Houses of Straw: The Presentation of Design on Television

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Abstract

The UK television programme *Grand Designs*, in which participants engage in the design and construction of their dream houses has, over a period of 14 years, done much to educate a lay audience about the design of domestic buildings. In this paper we analyze two episodes of the programme, both featuring houses constructed using straw-bales. Our analysis considers three ways in which the show frames design issues and participants for the viewer. First, we look at how concepts of sustainability are presented; second, we explore the different ways in which expertise is enacted; and third, we discuss how design as a process, and architecture as a discipline, are represented. Within the episodes we analyze, we find that, on the one hand *Grand Designs* seems to be architecturally progressive (in furthering a discourse of 'sustainability', and accurately reflecting the 'reality' of design), but on the other hand, it can be interpreted as just the opposite since, through problematizing notions of 'expertise', the show actually favours tradition over innovation, and emphasizes individual brilliance over collaboration and compromise.

Keywords

Design Process, Discourse, Domestic Architecture, Framing, Housing, Sustainability, Television

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Introduction

Design as a televisual subject has grown considerably over the past 20 years. Initially a subject that broadcasters struggled to make sense of, being neither a science, and hence to be treated with reverence, or an art, and hence to be treated with suspicion (Springer, 1991), design has more recently gained in popularity as new formats have been found for its presentation, particularly around the 'drama' of the design process (Lloyd, 2002) and in relation to the 'lifestyle' and 'makeover' genres of reality TV (Lewis 2008). Such shows are generally well accepted in the UK and North America and have included, for instance: *Project Runway* (2004-present, Lifetime/Bravo, USA) in the area of fashion design; *Top Design* (2007-2008, Bravo, USA) in the area of interior design; *Motor City Masters* (2014, TruTV, USA) focuses on automobile design; *Big Brain Theory* (2013, Discovery, USA) focuses on engineering; and *Design For Life* (2009, BBC2, UK) focused on product design. Design is also a regular element of business-orientated

television programmes, for example *Dragon's Den* (2005-present, CBC, Canada and BBC2, UK) and *The Apprentice* (2003-2013, NBC, USA and 2005-present, BBC1, UK).

Although there have been effective discussions of how design is presented in film (see for instance the special issue of *Design and Culture*, whose volume 1, no. 2 from 2009 was almost entirely devoted to 'Design on Film'), there has been little work done on how design is presented on television. What makes television programmes about design so interesting from an analytical viewpoint is that they contain elements both of contrivance (narrative structure; edited dialogue; jeopardy; and authorial voice, along with a combination of moving image, spoken word, sound, and music) and of 'reality' (i.e. 'real' design problems are set and solved, participants are not actors, dialogue is not scripted, and the shows are filmed in real environments (Hall 2006)). Furthermore, such programmes are generally easily accessible and arguably excellent communicators of cultural norms and values (Dant 2012; Morley 2004; Sender 2012). What television programmes also afford, as public texts, is relatively straightforward audio-visual data that can be transcribed and analyzed in ways similar to those in which other design conversations and texts are interrogated (for instance, through methods derived from discourse and conversation analysis (Oak 2009, Lloyd 2000, McDonnell and Lloyd 2008)). In particular, given the growing interest in how language is used in relation to design practice, (Forty 2000, Glock 2009; Mathews and Heinemann 2012, Markus and Cameron 2002; McDonnell 2009; Oak 2011, 2013), television offers the possibility of taking a critical look at the intersection between talk and design, without being beholden to the interests of specific practitioners.

This paper explores aspects of the long running TV series *Grand Designs*, a show that is focused on the design and construction of homes (homes that are usually, as the title suggests, expensive and imposing, but not always so, since 'modest' homes are also regularly featured). *Grand Designs* originated in the UK in 1999 and has been running on Channel 4 ever since, with the British version broadcast throughout much of Europe (France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Poland, Italy, Romania), in Canada, and also in South Africa, Iran, Taiwan, and India. In Australia and New

Zealand the show has spawned separate spin-off versions that follow the same format. As well as having a *Facebook* page and a message board on the *Internet Movie Data Base (IMDb)*, *Grand Designs* has also had several affiliated books published (e.g. 2009's *The Grand Designs Handbook*), and is the basis for both an eponymous monthly magazine and for *Grand Designs Live*; annual exhibitions in London and Birmingham that showcase products and technologies for home improvement (Collinson 2011).

The initial question for our research was: how is the practice of home design and construction presented, explained and assessed in the televisual setting, specifically on *Grand Designs*? To answer this question we focus on how design is mediated through the context of TV through looking at three interlinked discourses; on sustainability, on expertise, and on design process. We thought it was timely to open the parameters of research into design to explore, not just how design practice is 'really' conducted, but also how design practice is presented to a wide audience that is largely comprised of non-designers. Such an audience is significant to the field of design since the ways in which the public views, interprets, assesses, and engages with design can impact circumstances that range from levels of enrolment in design education (Waxman and Clemons 2007) and the popularity of sustainable housing (Andrews 2013), to wider social debates about design and the built environment. In focusing on *Grand Designs* as we do here, we are positing that those scholars who are interested in the established research foci of designers, design practice, and design history may also find it fruitful to consider those mediated design discourses that actively address a wide and varied audience.

