

# The DIY Principle in Home Improvement: Background, Motivation and Benefits

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**ABSTRACT:** Producing objects for one's own consumption is a major strand in the historical development of material culture. Making things with one's own hands can be considered a natural means to satisfy human needs. In the present time, this form of production is covered by the term "do-it-yourself" (DIY). DIY has become a global social phenomenon, especially thanks to the opportunities enabled by the Internet. Websites provide a lively forum for discussion, sharing ideas, how-to guides, and galleries of the results of DIY projects. The present work addresses home improvement DIY projects carried out by individuals in Slovakia. The aim is to outline the background, motivation and inspiration of so called do-it-yourselfers, the DIY process and participants' evaluation of their work. DIY is generally considered to be an activity for amateurs, which is to say people who engage in the activity in their free time, as opposed to professionals, who perform such activity as their job or to earn a living. Moreover, the paper also partly focuses on the relationship between amateurs and professionals which has shown to be the basic principle of current DIY home improvements. One of significant findings of the research showed that the individual experience of craftsmanship or craftwork and the individual need for self-expression appear to be important parts of the DIY experience. Research findings contribute to a better understanding of DIY production in the context of design as an academic discipline. The main research method used was a questionnaire titled "DIY home improvement", which was drawn up on the model of prior research abroad.

### KEYWORDS:

DIY, home improvement, motivation, benefits, design, craftwork, self-expression, self-realisation

## A VERY BRIEF HISTORY

Making objects for one's own consumption, including a construction or upgrade of a dwelling, is both the oldest and most basic way in which individuals have historically provided for their needs. In the territory of the present-day Slovakia, such activities were referred to as folk handicraft or popular production [1] or home manufacture [2]. In the historical context, Toran characterises the people who engaged in such production as subjects of lords who created their own dwellings and the necessary furnishings. "...The person who manufactured the product was usually both its single producer and consumer. Such producers of items thus had perfect knowledge of their own needs while also being intimately familiar with the available raw materials". [3]

After the industrial revolution, the practice of producing objects for the maker's own consumption became known as "do-it-yourself" (DIY) and the phenomenon was regarded as a form of leisure to be pursued in one's free time. [4] Since the 1950s,

"Do-it-yourself" has become a mass phenomenon, especially for people making improvements to their own dwellings [5], and not just in the Western countries with market economies. In the socialist Czechoslovakia it was closely associated with the figure of a handyman, especially in the "Normalisation" years of the 1970s and 1980s. [6] At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, DIY underwent another worldwide boom thanks to the communication opportunities offered by the internet. There is almost no area of daily life and material culture that has not been affected by this phenomenon. [7]

## QUESTIONNAIRE

The "DIY home improvement" questionnaire was specifically designed for a population of individuals who had already completed a DIY project in their own home. Respondents were recruited through the selected Slovak-language groups on Facebook: "Stavba domu, interiér, záhrada, chalupa, domácnosť" (House, interior, garden, chalet, household construction), "Urob si sám" (Do-it-yourself), "Stavba svojpomocne"

(Build-it-yourself) and other groups: “Škola a internát” (School and dormitory; a private Facebook group for tenants of the Nová Cvernovka studios) and “Ústav interiéru a výstavnictva” (Institute of Interior and Exhibition Design). The questionnaire was created in Google Docs and was completed by 120 respondents. The design of the questionnaire was partly based on prior research in this area, especially a similar survey undertaken in the USA by Wolf and McQuitty: “Understanding the do-it-yourself consumer: DIY motivations and outcomes”. [8] These authors describe DIY as an important and increasingly popular form of consumer behaviour about which relatively little is known. The authors of the study focused on the motivation and outcomes of DIY activity and carried out their survey through depth interviews with respondents who had implemented home construction and remodelling projects on a DIY basis. The authors present their results in a scheme where the factors that motivate DIYers are divided into two groups: “marketplace evaluation” and “identity enhancement”. The first group includes external reasons for a DIY approach: the lack of product availability, lack of product quality, economic benefits and the need for customisation. The second group includes internal motivators such as the fulfilment of craftsmanship, empowerment, community seeking and the need for uniqueness. On this basis they define the outcomes of DIY behaviours as a sense of accomplishment, control and enjoyment.

