Constructing at Home: Understanding the Experience of the Amateur Maker

Andrew Jackson

ABSTRACT  This study aims to further contribute to the growing body of knowledge about amateur designing and making by generating a deeper understanding of the intrinsic rewards associated with these activities. The study uses a methodology that is built around the tradition of case study based qualitative research, and the use of long, semi-structured depth interviews, site visits and photography. Drawing upon the fieldwork, the analysis identifies the structuring concepts of “investment,” “the project,” “the experience of the moment,” and “the materiality of making” – all of which are found to work in combination to generate powerful motivational forces for amateur makers.

KEYWORDS: amateur, craft, do-it-yourself, home, making, motivation, workshop.
**Introduction**

This research is about the experience of people who make things at home. Amateur makers – who exist outside the public realm of the professions, often working in private, domestic spaces – frequently escape the scrutiny of those interested in understanding the nature of design activity. Falling between categories, they make uneasy subject matter. They carry out work-like activity as a form of leisure, and they are simultaneously both consumers and producers, occasionally even being referred to by the portmanteau noun “prosumers” (Toffler 1981). Although operating within the boundaries of craft and design, their work is seldom legitimated by the attention of the academy, or inclusion in the exhibitions or publications that sustain the discourse of these fields. Those disciplines with a less squeamish understanding of their subject matter – sociology, anthropology and cultural studies, for example – have been quicker to register an interest in these forms of home production, while in less inclusive arenas the phenomenon has historically been the object of disdain.¹

This study aims to overcome these prejudices by utilizing methods associated with the social sciences – fieldwork, case studies and ethnography – in order to reach a deeper understanding of amateur making, and to make visible that which is frequently overlooked.

**Why Make Things at Home?**

This study aims to further contribute to the growing body of knowledge about amateur designing and making by generating a deeper understanding of the intrinsic rewards associated with these activities. Rather than focusing on results and outcomes, the research sets out to ask questions about the experience of making, questioning how we can better the motivations of people voluntarily embarking on sustained “careers” as makers outside of, and in addition to, their conventionally paid work.

One of the participants in this study is Greg, who makes wooden sea kayaks in his spare time.² Each canoe takes around three months to complete, and is crafted from hardwood strips and “two-pack” polyester resins (Figure 1). Made to his own design, these objects are sophisticated high-performance sports craft, built to a standard higher than that achieved by most professional boatbuilders. But why does Greg build these canoes? He earns his living by being a general carpenter and odd-job man. Although a keen canoeist himself, Greg doesn’t keep his kayaks for his own use – in fact he is anxious to see them leave his small workshop so that he can free up the space required to start the next project. Although he sells his canoes, it is very difficult for him to recover the costs incurred during the making process, and impossible to truly recompense for his labor time. As Greg puts it, “I spend my spare time working for the minimum wage.” Greg is one of a number of amateur makers who are deeply involved in activities that require much time, effort, and skill, yet produce little or no financial or status compensation.
In order to understand the incentives for this kind of activity it is necessary to consider rewards and motivations that may not be defined as rational, utilitarian, or social; this article represents part of a larger research project carried out in England between 2006 and 2009 that investigates the nature of these rewards. Thus I review the published work in the area, noting the difficulties associated with defining the field of study, and identifying gaps in the existing research. I give an account of the methodology used, which is built around the tradition of case-study based qualitative research, and the use of long, semi-structured depth interviews, site visits, and photography. I follow this with a description and analysis of the fieldwork and, finally, working within the conventions of inductive analysis, interpret the data by using the concepts of investment, the project, the experience of the moment, and the materiality of making – all of which are found to work in combination to generate powerful motivational forces for amateur makers.

