in Architecture and Urban Planning: Problems and Prospects*, Ottawa: Government of Canada, 1985., and Jo Pyke, *Women in building - the missing 51% : a report on employer practices and attitudes toward women in the building industry*, Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> For examples see Delores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighbourhoods, and Cities*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1981., and Jos Boys, 'Women and the Designed Environment: Dealing with Difference,' *Built Environment*, 16, 4, 249-256.

<sup>5</sup> For examples see Peter Ward, *Self-Help Housing: A Critique*, London: Mansell, 1982., Reinhard J. Skinner and M. J. Rodell, *People, Poverty and Shelter: Problems of Self-Help Housing in the Third World*, London: Methuen, 1983. and Kosta Mathéy, *Beyond Self-Help Housing*, London ; New York: Mansell, 1991.

<sup>6</sup> See Dennis Inglemann, 'Self-Built Housing in Victoria,' in (eds), *Metropolis in Ascendancy Housing and Population*, Melbourne: Department of Planning and Housing, 1990. and Nick Wates and Charles Knevit, *Community Architecture: How People are Creating Their Own Environment*, London: Penguin Books, 1987.

<sup>7</sup> Dell Upton, 'Ethnicity, Authenticity and Invented Traditions,' *Historical Archaeology*, 30, 2, 1996, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Cary Carson, *Keynote Address: Vernacular Architecture Forum Annual Meeting*, Williamsburg, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Sally McMurry, 'Women in the American Vernacular Landscape,' *Material Culture*, 20, 1, p. 49.

<sup>10</sup> Rebecca Sample Bernstein and Carolyn Torma, 'Exploring the role of Women in the Creation of Vernacular Architecture,' in Thomas Carter and Bernard L Herman (eds), *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press and Vernacular Architecture Forum, 1991, p. 64.

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<sup>11</sup> Sample Bernstein and Torma, 'Exploring the role of Women in the Creation of Vernacular Architecture,' p. 72.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Ann Williams and M. Jane Young, 'Grammar, Codes, and Performance: Linguistic and Sociolinguistic Models in the Study of Vernacular Architecture,' in Elizabeth Collins Cromley and Carter L. Hudgins (eds), *Gender, Class, and Shelter: Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995, p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Glassie, *Vernacular Architecture and Material Culture*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000, p. 67.

<sup>14</sup> Richard J. Margolis, International Self-Help Housing Associates and American Friends Service Committee, *Something to build on; the future of self-help housing in the struggle against poverty*, Washington: International Self-Help Housing Associates and the American Friends Service Committee, 1967, p. 43.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Harris, 'Reading Sanborns for the Spoor of the Owner-Builder, 1890s-1950s,' in Annmarie Adams and Sally McMurry (eds), *Exploring Everyday Landscapes: Perspectives In Vernacular Architecture*, Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1997, p. 265.

<sup>16</sup> Graham Holland, *Emoh Ruo: Owner- Building in Sydney*, Sydney: Hale and Ironmonger, 1988.

<sup>17</sup> See the following URL. <http://dmoz.org/News/Newspapers/Regional/Australia/>

<sup>18</sup> Holland, *Emoh Ruo: Owner- Building in Sydney*, p.149.

<sup>19</sup> Holland, *Emoh Ruo: Owner- Building in Sydney*, p. 151.

<sup>20</sup> Holland, *Emoh Ruo: Owner- Building in Sydney*, p. 150.

<sup>21</sup> Holland, *Emoh Ruo: Owner- Building in Sydney*, p. 151.

<sup>22</sup> Holland, *Emoh Ruo: Owner- Building in Sydney*, p. 149.

<sup>23</sup> Holland, *Emoh Ruo: Owner- Building in Sydney*, p. 241.

<sup>24</sup> Holland, *Emoh Ruo: Owner- Building in Sydney*, p. 149.