

DIY Dreams and the 'Potential' of House and Home

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This presentation is one part of a study of DIY (do-it-yourself) home improvement in New Zealand and an extension of a 20 year project into the meaning of house and home

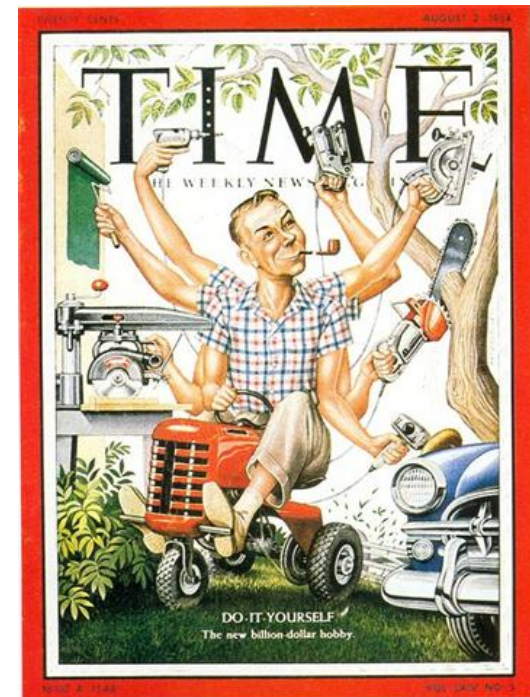


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What is DIY?

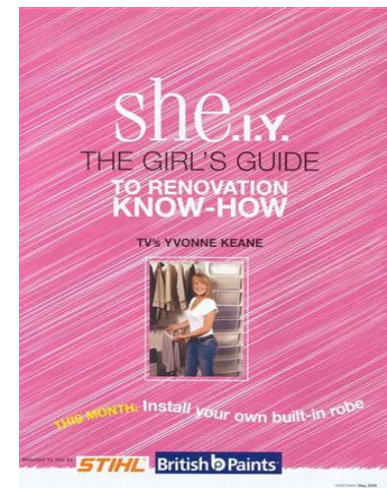
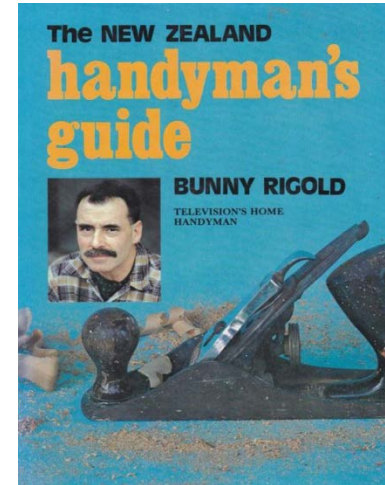
- DIY stands for 'do-it-yourself'
- It occurs when homeowners decorate, alter, build, maintain or repair any part of their home themselves,
- DIY projects may range from small, simple, one-off repairs through to major structural alterations requiring technical information, building consents, design advice and/or a large investment by homeowners in tools and materials
- DIY is often framed as one part of the 'informal economy', in that it involves homeowners providing services for themselves, as opposed to paying for them
- It is a global phenomenon: big in New Zealand, but also the USA, Canada, Australia and Europe, and emerging in Japan and China



Mid 1950s – USA

Theorising DIY

- Emerging but disparate international literature – ‘gender’ a key theme
- **Economics:** Economic determinants of the decision to do DIY
- **History:** Historical accounts of DIY movement in different contexts (usually with a strong gender perspective); DIY and “suburban husbanding” (Gelber, 1999)
- **Property/Housing Studies:** Policy work: Home improvement loans and the state of the housing stock
- **Retail Studies/Marketing:** Purchasing decisions, consumer behaviour and market research, particularly tools and equipment
- **Social Science:** The (domestic) division of labour (gender), homemaking, identity (gender), material culture and consumption, leisure and the meaning of house and home



Very limited NZ research, despite its cultural significance

DIY in New Zealand (population 4.5 million)

- A much revered tradition associated with life on the frontier – the no.8 wire approach
- Also often linked to NZ's high level of home ownership and fixation with property
- Became a "craze" in the post war era (associated with suburbanisation)
- Today the culture is reinforced by advertisers e.g., "DIY: its in our DNA"
- NZ\$1 billion spent on tools and materials at DIY retailers annually
- Big box retailers now dominate the consumption landscape (Bunnings, for example, employing over 3000 staff)