Classifying Amateur Making
Most often, within the English-speaking world, amateur making is discussed under the rubric of do-it-yourself, or DIY. The breadth of activity implied by this term, combined with the disparate disciplinary location of the research, has led to a range of literature that is fragmented and decentered. This review focuses on research that has originated primarily in Britain and the United States, with some references to sources from Australia, and aims to illustrate the varying perspectives on the subject in these regions. Judy Attfield acknowledged that “DIY is an aspect often mentioned in passing, but still not accorded much attention by design historians” (2000: 73), while Paul Atkinson (2006) believes that one of the reasons that DIY has rarely been examined in published studies is the problem of definition. Because the term DIY means different things to different people, there is uncertainty about where it should sit in relation to the discourses of art, design, and craft.
Conventionally, the term DIY signifies a form of home maintenance and improvement activity (Clarke 2001; Dent 1997; Goldstein 1998; Jackson 2006; Melchionne 1999; Miller 2001a; Shove et al. 2007). In other words, it popularly relates to the carrying-out of tasks normally associated with the building trade and professional decorators, by amateurs in their own home, and in their own time. At one extreme the term DIY can be used to describe the most prosaic of maintenance activity – applying a coat of paint to a wall, or putting up basic shelving – while at the other it refers to the design and self-building of complete houses and extensions (Brown 2007, 2008; Samuel 2008).

Within the history of design, studies tend to fall into one of two dominant strands – either hobbies and home handicrafts, or do-it-yourself. The former have focused on examinations of amateur needlecrafts, frequently in relation to issues of gender and status (Edwards 2006; Gelber 1999; Parker 1986; Turney 2004). Jo Turney notes how within the discussion of domestic needlecrafts “the emphasis is on understanding the making process and objects as ‘women’s art,’ an extension and symptom of a patriarchal society” (2004: 268). Steven Gelber, one of the few historians to explicitly address the issue of gender in relation to do-it-yourself, draws a gendered distinction between these home handicrafts and the forms of DIY associated with household maintenance, including the construction of artifacts using resistant materials. In his research into the growth of DIY in early twentieth-century America, Gelber identifies what he terms the half pound rule: “That is, women did not use any tool weighing more than a half-pound while men by and large avoided most tools weighing less, although larger paint brushes sometimes occupied a degendered middle ground” (1997: 70). Gelber finds that DIY and home improvements allowed men to actively participate in family activities while retaining spatial and functional autonomy. Household repairs and maintenance allowed men to stay at home without feeling emasculated. They replicated and reinforced work values and gave a sense of psychological fulfillment. Because jobs around the house had an economic value attached to them, they also carried the legitimacy of masculine skilled labor. Although issues of gender clearly play a role in the ways in which the meanings of these activities are constructed for the participants in this study, this article concentrates on those findings which help us to conceptualize aspects of the making experience which were common across all the makers in the study.

The Material and Social Interactions of Everyday Life
The potential insights into the material and social interactions of everyday life offered by studies of this area have encouraged interest from anthropologists (Miller 2001b) sociologists (Dant 1999; Moorhouse 1991; Shove and Watson 2008; Stebbins 1992) and design historians (Atkinson 2006; Attfield 2000; Edwards 2006;
In their discussion of the incentives for carrying out this range of activities, these studies have tended to focus either on utilitarian and economic motives (such as the saving of money and increasing the value of one’s house), the identity-forming qualities of the activity, or the representational and symbolic qualities of the outcomes. In this sense the work tends to be united by a concern with the results of the activity rather than by examination of the processes associated with amateur making. The work of Elizabeth Shove and Matthew Watson (2008) redresses this balance somewhat by introducing the idea of practice, and the relationships between the hardware of the activity, the distribution of competence (drawing upon the ideas of Bruno Latour (1993) to explore the agency of nonhuman objects), and new patterns of demand associated with consumer projects.

While acknowledging the contribution the foregoing work has made to our understanding of the subject area, the study described in this article adds to this range of literature in a number of new ways. It draws upon a methodology that allows us to more closely interrogate the actual experience of making than previous approaches have allowed, and it focuses on a more tightly defined group of subjects. In the next section I want to sketch the boundaries of this constituency of subjects.

