

EXPLORING SUSTAINABILITY AND IDENTITIES FROM AN INVESTOR'S PERSPECTIVE: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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Research has paid attention to the drivers and inhibitors of sustainable construction. However, how the tensions between different constraints and options are negotiated in practice needs further exploration. The role identification with sustainable construction plays within this process is still under-researched. Therefore, my autoethnographic exploration aims to better understand the connection between decisions regarding sustainable construction and the self-identification with sustainability. As a construction contractor, and more importantly as an investor, I investigate my fieldnotes and recollections during a project I realized in 2012/2013. I explore my decision-making and the role of my identification with sustainable construction to understand how my identification with sustainable construction influences my decisions about environmental, economic, and social aspects. I demonstrate how my identification with specific green solutions drives but also inhibits sustainable building. As the insights I offer come from my unique perspective as an investor, they are not generalisable but can provide insights into how identification with green building has an impact on decision-making. I show how apparently rational decisions are subjectively mitigated. Hence, I underline the importance of identification with sustainability to promote sustainable construction.

Keywords: autoethnography; identity; investor; practitioner research; sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability has been on the agenda of construction management research for a considerable time. Even before the term became prominent, the idea of building for future generations was a core concern of construction. However, because of the rapid increase in carbon dioxide emissions, climate change has added to the importance of sustainability. It is predominantly the zero-carbon-target that dominates discussion about sustainability. Yet, besides environmental sustainability, one has to consider economic and social sustainability (Scoones and Stirling, 2020). It is the consideration of all three of these aspects that makes design decisions regarding sustainability so complex.

Operational assessment schemes have been introduced and researched to support this decision-making (e.g., Leiringer *et al.*, 2022; Schweber, 2017). Yet there appears to

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be a lack of research in how tensions of commercial and sustainability considerations are negotiated “on the ground” (Schweber, 2017, p. 302) and of the role played by the identification with green building (Darko *et al.*, 2017).

Therefore, this paper investigates choices about these aspects from the perspective of a construction entrepreneur and small-scale property investor. To work towards a sustainable project, one must balance all three perspectives within both roles. Drawing on my personal experiences and reflections, I seek to reveal how I, my identities and the ensuing identity work play a central role while reconciling these perspectives. The paper aims to highlight the connection between choices about sustainable building and the identity of the investor.

The paper is organized into four sections. First, I briefly introduce autoethnography and how I use it. Second, I set out the research problem - how identification with sustainability influences decision-making. Third, I showcase, reflect, and analyse my personal experiences. Finally, I summarize my interpretation.

METHOD

To understand these processes better, I employ an autoethnographic approach. Autoethnography is closely related to ethnography. Ethnographers research a culture through observation, participation, and conversation with participants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). They collect their experiences in what they call fieldnotes. Fieldnotes are a form of diary or journal for research purposes (Emerson *et al.*, 2011). Through reflection, analysis, and interpretation, they seek to better understand the culture, or often just an aspect of it. Autoethnography distinguishes itself in that the researchers explore the culture they are already part of. They research in their backyards (Wolcott, 1999).

The primary material for my research is my own experiences and observations in my business. I am writing from a dual position. I am an entrepreneur in the Berlin area (Germany) where I employ almost 30 permanent staff members. Most of my employees are bricklayers and carpenters, and we build concrete and brickwork construction. But I am also an investor in small residential buildings on the outskirts of Berlin. I want to highlight the dual role and the competing identities here.

For this paper, I skimmed my fieldnotes but predominantly recollected events. I did what Ellis *et al.*, (2022) call 'memory work'. These experiences and reflections illustrate the points I would like to convey in this paper. Therefore, I include vignettes produced from these fieldnotes and memory. The vignettes are printed in italics. Undoubtedly, one may argue that I only report from my singular perspective. I do not want to contest this; it is a subjective picture that I draw here. However, I also provide insight into my inner decision processes that might inform others. They, in turn, might explore my findings further using their preferred methods.

