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Do-It-Yourself:
A Walden for the Millions?

THE SHORTAGE of skilled workmen and climbing labor costs have been determining factors in the inception and phenomenal growth of the do-it-yourself trend. But they are not enough to explain its impact on American society. In a decade, do-it-yourself has revolutionized the patterns of domestic life in millions of American homes, and it now cuts across income brackets, educational levels, social distinctions. It almost seems as if, a hundred years later, millions have taken to heart Thoreau’s example, withdrawing to their basement and garage workshops to find there a temporary Walden. Starting from nuts and bolts, from simple and concrete things, they may be trying to take hold of their lives at this immediate level. In specific, concrete jobs, carried through from beginning to end, they find the satisfying feeling of individual identity and measurable accomplishment they fail to get from their everyday routine in an office, at the assembly line or behind a counter. The temporary do-it-yourself withdrawal may help them get at that distance from society which is needed for a better perspective, making possible an intelligent return to it.

The stereotype of a romantic Thoreau communing with Nature and meditating by the pond does not square too easily with millions of people busily engaged building knick-knick shelves, painting the walls, re-shingling the roof or tinkering with the plumbing. Yet if they were to express their attitudes about it, some might say with Thoreau: “Drive a nail home and clinch it so faithfully that you can wake up in the night and think of your work with satisfaction.” ¹ Most of them would share his fascination for lists of materials and costs—the minute essentials of everyday life. The simple,

the concrete may be one touchstone for evaluating life around them—and their own. In a less dramatic way than Thoreau’s, these people too are perhaps rebelling against a society where meanings have lost their edge. The analogy holds in a number of ways, but of course we don’t intend to press it too literally. And before suggesting it as the basis for a tentative evaluation we ought to take a closer look at do-it-yourself: what it is, who engages in it, how and why.

If you look at it in business terms, do-it-yourself is today an economic reality that runs into over $6 billion a year. According to industry estimates, this “shoulder trade” will boom into a $10 billion business by 1960. Manufacturers have recognized its special demands both in their production and in their merchandising. Do-it-yourself installation is now an essential requisite for most building materials, and it is even becoming quite important for such major home equipment as water heaters and air conditioners.

Cartoons poke fun at inept amateurs painting themselves in corners. General magazines have stressed safety hazards and bumbling. But according to a recent estimate by This Week Magazine, do-it-yourself is the No. 1 American hobby, with some sixty million people engaging in it. The Department of Labor reported that in 1953 week-end carpenters and the new Sunday painters brushed on three-fourths of the country’s paint, pasted up 60 per cent of all wallpaper, installed 50 per cent of all asphalt tile. They bought some 25 million power tools to saw and drill, among other materials, 500 million square feet of plywood in one year. This is big business. And the figures make do-it-yourself sound like a massive, homogeneous trend. But is it? When you try to find out what people are looking for, in their do-it-yourself activities, what do you find?

If you ask, the two standard answers (depending on the group values and on the character of the person you talk to) are that such activities save money, or that they provide something to do—they’re fun. However, when you try to understand the motivations behind do-it-yourself, it begins to appear as if it were many things to many people. The differences seem more than just individual variations within one fairly well defined category. They seem sufficient to justify a breakdown of do-it-yourself addicts into at least three main groups: the craftsmen-hobbyists, the handymen and the do-it-yourselfers proper. Each group is distinct both in the type of activity and in the kind of motivation we find prevalent. It would take considerably more information than is available to present more than a few tentative

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2 Time, August 2, 1954, pp. 62-68.
3 This Week Magazine, June 3, 1956, p. 12. The article in which the editors of the magazine presented this and other estimates of the number of people involved in various recreational activities, was the first in a series on leisure living.
4 Time, August 2, 1954, p. 62.
suggestions. But even from limited observation some patterns emerge, perhaps of sufficient validity to at least suggest possible relations between do-it-yourself styles on the one hand and character types and social groupings on the other.