**Location of Research**

Even though the ethos of the makers chosen for this study springs from the world of DIY described above, they occupy a particular subcategory. They are makers of things, rather than maintainers of dwellings and spaces. They make for pleasure rather than necessity, and their making is rooted in a kind of homegrown inventiveness that some writers are beginning to regard with nostalgia. A manifestation of this amateur creative engagement with the material world is *Make*, a US quarterly magazine, which features contributors who engage in forms of extreme hobbyism (Figure 2). Examples of their ingenuity range from the designing and building of a working roller coaster in a domestic yard, to the making of an alarm clock that wakes the user by frying strips of bacon (Parks 2006). An article from the 2005 issue encourages users to dispense with the Apple operating system contained in their iPod and replace it with a Linux alternative – reducing the functionality of the device, but allowing users to feel that they are able to resist the dictates of a global corporation (Torrone 2005). The *Make* motto “If you can’t open it, you don’t own it” expresses a perception by the editors that these makers are seeking to regain control of the individual agency that is sacrificed when products arrive hermetically sealed and impervious to any creative modification or repair by the end-user.

While at first sight these activities appear to be a kind of design anarchy – circumventing conventional, professional networks of design in order to create personal and private responses to
globalized consumption, Charles Leadbeater (2008) and Robert Stebbins (1992), who take a more generalized view of highly committed amateurs than this study, each claim that these amateur interventions depend on their own unique networks of interaction and communication in order to function. Leadbeater identifies the latent economic power of “Pro-Am tribes” who are able to develop thriving communities based on shared identity rather than locality, while Stebbins, who coins the phrase “serious leisure” to describe the activities of a variety of enthusiastic amateurs, locates what he describes as professional-amateur-public networks.
The levels of seriousness and skill attained by makers who are the subject of my study means that they readily fall into the definitions developed by Stebbins and Leadbeater. However, while these two authors focus on a diverse range of activities, many with a performative component (both include stage performers and sports participants in their accounts), the participants in my study are exclusively makers, and tend to work in a solitary fashion. For them, networks of communication and peer-group approval play only a limited role in their activities. Their accounts, however, do begin to move us beyond the conventional ideas of DIY and home handicrafts, both in terms of the types of project that are undertaken and in the complexity of work required to execute them. The seriousness of their activity and their proximity to professional equivalents marks these makers out as distinct from the dabblers and semi-skilled practitioners of conventional DIY.

**Methodology**

Because the purpose of the study was to arrive at an account of the experience of the makers, an interpretive, qualitative methodology was adopted, based on a case-studies model. Rather than using the probability or random-selection sampling methods associated with a quantitative methodology, the research is based upon a process of purposive sampling, using predefined criteria to select respondents (Silverman 2006: 306). Using the snowball method, the fieldwork began by identifying makers who met the criteria for inclusion in the study. These were people who had set up their own home workshops, and had produced complex artifacts over a number of years, often attaining high levels of skill. They were then asked to recommend others they knew who also meet these criteria. After some preliminary research, those offering the most potential to inform the study were shortlisted, and asked to accommodate site visits, interviews, and photography. The goal was not the representative capture of all possible variations, but to gain a deeper understanding of analyzed cases, and facilitate the development of analytic frames and concepts to be used for further research. These approaches are commonly associated with grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 2008; Glaser and Strauss 1967). Grounded theory has a concern that goes beyond “big” social forces like class, gender, and race, and focuses instead on different variables and sites in social formation and transformation; considering social-structural dimensions in a contextualized grounded way. Rather than claiming single generalizable conclusions, qualitative research of this type is interpretive. It uses a process of analytic induction to generate rich description, and develop theoretical articulations of aspects of experience that are located and specific, and emerge from the study as fieldwork is undertaken. In this sense, the research is influenced by emic understandings of the world, and uses categories drawn
from the respondents themselves in order to make explicit practices and systems that are implicit to the data collected.