The *Grand Designs* programmes

It is important to distinguish at the outset between *Grand Designs* as a programme type and 'property makeover' shows. *Grand Designs* emerged from within the field of makeover/renovation programmes that gained momentum in the 1990s (e.g. *Changing Rooms* (1996-2004, BBC1, UK) and *Trading Spaces* (2000-2008, TLC/Discovery, US) and that themselves grew out the those mid-to-late 20th century 'shelter magazines' (e.g. *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Interiors*, and *Architectural Digest*) that presented ideas

of home improvement (Cullen 1999);. Nevertheless, *Grand Designs* is distinct from many such shows through its depiction of both the ‘real’ complexity of design (an actual project’s budget, difficulties with materials, contractors, engineering specifications, and planning applications are featured), and the ‘real’ timeline of the project is followed (i.e. rather than a contrived ‘against the clock’ timeline found on shows such as *Trading Spaces*). *Grand Designs* follows projects over the course of years as they are conceived, planned, built, and occupied and as such may be considered within the ‘documentary’ genre, as it is on the Internet Movie Database (*IMDb*). However, because its narrative features non-actors in many ‘real’ situations and working environments it could also be included within the genre of ‘reality-TV’ (Hill 2005). *Grand Design’s* deliberate approach to featuring ‘real’ design is supported by the show’s host, Kevin McCloud, who has noted that *Grand Designs* has intentionally sought to distance itself from other property-based shows (Kutz 2011).

Grand Designs has aired continuously in the UK since 1999, with (in 2015) more than 140 episodes broadcast and now in its 15th Series. The show is undeniably well-liked, with McCloud himself enjoying popularity, some celebrity, and considerable respect. He is now a significant figure in popular discussions of British architecture, with his voice having considerable authority, particularly in relation to the design, presentation, and critique of the domestic and built environment. Recently, he was described in the *Guardian* newspaper as the UK’s ‘architectural critic-in-chief’ (Collinson 2011) and in 2014 he received an MBE ‘for services to sustainable design and energy-saving property refurbishment’. Trained in the history of art and architecture, and having practiced in interior design, McCloud has been the sole presenter and chief writer of *Grand Designs* since its first episode.

Approaches to analysis

The frame for our analysis was initially in two directions. From the twelve series of programmes available to us we selected eight programmes for detailed analysis that either had an ‘eco’ focus (for example ‘*The Eco Modest House*, from Series 10) or a ‘heritage’ focus (for example ‘*The Disused Waterworks*’, from Series 3). Each

programme was transcribed verbatim and viewed many times to understand both how these particular subjects were presented and how the various protagonists were shown to interact. Our approach was to identify points and structures in the programmes where we had a sense that specific regularities or discourses were being enacted. We then looked for further corroboration and evidence as we developed our understanding of what was being presented. The paper thus draws on aspects of discourse analysis, especially those approaches that have considered how language is used to construct and 'frame' particular perceptions of reality for the viewing audience (Lorenzo-dus and Blitvich 2013; Borah 2011; Goffman 1974).

As our analysis progressed we began to focus on how 'eco-design' and sustainability were presented as two other discourses also came into view. The first other discourse was about design expertise, particularly the way in which trained architects and designers? were presented and appeared to conflict with the expertise of the presenter, Kevin McCloud. The second concerned the overall way in which design, as a process and practice, was narrated, particularly in relation to the balance between a specific individual's contribution (through, for example, moments of 'genius'), and those more collaborative contributions and presentations of work. With these discourses in mind we finally decided on two episodes of *Grand Designs* to analyse in detail: *The House of Straw* (shown in Figure 1) from season one (1999), and *The Cruck-Framed House* (shown in Figure 2) from season three (2003).

Figure 1. Grand Designs houses from the episodes analyzed: *The House of Straw*

Figure 2. Grand Designs houses from the episodes analyzed: *The Cruck-Framed House*

While each of the homes are different in location, methods of building, and scale, they nevertheless share the use of a sustainable building material for wall construction: straw bales. Further, these programmes retain a particular relevance in the context of *Grand Designs*'s history: the viewing public has voted them in the top 25 episodes and they are frequently mentioned by McCloud himself as among his favorite episodes (Lonsdale 2012; McCloud 2011). In each programme, the home's owners are intimately involved with the design and development of the buildings: *The Cruck Framed House* episode focuses on Ben Law, who has been living in an English woodland for the previous ten years while *The House of Straw* features two architects who are also academics, Jeremy Till and Sarah Wigglesworth.

The *Cruck-Framed House* is a modestly-sized home mostly constructed from local materials using traditional building techniques. Straw bales are used for walls (Figure 3) and solar and wind power for energy. The house is constructed in the woodland environment where Ben Law lives.

Figure 3. Use of straw bales in the *Cruck-Framed House*

The *House of Straw* is large and complex, with straw bales for walls (figure 4), steel beams for structure, and an office for Sarah Wigglesworth's professional architectural practice. Although located in an urban environment (in North London's Islington area), the *House of Straw* does feature aspects of sustainability, including a composting toilet, solar panels, and a sloping roof that was sodded to grow native plants, including wild strawberries.

Figure 4. Use of straw bales in the *House of Straw*

In terms of programme construction, episodes of *Grand Designs* while being largely filmed on location, are composed of five different kinds of design/talk segments: first, segments that show the protagonists (i.e. the featured home owners) interacting with a range of other participants (i.e. architects, designers, builders, planners, friends, etc.);

second, segments that show the protagonists speaking directly to the camera in a video-diary format; third, segments where the presenter, Kevin McCloud, talks directly with people who are involved with various processes (i.e. builders, planners, craftspeople, or the protagonists); fourth, segments where McCloud, apparently alone, talks directly to camera; and, fifth, McCloud's disembodied voice in voiceovers that introduce, summarize, assess, or otherwise reflect on activity that has been, or is about to be, shown.

