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# Do It Yourself: Democracy and Design

Paul Atkinson

## Introduction

The theme of this special issue arose from a perceived need to generate a discourse around the interface between ‘design’ taken as a function of the activity of ‘professional’ designers and being part of an established cycle of the design, production and consumption of goods; and ‘Do It Yourself’ taken as its antithesis—a more democratic design process of self-driven, self-directed amateur design and production activity carried out more closely to the end user of the goods created. Historically, productive and creative activities of this kind have allowed consumers to engage actively 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. The agencies that have mediated this interface between design and DIY (the advice leaflets, manuals and guide books, exposition and retail catalogues, newspaper reports and magazines and later, radio and television programmes) are of particular interest here. They are often the only evidence of what, for many, has been a significant element of the fabric of their everyday life—the results of the activity itself, owing to their individual and personal nature, often disappearing without trace with the passing of time.

It is not the aim of this Introduction, or even of this special issue, to give a comprehensive account of the history and development of Do It Yourself activity per se. To achieve such an aim would take far more space than is available here. There remains, however, a need to expand the existing canon of works, as relatively little has been written on the subject of DIY from a design historical perspective. With the exception of a few key texts and collections of conference papers, DIY as a design activity has not been the focus of a great deal of attention. This dearth of material

means that in an attempt to create any kind of meta-discourse on the subject, it is likely that the same key texts will be referenced. Although covering many disparate aspects of DIY, the articles in this issue frequently cite key works by authors such as Attfield, Gelber, Goldstein and Sparke.<sup>1</sup> These authors have taken different stances on DIY (as a craft activity, as a pastime, as a financial necessity, as a lifestyle choice) and analysed it as a social and cultural phenomenon and from economic, ideological and feminist perspectives.

No accounts have really developed the key issue of how DIY acts as the antithesis of the prescribed design of the mass marketplace—a democratizing agency allowing people, paradoxically, to react against the principles and edicts of design connoisseurship whilst simultaneously enabling the emulation of those above them in social hierarchies. Yet, DIY has arguably 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 (as the middle classes held dinner parties to show off the results of their DIY labours),<sup>2</sup> and as a political force by facilitating the wider dissemination of subcultural views through self-publishing. This special issue attempts to broaden the existing work in the area by taking this aspect of design democracy as its unifying theme, and thereby expanding the notion of DIY from the narrow perspective from which it is often viewed.

## DIY—a problem of definition

It is possible that the reason DIY has not been examined in published studies as much as it might have been is a function of the uncertainty as to where

exactly it fits in the discourses of art, design or craft. The boundaries between these terms in a design historical context have been explored recently, with a special issue of this journal focused on these matters,<sup>3</sup> or in texts such as Paul Greenhalgh's contribution to *The Culture of Craft* 'The crafts have not been well served by historians for much of the twentieth century... the fundamental problem with the word is that it is being used to collectively describe genres and ideas that formerly were not grouped together and that grew from quite separate circumstances'.<sup>4</sup>

Greenhalgh goes on to comment on the profusion of interpretations of 'design', 'art' and 'craft', and in particular of the term 'craftsman', described by Johnson in 1773 as 'an artificer, manufacturer, a mechanic'.<sup>5</sup> The distinctions between various aspects of DIY are similarly unclear. Where are the boundaries to be drawn between different levels of activity ranging from handicrafts to home maintenance, interior decorating, interior design, garden design, vehicle maintenance and customization, home improvement and self-build homes? As a result of this blurring of boundaries, it is not clear exactly what constitutes DIY, and consequently it is hard to say when DIY began.

One widely received view of DIY (and one that this issue is keen to expand) is that it is a phenomenon produced by a specific set of historical circumstances, i.e. DIY first occurred during the 1950s as a reaction to a post-war shortage of labour. That was the view taken, for example, by 'All Mod Cons', one of the only popular television programmes attempting to construct a history of DIY in Britain, which began by explaining that over the past 50 years there has been an epidemic of home improvement, and stating 'It all started in the 1950s'.<sup>6</sup> This view of DIY makes sense from only one particular standpoint, which sees DIY as a mass-marketed phenomenon of home maintenance and improvement popularized through a variety of media, and brought about by socio-economic developments which saw a significant move from rented accommodation to home ownership. Accepting only this definition of DIY negates a whole series of developments prior to the Second World War when similar conditions of labour shortages and lack of money brought about similar social behaviours in home maintenance. The situation becomes far more problematic if the definition of DIY is taken outside this narrow view

of home maintenance to encompass other activities such as handicrafts or hobbies.

For the purposes of this special issue, then, DIY is taken as covering a wide range of activities which are carried out for a variety of reasons, and consist of different levels of creative design input. Looking more closely at this range of activities, it is actually quite difficult to see them as completely disparate endeavours. They appear instead to be a series of overlapping activities having varying proportions of creative input and a variety of motivations for undertaking them.