The Makers
Eight respondents were selected as case studies for this initial stage of the research project, ranging in age from late 20s to late 60s, with two being women and six men. All were located in South-East England, and had their own workshops or specialized workspaces, most within the confines of their home or garden, with two working in spaces a short distance from their home. The participants in the study were chosen because they shared the following characteristics. They were all making discrete objects that required sustained periods of activity, probably over a period of months or even years, and were using processes and techniques that required tactile skill and encouraged ingenuity. All had continued with their making for at least five years, some for more than forty, and were not liable to be constrained by external timescales or deadlines, with their work taking place at times and in durations decided by them. They all had a source of income (from a job or partner) that was independent of their making activity. In this sense they were amateurs. For these makers the complexity of the tasks undertaken, the extended periods of time necessary in order to bring their projects to completion, and the range of tools and materials involved all necessitated the creation and maintenance of a dedicated workspace. The projects undertaken by the respondents included the making of furniture and canoes, model engineering, and racing-car restoration.

The participants agreed to take part in a semi-structured depth interview of about ninety minutes, as well as showing and discussing with me a range of materials and documents associated with their making. These included technical drawings, scrapbooks of collected material, sketches, and their own photographs. Each respondent also gave me a tour of his or her workspace, showing me completed objects and work in progress. As well as these interviews, the research was set in context with visits to craft fairs and specialist retail outlets, and reviews were carried out of magazines and websites catering to these pastimes. This article gives an account of the data generated by the interviews and visits and, as such, represents one aspect of a larger study.

Understanding Motivation
Over the course of the fieldwork it became clear that, for many of the makers, the possession or use of the final artifact was the least important part of the activity. When asked how he felt about somebody else owning his finished canoes, Greg replied:

To tell you the truth I am quite glad to see the back of them (...) I have worked and worked and I have had my pleasure out of building it and then it’s just sitting here.
Similarly, although it took Brian, another participant in the study, seven years to finish his first piece of model engineering (a miniature traction engine: see Figure 3), he only ran it once. He told me he was “not interested in watching them go. I would like to know it does go, but yes, I have only ever had it going once.”

Although the makers took pride in the outcomes of their work, this privileging of the process of making over the finished object was a recurring theme. There are similarities between these findings and those of Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, who observed a number of painters as part of a study carried out in the early 1970s. Csikszentmihalyi was surprised to find that after a piece was finished the artist would swiftly move on to the next canvas – leaving completed paintings stacked in the corner of the studio, untouched:

> They obviously enjoyed their work immensely, and thought it was the most important thing in the world. Yet it was typical for an artist to lose all interest in the painting he had spent so much time and effort working on as soon as it was finished. (1992 [1988]: 3–4)

Although the promise of a concrete outcome to these creative activities – whether making a painting or building a canoe – is a crucial factor in the structuring of a pursuit, it is clear that in the cases considered the possession of the final artifact tends to be eclipsed by the pleasure and satisfaction gained from the making process.
Using the findings from the fieldwork, I will illustrate how the makers generated these rewards through a series of framing activities that necessitated long-term investment in physical and mental resources, combined with detailed project planning. I will show how the experience of the moment, combined with the materiality of making, offers benefits and rewards that motivate these amateurs to persist with their demanding pursuits.

**Managing Constraints**

For almost all the participants in the study there was a professional equivalent to their amateur activity. Most, however, expressed ambivalence toward the kinds of external constraints and deadlines associated with professional work. Their pursuits generally took place at times decided by themselves and over periods of time that were flexible in duration and organized around other commitments. This is not to say, however, that these kinds of activity did not generate their own, inherent, constraints. These arose from processes that had to be undertaken at a specific time or place (such as the curing of glues or the application of paints and finishes), or exposed the project to the high levels of risk associated with processes that could go wrong (potentially wrecking hours of previous work). Few of the participants in the study, however, were willing to accept external constraints arising from deadlines imposed by the participation in events (such as exhibitions and competitions), or through obligations to co-participants in the field of activity. As Eric (who restores and races classic Formula One racing cars) made clear, the freedom associated with amateur status allows different priorities to be set:

Racing, to me racing is not important [...] I look about three weeks before, four weeks before, look at my work schedule, and look at what I have got, and say to Les [Eric’s racing partner] what are you doing that week? Shall we go? Yes, okay and then I will see if there’s an entry. If there’s no entry I don’t lose sleep over it. I am not one that has got to be racing; my friend is opposite, he just wants to go racing and I am not interested – I like creating.