In the remainder of the paper we present and discuss the three aspects of *Grand Designs* noted previously: ideas about sustainability; concepts of expertise; and, representations of design process. We do this by using direct quotation and verbatim excerpts from the programmes that provide an empirical basis for our discussion and allow our interpretations to be set in context and interrogated. The use of excerpts also gives a feel for the programme dialogue to those unfamiliar with the programmes. Our previous work (for example Lloyd 2000, Oak 2009) has used approaches associated with conversation analysis to consider design discourse in some detail and, while we still attend to detail in what follows, our aim was more to draw out positions from what we saw rather than to present the mechanics of conversation.

Ideas of sustainability: Framing the use of straw bales

Over the course of the (so far) fourteen completed series of *Grand Designs* one consistent theme throughout is of people wanting to build homes that are more 'sustainable', environmental or 'eco'. Indeed, *Grand Designs* has done much to present nuanced ideas about sustainability and educate its audience about what sustainable building might be. Yet, despite the presenter's dedication to sustainability, *Grand Designs* as a show features the concept without clearly defining what it is, either in general, or in the specific context of a particular programme. That is, the projects featured over many *Grand Designs* episodes offer several different perspectives on sustainability with some focusing on energy efficiency and the use of local or low-carbon materials, while others emphasize self-sufficiency in building or simply fitting in with local traditions and the natural environment. Indeed, in this way, like the myriad

‘articles, reports, and books on the subject of green or sustainable buildings’ (Guy and Farmer 2001, 140) *Grand Designs* is yet another text that contributes to the ‘bewildering’ ‘diversity of images of what sustainable architecture might be’ (Guy and Moore 2007, p. 15).

As *Grand Designs* has developed over the years, sustainability has moved from being a peripheral to a central theme of the show, as it has in wider society (Khan, Vandevyvere, Allacker 2013; Pyla 2012), although in some respects this has led to sustainability being a somewhat taken-for-granted part of some *Grand Designs* projects. Of course the very nature of most *Grand Designs* houses being on a grand scale, and furnished with new consumables, could be argued to militate against familiar ‘Eco-centric’ or ‘Eco-social’ ideas of sustainability, which emphasize the stability of local and global biodiversity, and the development of community cohesion (Guy and Farmer 2001, 141). In effect, on *Grand Designs*, forms of eco-consciousness engage with other considerations that relate to the build (e.g. financial, structural, or aesthetic issues) and so, instead of a simplistic rendition of sustainability, the show depicts the intersection between environmentalist, (design) professional, and pragmatic concepts of eco-awareness. This means that *Grand Designs* offers the opportunity to explore how sustainability may actually be enacted in practice as a form of ‘ethical consumption’ (Dant 2012, 209). Further, through giving its audience opportunities to view and interrogate the particular blends of sustainability it presents, *Grand Designs* becomes a contemporary text through which we can consider how sustainability itself is socially constructed and performed within and through the media (Hannigan 2006).

After analyzing many episodes of *Grand Designs*, it is apparent that there is considerable variety in terms of its representation of sustainability, one of the programme’s enduring fascinations is how in a particular episode the protagonists are presented as more-or-less strongly holding onto a specific environmentally-oriented ideology that drives their projects, and how any apparent compromise to this ideology may affect both the building and themselves as people. Materials and persons are shown as intersecting, and together they are made meaningful for the viewing audience

through Kevin McCloud's interpretation and presentation and interpretation of them. In the two programmes we have chosen to discuss here, the relationship between ideological position and protagonists arises through the common element they share: straw bales for construction. The notion of making buildings out of straw bales is not new, but it is a material that was (and still is) unfamiliar to most in the construction industry. Nevertheless, the qualities that straw bales present as building materials have made them extremely amenable to appropriation by different discourses in which diverse views of architecture, sustainability, and design can be read. In particular Kathryn Henderson (2003, 2006) has looked at how local planning legislation regarding straw-bale buildings has been enacted as well as how straw bales have been appropriated to different lifestyle aesthetics.

In the *Grand Designs* episode that features the *House of Straw*, Kevin McCloud gives an overview of the building project at the beginning of the programme. With a simple face-shot to camera he says:

Jeremy and Sarah plan to use unconventional materials everywhere. The walls of the bedroom wing will be made of straw bales - these will also run against the wall of the living area up towards the office ... There are no plans for the interior but by the spring they hope to have the exterior shell completed so we'll be able to see if this avant-garde building can actually be made.

Here, the use of straw bales is described as 'unconventional', and this fits with McCloud's initial framing of the house as being 'avant-garde'. The bales are presented as part of Jeremy & Sarah's approach to building and so act as a kind of analogy wherein the meaning of 'unconventional' is transferred between the bales and the couple. In contrast, the use of straw-bales is introduced rather differently for the *Cruck-Framed House* episode. Here McCloud says:

Ben is using building techniques that our ancestors used centuries

ago. First he'll build a skeleton from timber A-frames from his own forest, unusually the roof goes on next, it's covered with traditional wooden tiles or shingles, then the walls will be built out of straw bales and clad on the outside with oak...

In this case the initial, verbal framing of the project is as a much more natural set of processes, materials, and methods. Using straw bales to build the walls is not highlighted by McCloud as being unusual, instead, the bales sit in a logical sequence along with oak A-frames, wooden shingles, and oak cladding in a list that reinforces the depiction of Ben as thoughtful and sensitive to tradition.

