Do-It-Yourself Home Improvement

Practice at the Nexus of Consumption and Production

Michael Mackay
Lincoln University

Harvey Perkins
The University of Auckland
Thoughts about consumption and production

- Accounts of liquid modernity (e.g., Bauman) and the rise of consumer society provide insight into the great significance of consumption and shopping in everyday life.

- Such accounts, however, do very little to help us understand what people actually do with the commodities they buy.

- Barnett et al. (2011) suggest that while consumption (as shopping) is important, we should not lose sight of what goes on past the shop counter.

- These purchases make possible an important cluster of productive human actions involving practical skills and abilities, innovative thinking, creativity, emotions, conversations and ‘teamwork’.

- In this paper, using a New Zealand study of DIY home improvement, we want to illustrate how in many everyday practices, consumption and production combine in what Ritzer (2009) terms prosumption.
What is DIY?

- DIY stands for ‘do-it-yourself’ home improvement
- It occurs when homeowners decorate, alter, build, maintain or repair any part of their home themselves.
- DIY projects: 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.
- It is a global phenomenon: big in New Zealand, but also the USA, Canada, Australia and Europe, and emerging in Japan and China.
- Gendered in interesting ways
DIY: Disparate international literature

- **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 division of domestic labour, homemaking, gender identities, material culture and consumption, leisure and the meaning of house and home: but interestingly little reflection on questions of the links between consumption and production.
DIY in New Zealand

• A well-established set of cultural practices.

• Often linked to NZ’s high level of home ownership and domestic property as investment.

• Became widespread 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 per year on tools and materials.

• Big box retailers now dominate the DIY shopping landscape. (Bunnings, for example, employing over 3000 staff)
Our study of DIY home improvement

- NZ homeowner interviews (n=27) with house/shed tour, observations & participation
- Key informant interviews with retail industry participants (n=15)
- Analysis of ads, media and DIY manuals & mags
- DIY from the perspective of both day-to-day practice and globalised political economy
DIY as consumption and production

Consumption

• Consumption as shopping is an inescapable aspect of DIY (e.g., you need drills, nails, wallpaper, lifestyle magazines etc.).

• **Tools**: purchased, inherited, borrowed, gifted: Respondents owned or aspired to own a variety of DIY tools – some had very large collections.

• **Materials**: extensive range of materials purchased ranging from “raw” product (timber) through to those packaged especially for DIY enthusiasts; and sometimes sourced by foraging in second hand outlets.

• **Ideas**: drawn from internet, magazines, reality TV, advertisements: these sources created a discourse of style and appropriateness and the things needed to achieve them.
Production

• While our research participants certainly engaged in the world as consumers, they also took the role and identity of ‘producers’ which involved the following:

• Helping hands: enrolling family and friends not resident at the house – reciprocity, inter-generational family support and cohesion

• Informal professional help: getting family or friends with building skills to help – “mates rates”

• The “working bee”: a one-off social event designed to entertain and get things done

• DIY/professional mix: various combinations of contribution – sometimes to meet regulatory requirements
What’s Produced?

- **Interior decoration** – the most frequently conducted DIY activity: impressing visitors and keeping up with fashion

- **Repair and maintenance** – fixing not adding

- **Built form** – major projects such as bathroom or kitchen conversions, room re-configuration

- **Gardens and landscapes**

- Participants are producing their social and materials worlds, while simultaneously ‘building’ and maintaining their **identities**.
Conclusions

• The product of DIY practice is the DIYed home: a socially and physically constructed place which is personalised, adapted, displayed and to be enjoyed.

• While shopping is a crucially important part of DIY, it is much more than this.

• Each DIY project is an act of prosumption at the centre of an extensive social world (Becker, 1982) comprising: householders, tools, materials, ideas, families, friends, DIY stores and their employees, popular and technical media, advertisements etc.