In spite of this freedom, one of the most consistent characteristics of serious amateurs is their willingness to endure unpleasant situations in order to achieve a higher overall goal. Greg acknowledged that not all aspects of his pursuit were enjoyable:

The worst job is joining it together. That’s horrible. The surf kayak wasn’t so bad but the kayaks are a pain in the ass! [...] Lots of swearing and shouting goes on; it’s horrible. Of course all the time your head is stuck inside the boat and you have to wear respirator equipment you can smell resin and it’s just generally a very unpleasant job. I can’t bear it actually …
Similar sentiments expressed by the other makers in the study seem to indicate that endurance of these uncomfortable experiences is subsumed by the greater goal of the project. Because they are not obliged in a conventional sense to carry on at a task that has become unpleasant, the willingness of the amateur to persevere endows the activity with greater significance.

The makers in these case studies also shared a self-centered attitude toward their activities. They organized their pursuits in a way that required a minimum of social obligations, and maximized the possibility of rewards that were intrinsic to the process itself. These occasions tended to be privately experienced. Brian, the model engineer, describing the use of his milling machine, noted how he preferred to get on quietly by himself:

without looking at other people, and having them tell me I am doing it wrong. [I enjoy] that feeling of calm and peace that descends on you as you enter your own domain. I really like when you are working alone, and you are just peeling metal off like that, a quarter of an inch at a time. That is quite an impressive feeling, I would be quite happy doing that for 8 hours a day.

**The Lasting Private Career**

This privileging of the self extended into the ways that makers made long-term investments into their pursuits. The sense that they were acquiring skills and improving their competences, sometimes over a lifetime, came across powerfully in these encounters. Rather than dabbling and moving on, for these people their activities became a form of personal enrichment, their sense of self developing as they acquired the experiential knowledge associated with the use of tools, techniques, and materials. They maintained careers in their endeavors that lasted many years, with each project identifiable as part of a series of increasingly complex accomplishments, and with a significant amount of effort spent acquiring additional knowledge. Brian explained how he had spent over three years learning AutoCAD as an aid to the making process – and how it became almost as important as making the locomotives themselves. “The strange thing is you draw stuff on here in a very similar fashion to how you make it. I might start with a square block and cut bits off just exactly as I would do with a milling machine and end up with a shape you are looking for.”

As well as acquiring the skills necessary to enable their activities, the makers also accumulated material resources in the form of tools and workspaces. All of the participants in the study had created and maintained a dedicated and specialized workspace. A number of these had been built from scratch, and ranged from simple wooden shed-like structures through to brick-built workshops (Figure 4).
Jenny was fortunate enough to have an existing outbuilding at her farmhouse that she has converted into a furniture workshop (Figure 5), complete with dust extraction systems, and an elaborate arrangement of tool and materials storage. This attention to the detail of ordering and storing the components of the making process was common to all the workshops included in the study, and as much care and ingenuity was often lavished upon these aspects of the workshop organization as on the artifacts under construction (Figure 6).

Peter, also a woodworker, did not have a separate outbuilding. However, after the breakdown of his marriage, he had specifically sought rented accommodation that included a basement suitable for use as a workshop, and that was soundproof so that his activities did not disturb his neighbors. This had significantly reduced the
range of rented accommodation available to him, and he recognized that this was an indication of the importance of his making activities to his life outside his work as a mental-health nurse:

When I was thinking about looking for flats, I sort of wondered am I overemphasizing something, because I was looking at things for the criteria of where is there going to be a workspace,
or how am I going to do this, is there somewhere I can plug in the power, you know. Um, and then every so often I have to think am I overvaluing, because maybe I could actually get a nicer flat in a nicer area if I didn’t have this criteria, but it feels like a really nice feeling if you can have a work space.

Greg also felt that the workshop was essential to his lifestyle, describing his workshop as: “vital, I couldn’t do what I wanted to do without it. A workshop, it’s like perhaps a shed, sort of thing isn’t it? You’ve got somewhere to go, you’ve got tools, and you can make things.”