Background

There is an abundance of studies into policy driven initiatives to promote sustainable building, cost and marketing effects of sustainable construction and its economic viability (Darko *et al.*, 2017). However, use of, for example, Building Environmental Assessment Methods (BEAMs), has done little to change the “norms, values, beliefs, practices and taken-for-granted assumptions” of actors on construction projects (Leiringer *et al.*, 2022, 113). Murtagh *et al.*, (2016b, 68) suggest, many only comply with rules and some regard certifications as a ‘tick-box’ exercise. Similarly, Jowkar *et*

al., (2022, 169) argue, motivations to invest are more due to “comfort and aesthetical features than for energy savings”. Therefore, I seek to understand the motivations of actors from the perspective of identification with sustainability. The identification appears to play a significant role for small architectural practices, as Murtagh *et al.*, (2016a) show. There is, however, little research available about the relation between identity and sustainability. Apart from the work of Murtagh *et al.*, (2016a) - who explored environmental sustainability - only Troje and Gluch (2020) explored the relation of identity to social sustainability.

To learn more about identity's relation to sustainable building, I will try to investigate my experience investing in a small-scale residential building. How did my sense of self impact on the decisions I took regarding sustainability? This highlights my personal considerations and exchanges with business partners. As, “the reality of the construction industry is seen to be shaped by the dominant management discourse” (Green, 1998, 384), I provide an insider's picture of the industry. Hence, I contribute to a better understanding of how “tensions” between sustainable building and commercial demands are “negotiated on the ground” (Schweber, 2017, 302).

Exploring Decision and Identity

Four storey building

I commence my exploration using a project I began developing in 2011. That summer, I bought a plot of land in the suburbs of Berlin. With the help of an architect, I successfully filed for building permission, which I obtained in 2012. In the summer of 2012, building work began, and in the following year, the four-storey apartment building was finished.

Summer 2013

It feels good to see the new building - Four 2-bedroom flats - my first own project. A conventional brickwork and concrete construction, outer walls, cellar floor, and roof massively insulated, triple glazing, underfloor heating, geothermal heat pump, solar water heating, and a ventilation system. The calculations suggest a very low energy consumption for heating and hot water supply.

The price of the building was relatively high, although I secured a subsidised loan from the KfW (State-owned investment and development bank) and received some direct subsidies. Therefore, the cold rent - excluding the cost of energy consumption - was comparatively high. Now, I had to find tenants for the apartments.

I must admit I was proud of the building I saw before me. My company's workers had done a significant part of the work on the project. However, there was a lot of work to be done by others after the bricklayers left the site. There was some pride in having developed a project, but perhaps even more in the specific nature of that project.

It had a high standard thermal insulation and a low energy heating system. It was not rocket science, but decent, tested design and technology, which promised to be very energy efficient. The high standard contributed to the cost of the building, which was above other developments of similar size. Still, I was convinced that I had done the right thing.

Energy costs would rise in the future. I used to say during this time, the price of oil, gas, or electricity would go up by about 100%. It was a belief - something I anticipated without having proof or certainty. Yet, it worked as a heuristic for legitimising my choices. Of course, it was a qualified guess. Often, the decision to opt for the more or the less efficient system was not supported by economic data available at the time. For example:

Autumn 2012

When we talked about the hot water supply, the engineer suggested solar water heating during summer and a gas boiler during winter. "At the end of the day," he said, "it's the cheapest."

All costs considered; he may have been right. The investment in a geothermal heat pump was immense. It turned out to be more than 10-fold, although subsidies from the KfW helped to shoulder the bill. However, opting for the geothermal heat pump was more a decision of conviction than a purely rational economic choice.

Economically, the heat pump was at the time the more expensive choice. Yet, the additional cost did not amount to an inhibitor, as often observed (e.g., Jowkar *et al.*, 2022). I could have used cost as argument, but I did not. At the same time, the engineer seemed to prefer the greener solution. When I expressed my preference for the heat pump he immediately sided with my choice. This certainly added to my confidence.

When I reflect on that decision, and similar choices, I see that my professional identity played a significant role in these decisions. It felt as if I had to build and equip the house in this way. I did not go for the cheapest solution because the project was sufficiently financed. I could afford to invest more in sustainable design and technology.

That raises the question of what kind of sustainability I was pursuing here. It incorporated three aspects. First and foremost, it should have a low environmental impact and consume as little as possible energy while in use. But it had to remain economically viable. That, in turn, limited the possibilities regarding environmental sustainability. I could not spend an infinite amount of money (and resources) on eco-friendliness. I could not ask for too high rents for the house since that would have made it socially unsustainable. As I later learned, I was on the brink of precisely doing that.