For example, the various activities referred to in this Introduction and the accompanying articles could be split into two distinct areas which might be labelled 'the making of objects' and 'maintenance of the home'. The former would include handicrafts, knitting, the making or altering of clothes, soft furnishings, the building of furniture, boat building and self-publishing. The latter would include decorating, plumbing, electrical work, gardening and landscaping and building work—up to the building of extensions, shelters and self-build homes. Depending on the level of skill of the person carrying out any of these activities there might be different levels of creativity involved, and depending on their financial circumstances or the particular social and economic conditions of the time, they might be carried out either for personally fulfilling reasons or because there is no viable alternative. A good example here would be the making or altering of clothes, which might range from the following of a set of instructions carried out by mothers during wartime as a financial necessity, to the creative customization of clothes carried out by young people today as part of the creation and display of their self-identity. Likewise, the making of furniture might range from the origination of a design, the purchase of raw materials and their skilled manipulation into a finished piece, to the purchase of a flat-pack piece of furniture requiring only the following of simple assembly instructions.

It is clear that any attempt to categorize DIY activity will face these sometimes contradictory elements of need versus desire and creativity versus assemblage. As the issue of democracy and freedom of will to act is a key concern here, however, it would seem to make more sense in this case to consider the motivation to carry out such activities as being the organizing or defining principle with which to analyse

different aspects of Do It Yourself. I would propose that the list of activities described above could usefully be categorized into at least four distinct areas (although these too might have considerable areas of overlap within them).

Pro-active DIY—consisting of those activities which contain significant elements of self-directed, creative design input, and which might involve the skilled manipulation of raw materials or original combination of existing components, where the motivation is personal pleasure or financial gain.

Reactive DIY—consisting of hobby and handcraft or building activities mediated through the agency of kits, templates or patterns and involving the assembly of predetermined components, where the motivation might range from the occupation of spare time to personal pleasure (but which might consequently include an element of financial gain).

Essential DIY—consisting of home maintenance activities carried out as an economic necessity or because of the unavailability of professional labour, and which often involve the following of instructional advice from manuals (yet which does not rule out the possibility that such activities may also be creative and personally rewarding).

Lifestyle DIY—consisting of home improvement or building activities undertaken as emulation or conspicuous consumption, and where the use of one's own labour is by choice rather than need (although professional input, usually in the form of design advice, is often included).

The articles selected for this special issue deliberately take a catholic view of DIY—Clive Edwards' article on women's handicrafts and Fiona Hackney's analysis of home crafts in women's magazines in Britain contrast sharply with Sarah Lichtman's history of home fallout shelters in America. Andrew Jackson's article addresses the role of DIY boat building in the opening up of elitist leisure pursuits, and has parallels with Teal Triggs' article on the role of self-publishing in the subversion of mainstream publishing. The difficulties of categorizing DIY activity are evident in all these articles, if related to the framework set out above. Edwards' and Hackney's discussions cover handicrafts, home crafts and consumer crafts with differing amounts of creative input and resulting in differing amounts of self-expression, and therefore fluctuate between proactive and reactive DIY, although even if the items created were reactive,

they almost certainly contributed to the proactive creation of a home or lifestyle. Lichtman's article describes shelters built following a set of instructions as well as those assembled from a kit of parts, and could therefore largely be described as reactive, yet the particular social circumstances driving their building might be considered as making them, at least partially, essential DIY. The building of the Mirror dinghy described by Jackson could be considered reactive DIY in that it usually involved the purchase of a kit and the following of a set of instructions (yet requiring a considerable amount of skill), although the drive to do so was clearly tied up with issues of emulation and conspicuous consumption, which would categorize it as lifestyle DIY. Conversely, the creation of fanzines described by Triggs is quite clearly proactive DIY.

Although, as stated, there is not the intention to create a comprehensive account of DIY, it might be considered useful at this point to present some of the key aspects of the history of DIY that have a bearing on the issue of democracy and design.

## DIY—a brief overview

The origins of DIY as a hobby have been stated in many sources to have arisen from a perceived need to give idle hands something to do, and provide a productive and morally uplifting way of utilizing spare time. As Edwards highlights, this aspect has clearly been in evidence since the eighteenth century; the American author Steven M. Gelber points, however, to 'the industrially induced bifurcation of work and leisure'<sup>7</sup> at the end of the nineteenth century as one of the main reasons that hobbies and handicrafts took hold, stating that 'the ideology of the workplace infiltrated the home in the form of productive leisure'.<sup>8</sup> Gelber describes a change in the perception of hobbies at this time from their being an 'obsessive preoccupation' to being 'wholesome activities, most of which involved solitary productive activity that took place at home'.<sup>9</sup>

