



## Self-building programs: Homes made with pride

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A study into self-building housing programs in Greenland and Canada’s Northwest Territories has found that the owners take both greater pride in their home and have a greater ability to care for it.

That was the theme of a webinar organized by the At Home in the North (AHIN) node featuring Dr. Susane Havelka, an architect researcher, and Hans Peter Mønsted, a psychologist, based on a 2022 study of self-builders in Fort Good Hope, NWT and Uummannaq, Greenland.

“I was incredibly impressed with how much each builder remembered, 40 years down the line,” Havelka said. “They remember everything about the construction, from the number of days they worked on the building to the number of logs they used. And they had unbelievable pride in what they had accomplished.”

Mønsted, who grew up in a community of self-built homes in Greenland, said the government paid 90 per cent of the cost and supplied kits chosen by the self-builder under a program called Illorput. While the foundation, plumbing and electricity had to be done by professionals, the other components were handled by the self-builder. The Canadian self-built homes were supported through grants under the Homeowners Assistance Program (HAP).

“A self-builder will maintain their house in a way that reflects their pride in it,” Mønsted said. “They treat the house very well. It’s their face in the community.”

While the Greenland government continues to sponsor self-building homes, the Canadian government abandoned its program about 30 years ago.



“Our government in Canada doesn’t consider self-building as a remedy to the housing shortage,” Havelka said. “I think this has to be re-visited, not only because it costs less money but because people take more pride in their home when they’ve built it and they are better able to maintain it because they know how everything works.”

She said there was a noticeable difference in quality, and pride of ownership, between the self-built homes and the homes brought into the north from the south.

“These two innovative housing programs not only improved the quality and quantity of local housing but still stand here in front of us to describe self-building programs as successful, affordable solutions that have built long-standing viable communities. The results indicate that having autonomy over one’s process of building a house bolsters a sense of agency.”

Quotes from the self-builders supported the argument that they have a greater sense of independence and pride and have learned new and useful skills.

“When I first started (self-building), it was a journey of personal growth. Planning it myself, building it myself, of course I had help...some parts require help as they are too heavy. It is a very maturing process. That process resulted in me being able to take on larger responsibilities on my job as well. My journey of personal growth,” said one builder.

“Ever since it was finished (the house), I’ve been working on it from time to time. It’s my own, so I have to maintain it. I paint it ... I added stairs to it. I made a mistake with it so I rebuilt it again the year after,” said another.



Prof. Julia Christensen, Canada Research Chair (II) in Northern Governance and Public Policy and Director of the At Home in the North node, said the study showcases the potential for self-building, both in terms of adding to housing stock, but also through the emphasis on wellbeing and homemaking at the individual, familial and community scales.

“We need to broaden our understanding of the housing continuum in the North, and recognize that "home ownership" will look different from household to household, community to community,” she said. “Ultimately, ownership is about self-determination and independence, and one way to foster this is through self-building.”

Mønsted echoed those comments.

“The self-builders go through a building process that not only builds a house they’re working on but also themselves as people,” he said. “This is what we mean by the title that ‘houses build people.’”