

DIY “worlds” and the co-construction of home and self

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Abstract: The question to which this paper speaks is how can DIY home improvement, a central but largely unanalysed element of New Zealand housing culture, be interpreted in social theoretical terms? Many New Zealand householders, but particularly homeowners, choose to carry out their own home improvements, rather than employ professional specialists, following a longstanding cultural tradition known as DIY. In this paper we report part of a study of the DIY practices of 27 householders, characterising the types of activities which constitute DIY for them and how they organise the labour across projects, some of it amateur and other professional. The paper is based on a naturalistic qualitative social research methodology relying on interviews, participant observation and an analysis of archival and contemporary housing documentation, including building trade literature and DIY advertising. The paper is located in scholarly debates about the home as process, focussing particularly on elements of work (i.e., *making* a home) and self-building activity. We argue that while the term *do-it-yourself* is suggestive of a solitary activity, (homeowners doing their own home improvements, and deriving a great deal of personal pride and satisfaction from their achievements), in fact each project is an act of co-construction at the centre of a much wider ‘social world’ (Becker 1976). The outcome of this work is the ‘DIYed home’. This is a place in which to dwell and a mainspring of personal experience, meaning and pride; an ongoing and inherently creative family project. It is a place which is commonly talked about with others and proudly exhibited to houseguests – a socially and physically constructed *place* – ‘personalised’, ‘adapted’ and to be enjoyed.

Key words: DIY, do-it-yourself, projects, home improvement, housing, home-making, New Zealand, social science, human geography

1. INTRODUCTION

Do-it-yourself home improvement (DIY) is a key characteristic of ‘Kiwi’ identity and the New Zealand way-of-life, with a popular 2009 home improvement advertisement boasting that DIY is “in our DNA”. Since the 1950s, the national enthusiasm for DIY has spawned a major home improvement industry comprising: TV shows, manuals and magazines, websites and hardware *megastores*. Yet despite the obvious cultural and economic significance of DIY and its importance in the process of home *making*, the phenomenon has not been well-researched in New Zealand, marked by a startling silence among the nation’s housing researchers.

How can the doing of DIY, a central but largely unanalysed element of New Zealand housing culture, be interpreted in social theoretical terms? To answer this question, we explored the DIY practices of 27 householders, characterising the types of activities which constituted DIY for them and how they organised the labour across projects, some of it amateur and other professional. DIY emerged as an activity involving property owners conceptualising, planning and executing a range of projects associated with the production of both home *and* self. This act of co-construction is at the centre of a much wider social ‘DIY world’ “consisting of all those people and organisations whose activity is necessary to produce the kinds of events and objects which that world characteristically produces” (Becker, 1976, p.703). We begin our paper with a brief history of DIY in New Zealand followed by a review of the relevant social theoretical literature. We then summarise our research methodology. Our analysis sections include a characterisation of the types of projects our interviewees associated with DIY and an exploration of DIY *practice* (focusing on labour organisation). We end with a discussion about the role of tools and materials in the act of home improving.

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2. DIY IN NEW ZEALAND

Many New Zealand householders, but particularly, homeowners, choose to carry out their own home improvements, rather than employ professional specialists, following a longstanding cultural tradition known as DIY. The origins of the tradition are often traced to New Zealand’s colonial frontier, where material and labour shortages meant settlers *had* to build their own house from scratch (Hammond 1979). The self-determination, resourcefulness and practical skills displayed then have become entrenched in the mythology of ‘Kiwi DIY.’

While the origins of the Kiwi DIY tradition are nineteenth century colonial, it was during the 1950s and 60s that the activity began to evolve into the home-based pursuit that we (and the home improvement industry) now call ‘DIY’ – one associated more with discretionary weekend projects in and around the home than building a house from scratch. During this period the nation experienced growing prosperity, rising consumerism, rampant suburbanisation, increasing levels of private home ownership and the early development of the DIY retail sector (Mackay 2012).

Through the 1970s and 80s, the DIY phenomenon continued to evolve from its predominant suburban form. New modes of DIY activity emerged linked to: 1) the then government’s desire (as a response to a housing shortage) to promote the restoration of the older housing stock through the provision of access to DIY loans, 2) a shift in preference among many ‘baby boomers’ for buying and ‘doing-up’ older houses near the inner-city, and 3) the establishment of a now renowned DIY retail co-operative which helped small independent hardware stores survive in what was becoming an increasingly competitive marketplace (Mackay 2012). These developments occurred against the backdrop of a gradually deteriorating local (and global) economy marked by steadily rising levels of unemployment, increasing overseas debt, falling export prices and the increasing cost of oil (Wolfe 2007). These structural problems encouraged the Labour government elected in 1984 to inaugurate a new and radical economic regime, one which involved sweeping away regulations and economic controls, in favour of a non-interventionist, market-led approach, which soon became evident in the housing market. Through the late 1980s and 90s, the government’s restructuring package altered many aspects of everyday life in New Zealand, including the world of DIY.