Becoming Landlord

When I began advertising the apartments, I left the role of the entrepreneur behind and became the landlord. Now I had to 'sell' my product. The litmus test for my strategy was the market - the potential tenants to whom I showed the apartments. The recollection here originates from that period.

Autumn 2013 - One potential tenant complained the rent was too high, and he did not believe that the energy cost would be as low as I said. Therefore, he did not rent the flat.

However, during the coming years, it turned out, the energy bill was more than half the price I anticipated.

When I offered the apartments, I promised certain costs for the energy bill. However, the contract and German law leave the risk with the tenant. Except for specially drafted contracts, tenants pay the energy bill according to some formula incorporating their apartment size and specific energy consumption. Although I was not entirely sure about the energy consumption, I had sufficient belief the cost would exceed the advance payments I had asked for in the contract.

Here it becomes evident that my sense of self - my identity - played a role in this situation. I do not promise something I am myself not convinced I can deliver. Of course, I take risks, and I sometimes must disappoint others. However, as a business owner and landlord, I do not promise anything I know from the outset I will have

difficulties delivering. It is the sense of being a fair business partner I have already explored elsewhere (Grosse, 2019)

I confirmed my identity to myself through this promise and by delivering on this promise (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). At that time, I was new in the landlord role. So, I had to draw on other images to define how to act and what self-image I maintained. Yet acting fair and making a decent profit were again guiding principles. In the investor and landlord role, making choices about designs and technologies became more prominent than it had in my entrepreneur role. Usually, as a construction contractor, I build what architects and engineers prescribe. Although I know how to build energy-efficient houses, I can only raise concerns and give recommendations but am very seldom in the position to decide. Yet, even in this subordinate position, I can decline to build designs contrary to my principles. Most of the time, I can refuse to sign a contract. In any case, I have some discretionary power to influence what I build. However, the last word remains with the client and their design team. With my own project, it was different.

Building something long-lasting

For the first time, I could do what I usually only recommend to clients and their design teams. Yet here, I faced the dilemmas my clients and their teams had already encountered. Finally, however, I applied my conviction to my own project.

In general, I wouldn't want to build something that is not long-lasting. I tend to convince my clients (and others who ask for advice) to opt for the most energy-efficient option. It's a deep belief that buildings with low energy consumption will sustain in the future.

The interesting point in this reflection is the grey area - the range where it is unclear which choice is the best - the economically necessary or the ecologically defensible. Within this grey area, subjective preference can play a decisive role. I wonder what impact it has to identify oneself with sustainable construction something to aim for.

I ask myself how far I recognize "the quest for zero carbon as an essential part of [my] identity" (Green and Sergeeva, 2020, p. 499). Again, I cannot disregard the social and economic constraints I find myself trapped in. The quest for zero carbon must allow for economic and social sustainability. But that does not imply the dominance of the economic considerations, which are often disguised as economic necessities. It is rather, as Murtagh *et al.*, (2016a, p. 72) state, that "autonomous motivations of personal commitment and an ethical imperative, as well as self-identity, pursuit of quality and awareness of impact on people, were found to be more salient drivers of sustainability." Self-identity appears to be more potent than other motivations.

One may frame the thinking about sustainability and identity around three aspects - I have to maintain a living through my economic activity's economic sustainability. In other words, I have to make a profit through my business, and the properties I develop must sustainably attract tenants to yield a rent. This also points to the social sustainability of my endeavours: I must align my activities with my staff members so that they can identify themselves with the firm as a form of social identity and make a living from their income. As a landlord, I need to maintain a space the tenants want to call their home and can afford to live in. In both roles, the third aspect - environmental sustainability - provides a sense of purpose and moral responsibility. However, it continues to pose an ongoing struggle of competing demands. Therefore, I will explore how I identified more with sustainable building and how it impacted my decisions.

The decision on the heating system for the building was based on different considerations. First, there was a financing scheme of the KfW in place, which offered low-interest loans and direct subsidies to achieve low energy consumption standards (KfW 40 Standard). For each flat, it amounted to €5,000 in subsidies. Additionally, I could claim a €50,000 loan per flat at 1.5 % less than market interest. Therefore, the subsidies and the loan made it economically much more attractive. However, this still did not cover everything as there were other costly requirements to get the loan and subsidies. Consequently, calculating the exact cost versus interest gains and subsidies remained difficult.

Second, there were long-term considerations that made a difference. For example, if I invest in insulation and a lasting, low-consuming energy system I have to invest more today but I will have the edge over comparable flats with higher energy consumption in the future.