**DIY IN THE CREATION OF A DWELLING**

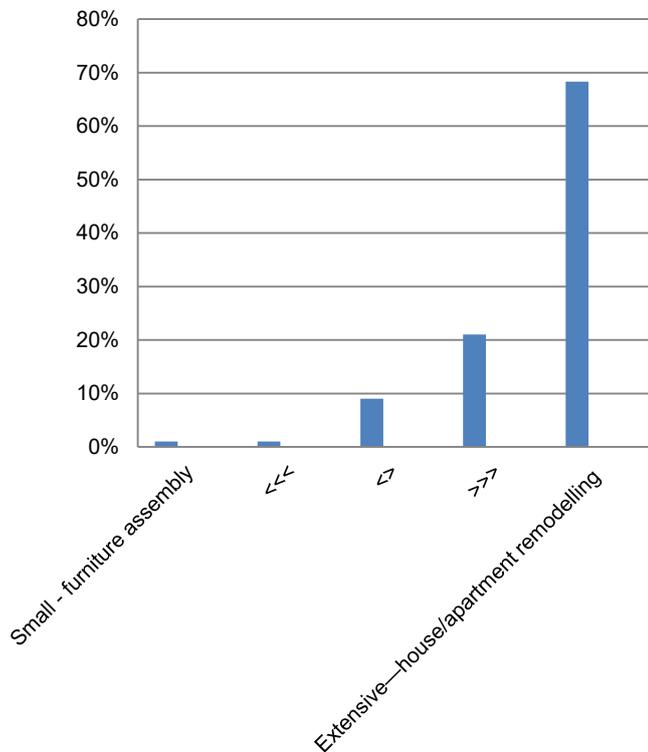


Chart 1: “Imagine one of your own previous home improvement projects. How would you characterise it?”  
Source: Andrea Ďurianová

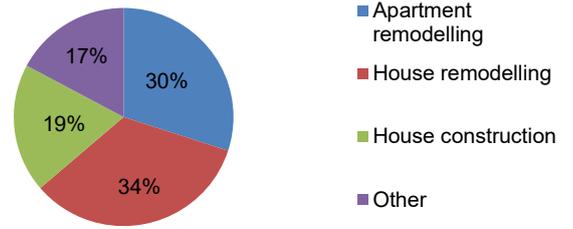


Chart 2: “What kind of project was it?”  
Source: Andrea Ďurianová

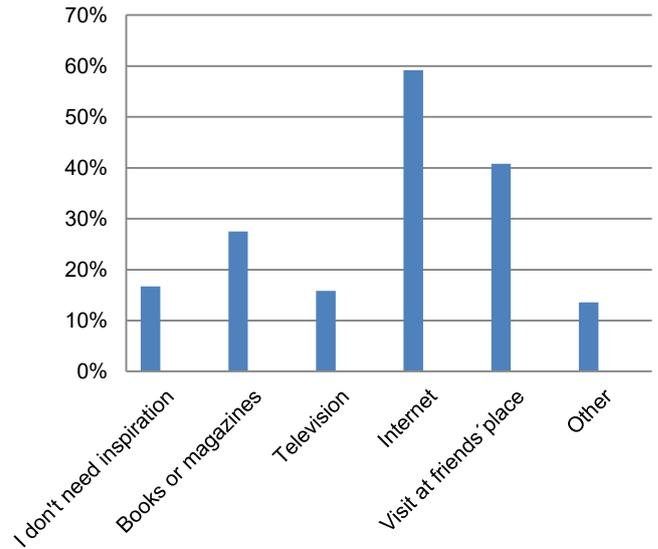


Chart 3: “What inspired your vision for the DIY project?”  
Source: Andrea Ďurianová