Methodology

- Big new topic in NZ, so an 'exploratory' and 'naturalistic' approach was developed
- Focused on DIY 'practice' but 'room-to-move' (an emergent study)
- Characterised by flexibility and "methodological pragmatism" (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973)

Methods

- NZ Homeowner interviews (n=27) with house/shed tour, observations & participation!
- Key informant interviews (n=15)
- Analysis of ads, media and DIY manuals & mags



DIY Dreams

- Planning/dreaming enjoyed by all participants – highly aspirational
- Not bound by thoughts of affordability or available time, or by their DIY capabilities or resources
- Encouraged by industry and media
- A continuous, evaluative and collective process:

“Every day, we’ll be talking about DIY stuff and our dreams for the place. And we’ve got all the house and garden magazines which I never thought I’d ever read. We just like sitting in our lounge chatting – ‘Oh, maybe we should fill in those cracks, or maybe we’ll just paint them and we won’t notice them as much, or maybe we can knock out that wall, or maybe we could change the garden.’ We talk about that all the time really” (Sally).

OUR 3-STEP GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL D.I.Y.

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- 2 ► GET FUNDS FROM NZ LOAN
- 3 ►►► BUILD IT

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DIY and the 'Potential of home'

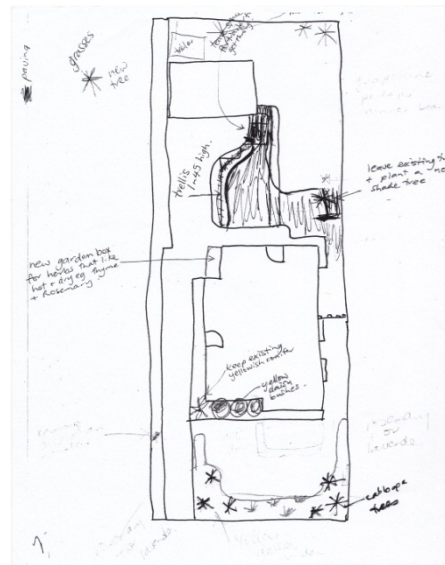
References to the 'potential' of property were frequently interwoven with our interviewees' narratives about the (imagined) making of the ideal home:

"You buy a house for the potential – it's such a clichéd word, but that is what you buy for, the potential. You can see that someone's done a bad job of it and that you could transform it really easily yourself by just say stripping the wallpaper or painting it, or doing some other project, like you could chuck in a French door. You can see in your head how you can improve it" (Alan).

Economic



Functionality



Aesthetic



DIY and the house buying process

- DIY opportunities and associated evaluation featured strongly during the house buying process
- This indicates that DIY planning (or at least thinking about doing DIY), starts early
- The real estate industry frequently draw attention (in their advertising rhetoric) to the potential of the houses they have for sale or those properties suitable to buyers for those with the nous for DIY

"Makeover dream"

"A blank canvas for the avid DIYer"

"SO much potential!"



"We went in and walked around and started assessing every room ... You go, 'oh wow, big open room, we could paint this, we could do this and I'd change those.' In a lot of the homes we went to, you'd see couples doing that DIY thing" (Alan)

The DIY 'list' – all participants had one

- An ever-changing inventory of all the DIY projects the homeowner(s) had dreamed-up in order to turn the house they owned into their ideal version of home
- The "list" was discursively significant – a key feature of the household language of DIY.
- A process influenced by representations of (the ideal) home in the popular media, personal observations and conversations with other homeowners.

"Our list goes something like this: we'll put the front fence up and then we'll go through the house, painting it. And doing the carpets and flooring and electrical stuff, and tiling if we need to, and then we're going to either add a living room where the kitchen is. And possibly put another bedroom on there. And then we we'd have to move the garage down the back. So there's that sort of thing. We'll put a deck out the back, a garden out the back too with planter boxes, and palm trees" (Sam).

Conclusions

- This part of our larger study sits in contrast to 1980s theorising which suggests that the increasingly privatised and home-bound condition of urban residents is a symptom of powerlessness and alienation in the public realm and workplace
- Rather, in New Zealand, 'home' is more typically a site of self and collective expression and ontological security; and a place within and from which strong social relations are established
- Home is thus an emergent process incorporating elements of aspirational fantasy, and for many New Zealand householders, DIY is a very significant and enjoyable element of this process



QUESTIONS?



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Te Whare Wānanga o Tāmaki Makaurau