Perkins and Thorns (1999) note that one “dramatic” change in the 1990s concerned the way Kiwis were able to use their leisure

and weekend time – one result of the reregulation (Le Heron & Pawson 1996) of shop trading hours which enabled seven days a week shopping. For some Kiwis, the change meant they had to work on one or both days of the weekend, leaving little time for DIY, while for those who continued working the Monday to Friday 37.5 hour week, Saturdays and Sundays now provided new opportunities for weekend shopping and/or to enjoy the new and burgeoning “café culture” (Perkins & Thorns 1999). Suburban lifestyles began to change as the classic “Kiwi weekend” shifted from one “typified by work on the house and section” (Perkins & Thorns 2001, p.38) to one *also* involving some of Saturday and Sunday at the mall (for work or pleasure).

The new regulatory environment, also transformed New Zealand’s DIY industry. The removal of import controls, for example, provided retailers with new access to global wholesalers which enabled them to import greater quantities and also a wider range of DIY tools and materials (Mackay 2012). Reregulation also enabled global DIY retailers to enter the local marketplace, pushing competition between stores to a level not seen before in New Zealand. The popular media were also beginning to capitalise on DIY through the 1990s through such means as reality home improvement TV shows, many of which were sponsored by DIY retailers who used them to promote their products *and* encourage homeowners to execute a home-makeover – offering the advice necessary for them to carry it off (Mackay 2012).

While ‘official’ statistics on DIY practice in 21st century New Zealand are difficult to locate, its significance can be gauged from popular publications that regularly comment on DIY. In 2004, for example, *The New Zealand Hardware Journal* reported market research that suggested there were more DIYers per head of population in New Zealand than in any other Western country (NZHJ 2004). It also revealed that a growing number of ‘Kiwi’ women were doing DIY; 61 per cent of those who were surveyed having completed a major project within the last two years, 66 per cent of them having used power tools for the first time during that project (NZHJ 2004). In *The Shed*, Parker (2005) stated that in 2004 alone, over one million power tools were imported to New Zealand (population 4 million) and that many of these were designed and bought for DIY. This affection for tools contributes to the very significant revenues generated each year by DIY stores, which some housing commentators have estimated exceeds NZ\$1 billion dollars per annum (Bingham 2003). Arguably, the most significant recent development has been the arrival of ‘big-box’ DIY superstores (Herbst 2007). On any weekend, a quick visit to these large “new landscapes of consumption” (Perkins & Thorns 2001, p.38), many of which include cafés, playgrounds, garden centres, product showrooms, hire departments and DIY classrooms, will show that the Kiwi tradition of ‘doing-up’ the house (or, more precisely, consuming DIY products) is still very popular today.

3. THEORISING DIY

DIY was first theorised in America in the late 1950s. Then, Roland (1958) observed a shift in the nature of DIY from an act of economic *necessity*, against the backdrop of material shortages in the war and immediate post-war years, to a new and emerging lifestyle *choice* in more prosperous times. This was evident in the growing number of home-owners who were opting to do DIY projects for fun, to satisfy their creative impulses and to have a hand in the realisation of their housing dreams. It was also evident in the then burgeoning DIY marketplace where, similar to the New Zealand experience, legions of DIYers were going to purchase the latest tools and materials. It was through DIY, Roland argued, that (male) homeowners were developing a sense of achievement in

their work while also escaping and recouping from the mounting pressures of social and economic life. Roland’s (1958) interpretation of DIY indicated that its analysis required a focus on: self-building, everyday life in the home *and* those elements of the capitalist economy relating to building product and tool retailing and associated lifestyle advertising. Despite Roland’s (1958) early work, however, it was not until the 1990s that the topic was revisited with any notable rigour. Writing from a cultural studies perspective, Melchionne (1999) suggests that this period of neglect was the result of a tendency among researchers to focus on groups engaged in acts of mass cultural contestation and a preoccupation with the interpretation of high cultural texts such as film, literature and new media. For Melchionne (1999) it was the very ordinary and everyday nature of DIY that had likely led to its neglect.

Over the last 20 years, academic interest in DIY has grown, particularly in America and Britain where the industry has expanded remarkably since the 1950s. The research canon covers a wide variety of perspectives including: urban economics (Mendelsohn 1977, Montgomery 1992, Bogdon 1996, Davidson & Leather 2000, Baker & Kaul 2002); housing studies and policy (Littlewood & Munro 1996, Munro & Leather 2000); consumer studies (Williams 2004, 2008); history (Gelber 1997, 1999, Goldstein 1998, Dingle 2000, Atkinson 2006, Jackson 2006); media studies (Lewis 2008, Rosenberg 2008, Powell 2009); consumption and material cultures (Browne 2000, Clarke 2001, Campbell 2005, Shove et al. 2007, Watson & Shove 2008) and the social sciences more generally (Melchionne 1999, McElroy 2006).

Arguably, the most thorough account has been provided by Gelber (1997, 1999) who investigated DIY as part of the history of hobbies in America – thereby conceptualising it as a form of leisure. Like Roland (1958), Gelber deduced that DIY surfaced during the 20th century as male-workers – especially those who did not use manual skill in the workplace – searched for creative outlets. Gelber suggested that by conducting DIY projects, from start to finish, people were able to derive a sense of pride and achievement in *their* work, making it an alluring free-time (self-building) activity. DIY was especially good for the male psyche because it involved the heavy tools, practical skill and control over the physical environment and, therefore, did not compromise, but rather reinforced, the values of masculine identity (Gelber 1997).