One of the first exchanges between McCloud and Jeremy & Sarah in the *House of Straw* further draws out the qualities of straw bales in relation to their wider context:

Note: '=' indicates speech immediately latches on the prior speech; '[' indicates overlapped speech; '/' indicates interruption.

1. KM ...it's not the obvious choice for a building is it? particularly an
2. urban building so what are it's - what are it's
3. S Well it isn't obvious because it hasn't really been used as a
4. building material very much in this country
5. KM Yeah but things like - as you know - insects and rat invasions...
6. J There's something very obvious about them - they're kind of
7. very direct because you kind of just you know? That's that
8. - you pick it up=
9. KM =Big bricks
19. J =and it's like kind of big bricks
11. KM It can't take very long to build a house - I mean to build a wall=
12. S =No you can build a wall very fast
13. KM =I mean you can kind of stack stack stack. I mean it's like
14. building it's like a stacking you know in a granary or in a barn=
15. S =Exactly

16. KM =you can quickly construct it/
17. S /That's the other thing we actually
18. quite like about them is that um because they haven't really
19. been used before they're really a well developed technological
20. solution to building in bales so it's an incredibly
21. [inventive way of putting up walls
22. J [That's so mad ha ha ha ha
23. KM Does that mean that nobody knows how to do it?
24. S Nobody knows quite how to do it - in other words - yeah and
25. everyone is still inventing different processes so it's a you
26. know a vehicle for invention=
27. KM =It's very exciting
28. S It is

In this exchange McCloud frames the interaction through asking 'common sense' questions of the protagonists, testing why they want to use this 'unconventional' material. He frames the decision to use straw through emphasizing the potential negative consequences of the material, for instance: straw as a habitat for vermin and pests, and the fact that no-one might know how to build with the bales. In the couple's defense, Jeremy says he likes the bales' 'obvious', building-brick quality, while Sarah embraces the construction challenge that they present.

In contrast to his thorough questioning of Jeremy & Sarah, McCloud's presentation of the use of straw bales by Ben in his *Cruck-Framed House* is less interrogative and more overtly supportive, thereby framing Ben as making a sensible choice that is consistent with his overall approach:

Straw is a fraction of the price of bricks and mortar, it's a very unusual choice of material but totally in keeping with Ben's organic low-tech approach to building – anyone can build with straw and since Ben's walls aren't load bearing the straw's just stuffed up in the gaps between the timber frame and board work.

Further, as well as differences in how the bales as a functional material are presented, there are also differences in how McCloud presents the ways in which the protagonists join the straw bales together, presenting another interesting point of comparison. In the following excerpt of talk from the *Cruck-Framed House*, McCloud admires the planning behind the house design, which has been laid out in bale measurements:

Note: words in {} are a description of how the talk is presented.

1. KM Those four they are full sized bales and they happen to be the
2. distance between the two windows is that – planned?
3. B It is planned yeah the original plans for the house were actually
4. laid out in bale measurements
5. KM Really?
6. B Ya
7. KM Hahh hheh very clever
8. B So the whole thing had to be designed around the bales like
9. where I’m sitting is going to be a window seat so it’s exactly one
10. bale high
11. KM {in voiceover narrative} The end cruck frame is exactly one bale’s
12. width away from the outside wall - the straw slots into the gap
13. KM {speaking directly to Ben} Now there’s a bit of a gap here
14. B Yup well we’ll come we’ll go towards that gap first
15. KM {in voiceover narrative} Then the bales are pinned together with
16. chestnut stakes

McCloud commends Ben for being ‘very clever’, that is, the system of design that is revealed clearly makes sense to McCloud, to the extent that he takes on the explanation of it in a short voiceover narrative description (line 11-12) that effectively reinforces the ingenuity of the approach. This is in contrast to the strictly face-to-face interaction with Jeremy & Sarah, which has no added voiceover for emphasis. The excerpt above describes very simply the method that is used to join the bales together, again in a short

voiceover narrative where McCloud says: 'Then the bales are pinned together with chestnut stakes' (line 15-16).

Unlike the neutral description of how Ben joins the bales together for the *Cruck-Framed House*, the method used for joining the bales together in the *House of Straw* episode is presented as a problem. This is apparent in the following interaction where Jeremy & Sarah have brought in some architectural students to help them with the construction of their home, and one of the students notes a potential drawback to the way that the bales are attached.

Note: St = Student.

1. KM {In voiceover narrative} The bales fit tightly between the vertical
2. trusses and are secured to the timber frame with metal strips.
3. This is a method invented by Jeremy and Sarah. Some of their
4. students have volunteered to help - one of them sees a problem
5. with the metal strip system
6. J What do you think that you're going to get?
7. St Condensation
8. J Condensation happening on here?
9. St Yeah, then you'll get moisture coming in and rotting the straw
10. J I see
11. St I mean I don't know if--
12. J Heh heh heh (sharp intakes of breath) Well this could stop the
13. whole thing couldn't it? Well but the metal isn't going to be cold
15. St It won't be exposed
16. J The metal's not exposed-- I would be worried about it coming that way=
17. St Yeah
18. J But it's not exposed
19. St Okay
20. J I think we're going to keep on