### *Essential DIY*

Although, for some, the popularity of handicrafts and consequently DIY might have arisen from a desire to fill spare time productively, for the Victorian and Edwardian working classes, DIY was clearly a necessity rather than a leisure pursuit. It has been argued

that the necessary skills and resourceful approaches to DIY activity have been more developed in certain generations than others. For example, the relatively large proportion of children in the UK population during Victorian and Edwardian periods<sup>10</sup> meant one focus of DIY was the making of toys. As James Walvin discussed, even though certain manufacturers produced 'Bristol' toys for the children of the poor retailing at one penny, thousands of children had to rely upon their own inventiveness in producing toys and equipment for street games.<sup>11</sup>

Following the First World War, DIY became a necessity not only for the British working classes, but also for those of the middle classes who suddenly found themselves in impoverished circumstances. Evidently, to avoid social stigma, the perception of DIY had to change. An article in *The Times* newspaper in 1920 bore the title 'The New Poor—Making the Best of It', and brought the plight of this new social group to light:

... the fear of social ostracism need not prevent the impoverished well-bred from following that excellent advice which was placarded at the Ideal Homes Exhibition:— Do it yourself and save money ... Last of all sacrifices, that leisure which we are now taught to think part of every human being's birthright may be lost to those who can no longer afford to pay others for their services in home or office, farm or garden ... Can the new poor effectively show to the world that man's life is not measured by possession? Their economy, like charity, must begin at home.<sup>12</sup>

The Ideal Homes Exhibition had been in existence since 1908, and was just one of the promoters of DIY between the wars. The first 'name' to be attached to DIY as a popular pursuit was W. P. Matthew, who brought the subject to the attention of the masses through writing books and presenting BBC radio broadcasts during the 1930s, before DIY became a serious national concern. The British self-help movement during the Second World War is perhaps one of the best documented areas of DIY activity, which involved a whole nation in a government-approved patriotic drive to preserve precious resources. 'Mrs Sew and Sew' and 'Dig for Victory' were just two examples of memorable images urging people to 'Make Do and Mend', making clothes last longer by repairing them, making new clothes out of old, and eking out meagre rations of food by replacing manicured lawns with vegetable patches. Even fashion-led magazines during the war promoted such thriftiness

by reminding readers that by making do with existing clothes, labour was freed up for the war effort.<sup>13</sup> As well as being a financial necessity, doing it oneself was presented as an expected and respected social attitude (although some testimonies report that cheap labour before the Second World War had made DIY unacceptable once more to the middle classes).<sup>14</sup>

It seems clear, then, that the skills necessary to perform DIY became highly valued during such periods where much work needed to be done and little money was available to pay for professional help. The lack of skilled labour available during the period of reconstruction following the Second World War also gave an altruistic reason for much Do It Yourself work, as described in a 1946 DIY guide book: 'Why not help others? ... The less that skilled labour has to be called in to do jobs which can be done by people themselves the more of that labour will be available to build and finish the millions of homes that are needed throughout the country'.<sup>15</sup> The resourceful people produced by such difficult times provided a ready market for the growth of DIY. Carolyn Goldstein commented on this phenomenon in the USA, where DIY became perhaps less of a necessity and more about social aspiration: 'World War II and its social and economic legacy accelerated the growth of the emerging home-improvement infrastructure and launched a widespread do-it-yourself craze in the United States. The war provided men and women with technical skills, confidence, and a predisposition toward using their resourcefulness to realize their dreams of domestic living'.<sup>16</sup>

Goldstein goes on to discuss how, as in Britain, propaganda campaigns throughout the war had urged Americans to conserve resources, and 'Make it do' by maintaining their houses properly, while at the same time promoting DIY activity as a means of partaking in an improved life to come, following the war.

### *Lifestyle DIY*

The post-war 'epidemic of home improvement' alluded to earlier was fuelled by mainstream promotion in a variety of media. In Britain, radio programmes such as 'Woman's Hour', started in 1946, gave advice on 'homemaking, make do and mend, recycling of products and tips for women to save money'.<sup>17</sup> The large-scale take up of television after 1952 provided the vehicle to bring DIY to an even wider audience. As Jackson relates, it was W. P. Matthews, the radio

presenter, who first appeared in a commercial television programme on DIY, before the appearance of the widely popular Barry Bucknell. Further promotion of DIY at this point came through the launch of new popular magazines from the mid 1950s onwards, including *Practical Householder* and *Do It Yourself*. As ‘All Mod Cons’ had it, the movement was so popular by this time that it was almost a cult ‘and Barry Bucknell was its guru’.<sup>18</sup> Goldstein’s view of the post-war promotion of DIY in the USA points to the notion of ‘the suburban ideal’ and the building boom backed by the GI Bill of Rights to provide a greater level of home ownership for returning soldiers as providing the context for DIY as a mass cultural phenomenon. As in the UK, this was widely publicized through magazines such as *Popular Mechanics* and *Family Handyman*.