Goldstein’s (1998) history of DIY in America, focuses more on the institutional mechanisms which have supported and encouraged DIY activity, such as the manufacture and distribution of home utility tools and the delivery of instructional information. Crucially, she also discusses the differentiation between men’s and women’s roles in undertaking projects. This was evident in her sample of DIY advertising, dating back to the 1940s. In the earliest of this material, men were almost always portrayed doing the building work around the home with their female partners close by looking on with admiration or engaged in their own light duties, usually cleaning or varnishing interior surfaces. Through the 1950s and 60s, this gendered division of labour changed slightly with women pictured involved in building work, but still mostly in a supportive role (Goldstein 1998). In the following decades, these representations shifted again with women seen carrying out more serious projects and, for the first time, using power tools. But, as pointed out by McElroy (2006), albeit in a European context, despite the gendered divisions emphasised in DIY advertising, another strong theme is the representation of DIY as an activity carried out ‘together’ by couples – reminiscent of the “joint approach” to gardening sometimes taken by British home-making couples (Bhatti & Church 2000, p.92) – a leaning which continues in DIY advertising (Mackay 2012).

While *historical* interpretations of DIY emphasise its origins in the 1950s and its strong gender and leisure dimensions

(including aspects of self-actualisation), work in the fields of consumer and material culture have been developing useful theory in relation to DIY practice *today*. Shove et al. (2007), for example, have used the British DIY case to explore “ordinary consumption”. They point out that while some ‘commodities’ are purchased in order to convey a desirable individual or group identity (i.e., they have symbolic value), many more are bought and used in the practical execution and accomplishment of everyday life, often in “pressingly mundane” ways (Watson & Shove 2008, p.70). This is no better seen, they argue (Shove et al. 2007), than in the act of DIY where the co-dependent relationship between houses, people, tools and other ordinary commodities (nails, sandpaper, glue, nuts and bolts etc.) is plainly obvious. As projects are carried out by DIYers, who enrol tools and technologies, their competence and confidence grows and, as a result, new possibilities for projects emerge which have implications for “future patterns of consumption” (Shove et al. 2007, p.43).

While one’s DIY aspirations may indeed be influenced by their growing confidence, research also shows DIY activity is influenced by conversations with other homeowners and wider mediating forces, including the vagaries of housing fashions. Perkins and Thorns (1999, 2001, 2003, also see Leonard, Perkins & Thorns 2004), in a study of the meaning of house and home in New Zealand, found that *ideas* for home improvement often emerged out of internal ‘household’ discussions and were *also* shaped by exogenous forces such as: the availability and of tools and materials; housing policy and planning (such as building codes); lifestyle magazine advertising; and the local and global media. Using Massey’s (1995) idea that places are ‘processes’ they argued that, given the vagaries of the marketplace and housing fashions, and the exigencies and new demands of everyday life, our homes are always in process, continuously (re)assembling to accommodate changing needs, wants and desires (Perkins and Thorns 1999, 2001, 2003). In these conceptual terms, ‘the home’, as a ‘DIY project’ is always evolving within an individual, local and global context – a project which never really ends.

While Perkins and Thorns (1999, 2001, 2003) provide a theoretical platform for thinking about DIY, the topic remains understudied in New Zealand, but not totally ignored. Where DIY has surfaced (and often only in passing) is in broader New Zealand studies covering topics such as: aesthetic leisure (Bell & Lyall, 2001); gender in home related advertising (Shaw & Brookes, 1999; Winstanley, 2000); the geographies of aging (Mansvelt, 1997); and informal work (Pawson & Cant, 1983). Our *explicit* focus on DIY aims to address this gap.

4. METHODS

To analyse DIY, we adopted a naturalistic research strategy (Blumer 1969, Schatzman & Strauss 1973). This approach involves researchers starting with a broad area of interest and sharpening their focus as their inquiry proceeds, generally using qualitative methods (Perkins 1988). Our fieldwork began in January 2007 with six months of contextual work. This included: 15 key informant interviews and an analysis of DIY magazines, manuals, product advertisements and building trade literature. These data were used to construct a preliminary picture of DIY, including key aspects of its history and wider economic and social structures. Over the period mid-2007 to December 2009 we conducted 27 interviews with Christchurch owner-occupiers, combined with interpretive house and shed tours. Negotiating access to participants was achieved through a snowball technique (the criteria for selection was that they were ‘home-owners’ and that they had done some DIY in the last few years). This snowballing generated a large list

of potential interviewees from which we selected “sedulously” (Blumer 1969), across age groups and generations, ensuring that we spoke to both young and older home-owners, from a variety of housing types and styles. All interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants, ranged in length from one to two hours, were recorded, transcribed, and manually coded in a search for recurrent themes.