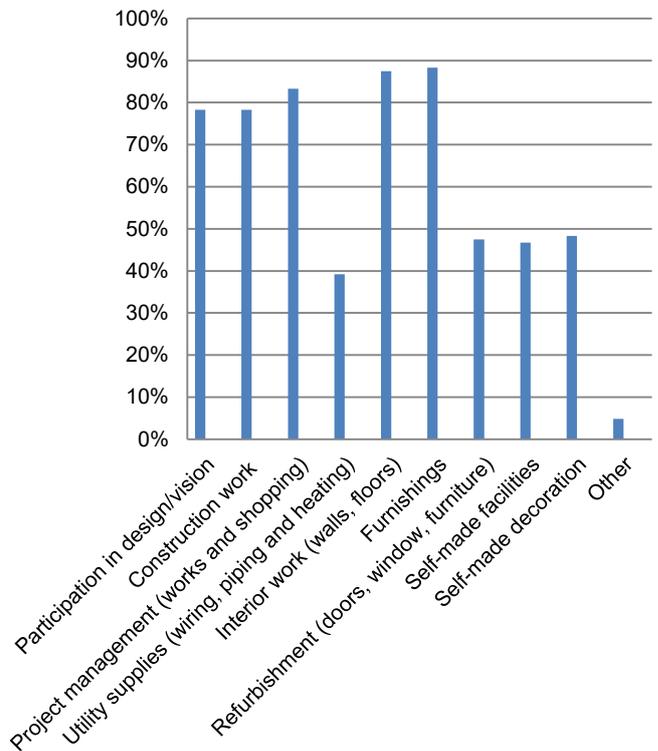


Chart 4: “Which parts of the project in your apartment or house did you undertake yourself?”  
Source: Andrea Ďurianová

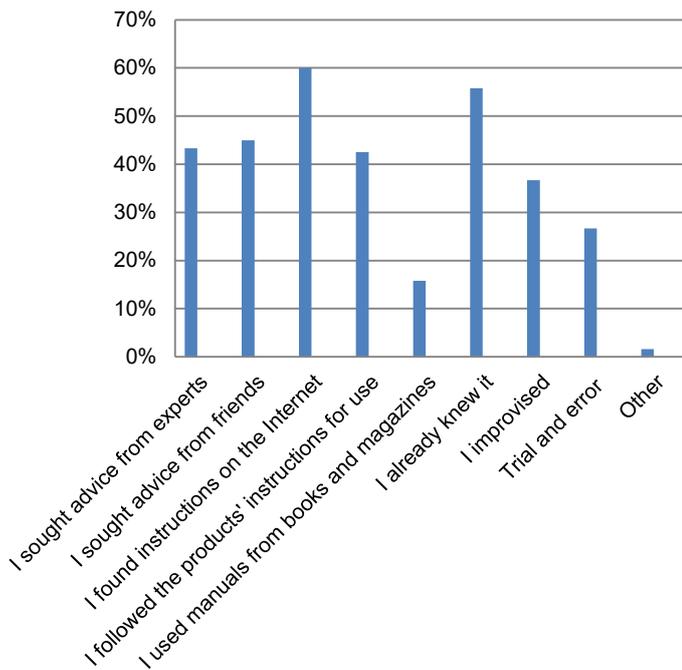


Chart 5: "How did you find what method to use?"  
Source: Andrea Ďurianová

Taking a DIY approach to the construction or remodelling of a dwelling while complying with current standards is a complex task involving a wide range of activities, which also requires different levels of competence and expertise. The level of DIY activity that is authorised, especially in larger-scale projects such as construction or remodelling is defined in the Building Act [9], which stipulates that such work must be performed under professional supervision. DIY activities may account for different proportions of work on individuals' home improvement projects and range across a variety of professions and sets of skills. Most of the DIYers who took part in this research describe their projects as extensive—their focus was either on the construction of a house or on the remodelling of a house or flat.

Our research also investigated the sources of inspiration for DIYers. Both professional and amateur creators produce ideas, visions and designs based on things they have seen before, though they add their own modifications, adaptations and improvements. Such an approach has much in common with Michl's definition of design: "every new thing that appears in the world of manufactured objects is based on an object that already exists and every technological system develops from previous systems just as every new artefact stems from of previous artefacts". [10] Contemporary DIYers owe much of their inspiration to the accessibility of information on the internet and the range of goods and material on the market. Almost sixty per cent of respondents found ideas for their own project on the Internet and the same percentage reported using the Internet to research how to implement their designs. When asked about the source of their working materials, 90% of respondents stated they purchased it from building material suppliers or a hobby market. The most frequently reported types of specific DIY activities were interior furnishing and interior work (modification of floors and ceilings), building work and organisation and management of work.