As Greg recognized, in addition to creating workshops, for many participants the opportunity to acquire and maintain a range of specialized tools was one of the continuing motivations for taking part in the pursuit:

I’m a tool freak, I must admit, and any tool that will make my life easier I just love the whole idea of using them (...). I do like high-quality stuff; you can’t beat those Japanese saws. They are actually called Japanese razor saws, and when you change the blade and have a brand new one, especially in that one, the one with the back on it – if you have a look at the blade it is very, very fine (Figure 7).

Greg rents a lockup garage that he has converted into a workshop. He has a large collection of tools, including these Japanese saws, which he stores around his workshop. As well as ensuring easy access to the tools as he needs them, this arrangement also serves as a form of display. He notes with some pride how his “full complement of tools stretches across the wall.”
Brian also discussed how he had salvaged and restored a mid-twentieth-century milling machine for his own workshop: “that machine is 50 years old. I found it on a scrap heap just up the road . . . I pulled it apart . . . it was all rusted solid, and I got the lathe at the same place.”

**Projects and Planning**

Building complex objects also requires planning and preparation. The makers in this study used a variety of methods to plan their work, including sketching and drawing, model-making, and the use of computer-aided design applications. Eric’s car restoration projects also included archival research and the compilation of histories that would demonstrate the provenance of the car he was working on. These were kept in folders and books that became records of the project. In this respect all of the makers, to greater or lesser extent, framed their activities within the idea of the project. As Shove and Watson have pointed out, “projects constitute ‘orchestrating’ forces, condensing diverse resources and energies around specific goals” (2008: 81). A project can last from several months to, in Brian’s case, a number of years. A significant component of the appeal of these activities consists in the creation of routines and regimes of experience that are self-determined; structuring time outside of work that would otherwise remain fluid and indeterminate. For the makers these projects become a form of parallel existence to their normal lives – they constitute worlds that the participants can leave or enter at will. These worlds remain available, even if the makers take a break from their activities for weeks, or even months – for there is always an element of the project that can be resumed when resources allow.

For the participants in this study, their pursuits are substantial enough for them to engage in the long-term acquisition of a range of special skills, knowledge, and experience, as well as acquiring and maintaining the material resources of tools, machines, and work spaces necessary to achieve the standards they seek. This complex infrastructure of both material resources and personal attributes frames and structures the kinds of activity that generate the pleasure and satisfaction that is sought by amateur makers. Although the effort and resources used to create and sustain these frameworks means there is a cost attached to these specialized leisure pursuits, in the end these costs are substantially offset by the rewards that are intrinsic to the experience of making.

**Relishing the Moment**

In counterpoint to the structuring role of prior investment in skills, resources and planning is the equally important but more transient concept of the moment. Brian spoke about how “a feeling of calm and peace” descends upon him as he entered his own domain, while Jenny described how she lost her sense of time while in her workshop:
I suppose it’s, when you are in that sort of, I suppose intense place [. . .] then time kind of doesn’t move really, well it flies by without you noticing, you just, I don’t know how to describe it, but basically it feels you look up and suddenly three hours passed and you finish something but you didn’t really know that it took a long time.

She went on to explain why she thought this was happening. She describes how her making offers her the opportunity to be “single-minded” after the multitasking involved in looking after her family:

I am much better at putting my head down and focusing on one thing at a time and I really enjoy that, and I suppose now with looking after a family you don’t really have that. You can’t put your head down and, you always have to sort of I don’t know, half do this and half do something else so when I go to the workshop, that’s when I then feel that I can have that again, and I mean I can go there at seven thirty and then suddenly its sort of eleven thirty.

Though phrased differently, all the makers reported this experience, and it is a powerful unifying factor among the cases considered. These moments might be described by Csikszentmihalyi as flow experiences. It is a time when the makers become completely absorbed in their activities, losing a sense of place, time, and self-consciousness. Csikszentmihalyi made an academic livelihood from exploring flow, his own answer to the question of why people became so addicted to autotelic, or intrinsically rewarded experiences (2000 [1975], 2002 [1992]). For Csikszentmihalyi flow is a result of reaching a balance between boredom and anxiety, between the challenge of the task and the skill required to accomplish it successfully.