The study site was Christchurch, with a population of 372,600 in June 2009 (CCC 2010). The city’s housing stock mainly comprises low-rise detached houses situated on their own section of land. In 2006, there were 134,718 private dwellings in the city (CCC 2010) with the dominant form of tenure being owner-occupation (the New Zealand norm). Christchurch was recently propelled into international news headlines when three earthquakes struck (September 2010, February 2011 and June 2011). These events caused significant damage to the city’s CBD, infrastructure, colonial heritage building stock (for which the city was renowned) and the houses and homes of residents living across all its forty-nine suburbs. Our fieldwork was conducted before these events.

5. THE SCOPE AND SCALE OF PROJECTS

In this first analysis section we define and categorise the scope and scale of our research participants’ home improvement activities. While the DIY activity base was diverse, our interviewees tended to refer to four main modes of DIY around which we structure our discussion: 1) interior decorating, 2) house repairs and maintenance 3) building work and 4) gardening and landscape construction.

5.1 Interior decorating

Interior decorating was the most frequent type of DIY carried out by our interviewees, generally done for the purpose of making the interior of their homes – or at least one room at a time in it – more visually appealing, up-to-date and/or representative of their tastes, identity and style. Along with these outcomes, it was the relative simplicity and affordability of interior decorating which our interviewees seemed to value and enjoy: *...rooms change quickly – instant result! You select a colour scheme and before you know it you’ve got a new room. I get the decorating bug ... quick and simple and it makes a difference that you can see (Linda)*.

It was the women we spoke to who favoured decorating, and for some, this was the ‘only’ type of DIY they did. Britney, for example, said she only did decorative work because it was “*reasonably uncomplicated*” and left her husband to take care of all other DIY jobs (perhaps suggesting that decorating is perceived as ‘easy’ as it does not involve a major rebuild but rather making the most of what is already there).

Myriad decorating motives were mentioned over the course of the interviews, most highlighting the link between decorating and a desire to impress visitors and houseguests with a well-presented and fashionable home (Clarke 2001). This meant their houses were constantly changing as they sought to keep up with vagaries of house and garden fashions, as promoted in the magazines and other media sources that they subscribed to and/or looked to for inspiration and ideas (Leonard, et al. 2004).

While interior decorating was often triggered by the desire to renew an aging or unfashionable interior (underpinned by a desire to impress others) a spate of decorating was also common after people had moved into a new property. This was done to personalise the dwelling – to make the new house feel more like ‘their’ home. Hazel noted that she and her husband had been through this “*...process to put a mark on the house*” and suggested that they “*weren’t happy*” until this was achieved. Conversely, a distinct spate of decorating was also commonly carried out just

prior to selling a home; with the aim of adding resale value to the house, or at least getting it presentable enough to sell. This process was very different from personalising the home; it was more pragmatic – aimed, first and foremost, at getting the house sold.

5.2 Repairing and maintaining

Interviewees also talked about *home repairs and maintenance*. A feature of this distinct category of DIY was that its purpose was not to alter or add something new to the house (such as new wallpaper or curtains), but rather to maintain the dwelling's appearance, integrity, functionality and, by association, its capital value. The most frequently mentioned task in this category was exterior painting, and while this job had an aesthetic component – the colour scheme for the outer shell of the home – it was rarely talked about with the same enthusiasm as was expressed for interior painting projects. Our interviewees said they preferred projects which offered more of a practical challenge and a more immediate sense of satisfaction: *...painting outside is a 'no-brainer'. I'd rather do projects where you make stuff, get the power saw out, cut the mask on and the earmuffs on and then its brmmmmmm as you cut the wood, sand the edges, get your tool belt on, square things up – painting's just up-down, up-down (Glen).*

The other common repairs mentioned were fixing: leaking taps or dripping pipes, leaking roofs, rusty guttering, damaged walls or interior paint work, and damaged or jammed doors. The level of expertise required to carry out 'fix-it' jobs ultimately determined the type of repairs the person was prepared to attempt (such as fixing broken glass or repair work on steep roofs, which few would do given the danger involved). Building regulations also governed what the homeowners could do by way of repairs, with plumbing and electrical repairs *having* to be left to professionals.

5.3 Building

Most of our interviewees had completed one major *building* project involving either the alteration or complete makeover (i.e., more than redecorating) of an existing room, or the installation of a new fixture or feature in the house (such as a new shower unit), and while not the most common type of DIY, these projects were often defining events in their DIY careers. Specific examples include: Barry's conversion of a second bathroom into an office for his wife, whose new job involved working from home; and Bruce's removal of a load-bearing wall to create a more spacious social area for entertaining friends. These examples show that the catalyst for this work was often the need to change the layout of the house to make it more functional or comfortable (which may also include an element of 'showing off' to friends), to meet new family needs or new life circumstances or to meet changing lifestyle preferences.

Among the couples we interviewed, it was the women who were often instrumental in organising these larger building projects – including the budgeting and hiring of external labour for specialist tasks. Their male partners, however, tended to *do* the work and enjoyed doing so because it offered an enormous practical challenge, was not repetitious, involved using heavy tools, provided many learning opportunities and the greatest overall sense of achievement (supporting the view posited by Gelber (1997) that DIY is an appealing activity for men, for these reasons).