Evaluating which design option is the most sustainable in environmental terms is often very difficult and depends on many different factors. For example, a gas boiler needs little energy to build compared to drilling 400 metres of geothermal pipes in the ground and producing two heat pumps, as was in my project. However, the energy consumption during use turns the tide against the boiler. Still, I am not knowledgeable enough to calculate the total carbon footprint of either option. Hence, simplifying heuristics is the only way to cope.

I knew burning gas would produce enormous amounts of carbon dioxide over the years. A heat pump produces only a fraction of this amount during use. Indeed, one could opt for green electricity and avoid even more carbon dioxide emissions. If my main concern is to build an eco-friendly solution, the installation of a geothermal system only had to be economically defensible. It just had to not be entirely off-track economically. Accounting for the subsidies and the interest deduction, the renewable option fulfilled the minimum economic requirements.

Still, the gas boiler was a tested system with a low risk concerning the anticipated energy cost. The geothermal system was not so well tested and was a riskier option concerning potential energy consumption. Again, I did not have the opportunity to assess the cost in detail. Or maybe I did not spend time and effort to assess. To a large extent, I had to rely on informed guesses.

In this example, I appear to be asking specific questions and not raising other questions. For example, I raised the question which led me to the decision on the geothermal heat pump. I subjectively picked questions that served my intention to build an environmentally friendly solution. As Pirsig (2014) says, the questions prescribe a range of possible answers. Even if we answer the question by employing objective science - which would be very difficult here - we choose the questions subjectively. Hence the answers we produce are a mere reflection of our subjective choices. This clarifies how important it is to identify oneself with a green agenda.

Limits of eco-friendliness

The importance of identification becomes evident when I turn to the example when I opted against the most environmentally sustainable solution.

Spring 2012 - Passive house

Early in the design phase, the architect and I very briefly discussed whether or not to build a 'passive house'. He argued that it would require too many compromises in design and would be pretty expensive. I didn't explore this option any further, and it

hasn't been discussed again. Retrospectively, I must admit I did not feel comfortable with the prospect.

I did not honestly consider building a passive house. It felt too farfetched. I had often seen some people involved in these projects appear idealist. Similar to the sustainability experts Troje and Gluch (2020, p. 66) describe:

"It would also be reasonable to assume that sustainability experts would enact the identity of the idealist, as it is likely that people who work with sustainability are interested in improving the social environment, might have an activist agenda and engage in educational work tasks aimed at 'spreading the good word' of sustainability."

I cannot say whether the passive house planners and owner were as described above, yet they somehow left this impression. It may have been this that led me to dismiss the passive house option. Again, as with the geothermal heat pump, I did not explore it in sufficient depth. Maybe because I lacked the time, but more likely because I did not have the necessary motivation. I did not identify with the passive house option - it was just not me. Apparently, identification with green construction can be a driver for green building, however the absence of identification can also inhibit green building.

The 'bricks and concrete' company

In a similar vein, I did not question whether to build the house from concrete and bricks. At that time, I had run the business for 13 years. All our jobs comprise of some brickwork and concrete. This is a substantial part of my professional identity; I am not into timber houses, and neither are my staff. I could not imagine building a 4-storey building from wooden frames - not even parts of it.

There was, of course, the economic perspective to this choice of bricks and concrete. I could let my staff members do the job. I had full control over the cost and could develop the most cost-efficient solution due to my familiarity with the material. Yet, there was no argument about the choice of materials. This had to fit within my company's capabilities.

It was clear from the very outset that it could only be brickwork and concrete construction. Everything else would have clashed with the company's identity. If I had chosen a different material, I would have been asked to explain myself and that would have been a difficult discussion. How on earth could I not use the very material we sell to all our customers with such great confidence? Choosing something else would have undermined this confidence in what we are and what we stand for - hence our organisational identity. Again, I had subjectively chosen the questions I asked. In hindsight, the narrow choice becomes obvious, yet I did not reflect on it during the decision process.

Recent developments

While the COVID disease gripped the world, prices for construction materials soared. In recent weeks, however, fuel and energy prices have almost skyrocketed. These price hikes have forced me to reconsider my reluctance to invest in photovoltaics. The cost-saving potential and the income from selling electricity appeared too small to make a case for such an installation.

