Do It Yourself: Democracy and Design

41 A0 Display boards
8 Films (3 projections)
87 Artefacts

design centre north, Barnsley, 6 May 2006 to 17 June 2006

Do It Yourself:

Democracy and Design

Paul Atkinson

Do It Yourself is not just home maintenance.

This exhibition looks at various aspects of Do It Yourself, in order to examine different ways in which people have personally taken part in the design process rather than be reliant on ‘professional’ design. As such, it covers a range of activities that might not be expected to be seen in an exhibition on DIY: Here, homecrafts such as embroidery and the making of soft furnishings sit alongside cold war fallout shelters, and sailing dinghies are seen next to punk fanzines. Such apparently dissimilar subjects are connected through the theme of democracy because of the role they have played in opening up design and production processes to the public.

One effect of examining DIY from such a perspective is to expand the notion of what might traditionally be considered as ‘Do It Yourself’. This exhibition regards any creative activity carried out by people not trained in design as ‘Do It Yourself’. In these terms, the creation of a cross-stitch sampler is as valid as building a fallout shelter, assembling a sailing boat from a kit, or creating a magazine by hand. Historically, productive and creative activities of this kind have allowed consumers to actively engage with design and the design process at a number of levels, and to express a more individual aesthetic unbounded by the strictures of mass-production and passive consumption.

And what to show? The advice leaflets, manuals and guide books, exposition and retail catalogues, newspaper reports and magazines and later, radio and television programmes are often the only evidence of what for many has been a significant element of the fabric of everyday life – the results of DIY activity, due to their individual and personal nature, have all too often disappeared without trace with the passing of time.

DIY has allowed people, paradoxically, to react against the principles and edicts of design connoisseurship whilst simultaneously enabling the emulation of those above them in social hierarchies. DIY has acted as a leveller of class – overcoming the social stigma of manual labour out of sheer necessity, and permitting the working classes to engage in leisure activities from which they were previously excluded. It has acted as a social force in reinforcing competitive displays of conspicuous consumption, and as a political force by facilitating the wider dissemination of subcultural views through self-publishing. This exhibition takes this aspect of design democracy as its unifying theme, expanding the notion of DIY from the narrow perspective in which it is often held.
The sections in this exhibition together cover a time period of some three centuries. The focus of the [Edwards'] section covers a period from the early 18th century to the late 19th century. 'Use your hands for Happiness' the 1920s and 30s, 'Do It Yourself security' the 1950s and 60s, [Jackson's] the 1960s and 'Scissors and Glue' the 1970s.

This exhibition does not attempt to construct a developmental history of Do It Yourself, but it does provide some indication of how the concept of DIY has been variously received over time. It is interesting, too, that so many of the same issues are addressed in each section. Throughout, issues of emulation, class and taste are discussed, as are similar economic and social factors. What is more of interest though, is how each section demonstrates different ways in which all forms of DIY have enabled the consumer to rail against the prescribed design edicts, and indeed, prescribed social mores of the time. Moreover, as this exhibition exposes, DIY can be seen as the ultimate expression of individual taste, and therefore as an accurate yardstick by which the popular aesthetics of design can be measured. Whether seen to be conspicuous consumption, emulation, self preservation or self-expression, DIY remains very clearly an intrinsic part of the material culture of everyday life.
Exhibition Photographs

design centre north, Barnsley 6 May 2006 to 17 June 2006
Window Display Boards

Internal space - Sections on Mirror Dinghy and 18C Women’s homecrafts
Items on Display - 18C Women's homecrafts

Internal space - 18C Women's homecrafts
Internal space - Sections on 1920s & 1930s Women’s magazines

Items on Display - 1920s & 1930s Women’s magazines
Items on Display - 1920s & 1930s Women’s magazines and embroidery samples
Internal space - Section on Cold War Fallout Shelters with replica fallout shelter, survival advice leaflets and emergency ration kits, and public advice films being screened.