The concern (that condensation may occur and rot the straw) is evident in the interaction (lines 6-7), but McCloud particularly ensures that viewers are alerted to this potential difficulty through a voiceover narrative that orients us to the forthcoming interaction and ensures that we are aware of the salience of this potential problem (lines 1-5). The problem, McCloud implies in this voiceover narrative, is with the overall system of joining the bales, a system that is the 'invention' of Jeremy & Sarah. That is, the couple have come up with a new way of joining the straw-bales (with metal strips) that might inadvertently cause the bales to deteriorate. Perhaps they aren't so smart after all, McCloud implies, given that their 'invention' might stop the 'whole thing' (line 13). Yet, in the actual process of the build that is depicted on the episode, the potential difficulty caused by using metal strips is a briefly-considered issue that Jeremy reasons will not actually cause deterioration because the metal is not exposed (lines 13-20). In effect, Jeremy and the student resolve the problem through their knowledge of the materials and mode of construction, yet their reasoning process is not noted by McCloud. Instead, this segment of the show retains its implied negative evaluation of Jeremy & Sarah's invention through the 'set up' provided by McCloud's introductory voiceover. In this way McCloud's voiceover acts as a frame through which the problem is defined, the cause is diagnosed, and judgments about the people involved are suggested (Entman 1993, 52).

Once each of the houses have been constructed McCloud switches his attention away from materials and processes to the sensual qualities that the straw offers the buildings' inhabitants, and here he is relatively consistent in his positive framing of the use of the bales in both of the homes. For instance, looking around the *House of Straw*, the first thing that McCloud mentions are the acoustic properties, which he evaluates in glowing terms.

It's actually very very quiet in here-- the sound deadening property is fantastic and the straw is really densely packed you can ha ha you can certainly tell that it's a straw bale house can't you?

While McCloud does positively present and assess Jeremy & Sarah's building as being quiet, he is more strongly effusive about the *Cruck-Framed House*.

1. KM The straw bales give it a real sense of weight of mass of solidity
2. – makes you feel very secure
3. B It does it does – secure and warm - angling the windows gives
4. you a lot more sort of interesting light coming in
5. {6 lines excised for brevity}
6. KM Wow this is absolutely beautiful the sculptural curve to this
7. wall and you've got a nice square edge seat and these lovely
8. curving returns on these windows
9. B Yup
10. KM Which as you say kind of give much more light into the room
11. B It's actually lovely stuff to work with straw

In this exchange with Ben, McCloud again emphasizes the 'massive' quality that the straw produces (line 1), but here he positively associates this with protection (line 2: secure). Additionally he positively assesses the sculptural effects formed by the bales and the quality of light that is produced because of the deeply curved walls around the windows (lines 6-8). Through using terms such as 'beautiful, nice, lovely', the viewer is left in no doubt as to how McCloud perceives Ben's use of straw bales; whereas, in the excerpt concerning Jeremy & Sarah's *House of Straw*, McCloud's laughter and comment that 'you can certainly tell that it's a straw bale house' is at best a rather cryptic evaluation.

In contrast to his favorable impressions of Ben's use of straw, McCloud presents two 'arguments' or narratives that subtly undermine Jeremy & Sarah's 'innovative' and non-regional, urban approach to using straw. McCloud's first argument is to link the concept of 'sustainable' with 'local'. In a sub-narrative within the *House of Straw* episode, McCloud constructs a studio space for himself and uses straw bales for walls, clearly

linking the aesthetic effects of the straw (their 'massive' quality) to their being local, rural materials 'chopped out of the fields'. Straw may be sustainable but it is not associated with urban building, McCloud implies.

The second way McCloud subtly undermines Jeremy & Sarah's approach is to suggest that being inventive (necessarily) leads to problems. For instance the 'invented method' of using metal strips to fix the straw-bales together suggests that this method might actually destroy the integrity of the bales and hence the very fabric of the house. In contrast, the problems encountered by Ben are shown as challenges that are overcome, and usually overcome by doing something local – for example cutting down a tree, dredging a pond, or asking friends around to help out. The presentation and interpretive framing of the *Cruck-Framed House* is of Ben keeping alive traditions, together with associated ways of living, which are being lost due to urbanization. The *Cruck-Framed House* thus represents an idea of sustainability as local and nature-based, one that McCloud appears to tacitly espouse.

In comparing the two narratives of building with straw bales, our suggestion here is not that either approach is intrinsically better, in terms of sustainability or otherwise. What we are highlighting is how the ways in which the narrative is constructed and presented provides the viewer with an argument for a particular type of sustainability. In this respect McCloud has significant power to influence the audience with his own ideas about what constitutes sustainability or eco-awareness, and to further frame himself within wider culture as an 'expert' and authoritative voice in issues pertaining to sustainability, design and domestic architecture (Smith 2010).

A comparative analysis of the use of straw bales in the two episodes also highlights the fact that the later programme of the two we consider here, *The Cruck-Framed House*, from season 3, does not refer in any way to the earlier programme, *The House of Straw*, from season 1. This makes McCloud's comment near the beginning of the *Cruck-Framed House* episode (that straw bales are 'an unusual choice of building material') rather odd, since they are not unusual to him (or the regular viewer), and probably quite the

reverse, given that, as part of his involvement in *The House of Straw*, he used straw bales to construct his own studio. The *Cruck-Framed House* episode, as all *Grand Designs* programmes, starts afresh as a self-contained story; as a series of televisual accounts, each episode has an explicit 'once upon a time' and a (usually) 'happy ever after' narrative structure.