## AMATEUR AND PROFESSIONAL

DIY is generally considered to be an activity for amateurs, which is to say people who engage in the activity in their free time, as opposed to professionals, who perform such activity as their job or to earn a living. In the past there were much sharper differences between professionals and amateurs, mainly because of the technological sophistication of their tools and procedures. Nowadays, amateurs have easy access to more advanced technologies and methods of implementation—they can purchase "professional" tools or technology and the Internet provides a wide variety of instructional guides. Although access to tools, materials and methods cannot guarantee the quality of implementation, they at least make it possible for DIYers to perform on the same level as professionals. According to Atkinson, this could lead to the complete elimination of the dividing line between professionals and amateurs. [11]

Our research shows that current DIY activity in homes combines the work of DIYers with that of specialists or construction firms to varying degrees. A relatively high percentage of questionnaire respondents (36.7%) had implemented more than 80% of the work on their project with their own hands. It should also be noted that over 40% consulted their method with experts. On the other hand, 40% of respondents stated that they undertook the work themselves because they thought they would do it better than professionals. This may reflect the insufficient quality and availability of professional work on the Slovak market. There is a shortage of high-quality craftworkers and growing demand, which leads to a rise in prices and creates opportunities for workers with less than adequate qualifications and practice. Negative experience with professionals providing work of inferior quality can discourage individuals from cooperating with them in the future.

What is more, the DIYers who responded to the questionnaire appeared to have relatively strong skills and experience. This is reflected in the relatively high percentage of project tasks that they completed themselves and the wide spectrum of activities that they engaged in, including specialised jobs such as work with utility supplies (electric wiring, water piping and heating). Although we have no means to measure the quality of the DIY projects undertaken by the respondents, they themselves rate them as being almost excellent. As many as 60% of them claimed that DIY came naturally to them and over 90% stated that they would engage in DIY again in the future.

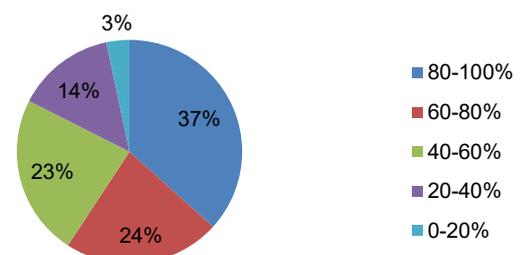


Chart 6: "If you cooperated with professional craftworkers or companies in your project, what percentage of the project would you estimate was your own work?"  
Source: Andrea Ďurianová

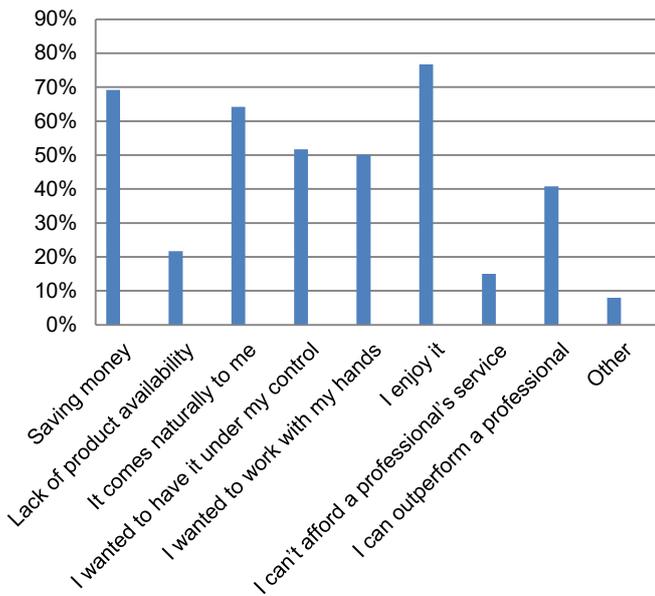


Chart 7: "What were your reasons for choosing DIY?"  
Source: Andrea Ďurianová

**INDIVIDUALS' EXPERIENCE OF CRAFTWORK**

The individual experience of craftwork or craftsmanship appears to be an important part of the DIY experience. When respondents were asked about the benefits of DIY, the most frequent response was "good feelings or taking pleasure in craftwork". These positive feelings probably come from the process of creating the home, which engages the individual's whole being. It is a process that brings together mental and physical work in the creation of meaningful and useful objects. Successful implementation of a project can increase individuals' confidence in their own abilities and thus be a source of self-assurance and a positive self-image.