Internal space - Section on Punk Fanzines with Fanzines in cases
Above: Internal space - From Section on Women’s Magazines to entrance showing Punk Fanzines in cases and Mirror Dinghy with video documentary being screened

Below: Internal space - Section on Punk Fanzines on opening night
Next Page: The prototype no3 Mirror Dinghy in situ, made by Barry Bucknall
Exhibition Listings:
The Guardian
RIBA Journal
World of Interiors, Blueprint
Review article

Yorkshire Post Magazine 6 May 2006

(Circulation 57,000)
Home truths on DIY then and now

DIY can be an expression of individualism and creativity according to a new exhibition in Barnsley. Maybe so, but John Woodcock begs to differ.

Mr Eddis was our woodwork teacher. I can visualise him, before me and wearing a grey smock with a squad of pencils standing to attention in the lowest pocket, as he slipped a piece of pins into the vice and in one flowing move placed a beautiful golden nail.

"Right you are," he’d say, "Do the same." Several did.

Leeds is the only secondary modern to become a proper art school, and we were permitted to liaise with Mr. Eddis building booms and restoration workshops.

No one before had taught to get the vice bite right, any nails had a mind of their own and pegged boat ahoy the wood. The result wasn’t a pretty sight. My efforts concerning dovetail, cutters, and dovetail and tenon joints were so pathetic that Mr. Eddis wouldn’t let me take home any sawn-legged versions of a chair table and stool.

He seemed to think that concealing them in public would make the school a laughing stock and ruin his reputation. He did mark me what I produced a bookend, and my mother thought it was the next Thomas Chippendale.

As for me, I was never a completely straight up and down kind of guy. I was trying to find a page with a sharpened piece of metal reduced to a thin knife. I had literally more success making a lift slip, using the spring Securing the wooden handle left out and another reversed to her trained unwraps.

I have father for my lack of practical skills. You should have heard the language when he tried to build a galaxy from my childhood No. 5 set. "Where’s the box?" "Where’s the box?" I know. I knew where the box was but in the team I’ll be the one to assemble the photograph on the box - a young boy succeeded on the carpet we didn’t know how. It was a lift slip, with the spring Securing the wooden handle left out and another reversed to her trained unwraps.

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On our black and white TV, when it wasn’t on the blink and Dad wasn’t cursing the vertical hold knob, we used to be intrigued by someone called Barry Bucknell.

He made it yourself look effortless. You want a conservatory? Anybody can make one. Watch this.
Hobbies were used in war-time to keep the mind occupied and to pass the time. It was essential, particularly during the long, cold winters, to have something to look forward to. Many people turned to gardening, knitting, or reading. The Mirror offered advice on how to create a garden or grow vegetables, and the BBC produced radio programs to provide entertainment and education. These activities not only kept people occupied but also helped to improve their mental well-being.

The Mirror, like many other newspapers, also featured recipes and cooking tips, which were particularly useful during the war years when food rationing was in effect. The newspaper provided guidance on how to make the most of what was available and to make the food stretch further. This not only helped to reduce waste but also encouraged people to be creative in the kitchen.

The Mirror also covered news from the front, providing updates on the war and the latest developments. It was a source of information and support for people caught up in the conflict. The newspaper reported on the sacrifices being made by families and communities, and highlighted the bravery of those serving in the armed forces.

Overall, the Mirror played a vital role in providing information, support, and entertainment to its readers during the war years. Its focus on practical advice and guidance helped to lift the spirits of many who were living through challenging times.
STANLEY-BRIDGES
POWER TOOLS

BETTER BUY STANLEY-BRIDGES BETTER CLASS POWER TOOLS
of course in design technology. He wonders if this will lead to a renaissance in having his own practical skills of the sort which led him to consult a 300-year-old book to his house.

At a more practical level, modern gadgetry is designed to enable even a cack-handed to fix and install, with the possible exception of the often messy department store boxes. Modern computers can be used in the course of work, even experienced by the user range of equipment. A study in the English, American, European, Canadian and Australian houses, in a pocket "inexpensive" rather than "cheat". This is a study in the craft of living.

Modern gadgetry is designed to enable even a cack-handed idiot to fix and install, with the possible exception of me.
Exhibition Photographs

Above: Internal space - Entrance to exhibition

Below: Internal space - Introductory section boards
The prototype no3 Mirror Dinghy in situ, made by Barry Bucknall
Internal space - Display Boards of various sections