The deliberate repetition of the narrative format without cross-reference between programmes, also means that each programme is framed as having distinct 'morals' that may be separate from those of other programmes. These messages conveyed or lessons to be learned can be explicit, since McCloud often says, as he introduces the programme for the viewer, "this is a story about...". To this he adds a general theme, e.g. how fate can deal a cruel blow. Additionally there are morals that are more implicit, drawn out for the viewer, but left unsaid. In the case of the *House of Straw* the suggested message concerning sustainability is 'don't be too innovative', while, in the case of the *Cruck-Framed House*, it is: 'live on the land and use local materials'. In a broader context, and for these programmes in particular, these implicit 'morals' serve to define aspects of sustainability for the viewer.

Concepts of expertise: Evaluating the protagonist designer

Throughout each *Grand Designs* episode Kevin McCloud assumes the role of omniscient expert: first, through voiceovers in which his disembodied voice is heard in relation to some action or issue that is presented on screen; and, second, in segments that feature his embodied presence where, simultaneously, his voice is heard and his body is seen on screen. In these embodied segments McCloud talks with participants, engages in activities that are related to home design or construction, and/or speaks directly to camera in monologue. McCloud's talk is critical to the narrative of *Grand Designs*, since it is through his talk that neutral descriptions and explanations of action are integrated with implicit or explicit judgments. Indeed it is his voice that decodes for the viewer the complex activities associated with designing and building. Through McCloud's spoken words the presumably impartial viewer (who is likely not an expert on the design process) learns both what is happening and what value is to be associated with what is

happening. In this way McCloud is the prescient, 'expert host' (Smith 2010) whose voice, particularly in those segments in which he speaks over a depicted action, powerfully shapes meaning and interpretation for the viewers. Such voiceovers act as commentary, which as Ang notes (referencing Foucault): 'is a type of discourse that has the aim of dominating the object: by supplying commentary one affirms a superior relation to that object' (Ang 1985, p. 97; citing Foucault 1971).

As each *Grand Designs* episode unfolds, McCloud not only talks about materials and processes, he also evaluates the homes and the participants themselves through comments that associate the buildings and people with the categories of 'good' and, while perhaps not 'bad', certainly 'not so good'. Locating participants in clear-cut categories helps to shape the complex reality of designing and building into a relatively simple story that is easily understood by the viewing audience. In the previous section we noted how McCloud assessed as 'very clever' the use of straw bales in calculating the dimensions of the *Cruck-Framed House*'. In contrast the same advance-planning method, carried out several years earlier for the *House of Straw*, is described simply and factually in voiceover:

The wooden trusses and the foundations that support them are both designed according to the dimensions of the straw bales. Jeremy and Sarah are now in the thick of putting their ideas into practice - making it up as they go along means they have to race to solve problems to avoid holding the build up. With a design like theirs that's an uphill struggle.

As we see here, following McCloud's neutral description of how the design of straw bales were used in Jeremy & Sarah's design, McCloud moves away from an impartial stance and shifts to making negative assessments that imply, for instance: that the couple are clearly disorganized ('making it up as they go along', and 'race to solve problems') and not particularly capable ('with a design like theirs, that's an uphill struggle'). Further, his judgments of the couple suggest that their approach to design may have negative implications for others by 'holding the build up'. In effect, as we

showed earlier, the use of straw bales is framed differently for each project: as either traditional/positive (*The Cruck-Framed House*) or unconventional/negative (*The House of Straw*). These categories have implications for how the protagonists are presented as more-or-less principled agents and also for how design practice is depicted for the viewing audience.

The following two quotations are examples where McCloud assesses the current-state-of-a-project. The first is from *The Cruck-Framed House*:

When Ben started this project I wasn't quite sure what his house was going to look like, after all this is the first house he's ever built but Ben is a born designer. There's that impeccable attention to detail here and a beautiful and modest simplicity. The design of this house succeeds because it's basically made out of one material from one place driven by one idea - the vision of one man.

The second is from *The House of Straw*:

Experiments in [design] are a noble idea - but the stakes are high ... this build is going at a snail's pace. Making it up as you go along is all very well in the ivory towers of academia but on the building site like this you've actually got to make it with some reference to the schedule.

These two quotes reveal some similarities between how McCloud speaks about the buildings being created: for instance, he notes that Ben's structure is 'the first house he's ever built', and Jeremy & Sarah's home is a contribution to 'experiments' in design. Otherwise, however, there are marked differences in the ways in which McCloud frames the protagonists: for instance, in the first quote above, Ben is deemed 'a born designer', with phrases such as 'impeccable attention to detail' and 'beautiful and modest simplicity' serving to reinforce the positive assessment of Ben's home, his skills as a craftsperson, and his persona as an individual. Finally, in McCloud's words that end

this segment's commentary concerning Ben, the woodsman is cast as being fully and successfully in control of the overall project ('driven by ... the vision of one man').

In contrast, when discussing Jeremy & Sarah, McCloud uses phrases such as 'snail's pace'; 'making it up as you go along'; and 'ivory towers of academia': all colloquial and idiomatic phrases that would be familiar to a general viewing audience, and that focus attention away from the couple's home, and onto their abilities as designers. In the second quote, above, the use of the ironic, idiomatic expression 'all very well' is an argumentative move that serves to discredit and disqualify Jeremy & Sarah's capabilities as professionals (Krabbe and Walton 1993). In effect, through McCloud's commentary, viewers of this episode hear that the couple are out of touch in ways that are potentially irresponsible.