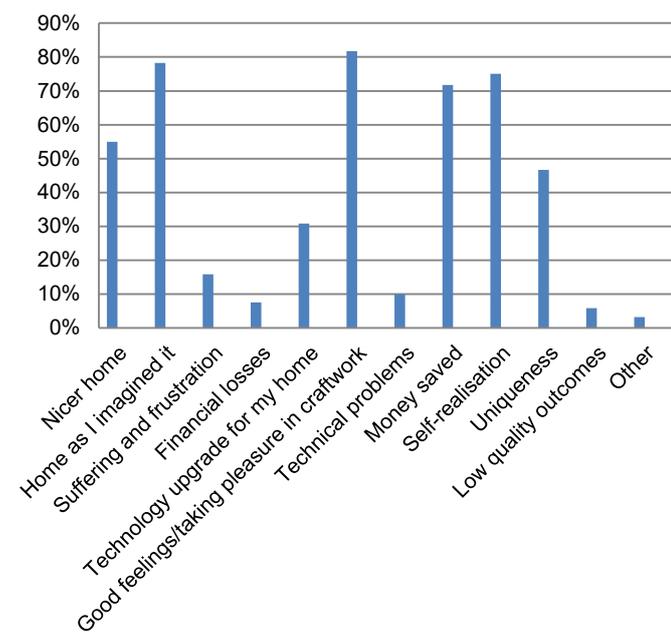


Chart 8: "What was the outcome of this DIY activity for you?"  
Source: Andrea Ďurianová

In the words of so called do-it-yourselfers themselves, a common reason for engaging in DIY is that "they enjoy the process (of making)". Similarly, in our questionnaire, "I enjoy it" was the most frequently chosen answer to the question about the reason for engaging in DIY (76.6%). Although there is no specific definition of this term or phrase, it is reasonable to expect that it means more than just "fun". The claim "I enjoy it" can extend into the area of interest, taking pleasure in the activity and above all the development of one's own abilities and skills. The expression might even point to the mental states covered by Mihaly Csikszentmihályi's theory of "flow", which is described as the optimal psychological experience of a particular activity. [12]

**DIY AS A MEANS FOR INDIVIDUALS' SELF-EXPRESSION**

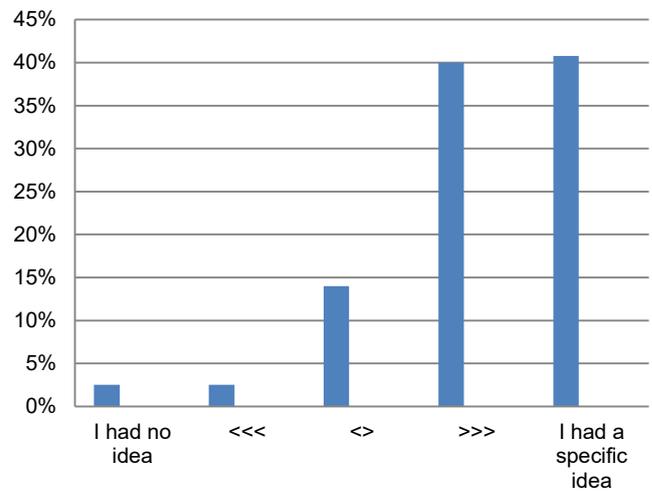


Chart 9: "Before you started, did you have a specific idea of what the finished project would be like?"  
Source: Andrea Ďurianová

According to Soňa G. Lutherová, the way in which we provide for our home or housing is a "process related to our understanding of ourselves—what we have speaks not just about who we are but also about who we would like to be". [13] DIY work on a dwelling thus becomes a significant means for expressing DIYers' vision of their "dream home" balanced against the financial resources available to them, and the individuals' craft skills and abilities. The respondents who completed the questionnaire stated that before starting their DIY project, they already had a relatively detailed concept of their future home ready. This could take various forms—from an architect's design or DIYer's own sketch up to a more abstract concept existing only "in their head". At the same time, the vast majority of them (78.3%) mentioned "making their home as they imagined it" was a benefit of the DIY project. The need for self-expression or self-presentation in home is often expressed through phrases such as "having things your own way" or "having things as you imagined them" and need not refer exclusively to a DIY approach. Nevertheless, there are grounds to believe that DIY strengthens the relationship between the DIYer and their dwelling. Many DIY projects leave a strong imprint in the DIYers' memories reinforced by their physical and emotional experiences.