Part of the sustained growth of DIY as a leisure activity from the 1960s onwards may be attributable, at least in part, to a gradual de-skilling of the processes involved, reducing much of Do It Yourself to a case of self assembly and finishing. Consider, for example, the different processes expected to be tackled and skills expected to be possessed by a competent DIY practitioner as described in the 1935 book *The Practical Man’s Book of Things to Make and Do*. These included activities ranging from wood turning, veneering and finishing to ‘Practical Notes on Building a House’; electrical work from ‘Making and Fitting a Burglar Alarm’ to constructing a radio; and small jobs ranging from boot and shoe repairs to clock cleaning. In a separate section on ‘Handicrafts for the Handyman’, advice is given on pottery, cardboard work, and ‘Papier Mâché and Cement Work’.<sup>19</sup> In short, it is a list of activities that lack of time alone is likely to prevent many people from undertaking today. Manufacturers and retail chains alike have worked to develop and promote easier methods of producing the results which once required so much dedicated input through new materials and kits of parts, which to some extent can be regarded as removing a previously desired element of individuality. As Hackney’s article references, in the book ‘Women and Craft’, Pen Dalton wrote ‘the encouraging of dependence on projects from women’s magazines, patterns and pre-designed kits, however well designed and demanding of the patience and skill of the housewife, has had a standardising and largely detrimental effect on craft practice’.<sup>20</sup> The reasons for such a development are complex and the result of a

number of interrelated factors, economic and social. The simplification and commodification of skills can indeed be seen in any number of facets of life today, and is an attitude, it has been argued, arising from the 1950s rise in consumerism:

this is the generation of Moms who embraced myriad use-less household appliances, canned and frozen foods, ready-to-wear clothes, and mass-produced decor; consequently, this is the generation of Moms whose daughters and sons were as often as not not taught how to cook, sew, garden, decorate, or clean. Their daughters’ and sons’ generation – roughly that of the baby boomers – capture our imagination because it is the first generation who in a fundamental sense does not know how to take care of themselves and who apparently seriously adopted the belief that a good-paying job would do.<sup>21</sup>

Where full meals used to be made by scratch from numerous ingredients, there are now ready-made meals and ‘cook-in’ sauces available. Where clothes were darned, patched and altered and appliances repaired, it is often easier, cheaper or more efficient to replace them with new, updated or more fashionable versions. The economics of global-scale mass production have put first world consumers in the position where necessities such as cooked food, clothes and furniture can often be purchased for less than it would cost to purchase the raw materials to produce them themselves—even if they did possess the relevant skills to do so. In these circumstances it is no surprise that DIY today is often not seen to be a necessity of any kind, and can only make sense if it is seen instead as a leisure pursuit or lifestyle choice. The appearance of a number of popular British television programmes over the last decade or so, presenting the constant makeover of interiors and gardens as an essential aspect of modern living and combining DIY labour with bought-in help and expert advice bears testament to this and reinforces the perception of DIY as no longer an end in itself, but of secondary importance to a necessarily ephemeral end result.

## DIY as democracy

Taking all the above into account, the question arises as to how, and in which ways have these various facets of DIY activity acted as a democratizing agency. This has occurred in a number of ways: giving people independence and self-reliance, freedom from professional help, encouraging the wider



dissemination and adoption of modernist design principles, providing an opportunity to create more personal meaning in their own environments or self-identity, and opening up previously gendered or class-bound activities to all.

In his analysis of DIY as a hobby, Gelber claimed that hobbies allowed people to perform ‘the perfect job’: ‘Hobbies do indeed seem to embody almost every positive element of work.... Workers enjoy jobs that allow them to create something, permit them to use a skill, give them the opportunity to work wholeheartedly, and let them exercise initiative and responsibility’.<sup>22</sup> In this respect, any DIY activity can be seen as a democratization of the work process, allowing decision-making and freedom from supervision at levels unlikely to be available at work itself. Jackson addresses this aspect in his article, relating the enjoyment of making the dinghy to increased enjoyment when partaking in the sport of sailing.

Over and above providing freedom from supervision, DIY has been able to provide financial independence to a greater or lesser extent. *The Practical Man’s Book of Things to Make and Do* began by stating that

The man who can use tools properly is to be envied, for the field in which he can exercise his ability and skill is practically unlimited. He need never be bored for lack of some thing to do.... And not only does such employment occupy spare time in a pleasant manner and satisfy the natural instinct to create something with one’s own hands, but it is possible to make such recreations pay for themselves.<sup>23</sup>

In the accompanying articles, Edwards and Hackney both comment on the ability of women to extend home-making budgets and earn independent income through proactive and reactive DIY activity.

