

## **Video making as research: learning from the experience of eco-homes**

GOODCHILD, Barry <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8572-3598>>, O'FLAHERTY, Fin <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3121-0492>> and WALSHAW, Aimee

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### **Published version**

GOODCHILD, Barry, O'FLAHERTY, Fin and WALSHAW, Aimee (2013). Video making as research: learning from the experience of eco-homes. In: Housing Association Studies annual conference, York, 10-12 April 2013.

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**Housing Studies Association Annual Conference  
York, April 10-12 2013**

**Video making as research: learning from  
the experience of eco-homes**

**Barry Goodchild, Fin O'Flaherty, Aimee Walshaw  
Sheffield Hallam University**

Work in progress

# Introduction (I)

- The aim of this presentation is essentially one of methodology, as is stated in the title of the workshop. The aim is to reflect on the use of video to understand and show how 'ordinary' people use innovative eco-homes.
- Micro-study.
- The development of eco-homes is as a result of the implementation of national targets for carbon reduction. Truly a long-term change in the landscape of housing.
- The eco-homes studied here, are newly completed, rather than modernised dwellings. Much of the policy focus is on the latter.
- However, if eco-technologies and other eco-features start to pose problems in newly completed homes, they are likely to do the same in the older stock as well. The technologies of low energy design are commonly the same and involve a combination of heavy insulation, increased air tightness and the use of renewables.

# Introduction (2)

- Many previous studies have enquired into the technical performance of eco homes (Jackson et al 2009: O'Flaherty 2009).
- Strictly speaking, however, the performance of a dwelling in use is determined not by the house itself but by the occupants. If the eco-features of a house are not used correctly, their advantages will not be realised.
- Moreover, as has been widely recognised (Brunsgaard et al 2012: Shove et al, 2007, 14: Walshaw, 2011), understanding daily life in the home involves more than the use of short questionnaires and statistical analysis. It involves detailed and often lengthy observations and discussions.

# Introduction (3)

- The research was funded by the ESRC under a knowledge transfer programme. The aim was to enable designers and developers to think about things from the users' point of view, as is a prerequisite in good design (Lynch and Hack 1984).
- However, the line between knowledge transfer and knowledge acquisition is commonly unclear in applied social research. The very process of preparing material for dissemination starts to raise questions- about the implications of the method and about the video contents.
- Two sections: Starts with the logic and method of video, including the present study. Goes on to examine the issues that arose in implementation.
- No detail on the analysis of the video contents. But to avoid a sense of anti-climax, the conclusions summarise the main findings.

## Part A: The logic of video

### The strength of video (I)

- The logic of video is not too different from that of other qualitative research methods. Video enables a detailed interview and also enables observations of the context in which the interview is undertaken.
- Video has, however, particular strengths.
- In a conventional interview, the interviewer is in a privileged position because he or she can see the surroundings and read any non-verbal signals from the respondent.
- In a videoed interview, in contrast, the interviewer's privileged position is diminished, though not eliminated. A video cannot reproduce the smells or the temperature in a home. Even so, the analyst can see into the interview; can participate to an extent in the fieldwork; can go inside the home with the interviewer.

## The strengths of video (2)

- Equally, in presenting a world to the self and to others, video provides a means of engaging the subject of research, in encouraging them to reflect. Pink (2007) has, in particular, used the principle of 'walking with video' to reveal the meaning of a place and to establish a dialogue with the users.
- Later, Pink and Mackley (2012) used the same technique to examine the use of energy in the home.
- The present research likewise assumes that videos offer a particularly sensitive way of understanding the use and social construction of the home and offers through this a sensitive means of analysing the factors that determine the consumption of energy.

# The present study

- The video were undertaken with volunteers in three different locations:
  - Nottingham (Green Street), developed by a public/ private partnership agency for sale; (five volunteers)
  - Rotherham (Henley Way) developed by a social housing agency for a combination of sale, shared ownership and rent (five volunteers) and, finally,
  - Greater Manchester (New Islington and Salford), developed by a social housing agency for rent (three volunteers).
- The schemes therefore incorporated class differences.





# The dwellings

- The dwellings themselves are two and three story terraces, with a few small detached houses at Henley Way.
- The houses at Henley Way are also distinctive in that some have, in the words of the respondents, ‘an upside down layout’ with the bedrooms on the ground floor and the kitchen and living room on the upper floor.
  - Designed to maximise heat in the rooms used during the day.
  - Source of contrasting evaluations.
- Apart from ‘the upside down houses’, the main innovations lay in the details and the technology. The various dwellings invariably possessed high levels of insulation, supplemented in different schemes by solar hot water panels, photovoltaic panels, mechanical and passive ventilation systems and, in one case, an air source heat pump.

# The interview

- During the visit, respondents were first asked to describe in their own words:
  - their housing histories;
  - their motivations for moving to current home;
  - their feelings towards their current home;
  - their attitudes and practices in relation to sustainability.
- This aspect of the interview generally took place in the living room, as the following screenshot shows.



# The tour

- The respondents were then asked to provide a guided tour of the home explaining its design and low energy features and how they understood these.



- A preliminary interview was also undertaken with each respondent, explaining the implications and purpose of the research. The video interview and tour itself lasted at least an hour.