Let's take Mr. T. first. He has a responsible managerial position and a comfortable five-figure income. His basement workshop represents an investment of at least $1,400. Power tools for both wood and metalworking are efficiently arranged on separate stands, each with its own motor. His 10-foot-long workbench has well-planned cabinets above and below for storage of tools and supplies. The returns from his investment are quite craftsmanlike (mainly copies of Early American furniture, with homemade hardware), but certainly not justifiable from an economic standpoint. He is the real craftsman-hobbyist, the kind of man for whom a craft is a most absorbing and desirable leisure activity. There have always been such people, and it is quite understandable that the mastery of the necessary skills, the competence required to achieve craftsmanlike results should have had a strong appeal for men whose paramount preoccupation was mastering their physical environment and molding raw materials into finished products. Their avocational interest in a craft was merely another expression of their production-oriented personality. Often there was an even more direct relationship, when skills learned at play were used for work improvement—as still happens with some factory workers, whose hobby is parallel to their job, and whose off-hours tinkering may result in suggestion-box prizes. On the whole, however, our society has shifted the emphasis from production to consumption, and we are much more preoccupied with manipulating people than with manufacturing things. Why then the dramatic postwar boom in home workshops?

Twenty years ago, the pioneering Leisure: A Suburban Study mentioned crafts only briefly in a ten-page section on “Painting, sculpture, and crafts.” The grouping itself is indicative of the place of handicrafts in the society of the thirties. Though the authors say that, “a workbench and a small lathe in the basement of a home is by no means unknown” (today it would

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8This example is based on the author's experiences as do-it-yourself editor of a "home service" magazine. Mr. T., as later on Mr. M. and the L.'s, were selected because they are representative of attitudes and of situations observed frequently, throughout the country, in contacts with people involved in do-it-yourself activities.

be a drill or a saw), one gets the impression that an easel was about as common. Throughout the chapter, the various crafts (woodworking, pottery, basketry, etc.) are discussed pretty much as if they were merely different in form, not in significance, from painting and sculpture and even poetry. "The practical utility of handicrafts has been almost entirely destroyed by the machine," the authors state; "but the avocational and recreational significance of these activities remains and is perhaps destined to increase."7

However incorrect the first statement has proved recently, the last prediction has turned out to be quite accurate. Handicrafts as a hobby—not only woodworking but gardening and hot-rodming and boat-building—have become a favorite leisure pursuit of millions of people. Mr. T. is in very good company. Workshop enthusiasts include business, government and military leaders such as U. S. Steel Vice President David Austin, Dean Acheson, General Curtis LeMay; entertainment figures such as Desi Arnaz, Dick Powell, Edgar Bergen, Fibber McGee, Jane Russell, Perry Como. Watching Ed Murrow's "Person to Person" one is struck by how often his hosts turn out to be, to a greater or lesser extent, do-it-yourself addicts. And workshop hobbies are certainly not a pastime for the very well-off alone. A 1955 study by the Research Department of the Capper Publications found that nearly 60 per cent of Household magazine's 2½ million readers have a workshop.8 Ownership of tools—including some specialized tools such as cement finishing, linoleum and plastering tools was even higher, over 80 per cent. It seems that we could safely assume that a large majority of the readers reporting a home workshop are not just fix-it men, but spend part of their leisure time working on hobby projects in the workshop.

A prerequisite of this widespread interest in craftsmanlike hobbies is of course the increased possibility for leisure, both in terms of more free time and of generally less tiring work. Still, our surplus energy and our short workdays and long week ends could have resulted in different leisure patterns; they allow, but do not account for, the popularity of handicrafts.

In Mr. T's case, the strongest motivation seems to be that of the old-time craftsman—the satisfaction of mastering difficult techniques and shaping hard materials into craftsmanlike objects.9 Also, woodworking or

1Lundberg et al., Leisure: A Suburban Study, p. 280.
3A noted sociologist, who has contributed much to the study of contemporary man and of his work and play patterns, is himself a perfect example of this striving after perfection in do-it-yourself. In his case, it was car painting. It started as a disgusted answer to body-shop sloppiness. It progressed, week end after week end, through many trials and not a few errors. The result? In a letter to the author, he described it thus: "I can now honestly say my car has one of the finest paint jobs in the country. It happens to be a 1949 Buick which is probably worth all of $300 in the used-car
growing provides a readily accessible physical release after a day spent at one’s desk, behind a counter, at the assembly line. And for people like Mr. T., the basically inner-directed persons who carry on the tradition of craftsmanlike hobbies, another consideration may be relevant. Such activities offer a “purposeful” way to employ leisure time, freeing people of guilt feelings about their abundant leisure. Like frantically “broadening” vacation trips and compulsive cultural appreciation, craftsmanlike hobbies resemble work closely enough to avoid the stigma attached by the Puritan conscience to leisurely laziness and sheer enjoyment of one’s own living.

In some cases, the withdrawal to a workshop indicates, as David Riesman points out, “an unconscious or barely conscious desire to run away from the problems set up in the play worlds of taste exchanging and criticism.”