As well as promoting self-sufficiency on a functional and economic level, DIY also allowed people from a range of backgrounds, living in housing stock of various ages to engage with modernist design principles without employing expensive architectural advisors. Corbusian ideas concerning a healthier, more hygienic environment arising from the elimination of dust traps and the efficient maintenance of high standards of cleanliness were achieved as early as the 1920s through the straightforward covering of door panels and the boxing in of stair balustrades with plywood and later hardboard imported from

Scandinavia. Instructions for achieving the uncluttered lines of the modern interior through such concealment appeared in a number of handyman’s guide books of the time,<sup>24</sup> and were present in advice manuals for many years after. Writing on the same phenomenon in the mid 1950s, Raphael Samuel wrote ‘home improvement was largely a matter of making surfaces seamless’.<sup>25</sup>

Another way in which DIY acted as a democratizing agency was to release people from the grip of professional tradesmen and skilled artisans. David Johnson, founder of *Do-It-Yourself* magazine, attributed the boom in DIY in the 1950s to technological developments allowing new materials and tools suitable for non-professional use to be readily available. As early as the start of the nineteenth century, ready-mixed paint in cans available to the ‘common person’<sup>26</sup> was seen as ‘a menace threatening the business of oil and colour merchants’<sup>27</sup>—a threat to professionals which increased exponentially in the 1950s with the introduction of emulsion paint and the paint roller, and the move to sell wallpaper through retail outlets.<sup>28</sup> Coupled with the development of the electric drill with a variety of attachments,<sup>29</sup> these advances allowed anyone to achieve suitably impressive results in interior design and decoration without the employment of professional help.<sup>30</sup> Many companies which had previously only supplied industry moved to selling direct to the public, with some even holding clinics in DIY advice.<sup>31</sup> The provision of such advice even went as far as the creation in the UK of the National Self Build Association (NSBA) providing guidance to people wishing to build a complete home from scratch.<sup>32</sup> The dissemination of this democratization of skill through the press and DIY magazines did not go unchallenged by the professions under threat. Johnson recounts letters to *Do-it-Yourself* magazine from professional tradesmen accusing the publication of ‘taking the bread and butter out of their mouths’<sup>33</sup> and that the Registered Plumbers Association attempted to get a bill through Parliament to prevent non-professionals doing as much as changing a tap washer. The Electrical Development Associations and even the Home Office complained about how dangerous it was to publish articles on home electrical repairs. Developments in technology have been a key element of the case studies presented in both Jackson’s and Lichtman’s articles—in particular the development of the electric drill, which

enabled many processes to be undertaken by the householder for the first time. The level of work necessary to build a fallout shelter would have been far greater without the use of power tools, and the production of a dinghy at home would have been almost impossible without developments in materials such as plywood, resins and glues. Even in Triggs' article, the easier reproduction and dissemination of fanzines, with the associated lack of censorship from editors, publishers or retailers, was only achieved through the large scale take-up of photocopiers.<sup>34</sup>

### *Self-identity*

The role of DIY activity in the creation and maintenance of self-identity is clearly an important one, and is not unconnected to the issue of design democracy. After all, if there were no element of democracy available, no choice to engage in the creative process, then the freedom to develop self-identity might be severely limited. The creative elements of all DIY, whether truly original design work in proactive DIY, or the creative production of mediated design practices in reactive DIY, enhance people's notion of themselves as an agent of design rather than merely a passive consumer.

The involvement in the creation of goods in order to derive personal meaning has become increasingly important to many in an age of mass-consumption. In 'The Aesthetics of Social Aspiration', Alison Clarke commented that many academics had seen the British boom in home improvement of the 1980s as associated 'with the broader conservatism and materialism of Thatcherite politics'.<sup>35</sup> The home improvements she discusses cover all aspects of advice magazines and television programmes that grew in popularity throughout the 1990s, and are seen as an 'ethnographic example [which] shows how the ideal home, as used to influence the construction of the actual home, becomes an internalized vision of what other people might think of one'.<sup>36</sup> It is, therefore, more imperative than ever for many to engage in consumption of this order. Don Slater's book *Consumer Culture and Modernity*<sup>37</sup> describes in detail the extent to which self-identity is now a function of such consumption. In this respect, DIY (even if it is merely an assemblage of components) provides a means of partaking in consumer culture and its associated status while perhaps allowing the consumer to achieve a more individual sense of self. Edwards' and Hackney's articles address

this very issue, how women's activities in home-making involved self-expression and the creation of personal meaning. Taking this further, Lichtman's article refers to the building of a fallout shelter as making the home a 'psychological fortress'. An extreme example, taking the construction of possessions and self-identity to perhaps the greatest extent, Roni Brown's study of self-build homes led her to find that 'these homes are primarily places of narrativity where the meaning of home is established through a complex set of material and human relationships'.<sup>38</sup> Her conclusion, that 'the act of self-building (as a complex, creative and risky process) amplifies the meaning of home as dwelling place because it forms a significant causal link in the life-stories of those involved'<sup>39</sup> highlights the potential of involvement in the creative process to reinforce notions of the self.