Again, I needed to identify with the new realities. A big boost in that direction came from my direct co-worker who pushed for that system. This convinced me to explore it. What happened was an alignment with the group in my office. In one way, they ran into already open doors. But some identity work took place to align my professional identity with the organisational identity I perceived in my office. An incident that contributed to this identity work was the following:

Late Autumn 2021

"Actually, you could do a bit more for the environment, couldn't you?" a staff member said and hinted that I could install a photovoltaic system on the firm's roof. Less than a half year later I took action.

March 2022 - I called an old classmate. Years ago, his firm renewed the roof of my company's office, garage, and shopfloor building. In the meantime, he took on business installing solar panels on roofs too. So, I called him to come over to my office. He visited the building and took some measures. A few days later, I received his quotation for photovoltaic panels that could easily produce the energy my company needs to run and heat the office and charge some electric vehicles.

Once I got the numbers from him, I went to my desk and created an Excel spreadsheet to explore whether it was economically viable. It seems to make sense. Hence, I called him to order the panels and asked him to see whether it was feasible to install a photovoltaic system on the residential house.

I needed the severe disruption of the energy market - exploding diesel and electricity prices - to give me a wake-up call. I may not reduce the cost of electricity by installing photovoltaic panels, but I vastly reduce the exposure to volatilities in the energy market. Furthermore, once the system is up and working, I am only supposed to buy a remainder of 30% from the grid. The rest I could produce myself.

When I turn back to my initial example of the geothermal heat pump, the recent price hikes have a reaffirming effect. I anticipated higher prices, but I did not think it would happen so abruptly. However, the higher prices justify my decision even more. It also influences my thinking about the photovoltaic panel, and I am more confident it will be a reasonable choice to install them.

The Processual Nature of Change

These changes of identities are, as I demonstrated above, gradual processes and often incorporate all three aspects. Sometimes the changes take place more rapidly. However, as in the case of the photovoltaic system, the groundwork had already been done and only the visible change - pursuing the project of installing the system - appeared to be a rapid shift.

It is necessary to work towards the identification of single actors in turn but also organisations with sustainable construction. I consciously use the vague term 'organisation' because it can, and should, entail groups of individuals in the sector from different firms and different occupations. As one sees in my case, it is certainly not enough to convince the executive management to opt for sustainable solutions; it must trickle through the organisation. For example, most of my employees buy-into the idea of well-insulated houses and care for the quality of their work (e.g., being mindful of thermal bridges). Therefore, building houses that are sufficiently well-insulated turns out to be not too difficult to manage because it is ingrained in the organisation's self-image. However, this organisational identity developed over time and maybe my effort to educate and train staff members to embrace this approach contributed to it.

CONCLUSIONS

Turning Identity Into Action

Building on Murtagh *et al.*, (2016b) I demonstrated by my personal example as investor that decisions about sustainability are more closely related to identity and identity work than to rational choices. If I identify myself as one who cares about

sustainability, I develop a specific notion of myself - not unnecessarily exploiting resources and not polluting the environment beyond sustainability. As coined by Alvesson and Willmott (2002), dealing with ambivalence and dilemmas amounts to identity work. Yet the identity I am maintaining leads me to ask predominantly questions which implicitly prescribe or yield answers that support or maintain the identity I have built. These processes I have demonstrated above in detail. The identity operates similarly to the notion of quality in Pirsig (2014). A higher order dominates rationality ('classic thought', as Pirsig would term it). Hence, we deliberately ignore questions that could yield answers which challenge our identity.

I ignored arguments against a sustainable solution (e.g., the geothermal system). Still, I also ignored arguments in favour of it (e.g., the passive house or my earlier thoughts about photovoltaic panels). Hence, identification - on individual and organisational levels - with sustainability and, in particular, with the environmental aspect of sustainability can shift the balance for many decisions to be taken. Considering the reaffirming effect - decisions favouring environmental sustainability will positively affect the future decisions of an individual (as in my case), of an organisation (as in my company), and across organisations.

LIMITATIONS

The claims I make are based on my personal experience and therefore not generally applicable. That said, they might inform others. Still, I argue from a privileged position. My project was comfortably financed and through my business I had easy access to resources others in the industry do not have. Being so privileged it was often easy to opt for the eco-friendlier solution. Hence, my conclusions must be handled with the appropriate caution. Nevertheless, I believe identification with green building can tip the balance in many cases toward more eco-friendly solutions.

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