

## **DIY and the restlessness of domestic interiors<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Where do DIY projects come from?**

DIY<sup>2</sup> brings to light some neglected aspects of domestic interiors and the way they change. Social and historical analysis of interiors covers a wide range of concerns, such as the symbolic importance of décor and household contents, or the co-production of household spaces and practices, generating insights about cultural, social and aesthetic changes related to material configurations of the home. Generally missing, however, are the processes through which those material configurations are themselves physically changed – the work, dust, creativity and frustration of coordinating tools, materials, competence, confidence, body and the fabric of the house to effect a material change to the home. Analysing how DIY improvement projects happen – how they are conceived, undertaken and realised – demonstrates the iterative, emergent character of interiors' restlessness.

### **Conventional explanations - Demographics, markets, self-identity...**

Existing literature on DIY and home improvement already reveal a range of correlates of, and motivations for, making changes to the home. On the one hand, factors amenable to statistical analysis such as economics and demographics have been revealed.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, qualitative studies have predominantly focused on home improvement as a project of self-identity, or materialization of ideals of home.<sup>4</sup> These studies begin to fill out part of the picture of the emergence of DIY projects, as do conventional explanations of the rapid growth of the DIY market,<sup>5</sup> in relation to the buoyant housing market and the impact of TV home makeover or development shows. These separate elements – economics, markets, household demographics and mobility through to self-identity and media inspired aspiration – are each factors which play greater or lesser role in the emergence and shaping of DIY projects. But still missing is a sense of how these elements come together to shape a project in the practice, along with other mundane but vital ingredients.

### **Projects emerge from ongoing conversation**

Some DIYers can, retrospectively at least, articulate the history of the work within their home as the realisation of a Grand Design. However DIY projects often emerge from the *ongoing conversation* between a changing household - its composition, routines, accumulation of possessions, etc - and the fabric of the property. The emergent character of projects becomes especially apparent with longer periods of residence, where the DIY history has continued beyond the initial flurry of work typical when first moving in to a property, the birth of babies or the departure of grown children, changing financial situations, etc., can provoking new projects to make the home fit, not simply with the self-image of the occupants, but also with the practical exigencies of their everyday life. At times a DIY project might only be finally formed and realised as a result of a point event, such as the imminent arrival of guests highlighting the need for order that some new shelving would enable. What we wish to highlight here is the active role played by the fabric of the house itself, providing limitations, affordances, inspirations and attachments on its side of the conversation with the household.

### **Projects take shape through iterative practices**

However, it is not only at the level of planning a project that the emergent character of DIY practice is apparent. There can be few DIYers who have finished a project of any significance having gone through only the processes envisaged, using only the tools and materials planned, or perhaps even achieving quite the final effect anticipated from the start. DIY is almost inherently exploratory, the complexity of coordination requiring that contingencies will have to be dealt with along the way. Here, the active role of tools and materials in enabling and shaping the project comes into focus. At least since the power drill entered the home in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been an accelerating

development of tools and materials available to the DIYer. Through speeding up tasks, making them more convenient or demanding of less skill on the part of the user, these developments have made a widening range of tasks possible for a 'typical' DIYer to tackle. Respondent W moved a radiator, a challenging task he felt able to tackle thanks to 'speedfit', which enables plumbing to be assembled from plastic components with push-fit connections, obviating the need for the skilled assembly of copper pipes, connectors, washers, flux, etc. Although W started the task without a clear idea of how it would be completed, through the iterative process of engaging with the components of speedfit, the existing infrastructure of pipes etc, the job was accomplished. The competence to accomplish the job only came together in the practices of assembling the entities involved in effecting the change. Developments in the capacities and affordability of DIY tools and materials thus change the basic terms from which DIY projects emerge, and play an active role in their realisation.

### **Doing DIY changes the terms for future DIY**

DIY work and projects can also emerge from the very process of DIY. Working to realise one planned effect, once commenced, so often reveals jobs that need to be completed before the next step of the planned project can be undertaken. But also, once completed, the realised effect can prompt new work. Firstly, this can take the form of matching to the new fabric of the building. For respondent A, painting her downstairs walls meant that the old carpets had to be hastily taken up, as the clean plain walls made the carpets intolerable, despite previously being relatively inoffensive, at least in comparison to the floral wallpaper she had removed before painting. Secondly, the very unpredictability of what a DIY task will involve, and the inherently exploratory nature of an amateur tackling a range of jobs, means that DIY practitioners are frequently developing skills and confidence, and perhaps also extending their range of tools and stocks of materials, through taking on projects. Consequently, the process of realising a DIY project can change the conditions of possibility for the DIYer in ways which can enable new possible projects to emerge.

### **What makes interiors restless?**

Looking at the implications of changes effected to interiors for understanding complex social and cultural dynamism has abundant potential. But looking also at the process of effecting those changes brings additional insights. A broad scale historical view can identify radical innovations and paths of development at a societal level, and tie them to major shifts in technology, social structure and household practices. But the restlessness of interiors also derives from the steady accretion of modification projects, projects which do not emerge ready formed from the play of structural changes, nor simply as consumer reactions to the state of the housing market, media or corporate manipulation. Projects emerge, their manner of execution and final effects determined, substantially through the ongoing conversation between household and house, and the purposive interaction of bodies, competences, tools, materials and the existing fabric of the home. It is ultimately only in the *doing* that the diverse range of entities propelling restlessness congeals into the means to effect material changes.

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<sup>1</sup> This note draws on work done for *Designing and Consuming: objects, practices and processes*, a two year project under the ESRC-AHRC *Cultures of Consumption* programme. More details of the project are available from [www.durham.ac.uk/designing.consuming](http://www.durham.ac.uk/designing.consuming)

<sup>2</sup> DIY stands for do-it-yourself, which we take to be the accomplishment of home maintenance and improvement by householders without professional help.

<sup>3</sup> Baker, K. and B. Kaul (2002). "Using multiperiod variables in the analysis of home improvement decisions by homeowners." *Real Estate Economics* 30(4): 551-566; Bogdon, A. S. (1996). "Homeowner Renovation and Repair: The Decision to Hire Someone Else to Do the Project." *Journal of Housing Economics* 5(4): 323-350; Pollakowski, H. O. (1988). *The Determinants of Residential Renovation and Repair Activity*. US Department of Housing and Urban Development.

<sup>4</sup> Clarke, A. (2001). *The Aesthetics of Social Aspiration*. Home Possessions, D. Miller. Oxford, Berg; Munro, M. and P. Leather (2000). "Nest-building or investing in the future? Owner-occupiers' home improvement behaviour." *Policy And Politics* 28(4): 511-526; Woodward, I. (2003). "Divergent narratives in the imagining of the home amongst middle-class consumers - Aesthetics, comfort and the symbolic boundaries of self and home." *Journal Of Sociology* 39(4): 391-412.

<sup>5</sup> The market, currently worth around £12 billion per year in the UK, has been growing at a steady rate of around 7-8% per year since the late 1990s Mintel (2005). *DIY Review 2005*, Mintel International Group Ltd