This kind of escape may be dictated by an incapacity to deal with such problems, and provide a plausible excuse for not facing them and attempting to work out a satisfactory adjustment. If so, it is probably an obstacle to a well-integrated personality development. But we feel that for many people it is good to find respite from constant “interpersonalizing” and get a chance to deal, more or less creatively, with things—rather than to spend every hour of their time, at work and at play, practicing psychic ping-pong with people.

This business of dealing with things, of creating something, is obviously a very important aspect of craftsmanship, and of the do-it-yourself trend as a whole. A 1954 *Time* cover story found in it one of the main motivations for do-it-yourself. For people involved in today’s huge, anonymous processes of production and distribution, the article said, “it is hard to see what they are really accomplishing. But in his home workshop, anyone from president down to file clerk can take satisfaction from the fine table, chair or cabinet taking shape under his own hands... and bulge with pride again as he shows it off to friends.”

We should perhaps pause, at this point, and take a closer look at what these people are making in their workshops—president or file clerk—and just how that fine table or cabinet is “taking shape” under their hands. It’s easy to get carried away and think of millions of people creating like craftsmen of old, getting a pile of fine lumber and through their ingenuity and skill producing beautiful objects. But let’s not forget the kits, the market, and in materials and time I spent the equivalent of $800 to $1000. From any rational viewpoint, in short, it was a silly thing to do. Yet I got a tremendous charge out of it, as I felt I was coming closer and closer to some sort of perfection—the kind impossible in the more normal pursuits of life.”


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iron-on woodworking patterns, the detailed how-to instructions in books and magazines and newspaper columns, the ever-easier products and tools that commercial initiative turns out at an increasing rate, and that eliminate the need for long practice and the learning of complicated skills. Mr. T. would not dream of assembling a piece of furniture from a kit, but the great majority of today's craftsmen-hobbyists rely heavily on all kinds of do-it-yourself aids in their workshop projects.

This evolution of craft-hobbyism has brought about a significant change in the attitudes of its practitioners. For the oldtime craftsman, as for Mr. T., the greatest source of satisfaction is in doing. In Time's words, it stems "from the fine table, chair or cabinet taking shape under his own hands." But for today's average craftsman-hobbyist, the main object seems to be to have done. Kit assembly is the extreme example of this. And certainly putting bolt A through hole B and fastening with nut C, as per instructions, leaves little room for pride in the process. What counts most here, we feel, is the satisfaction of having built something, and being able to show it off to friends. This doesn't mean that the craftsman-hobbyist does not enjoy working with things—he does—but it suggests a different motivation for his activities than the mastery of the techniques of woodworking or boat-building. He engages in his craft partly as a pleasurable pursuit in its own right but perhaps even more as a means to taste competence as an asset to exploit in his relationship with other members of his group. A pretty good indication of this can be found in the innumerable groups organized to bring together fellow craftsmen, such as the Men's Garden Clubs. Trading information and practical know-how is an important function of these groups. But even more important, even if not often acknowledged, is the trading of connoisseurship that the meetings make possible.

In The Lonely Crowd, Riesman contrasted "the taste-exchanging use of leisure with craftsmanlike use of leisure," describing the contrast as "one between two worlds and two character types." This holds true for Mr. T., and there may be quite a few like him, as strongly inner-directed people turn to craftsmanship to find a welcome relief from an increasingly personalizing environment. But on the basis of our experience in the how-to field, and the booming sales of anything that promises easy do-it-yourself results in a hurry, we think they are exceptions. For most Garden Club members, and members of do-it-yourself groups, and for all the people who assemble authentic Colonial furniture from kits and order iron-on patterns to make a cutting board—craftsmanship has a different meaning. The attention has shifted from materials and techniques to the finished

12David Riesman, The Lonely Crowd, p. 357.
product. And concentrating on getting bigger and better roses than one's neighbor grows is not so very different from competitive sun-tanning at the beach, or comparing notes on how one dines and wines.

Mr. M. is a very different case. He is an older man, with a routine office job, and a house that looks as if it had been furnished right after his marriage 20 or 30 years ago, and never a change since. Apparently, he has not built a piece of furniture or grown roses in his whole life. He doesn't have a workshop, and keeps his few tools helter-skelter in a corner of his garage. But he has fixed leaks in the roof, poured a concrete walk from house to driveway, puttered with the plumbing when something went wrong, patched this or that as the need arose. He is the typical handyman, the fix-it man. There have always been people like him who took care of most repairs around the house, without any inclination to build furniture or to tackle ambitious and, to them, marginal projects such as a pool or a patio. With the postwar housing boom and shortage of skilled workmen, coupled with rising labor rates, millions have joined the ranks of part-time handymen.