Finally, a number of the key texts mentioned above, and some of the articles in this issue, have considered DIY as a means of asserting a masculine identity in a changing or uncertain world; yet it has also been presented as a bonding activity for couples and families, and one which acted to open up stereotypically gendered roles to others. The frontispiece to *The Practical Man's Book of Things to Make and Do* [1] shows a family together, each busy with their own DIY task, while in a section titled 'All the family can help' the 1946 book *Man About the House* stated 'Although this book is called 'Man About the House' many of the jobs described in it can be done by the woman about the house and some of them by children'.<sup>40</sup> During the post-war boom in DIY in the USA, one anthropologist wrote 'The do it yourself movement is not just a hobby. It is often a pleasant and meaningful contribution to family life'.<sup>41</sup> And *Time* magazine in 1954 stated 'For many Americans, do it yourself makes possible luxuries that once existed only in their dreams. ...Like many others [a certain retired couple] have found a new source of happy companionship in doing tasks together'.<sup>42</sup> The commentary of the aforementioned TV series 'All Mod Cons' stated that 'DIY had become an essential part of the modern marriage ... a cosy combination of love and labour'.<sup>43</sup> In *Putting on the Style*, Sally MacDonald and Julia Porter state that advertisers made assumptions about domestic roles, assuming that men did decorating and DIY and worked with hard materials while women worked with textiles, whereas in fact couples often worked together.<sup>44</sup> Penny Sparke



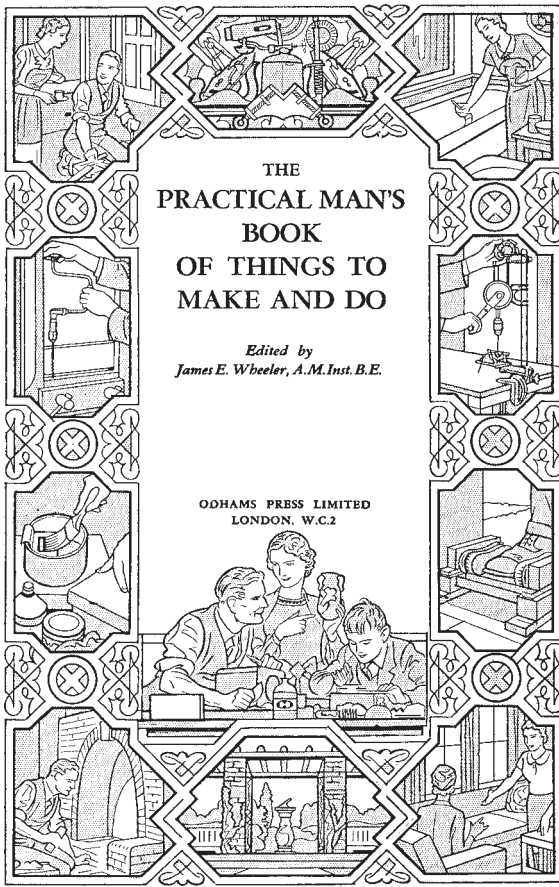


Fig 1. Frontispiece to *The Practical Man's Book of Things to Make and Do*, Odhams Press, 1935

also stated that 'togetherness' was the dominant represented theme of post-war domesticity:

The "do-it-yourself" movement was to be engaged in by both partners. . . . While it was up to the husband to fix the plumbing and electrics, the wife would make the curtains, and while the husband went up the ladder to paint the ceiling, her role was to support it at its base, a perfect metaphor for the relationship between the sexes.<sup>45</sup>

In fact, the popular representation of home maintenance as a largely masculine undertaking was undermined following the Second World War. Wallpapering in particular was presented as a feminine role, with teenage girls being used to demonstrate how easy it was to paper a room in 1950s DIY exhibitions.<sup>46</sup> Women were not just decorating either—the obituary of TV DIY expert Barry Bucknell claimed he was a 'DIY hero to postwar women' and 'helped women

prove that they could cope with household repairs as well as men could'.<sup>47</sup> Angela Partington's view was that 'there was a strong emphasis on do-it-yourself [in the 1950s], which was in some ways a continuation of the "make do and mend" war years, and this tended to demystify professional design as a kind of glorified homemaking'.<sup>48</sup> Goldstein commented that in the USA, the representation of the role of women in DIY changed from a supporting one carrying out light duties to one where women dealt with construction projects throughout the 1950s and 1960s, but the serious input of women in DIY was not really made explicit until the 1970s.<sup>49</sup>