5.4 Gardening and landscaping

Our interviewees also talked about *gardening and landscaping*, perhaps signifying that their gardens and outdoor areas were inseparable from their homes and, by extension, the wider DIY culture. This was not in itself a surprise; Kiwis have long been 'keen' home gardeners, an interest buoyed by suitable soils and climate and properties which traditionally have had a great deal of space for vegetable plots, lawns, fruit trees, grape vines and

decorative displays of flowers, trees and shrubs (Perkins & Thorns 1999). One interviewee described landscaping tasks as the most common jobs accomplished by New Zealand home-owners, especially in summer when the weather outdoors was more settled:

Knocking out a wall is the ultimate DIY job that you might aspire to do but more common is landscaping gardening ... In summer you'll always see Kiwis in their gardens or driving to the dump with a load of hedge clippings or concrete they've ripped up (Glen).

The creation of a garden was the very first project many of our interviewees did once they had moved into a new home. Like interior decorating, these activities were considered an inexpensive way to begin personalising the new house in order to develop a sense of ownership.

Three of the women we spoke to also emphasised the leisure dimensions of gardening, especially the satisfaction they got from the process of creating an outdoor environment which was nice for them as well as their neighbours to look at. In this design context, our interviewees also talked a lot about the 'type' of garden they were trying to create. Barry and his wife, for example, were developing their section into a wild 'cottage' garden, while Shane was developing his section into a 'play space' for his children with sandpit, cricket pitch and trampoline dominating his yard. While many of our younger interviewees and also those in their mid-life stages, talked about creating a space for outdoor entertaining or play, our older research participants emphasised the productive elements of their gardens, such as vegetable and fruit growing.

Gardening was clearly one way in which our interviewees sought to make their house a home and, through this process express their identity. Like the interiors of their home, their gardens were in a constant process of change, influenced by new trends in garden style, but also natural processes.

6. DOING DIY

Having characterized the types of jobs which constituted DIY for our 27 interviewees, we now report on how they executed their projects. First we examine the planning which commonly occurs before the work begins. Second we analyse the labour structures within projects, speaking to the question: *who does the work?*

6.1 Planning projects

All our interviewees said that they began their DIY projects with a period of planning, one which varied in duration and intensity in relation to the scale and complexity of the work and their DIY experience, skills and 'know-how'. The most prolonged period of planning was carried out before complex *structural* projects began, with more spates of research, negotiation, purchasing and decision-making carried out as the project proceeded through its various stages, each requiring a different combination of tools, materials, skills, information and advice, and/or the enrolment of additional help and expertise when things did not go 'according to plan'.

Planning tools were often used by our interviewees to help in this process, including paint colour charts, paint test pots and sample squares of key materials such as tiles, fabric, bench top coatings and floor vinyl, all collected from the home improvement stores they visited during their project planning. These tools helped them to visualise aesthetic dimensions of the finished project and, ultimately, assisted them in making their final decisions about the colour and style of the products they needed to buy.

Another common planning activity – especially for large scale projects – was budgeting for the tools and materials needed. From experience and/or from the advice they got from 'other' DIYers, our interviewees recognised that resourcing a big project could be a costly affair, with many stating that they felt they were 'pouring'

money into their houses via DIY. For some of them, especially first home-owners, big projects were often beyond their financial means and loans had to be arranged before the project could start.

Another characteristic of the planning of DIY projects was the search for information from outside the household. Barry said that the need for this type of input was part and parcel of the planning process because: *...you're a DIYer so you need information and advice to fill the knowledge gap – usually with me it's a major knowledge gap (Barry)*. Whatever the specific need for information, our interviewees' preferred source was a friend or family member who had done a similar project. Anna and James said that prior to their bathroom renovation they visited friends to observe how they had tiled around their bath and the materials they had used, and also to discuss the cost of the work. Sam said he also sought guidance from his friends – *“other handymen”* he trusted and who were willing to answer his questions as he framed up his projects. Another common source was a friend or family member who was formally qualified in a house-related trade (such as plumbing or electrical work) – who could offer some *expert* advice at no cost: *I use my friends and family as an advice network – from advice on materials to everything. I've got a good group of them who are 'tradies' and they've got a broad range of knowledge from structural engineer, architecture, electricians ... (Hamish)*. Our interviewees also frequently sought guidance from staff at DIY stores. Through these social encounters, some of our interviewees said they had developed a strong rapport with particular staff members, coming to know some employees by their first names.

While *people* were the preferred source of DIY information, our interviewees also utilised the popular *media*. For example, many had turned to the generic information provided in DIY magazines, home improvement manuals, newspaper columns, or the 'how-to' brochures produced by DIY product manufacturers.

The broadcast media were also seen as a *potential* source of DIY information, such as the New Zealand version of the TV programme *Changing Rooms* and international shows such as *60 Minute Makeover*. Most of our interviewees valued these shows for the ideas they provided rather than as a source of practical advice. Most found them entertaining and a way to keep-up-to date with the latest housing fashions, but they did not consciously watch these shows expecting to be educated on practical aspects of DIY.

All our interviewees (although some more than others) enjoyed the project planning phase, particularly the intellectual stimulation, conversations, social interaction and excitement involved in transforming an 'idea' into a realistic and achievable set of practical tasks. Who carries out these tasks – the division of labour within DIY households – is the focus of the next section.