As well as having flow-like qualities, the moment-by-moment experience recounted by the respondents could also be characterized by a kind of spontaneity, a way of working that uses the materials and tools at hand, and continuously responds to their qualities and characteristics. These interactions involve processes and techniques that require tactile skill, and encourage decision-making processes that are heuristic, iterative, and intuitive – an attitude to working that might be usefully referred to as “bricolage.” Here Eric describes working on one of his cars:

I remember working that out, and that T junction, and I remember drawing that block and getting it made and, you know, you look at that and you clean it and you think, “oh I must try another spring clip,” you know, we worked it out [. . .] The same as at the front, you know, it’s got an anti-roll bar on the front and I stood here and I thought “oh, the anti-roll bars a bit thin maybe we should try a thicker anti-roll bar,” well that’s
another couple of months work the way I do it, drawing, finding the material, getting the clamps made, but that’s slowly but surely . . .

Or, describing a more immediate mode of work, Greg talks about fitting a piece of timber to a kayak:

I thought the way I made the strips was going to be ideal, then when I got to a certain point, I couldn’t have known it till I got there, the angle, the way the boat went, the strips just would not go, and every time I tried to get a strip to go it snapped, and I just couldn’t, I tried steaming it, and messing around with it, and all sorts of things and I just could not get it to work […] so then I was ranting and raving and finding a solution, and fixing it.

The amateur status of the makers means that they are free to develop their work in these unconventional and experimental ways without the fear of running over budgets, missing deadlines, or earning the disapproval of colleagues or managers. This freedom to innovate in an open-ended, unconstrained fashion gives the activity many of the qualities of play, further reinforcing and enhancing the rewards associated with accomplishment, and achievement against the odds.

**Conclusion**

This study reveals ways of spending time that are far more complex than accounts of amateur making generally suppose. The pursuits considered demand substantial investments of physical and mental resources – in return, they generate a structuring experience that is qualitatively different to the modes of life devoted to paid work, family life, or the day-to-day sustenance of the domestic world. This engagement with skill-building and the development of knowledge – but at a pace that is set by the participant – combined with the acquisition of tools and materials, and the construction of a specialized space, creates a powerful sense of purpose in otherwise voluntary activities. These activities defy conventional explanations of home craft that define the activity as either being motivated by utilitarian and economic factors or being driven by the representational and symbolic function of the outcomes. Far from being engaged, as one writer would have it, in purposeless acts of self-gratification, whose only function is to unconsciously service the economy by buying commodities in the form of materials and tools (Adamson 2007: 140), the people in this study have become highly skilled at generating rewarding, flow-like states through the planning of their activities, and the materiality of their interaction with their environment. In this sense, their relation with objects is not simply functional or symbolic, but is also at the same time
linked to their sense of self. Their investments, combined with their utilization of skill and technique, allowed them to engage with the physical and sensual qualities of the material world in a way that ultimately becomes more important than the artifacts that they produce. Although these interactions with the material world can be regarded as a form of “work,” generating demanding and sometimes unpleasant obligations, it is also a form of pleasure seeking – a quest for sensation and emotion. To quote Lefebvre: “In this context leisure involves an original search – whether clumsy or skilful is unimportant – for a style of living. And perhaps for an art of living, for a kind of happiness” (1992 [1958]: 43).