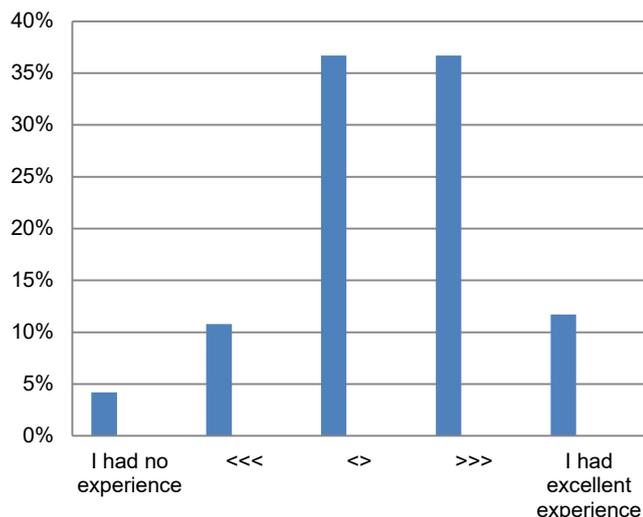


Chart 10: "What experience of craftwork did you have before this project?"  
Source: Andrea Ďurianová

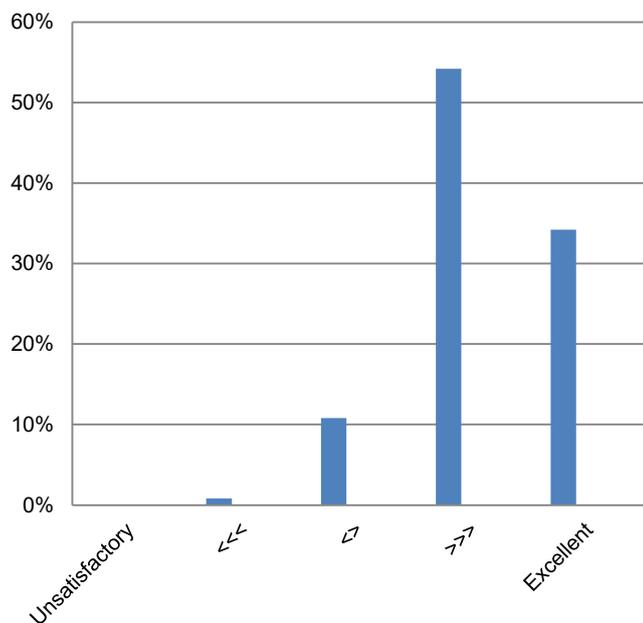


Chart 11: "How would you evaluate the results of your efforts?"  
Source: Andrea Ďurianová

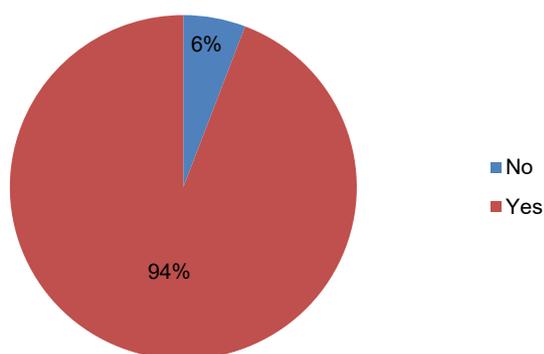


Chart 12: "Will you engage in DIY activities again?"  
Source: Andrea Ďurianová

## CONCLUSION

The research population was so called do-it-yourselfers who had already carried out a DIY home improvement project that was extensive in scale according to their own subjective assessment. The most common projects were the apartment or house remodelling or construction of a house. The DIYers appear to have relatively strong skills and experience in the relevant crafts. They evaluate the benefits of DIY as greatly outweighing any disadvantages and they expressed high satisfaction with their own work. Research has shown home improvement DIY is a relatively complex process which includes developing a concept of the future state of the dwelling, design preparations and carrying out the work involving varying degrees of cooperation with experts and firms. The Internet was found to be the most important source of inspiration and practical guides. A significant finding of the survey relates to the respondents' evaluation of their motivation and benefits. Besides saving money, DIYers often speak about values related to subjective experience (the pleasure of craftwork or craftsmanship), self-improvement, self-realisation and self-expression (having a home as they imagined it).

Although these findings need to be tested and investigated in more detail, the fields of design and the applied arts should not overlook the benefits that individuals derive from engaging in DIY projects. End-user participation in the design process has been a subject of discussion for a long time and the DIY principle has received some attention in the work of professional designers. It should be part of the mission of design to initiate and intensify the dialogue between professionals and amateurs and to offer sustainable strategies for DIY projects. Producing objects for one's own consumption is not just a kind of passing modern fashion but a relevant current strand of material culture and above all a human privilege.

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