6.2 Getting the work done

Who physically carries out the DIY projects in a household? In this section, five arrangements of labour within projects are discussed: household DIY, helping-hands, informal professional help, the 'working bee' and DIY/professional mix.

6.2.1 Household DIY

For the single-homeowners we spoke to, the responsibility for the making and maintenance of home (via DIY should they choose to do it this way) fell squarely on their shoulders. But for couple-households, the division of labour was varied and complex, some jobs done alone, others collaboratively, a demonstration of 'teamwork' and family bonding in the making and maintenance of home: *...you're making a nicer place together and that's important ... it's nice to have some time working together on something ... just spending time together (Linda)*.

While 'teamwork' was a prevalent interview theme among the couples we spoke to, all of them also pointed out that they

occasionally carried out DIY projects alone. There were two common situations when this occurred. First, unaccompanied DIYing provided an escape from the pressures they felt existed in their everyday lives, or had built-up over the day or week at work. In this sense, *doing* DIY was a form of retreat and revitalisation, consistent with the findings of historians Roland (1958) and Gelber (1997, 1999). Second, some DIY was carried out alone because the task in question was understood to be the responsibility of just one household member. This allocation of responsibility was clearest around routine maintenance tasks (such as lawn mowing), with these jobs commonly (but not always) assigned to the male of the house. None of the men we spoke to complained about these obligations, but rather saw it as their way of making a tangible contribution to the ongoing upkeep of the family home.

6.2.2 Helping-hands

While by strict definition DIY refers to the execution of home improvement projects by owner-occupiers, our interviewees told us that many of their projects had been accomplished with help from family members and friends who were not living in the house. In most cases, this help was used to accomplish large scale projects which could not have been achieved by the homeowner(s) alone (because they did not have the skills) or accomplished in the timeframe which was available to them (i.e., an extra pair of hands was needed to speed up the work). This help was firmly centred on the convention of reciprocity, an implicit give-and-take social arrangement with one person providing help to another with the understanding that similar help would be available to them in the future. Interviewees stressed that the notion of reciprocity was a central tenet of the Kiwi DIY tradition. Our male interviewees had the most to say about this exchange between friends. At the centre of their narratives were two interwoven themes: necessity and 'mateship' (or the proving of oneself as a dependable friend).

DIY was also described as an activity that brought family members together, thereby providing a platform for enhanced family cohesion and social interaction. While immediate family members were frequent 'helpers', most interviewees told us that it was their 'fathers' who took the most interest in their DIY projects and seemed to help them out the most. Linda said that for her, this was a positive aspect of DIY, providing a rare opportunity for her and her husband to get together and communicate with her father. Jerry believed that his father simply enjoyed being around the family and that DIY gave him an excuse to visit and spend time with them while feeling good about helping them out in a practical sense. Comments from our older interviewees (all of whom had children of their own and frequently helped them with their home improvement projects) provided further insight into these 'family DIY encounters'. Jack and Jane, for example, said that they helped their adult children with their projects because they believed it was a pleasurable form of parental support. They were always willing to get in and do the messy jobs because it felt good to demonstrate to their children that they were still capable of doing DIY and also to pass on their skills. Simultaneously, it showed their children that they were genuinely interested in being a part of their lives.

6.2.3 Informal professional help

Practical help was also occasionally provided to our interviewees by friends or family who were professional contractors, especially where difficult or regulated work needed to be done. While these 'helpers' often provided their services for free, they sometimes charged 'mate's rates' (a generous tax-free, hourly cash rate worked out between the friends). Natalie, for example, had negotiated 'mate's rates' with the friend who was a professional builder to help her husband Terry with their upcoming bathroom renovation, having realised the disjuncture between the complexity

of this job and her husband's level of plumbing and building skill. David pointed out that a benefit of this form of help was the professional finish that could be accomplished, that was usually beyond the capabilities of the average DIYer.

6.2.4 The "working bee"

While most of our interviewees noted that DIYing with a friend or family member was a fun and rewarding experience, the social emphasis placed on DIY was perhaps strongest in their reference to the 'working bee'. This event was described as a one-off occasion, normally associated with a specific home improvement task (usually large in scale or a complete home makeover), involving a group of friends and family voluntarily helping out, with the recipients of the labour typically providing the assistants with refreshments throughout the day. While much work could be achieved over the course of a working bee, our interviewees valued the enjoyment they derived from having people at their home and the interpersonal contact that occurred as the work got done.

6.2.5 DIY/professional mix

Some of our interviewees' DIY projects comprised a mix of household labour and fully paid professional help. This occurred in three main ways: first, the professional doing the job with the homeowner helping out; second, the homeowner doing the preparation/demolition work then handing the job over to the professional; and third, the professional doing a single specialised task within a larger multifaceted project. Hamish, for example, employed an architect to help him draw up the necessary plans for a council permit to remove a load-bearing wall and then employed a builder to help him do the most complex part of the alteration. Jack, an experienced DIYer, was also intending to employ a professional for the complicated facets of a room extension, but intended to "hover in the background doing the labouring".