These types of normative or stereotyped gender roles are also examined in Edwards' article, as he discusses the received notions of the period—a distinction between the binary opposites of male/female, professional/amateur, the workplace and the home. For both Edwards and Hackney, proactive and reactive DIY activity was a means of playing out power relationships within the domestic sphere, and Hackney, like Goldstein, points to a disparity between the reality and the representation of women as having an active rather than a passive role. Jackson, Lichtman and Hackney all discuss the role of essential and lifestyle DIY in assuaging a 'post-war crisis of masculinity' in both Britain and the USA when the seemingly paradoxical notions of manliness and domesticity were brought together. In some ways, there was perhaps a need to promote earlier stereotyped roles of the male as protector and provider and the female as homemaker and housekeeper, although, as Jackson and Lichtman both reveal, it was the relationship between father and son, damaged heavily by the separation of war, which benefited most from the popularity of Do It Yourself.

## Conclusions

The articles in this special issue together cover a period of some three centuries, and appear in roughly chronological order, although inevitably an amount of overlap occurs. The focus of Edwards' article covers a period from the early eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century, Hackney's the 1920s and 1930s, Lichtman's the 1950s and 1960s, Jackson's the 1960s and Triggs' the 1970s. This is not a purposeful attempt to chart or construct a linear, developmental history of Do It Yourself, but it does provide, at least,

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 by each author. Throughout, issues of emulation, class and taste are discussed, as are similar economic and social factors. What is of more interest here though, is how each article 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 these articles expose, 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.

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## Notes

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- 1 See Judy Attfield's work on DIY in *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life*; Stephen M Gelber's work on leisure in *Hobbies: Leisure and the Culture of Work in America*; Carolyn Goldstein's *Do It Yourself: Home Improvement in 20th-century America* and Penny Sparke's *As Long As It's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste*.
- 2 Oral testimony on people entertaining in order to show off, fuelling a 'keep up with the Jones' approach in J. Dent, (Dir) 'The DIY Pioneers', part one of 'All Mod Cons.' First broadcast 21 July 1997, BBC2.
- 3 G. Lees-Maffei & L. Sandino, (ed) (2004) 'Dangerous Liaisons: Relationships Between Design, Craft and Art', *Journal of Design History*, vol. 17 no. 3.
- 4 P. Greenhalgh, 'The History of Craft', in P. Dormer (1997) *The Culture of Craft*, Manchester University Press, p. 21.
- 5 S. Johnson (1773) *A Dictionary of the English Language*, cited in Greenhalgh, op. cit., p. 22.
- 6 J. Dent, op. cit.
- 7 S. M. Gelber (1999) *Hobbies: Leisure and the Culture of Work in America*, Columbia University Press, p. 4.
- 8 Ibid, p. 2.
- 9 Ibid, p. 28.
- 10 J. Walvin, 'Children's Pleasures' in J. K. Walton & J. Walvin (eds.) (1983) *Leisure in Britain 1780-1939*, Manchester University Press, pp. 228-241. Between 1801 and 1914, census returns show that children under 14 formed one third of the population of Great Britain, and between 1841 to 1901, the number of children almost doubled to 10 million. (Walton & Walvin p. 228.)
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Anon, 'The New Poor - Making the Best of It' in *The Times*, May 11, 1920 p. 19.
- 13 Sir Thomas Barlow, Director of Civilian Clothing writing in Harper's Bazaar, cited in McDowell, C (1997) *Forties Fashion and the New Look*, Bloomsbury, p. 93.
- 14 J. Dent, op. cit.
- 15 P. Hunot (1946) *Man About the House*, Pilot Press, p. 13.
- 16 C. M. Goldstein (1998) *Do It Yourself: Home Improvement in 20th-century America*, Princeton Architectural Press, p. 31.
- 17 Commentary in 'Demob Happy', one of *The Lost Decade* series of television programmes. First broadcast 30 Oct 2005, BBC4.
- 18 J. Dent, op. cit.
- 19 J. E. Wheeler (1935) *The Practical Man's Book of Things to Make and Do*, Odhams Press Ltd., pp. 5-6.
- 20 P. Dalton, 'Housewives, Leisure Crafts and Ideology: De-skilling in Consumer Craft' in G. Elinor et al. (eds.) (1987) *Women and Craft*, Virago Press, p. 32.
- 21 J. McCracken (2001) *Taste and the Household: The Domestic Aesthetic and Moral Reasoning*, State University of New York Press, p. 261.
- 22 S. M. Gelber, op. cit., p. 33.
- 23 J. E. Wheeler op. cit., p. 3.
- 24 For an in-depth account of this phenomenon see C. Brooks, 'The Amateur Mechanic and the Modern Movement' in *Conference on Twentieth Century Design History* (1977) Leisure in the Twentieth Century, Design Council Publications, pp. 24-31, and also J. Dent, op. cit.
- 25 R. Samuel (1994) *Theatres of Memory, Vol. 1: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*, Verso, p. 52.
- 26 Boswell, cited in D. Johnson, 'The History and Development of Do-It-Yourself' in *Conference on Twentieth Century Design History* op. cit., p. 68.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 A 1954 article in *Time* magazine discussed the range of new tools and materials fuelling the DIY boom, including ready glued wallpaper, rollers with paint reservoirs, spray paint and plastic tiles. (Anon, 'The Shoulder Trade' in *Time* magazine, Aug 2, 1954.)
- 29 Apparently, Black & Decker had an early success with a drill for home use after noticing staff borrowed industrial drills to do maintenance jobs around the home. (Goldstein, op. cit., p. 49).
- 30 In 1954, it was reported that 70% of wallpapers were sold through retail outlets: 'a statement of some sociological significance that ought to be of particular interest to the professional decorators' (Anon, "'Do It Yourself' Display—Hints for Handymen in the Home' in *The Times*, Sep 10, 1954 p. 10) while in 1957, the Housing Committee of St. Marylebone Council recommended paying tenants for DIY decorating work to save costs—causing a protest from the National Society of Painters (Anon, 'Do It Yourself Payments' in *The Times*, Feb 18, 1957 p. 5).
- 31 Anon, 'Do-It-Yourself is Big Business' in *New York Times*, Jun 10, 1956.