Fairly reliable evidence of this widespread interest can be found (aside from just spending an hour or two in a hardware store and watching the customers) in the large percentage and consistently high readership of straight home maintenance articles in such magazines as Better Homes and Gardens and Household, the two most down-to-earth home service magazines, with over 4½ and 2½ million reader families respectively. Through these growing numbers of handymen our country seems to be finding an answer to the problem of mass-producing services in the field of home maintenance. Modern appliances have pretty much done away with the maid. Repair kits, easy-to-use and readily available supplies and tools may well make the plumber, the painter and the carpenter nearly obsolete except as part of the building industry.

This radical change in the economy of the home is bound to affect the patterns of life at home. It will channel part of the handyman's leisure time into home maintenance activities and thus influence the family's recreation patterns. It may sometimes tend to draw man and wife and children into a closer partnership through work done together. But the most significant development takes place when handymen stop drawing the line at "essential" repairs, as Mr. M. does, and gradually widen their spheres of activities. Handymen such as Mr. M. can still be found at the lower end of the socio-economic scale and among people for whom the inner-directed virtues of thrift and economic self-reliance remain strong, vital motivations. The great majority of the new, postwar handymen, however, seem of a different breed. After finding that they can use ham-
mer and saw to fix a screen, they will put up some shelves for storing assorted junk in the basement, then build a table for the kids—and perhaps tackle next a major kitchen remodeling job or add a family room. More likely than not, their wives play an active part in giving their activities this less strictly utilitarian bent, urged on by those most enthusiastic avocational counselors of do-it-yourself, the home service magazines. What we find then is not the now atypical Mr. M., the fix-it man who has always been with us. We have instead a do-it-yourself man (oftener, a do-it-yourself couple), ready to tackle almost any project thought to enhance living comfort and the looks of the home. In this process, purely economic considerations lose their paramount importance, and cultural values come to exert a significant influence on the direction of do-it-yourself activities.

Let's look now at the third group, the do-it-yourselfers. They have no immediately apparent ancestor—such as the old-time craftsman and the fix-it man were to the other two groups. They are usually fairly young, with an income from average to slightly better than average. And though the husband’s and wife’s contributions will vary, they usually work as a couple. The L.’s are a good example. They are in the late twenties, college graduates, with two children. Their income barely reaches the $5,000 to $7,500 bracket, and it is geared to what William H. Whyte called budgetism, the “smooth, almost hypnotic rhythm” of regular, unvarying monthly payments. After the “fixed” expenses—house and car payments, food, nursery school, payments on their new automatic washer and TV set (next it will probably be a dryer)—and the usual incidental expenses such as doctor bills, recreation, etc., there is not quite enough left over for expensive furnishings and home improvements. So the L.’s have built a dining table and benches from some oak planks they found in their parents’ attic, they have refinished a few pieces of second-hand furniture and they are now spending part of his vacation painting their house. Do-it-yourself is a way to get around budget limitations and to furnish and decorate their house as the home service magazines say it should be. They are the audience Living for Young Homemakers is edited for—and as a matter of fact, the L’s do subscribe to Living.

On the surface, the motive is purely economic. The L’s do some of it themselves because they can’t afford to add more payments for all the expensive furniture their taste requires, and because their monthly budget won’t easily stretch to include a contractor’s paint job. Yet, these are the kind of people who are “so unconcerned with total cost or interest rates that they provide a veritable syllabus of ways to make two dollars do the

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work of one." It is not old-time thrift nor pioneer, necessity-born enterprise that impels them to do it themselves. "They are acquisitive, yes, but" as Whyte puts it, "for the good life." Do-it-yourself is not a means to save money, but to upgrade their living standards, to afford more of the luxuries their peer group sets up as necessities of life.

An interesting recent development along this line was discussed in the advertising and marketing magazine Tide. The article noted that "some appliance makers are pushing a . . . controversial technique for breaking through the distribution and price barrier to the sale of packaged kitchen, air conditioning and heating: capitalizing on the burgeoning do-it-yourself trend." After listing a number of specific industry promotions by some of the major companies, Tide's comment was that, "appliances you can install yourself may help unlock the distribution blocks in major appliance marketing." Here again, as we noted earlier in the field of home repairs, do-it-yourself provides a means to mass-produce services in the home and to help American industry distribute more efficiently and reach more people. Our economy is gearing itself to it in so many and so permanent ways that it doesn't seem justified to expect that an economic downturn and the resulting labor surplus would mean the end of the do-it-yourself boom, as some have predicted.