Notes

1. Turney notes how within many studies of art and design practice “any discussion of home-crafted objects is marginalized to the level of all that is ‘bad’ in art, design and craft” (2004: 268).
2. The names of all participants in this project have been changed to preserve their anonymity. Interviews were carried out between May 2007 and June 2008 in the makers’ homes and workshops, and photographs were taken throughout the visits (unless otherwise stated, all images are by the author). All the participants have consented to their comments, and images of themselves and their workshops being published. My thanks go to them for taking part in this study.
3. Atkinson (2006: 3) attempts to reach a more precise classification of do-it-yourself activity by employing a series of subcategories – Reactive DIY; Essential DIY; Lifestyle DIY, and Proactive DIY. For Atkinson “Reactive DIY” consists of making activities mediated through the use of kits or templates, the motivation ranging between a way of occupying spare time through to personal pleasure. “Essential DIY” is defined as home-maintenance activity carried out because of economic necessity or a shortage of skilled labor (though such activities may also be personally rewarding), while “Lifestyle DIY” consists of home improvement undertaken as emulation or conspicuous consumption, and where the use of one’s own labor is by choice rather than necessity. The topic of this study is Atkinson’s fourth category, “Proactive DIY” – do-it-yourself that contains significant elements of self-directed design input, with the motivation often being personal pleasure.
4. Special editions of the Journal of Design History published in 2006 and 2008 make a useful contribution to this area of research, though the range of subject matter contained in the articles confirms the breadth of the area, and the associated difficulties with defining the subject matter (Atkinson 2006; Beegan and Atkinson 2008).
5. The term “resistant materials” has been used within the UK national school curriculum since the 1980s as a way of distinguishing between the teaching of textiles and needlecrafts and...
the teaching of craft and design skills using wood, metals, plastics, and ceramics.

6. Jonathan Glancey exemplifies this view in “The Manual Vanishing” (2008), a *Guardian* editorial piece where he laments the loss of making in favor of consuming. This sense of loss is a recurring theme in other mainstream accounts of amateur makers, including *Men and Sheds* (Thorburn 2002), and *Makers, Breakers and Fixers* (Thompson 2007) (written from the perspectives of the UK and Australia respectively). These authors argue that amateur makers represent the last vestige (in the developed world at least) of a more self-reliant, resourceful society. In their view, this was an inventive culture whose members were more easily able to understand and maintain the material world upon which they depended.

7. Leadbeater explains the functioning of these systems by using the metaphor of beach use – the adoption of a series of etiquettes that allow holidaymakers to coexist in a confined space, and engage in a variety of activities without causing offense (or having fights) (2008: 35). He draws parallels with the idea of the open, self-regulating, peer-to-peer systems (such as Wikipedia), and open-source programming, which operate without the centralized rules and regulations of professional intervention – yet manage to sustain a cohesive and productive culture.

8. Emic and etic are terms used to refer to two different kinds of data concerning human behavior. An emic account is a description of behavior or a belief in terms meaningful (consciously or unconsciously) to the actor. An etic account is a description of a behavior or belief by an observer, in terms that can be applied to other cultures. Emic accounts offer insights into the local construction of meaning, and local rules for behavior, while etic accounts facilitate comparative research and aim to be culturally neutral.

9. In Grounded Theory, conceptual categories are derived from data; they represent a researcher’s understanding of the experiences, actions, and issues that have been described by the respondents, and act as a way of grouping and organizing the data with which the researcher is working (Corbin and Strauss 2008: 51).

10. In *The Savage Mind* (1966) Lévi-Strauss calls this ongoing process of problem solving the “science of the concrete” – forming one’s survival by adapting the bricoleur from the world. The term was later adopted by Hebdige (2002 [1979]) to describe the assemblages of appropriated objects used by members of youth subcultures to signify resistance to mainstream culture, and later still by Attfield (2000) to describe the ad hoc, ahistorical facades created by DIY house renovators in 1990s Britain. The use of the term here, however, is derived from Harper’s rich
account of a small vehicle-repair workshop in northern New York State (1987). Even though Willie, the subject of Harper's ethnography, is a professional tradesman, the organic, almost pre-industrial nature of his work ethic has strong resemblances to practices of the makers discussed in this article.

11. These ideas have been more fully explored in studies carried out within the social sciences that have concentrated on the materiality of experience – deliberately setting out to avoid treating material culture purely as a series of symbolic outcomes, as signs and symbols (Campbell 1996; Cummings 1993; Dant 2005; Miller 2001b; Pink 2004).

References