# Afterwards

- The resulting individual videos were then collated and edited into a summary video of between 15 and 20. minutes for each of the three different areas.
- The summary video was later presented to the participants in a local film 'première' to enable comment and feedback.



## Part B: Implementation

### Identity issues (I)

- Once completed, the summary videos were posted on a dedicated Facebook site.
- Respondents were aware of this from the outset. The audience was therefore not just the subject and the researcher, as in the studies by Pink (2007). The audience was, instead, a wider, albeit poorly defined, world of those interested in eco housing or merely curious.
- In this context, the videos started to raise new issues, not just about the details of use but about identity and reputation.

## Identity issues (2)

- One respondent put the point explicitly in an email after seeing the summary video.
- ‘It was a shock to see and hear ourselves as others might see us, and we continue to ponder our own sense of identity, which has been quite radically affected by this encounter with ourselves. So you can already claim that your film has been a life-changing experience for someone.’
- For other respondents, the issue of identity arose indirectly.
  - One respondent stated at the time of the première that she had joked with friends at work that she was going to appear in a video and looked forward to seeing it.
  - Another refused to allow the research team to use any part of a completed video because she was going through a process of separation and she worried that her husband might use the video to his advantage.

# The sensitivity of social housing landlords

- The power of videos to influence identity and external perceptions was also apparent in the reaction of the developers, especially social housing landlords.
- The research was intended, from the outset, to include two estates that had been developed by social landlords for rent or shared ownership or a combination of the two, together with a third estate developed for sale by a public/ private partnership agency.
- As completed, however, the social housing estates were not same as those originally planned, owing to objections from landlords who, after an initial agreement a few months earlier, had encountered various problems in the schemes after completion. The social landlords feared that publicity might either damage their reputation or cause too many complications for local housing managers who were already hard-pressed trying to deal with those problems.

## The response of residents

- Similar concerns arose during and after filming. On one estate, filming could not start because residents did not want to participate in the middle of a dispute with their landlord, (inadequate heating, poor maintenance and flooding from an apparently faulty rainwater harvesting system).
- Filming elsewhere revealed a repeated concern from tenants that they had received inadequate technical advice from the social landlord. The following comment illustrates the point:
- ‘I got told it was an eco-home and you would save money and things like that, but the day that I came to sign for the keys, so did a lot of other people. So you had to meet at the door number of your house, you would come in because the door was open and a woman gave you a folder .... And then she just went.’



## The response of social landlords

- On seeing the video, the social landlord in Manchester expressed an initial concern about whether the tenants' experience was typical. Later, the landlord reported that it planned to use the completed video for the training of its management staff. Seeing the video was therefore likely to lead to a change in management practices.
- The social landlord in Rotherham in contrast was already aware of the poor level of public understanding of eco-features in the home and had obtained funds to employ community energy champions to provide energy advice to its own tenants. In this case, therefore, the videos confirmed what the landlord already knew.

## More research, please

- Developers are often sensitive about their public reputation. Social housing developers are, of course, not necessarily more sensitive than private developers.
- Occupiers are also sometimes reluctant to make public criticisms- for fear that it would upset their landlord or damage the reputation and possibly the value of their estate.
- However, the very sensitivity of those involved and the consequent reluctance to publicise critical reports is likely to lead to a lack of public or professional awareness of the problems and dilemmas in innovative housing schemes, including of course low carbon/ zero carbon housing.
- Neither surveys of user response in housing nor videos of user response offer a panacea. If independently funded, however, as was the present research exercise, they may offer a corrective to other assessments.

## Conclusions (1)

- A need for detailed qualitative, user-oriented research is one lesson.
- Other implications depend on the type of scheme under consideration. The examples illustrate two main ways in which developers have come to provide innovative forms of low energy/ low carbon housing.
  - The scheme in Nottingham provides an example of a specialist developer identifying a niche market of consumers.
  - The schemes in Rotherham and Greater Manchester provide examples of a social housing developer responding to policy imperatives in favour of innovation and to additional funding opportunities.

## Conclusions (2)

- The prospects for expanding niche housing schemes depends on the size of the potential market,
  - not just for committed green consumers but for
  - cost conscious green consumers such as those currently in living in inefficient, draughty older housing.
- For private developers, much also depends on whether they can provide the 'bonus' aspects of the eco-home without sacrificing costs or other aspects. Very few people want to buy a home just for their eco-features

## Conclusions (3)

- The prospects for innovative social housing depend essentially on the funding regime. However, social housing developers might still pay attention to the preferences and demands of their tenants.
  - Obviously this means designing and developing homes where the technology does not break down.
  - Also means designing and developing homes that conforms to established notions of what a home looks like and not easily stigmatised.
  - Also means providing a strategy to deal with the novelty and complexity of new energy technology.

## Conclusions (4)

- Complexity was also an issue for those who had bought their home, though it did not figure as prominently in the interviews.
- A possible response, as the social housing landlords have recognised is to provide more guidance, more support and to train staff so that they can provide the support.
- In the longer term, however, the answer is surely to introduce technical systems that are simpler to control and more user friendly.

# Acknowledgements

- We must acknowledge
  - the financial support of the ESRC, for which we are grateful;
  - Littlestar of Manchester for undertaking the filming and editing

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