There are many other instances of talk where McCloud praises Ben and his home, while speaking disparagingly of Jeremy & Sarah and theirs. Table 1 below shows a number of quotations where descriptions of the project lead to positive and negative evaluations of the protagonists.

Table 1: Descriptions of the two projects by the presenter

<i>The Cruck-Framed House featuring Ben</i>	<i>The House of Straw feat. Jeremy & Sarah</i>
This is West Sussex ... where the planners won't even let you put up a garden shed and yet ... he's achieved the unthinkable, he's got planning permission to build a house	Amazingly their design sailed right through planning
This project is a real labour of love, a totally hand-crafted house, each timber cut and prepared and fixed using traditional jointing methods.	They've caused quite a stir in architecture circles already. People pay to hear them talk ... but talking is one thing - doing is another.
This extraordinary hand made house is as beautiful and natural as anything I've ever	The first experiment are the gabion walls and it's the first place that theory doesn't match

seen ... I can't wait to see what it looks like when it's finished.	reality ... it's a bit of a cheat but reinforced concrete pillars now have to be hidden in the middle of each gabion.
Ben's determination has paid off ... his house is up and ready.	Original ideas are all very well - but I wondered how Jeremy and Sarah as practicing architects explain their vision to others.

In the first four instances of positive talk concerning the *Cruck-Framed House*, Ben's achievement (in getting permission to build) is described as an extraordinary event. Further, the commentary effusively praises Ben's skill and ingenuity, his attention to aesthetics, and his determination. In contrast, in the four instances of talk concerning the *House of Straw*, McCloud expresses surprise at Jeremy & Sarah's success at being granted planning permission, while further suggesting that the couple are more adept at talking and theorizing than designing or building. While McCloud does have some positive things to say about Jeremy & Sarah, overall Ben's actions and persona are categorized as being clearly good, while Jeremy & Sarah's are not. Indeed, at times McCloud's talk frames Jeremy & Sarah as not fully proficient as trained professionals, in contrast to his positive presentation of Ben as a 'born designer'. By depicting the couple as less than competent, McCloud's judgments have several implications for Jeremy & Sarah but also for McCloud himself. His evaluations serve to subtly shame Jeremy & Sarah and position McCloud as more authoritative than the professional architects and designers (since he is in a position to judge them) (Palmer 2006). In consequence, McCloud's assessments help to solidify his role as 'expert' in the eyes of the viewing public (Smith 2010).

Representations of design: risk, individuality and practice

Kevin McCloud does make some positive comments about Jeremy & Sarah. Half way through the *House of Straw* episode he offers the following reflection:

When I first met Jeremy and Sarah I thought to myself here is a pair of real architect's-architects - you know all that ICA* stuff and all those academic

treatises meant that here was a house that was going to be built out of ideas rather than out of passion - but now I think that not only are they remarkably good communicators but they're not detached from this project they're remarkably committed to it and they're taking all the risks – I mean personally, financially, academically, professionally, they are putting everything on the line.

*Institute of Contemporary Arts, London

McCloud's utterance above initially presents the couple as out-of-touch professionals ('real architect's-architects ... all that ICA stuff'), but he then contrasts this with a more positive evaluation ('remarkably good communicators') (Harris 2002; McQuarrie 1996). This allows viewers to see them as academically-oriented practitioners, but potentially also as committed and engaged professionals. This more positive judgment is especially amplified by McCloud's repetition of the word 'remarkably' indicating some level of surprise as if, in spite of them being designers, they have retained the capacity to communicate effectively. Similarly, at the end of the quote, he implies that the level of commitment to the project that the couple demonstrate is unusual, though he ends the segment of talk by underlining the risks they are taking ('putting everything on the line'). In his summary comments at the very end of the *House of Straw* episode McCloud returns to the issue of the project's risks:

As Jeremy and Sarah admit this is an extremely experimental project it's a wacky building and the route they've chosen to follow isn't fast or cheap or efficient, in fact I'd say it has been and still is a fairly hair-raising adventure for them and a brave one too because they're risking their money, they're risking their livelihoods, their reputations here. But that doesn't stop them from playing with ideas and why not? ... it's nice to see a pair of architects not afraid to have a go and make something so different.

By using phrases such as 'playing with ideas' and 'not afraid to have a go', McCloud offers a positive evaluation of the couple as creative and inventive, rather than only as

haphazard and chaotic. Again, however, this is balanced by a more ambiguous and potentially negative statement: the couple have been 'brave' but they also had a great deal to fear (losing money, livelihood and reputation). The reference to a 'fairly hair-raising adventure' suggests that while bravery has been involved, their project has also been somewhat reckless.

An inclination of McCloud's is to present design as fraught with danger, as we see since, interestingly, he also lists the hazards of Ben's project near the beginning of the *Cruck-Framed House* episode:

To build a conventional house really well I think you need just reams of drawings. You need a bill of quantities, a full specification, a schedule, you need contracts with your builders, and if you don't have all this things can spiral out of control. But Ben's approach is entirely different, if he's got any plans at all they're in his head (sigh) so maybe it doesn't matter that nobody on this build has built a house before, maybe it's fine that he doesn't have a schedule and it's okay that he makes up so much of it as he goes along – but personally I find the whole thing terrifying.

At the end of the *Cruck-Framed House* episode McCloud again reflects on the project:

When Ben started this project I wasn't quite sure what his house was going to look like, after all this is the first house he's ever built, but Ben is a born designer, there's that impeccable attention to detail here and a beautiful and modest simplicity. The design of this house succeeds because it's basically made out of one material, from one place, driven by one idea - the vision of one man.