7. TOOLS AND MATERIALS

In addition to the enrolment of non-household members in their projects, our interviewees also enrolled and used material objects (i.e., tools and materials) in their DIY work.

7.1 Tools

Our interviewees owned or aspired to own, a variety of DIY tools with some of them in possession of comprehensive collections. These larger collections generally reflected the homeowners extended involvement in DIY practice, and the diversity of the projects they had done over their history of home-ownership. Jack, for example, had a biscuit joiner (a woodworking tool for joining bits of wood together) in his all-inclusive tool collection, an item he initially acquired to build a wooden bookcase in the early 1990s, but since had been used for a range of other tasks. He also owned a drill press, spot welder, chainsaw, belt sander, jig saw, bevel-edged chisel set, rasps, router, files and an electric concrete mixer. These were all initially purchased for a specific job, after which they were available for him to use in his other projects.

How our research participants went about accessing tools for their DIY projects occurred in three main ways. The first and most common method was by purchasing them outright from general DIY stores or specialist hardware retailers. This was either done on a 'need-it-now' basis for projects which were being carried out or planned, or more spontaneously, in the case of tool enthusiasts who simply wanted to add them to their collection. Shane, for example, had purchased an electric circular saw specifically to cut decking timber, but was also "... guilty of buying a router on the same day which [he] didn't actually need". Secondly, tools were also

inherited; passed down by older family members who were either upgrading their collections, were reaching the end of their housing journeys or who had passed away. Barry, for example, inherited all his late father-in-law's tools, including an electric drill which remained his favourite tool – not only for its versatility but also because it was a family heirloom (held for more than its use value).

Shane said that his father was "past the DIY stage" and had given him a lot of the tools that he felt that he no longer had a use for. The third most common method for acquiring tools was as birthday or Christmas gifts, or, for most of the men we spoke to, as Fathers' Day presents. Not surprisingly, we found increased tool advertising in newspapers and home related magazines in the days leading up to these occasions, with DIY retailers promoting the concept of 'giving tools to men' since at least the early 1950s.

Our research participants said that from time-to-time they found themselves without the tool(s) they needed to carry out a specific DIY task and, instead of buying what they needed (perhaps unable to afford the item in question or replace or upgrade a broken equivalent), they borrowed from other homeowners they knew, commonly friends, family and neighbours. Marty, for example, had recently borrowed plastering gear from a friend to finish plaster coating the interior walls of his laundry-to-bedroom conversion. He noted that borrowing tools was part of the "Kiwi DIY tradition". He also said that he made a conscious choice between the tools he wanted in his collection and those he did not want to buy, such as plastering tools which he was not too "excited about".

While all the homeowners we interviewed could recall occasions when they had borrowed tools for specific tasks, it was the first-home owners in this study who appeared to be the most active tool borrowers. The first-home owners were carrying out some of the most significant projects yet did not have the most sophisticated tool collections at this early stage in their housing and DIY journey. This paradoxical situation, coupled with the financial constraints associated this stage of the life/housing course, often meant that they had to rely more heavily on borrowing tools from other people within their social networks.

7.2 Materials

One need only briefly walk the aisles of a DIY megastore to see the extensive range of building supplies available to home improvers – plumbing, electrical, landscape, timber, roofing, fasteners, locks and latches, sealants, paints, abrasives (such as sandpaper) and adhesives. Like tools, DIY materials – the ingredients of any DIY project – vary greatly in their cost and quality. While some building materials can be defined as 'raw' (such as lengths of untreated timber or bags of powdered cement) others have been designed, processed and packaged specifically with the novice in mind (i.e., they are easy to use). Many of our interviewees were enthralled when they discovered materials designed to simplify and speed up the work process. Linda, for example, spoke excitedly of her recent discovery of quick dry interior paint that did not require a primer or undercoat, thereby speeding up and greatly simplifying the painting project she was doing: "...it's just two or three coats from the same tin! It dries so fast that you can actually slap that many coats on in a day and then, "dah-dah!" job done! (Linda).

Such advances in building material technology have brought a wider range of projects within the reach of the average DIYer. However, our interviewees also identified products that remained extremely difficult to use or manipulate. The most frequently mentioned was interior wall-board plaster which most of the research participants found difficult to mix and apply, while others simply avoided trying, aware from the advice of friends and family that plastering was one job best left to the professionals.

While myriad criteria can be used to categorise building goods (such as the different cataloguing systems used by hardware stores)

our interviewees made the distinction between *non-decorative* and *decorative* materials, and mainly talked about the latter category. Decorative materials were those they used to create a visual *effect* – a desirable ‘style’ or ‘personal touch’. Examples of these types of materials include wall and floor coverings, paints, wallpapers and vinyl, tap ware, laminated or stained wood panels and shelving, and electrical fittings (such as decorative light shades). While these materials do all “perform” (such as paint which seals and protects, or shelving which holds books) the advertising for decorative home improvement products have long also promoted their *aesthetic* qualities (Leonard et al. 2004). Given the fashionable attributes of these products, decorative materials were frequently altered, discarded or replaced by our interviewees, as housing fashions changed. Rose recalled wallpapering one of the houses she had owned with floral wallpapers – a different one for each room – and then, three years later, painting over the paper to create the: “*modern look with a feature wall in each room*”.