From all we have been saying, do-it-yourself appears as the domestic answer to some important needs of our economy of plenty. It is not, though at first glance it may seem so, a return to artisan production. It has developed rather, in a spontaneous, haphazard way, as a mechanism of distribution of goods and of "canned" services in the home. As such, it is another result of the shift from a production-oriented to a consumption-oriented culture. Some people might stress its utilitarian aspect of keeping the house in good working order, others its hobby aspect. But a close look at today's craftsmen-hobbyists and handymen show that even for the great majority of them do-it-yourself is essentially a means of taste-exchanging consumership.

We have come a long way from our opening suggestion that do-it-yourself might be a sort of contemporary Walden. In fact, stressing the importance of the group in giving it direction, we have seen it predominantly as a social phenomenon focusing on relationships among people, not between the craftsman and his materials. It would thus be in opposition to Thoreau's withdrawal from society and emphasis on the individual. And yet, there are

34William H. Whyte, "Budgetism: Opiate of the Middle Class," Fortune, May, 1956, pp. 133 ff. This article gives an excellent portrayal of the economics of today's young middle-class couple.


36Tide, July 22, 1956, pp. 34-35.
important points of contact, if we keep in mind that Thoreau was a nineteenth-century New England thinker and the millions engaged in do-it-yourself are contemporary, average Americans.

For one thing, do-it-yourself is an obvious symptom of a widespread craving for individuality, for the "custom," even if it does usually rely on mass-produced components and seldom goes beyond seeking a variation within the accepted group standards. This is not the individualism of "Civil Disobedience," but it is perhaps a healthy sign that we too often overlook. There is certainly much that is spurious and fake about do-it-yourself creativity—the paint-yourself-a-picture-by-numbers kits are but one horrible example. Yet, aren't we rather snobbish if we spurn the pie baked from a mix (if it's good, and it can be), simply because the lady didn't start from scratch as her grandmother used to do? Actually, mass-produced tools and products that are easier to use do not increase conformity, but put diversification within reach of more people. And because they make it easier to produce craftsmanlike results than it is to play good tennis or to speak authoritatively of vintages, they afford people a better chance for that taste competence which lets them stand on their own feet and strengthens their feeling of individual identity within their group.

There is another way in which do-it-yourself helps individual realization, and that is through the confrontation with things—specific and concrete things. In an essay on "Freud and the Crisis of our Culture," Lionel Trilling remarked "how open and available to the general culture the individual has become," and how, in this light, "we may think of Freud's emphasis on biology as being a liberating idea. It is a resistance to and a modification of the cultural omnipotence." We may be stretching his meaning here, but we feel that something of the same sort happens when one is confronted with wood and nuts and bolts. "Getting close to the soil" is a romantic ideal, yet it perhaps makes some sense. In our abstract, too verbal society we may not be materialistic enough. The hard touch of the things we do ourselves may be a needed corrective; they help us define our selves at least at a simple, biological level. Thoreau's fascination with sounds and sights and smells and things he touched had some of this quality, was in a way a search for an elementary touchstone as to what was real to men.

One final consideration, which is closely connected to what we just said, has to do with the relation of do-it-yourself to society as a whole. Eric Larrabee commented a few years back in Harper's that, "while the thoughtful commentators of the world of better letters were exercising themselves about the apathy of their audience, the audience was out in

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the garage building bookcases . . . . In apathy was their defense, in non-participation was their independence.” These people pay their taxes, and they are certainly far from articulate about their philosophy of government. Yet they may share the outlook of the author of “Civil Disobedience” to a much greater extent than they are given credit for. They are busy in their gardens, in their workshops, painting their houses. Their refusal to get involved—however frustrating to political activists and impatient liberals—may be a healthy protest against society’s ever increasing demands for participation. Their do-it-yourself activities, as we have suggested, are largely in function of a group. But this is participation of a different kind. It is active, it is specific, it equips each of them to feel individually more competent, and thus helps them assert personal identity. And it is at the same time a healthy withdrawal from that other world which keeps making inordinate—and vague—emotional demands on them. In workshops or gardens, do-it-yourself may be just as close as millions of Americans can get today to a personal Walden.