- 32 For example, see B. Phillips, 'Help for Do-It-Yourself Builders' in *The Times*, May 25, 1983 p. 27. However, the notion of self building of properties was by no means a new one—in England the first Building Societies were set up as mutual self help societies in the 18th Century to provide finance for self builders. Once homes were completed the societies were closed down and were, therefore, known as “terminating building societies”.’ (M. Daligan, Walter Segal Self Build Trust (<http://www.mondodesigno.com/segal.html> accessed 5 Oct 2005).
- 33 D. Johnson, op. cit., p. 70.
- 34 As Triggs mentions, prior to the availability of photocopiers, science fiction and comic fanzines were produced on Gestetner duplicators. Even though the photocopier was invented as early as 1938 by Chester Carlson, the first available machine did not appear until 1959. It became widely adopted by business in the early 1970s when cost reductions in technology allowed a number of competitors to enter the field. See [www.xerox.com](http://www.xerox.com) and [www.InventHelp.com/Chester-Carlson-and-the-Invention-of-the-Photocopier.asp](http://www.InventHelp.com/Chester-Carlson-and-the-Invention-of-the-Photocopier.asp) (both accessed 13 Oct 2005).
- 35 A. J. Clarke, 'The Aesthetics of Social Aspiration' in Miller, D. (ed.) (2001) *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors*, Berg, p. 23.
- 36 Ibid, p. 42.
- 37 D. Slater (1997) *Consumer Culture and Modernity*, Polity Press.
- 38 R. Brown (2005) 'Narrativity in Home Design and Home-Making: The Personally Derived Space', unpublished conference paper presented at *Locating Design*, Design History Society Conference, London Metropolitan University, September 2005.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 P. Hunot, op. cit., p. 15.
- 41 Margaret Mead cited in S. M. Gelber, op. cit., p. 268.
- 42 Anon, 'The Shoulder Trade' in *Time* magazine, Aug 2, 1954.
- 43 J. Dent, op. cit.
- 44 S. MacDonald, & J. Porter (1990) *Putting on the Style: Setting Up Home in the 1950s*, The Geffrye Museum. David Attenborough and Simon Vaughn also commented on expected gender roles, and discussed the fact that during the Second World War it was common for men, especially sailors, to knit in their spare time ('Demob Happy', one of *The Lost Decade* series of television programmes. First broadcast 30 Oct 2005, BBC4).
- 45 P. Sparke (1995) *As Long As It's Pink: The Sexual Politics of Taste*, Harper Collins, p. 171.
- 46 Anon, "'Do It Yourself' Display – Hints for Handymen in the Home' in *The Times*, Sep 10, 1954 p. 10. See also D. Johnson, op. cit., p. 69.
- 47 D. Barker 'Barry Bucknell: DIY Hero to Postwar Women' in *The Guardian*, Feb. 27, 2003.
- 48 A. Partington 'The Designer Housewife in the 1950s' in J. Attfield & P. Kirkham (eds.) (1989) *A View from the Interior: Feminism, Women and Design*, The Women's Press, p. 211.
- 49 Goldstein, op. cit., pp. 67–82.