While materials for projects were generally purchased new from DIY stores, our interviewees said they also enjoyed rummaging around second-hand building supply outlets for the resources they needed. Some of them did this because they liked to recycle while others simply enjoyed foraging for a bargain (perhaps not being able to afford any other option). Most also pointed out that they ‘hoarded’ materials, evidence of which we saw in their sheds where a wide range of materials were stored – either collected from various sources or left over and saved from their own previous jobs. Dave, for example, had a stack of decking timber balanced in the rafters of his garage, the leftovers from a project his father had done: *...you can never have enough wood lying around, there’s always a use for it (Dave)*. While stacks of timber were common in the sheds and garages of our interviewees, so too were shelves or cupboards containing partially full tins of paint, the leftovers from past painting projects: *...saved just in case there might be a use for it in the future (Hamish)*.

Informal networks of exchange also surfaced as a major theme in the discussions about materials. Our interviewees provided many examples of trading materials with friends and neighbours. Max and Jill told us about when they went visiting their friend’s house and noticed an old upturned plastic bath on the lawn. Their friends had just completed a bathroom makeover and, in that process, had replaced the old plastic bath with a newer model. In exchange for some electrical advice, Max was given the bath which he picked up and installed in his own home.

8. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

While the term *do-it-yourself* is suggestive of a solitary activity, (homeowners doing their own home improvements, and deriving a great deal of pride and satisfaction from their achievements), this paper has shown that in fact each DIY project is an act of co-construction at the centre of a much wider ‘social world’ (Becker 1976). This ‘world’ comprises tools, materials and non-household members (family, friends, DIY store employees, popular media etc.) who are enrolled in various capacities including labour but also in the supply of design advice and ‘how-to’ knowledge.

Beyond the aim of personalising, adapting and protecting their homes, owner-occupiers do DIY because they *enjoy* the home as a site of work or, put another way, working on the home. For all of our interviewees, DIY (although not all types of DIY work for everyone) was a mainspring of pride, satisfaction and self-efficacy which are the positive rewards usually associated with “productive” leisure activities (Campbell 2005, Gelber 1999, Stebbins 2009). The positive characterisation of DIY which emerged in our research was not entirely unexpected. Our initial

review of the literature had heightened our awareness of the fact that DIY can be a fun and rewarding experience – even when a project is a long haul. To recap, Roland (1958) argued that because DIY was a practical and creative process, it was highly satisfying work, especially for those individuals who did not gain such satisfaction from their paid employment. Similarly, Jackson (2006) noted that DIY was “self-actualising” work – practitioners able to realise their full creative potential via the accomplishment of challenging projects which, in the end, embodied their energy and practical skills. Mansvelt (1997) noted that it was the productive and work-like nature of DIY that was appealing for older homeowners who derived a sense of self-worth from DIY. As such, Mansvelt (1997) suggested that DIY was neither wholly work nor leisure, but best seen as a leisure-work hybrid. Our research findings support the idea that DIY is best conceptualised as a *composite* of work and leisure (not one or the other of these constructs) – involving homeowner(s) “labouring” towards specific material goals – a new deck, a modernised bathroom – while simultaneously “enjoying” the activity.

Two dimensions of the “DIY experience” stood out as being *particularly* enjoyable on the part of our interviewees. First, all of them emphasised the great sense of “personal fulfilment” they derived from carrying out (and, more often than not completing), challenging, creative and productive projects. Second, all of them said they enjoyed the sense of “freedom” they felt when executing DIY projects. Most of them enjoyed the feeling of being in control (the self-determined and self-reliant Kiwi homeowner) when doing DIY – feeling *free* to make their own decisions, change the direction of the work, experiment with techniques, playfully joke around and work at their own pace. This sense of freedom was a novel and enjoyable experience for the first-home owners we interviewed, all of whom talked about their recent freedom from the constraints associated with renting – now home *owners* able to seize control of and improve their domestic surroundings. Some DIY projects also provided our interviewees with a sense of freedom from the constraints and stresses of their everyday lives – a moment to escape or “lose themselves” in project work, even if that just meant pottering around the house and garden. Engaging in DIY also provided a feeling of *freedom* from the structures of the formal labour economy (i.e., not having to pay labourers to attend to their home improvements) which was very appealing to think about, especially in terms of the money that could be saved.

As evident in our research, the outcome of DIY *practice* is the ‘DIYed home’, the expression of the continually emerging relationship between (and an assemblage of) people, products and place. This is a personalised place, but not just because it reflects one’s sense of ‘style’ and consumption choices, which may be used to communicate a particular identity (Porteous 1976, Bauman 2007) but because it also embodies one’s skills, energy and effort – thereby standing as a symbolic representation of the owner’s productive, reflexive and creative selves. The ‘DIYed home’ is not just a place to live, but is also generative of personal experience, meaning and pride; an ongoing creative family project. It is a place which is commonly talked about with others and proudly shown to houseguests – a socially and physically constructed *place* – ‘personalised’, ‘adapted’ and to be enjoyed.

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