As with the *House of Straw*, McCloud frames Ben's situation with respect to the *Cruck-Framed House* through using comparison, exaggeration ('extreme case formulations'; Pomerantz 1986), and repetition. The pattern here is different though. In comparison

to the contrasting statements he makes about Jeremy & Sarah (for example ‘creative but reckless’) McCloud’s initial concerns, laid out in the quote above concerning Ben’s home (‘spiral out of control’, ‘terrifying’) are fully resolved, with unreserved praise, at the end of the programme. For McCloud Ben is a ‘born designer’ with ‘impeccable attention to detail’ who has shown ‘beautiful and modest simplicity’. The success of the project is clearly down to his personal ingenuity and individuality (‘driven by one idea – the vision of one man’).

Ultimately these two episodes of *Grand Designs* frame designing and building a home as a set of activities whose success is not based on hiring (or being, as in the case of Jeremy & Sarah) knowledgeable, experienced, professional architects, but on being a particularly brave, passionate, and visionary person. Indeed, it appears to be Ben’s lack of ‘architectural process’ (no specification, schedule, or contracts) that has led to his success. In contrast it is Jeremy & Sarah’s commitment and bravery, rather than their expertise as design professionals, that has kept them going.

As a series about design *Grand Designs* frames design practice as an essentially heroic and artistic activity, undertaken, as it is in these episodes, by uncompromising individuals. Kevin McCloud’s comment that it is ‘the vision of one man’ that drives the success of Ben’s house (despite the fact that Ben actually consulted with a professional architect and other building experts) could be seen as out of kilter with rather more collaborative approaches to creative practice that are now recognized by many design practitioners and researchers (McDonnell, Lloyd 2009). Through *Grand Designs*, McCloud has had popular and professional success with presenting home design as a creative and expressive activity, but, by framing the people who undertake such activity as Romantic idealists who are willing to put ‘everything on the line’, his presentation of design as a dangerous sport can also be seen to distance design from the everyday lives of those less intrepid, more ordinary people who make up much of the show’s audience.

This is somewhat ironic given McCloud’s implicit critique of architecture and design – through Jeremy & Sarah – as being ‘detached’, as being too much about ‘ideas’ and not

enough about ‘passion’. In the two programmes we’ve looked at here, the profession of Architecture, and the process of design are presented as somewhat distanced and removed from the ‘real world’, or at least ‘the real-world-as-shown-on-TV’ (and arguably a key feature of *Grand Designs* is its focus on presenting architecture-as-reality by following and recording projects over periods of years). Indeed the professional side of design, in terms of planning, process, drawings, project management, etc. is often shown as actively preventing a more natural, intuitive and creative process (which the *Cruck-Framed House* shows in its pure form). Of course a programme about professional design would be a different proposition, but the presentation of the profession in *Grand Designs* does have consequences for public perceptions about what constitutes ‘progress’ in the built environment. This is particularly so around ideas of sustainability, which are now central to the design professions, as well as to *Grand Designs*. However, while, in professional practice, and architecture more specifically, sustainability is codified in requirements and building codes – constraints around which designers and architects have to work creatively – in the two *Grand Designs* episodes we’ve analyzed, sustainability is presented as being ‘traditional’. Here, sustainable design process becomes more about the crafting of buildings through contact with local materials rather than in relation to policies and code. So while the profession could be seen as embracing technology for sustainable purposes (disparaged as ‘innovation’ in the *House of Straw*), *Grand Designs* presents an argument for an ideal of sustainability as being a return to the traditions and practices of the past.

Concluding Comments

Television is a powerful medium for the depiction of design since design of all kinds, from fashion to architecture, engages with transformation and ‘the new’. But, as we have shown here, in the context of reality TV, images of design-related activities and the novel objects that ensue are presented to the viewing audience through particular frameworks that position materials, values, processes, and protagonists in relation to judgments of greater or lesser worth (Stead and Richards 2014). We have considered how home construction and home owners are presented and assessed through the

perspectives of Kevin McCloud as a popular ‘expert’ and through *Grand Designs* as an influential programme. By looking closely at the content of two particularly popular and well-known episodes, both involving the use of a ‘sustainable’ material in their design and construction, we have shown how particular ideas about what constitutes sustainability are framed for the viewer. This is important since ideas about what is sustainable drive an increasing number of debates about design that go much further than the built environment. A version of sustainability that advocates ‘local materials and traditional methods’ whilst appearing to eschew ‘invention’ and ‘innovation’ could then be argued to disempower the viewing public by favouring particular types of (presumably limited) material whilst discounting the value of design thinking, large-scale production, and sustainable symbolism. The fact that the programme allows ‘conventional’ expertise about designing and building to be constantly doubted also brings into question the value of both a design education and the system of planning regulations that have evolved to ensure compliance; arguably key components of a sustainable society.

The two programmes we have analysed in detail were chosen partly because of the contrasts we observed and to some extent represent polarized views of what, in other programmes, are harder to discern, though our view, having considered a substantial number of programmes, is that there is a regularity underpinning many episodes of *Grand Designs* on issues of sustainability, expertise, and design process. We stand to be corrected however, and therefore, through presenting these analyses, we hope to encourage other researchers to explore design, not only as sets of activities that occur in professional or pedagogic settings, but also as framed and mediated texts that serve to reinforce or challenge public perceptions of the materials, concepts, persons, and practices of design.

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