

Occupations:

from tactics of (mis)use, to strategies of homeimprovement
by Joanna Zawieja

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Wednesday morning. I'm working on a model in my bed room.

It's an addition to an existing building. I'm thinking about intruders.

In my room there's a sink. It's been blocked since I moved in.

This morning two plumbers come by to fix it. Middle-aged, worn, smelling of tobacco, they enter my room with some serious apparatus. While I'm polishing my paper castles, they're pulling hair up from the pipes.

One of them asks: "Making Christmas decoration, are you?"

They know my room. I've only lived here for some weeks, but it is my room. I've brought my music here, my shoes and my duvet.

And they are expelling hair from my room. Somewhere hidden within the walls, someone forgot their hair. I wonder what I forgot.

*"A building is a collection of opacities and transparencies, a theater of appearance and disappearance in which we mask our presence or make it known. [...] We are revealed through these traces, the things that architecture cannot keep, the separation that it cannot provide, its secretions, the excess that leaks through like light."*¹

1945, in the aftermath of World War II, Iwona and Bernard Koczorowski, my grandparents, fled the ruined Poznan in central Poland in search for a home. They arrived in Szczecin, a former Hanseatic city that during the last 200 years had been under German governing. Between the 30th April and 5th July 1945, Szczecin had had 5 different changes of governing powers, but was finally declared Polish.

Iwona and Bernard came to Szczecin within days after this decision, and found a city emptied in haste, where houses still were warm. They moved into a semidetached house in the centre of town, fully furnished to the level of food in the cupboards, and accompanied by three cats.

¹ Bermann, Karen. "The House Behind", in Heidi J. Nast and Steve Pile (eds.), *Places Through the Body*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p.169.

This house, at Piotra Skargi 42, had obviously belonged to an affluent German family, with standards the 21 years old Iwona and 25 years old Bernard could never afford. The act of moving into such a fully defined setting, with the outspoken aim to start a family, could easily have become an aspiration towards the represented norms within the house. But this setting that had been taken over also symbolized Poland's former occupants, and became thus something to define oneself against. It would be pure foolishness to get rid of the new possessions - instead all the cupboards, rugs, beds and tableware had to be given a new meaning. The traces of the former owners had to be overwritten by the houses new occupants.

Life had to be lived forcefully, inscribing own experiences in the walls as soon as possible. In manic ceremonial manners dinners took place every night.

The found food larder supplied all the ingredients, combined in the most conceivable non German fashion the dinners are still more known for their creativity than culinary qualities. Stories were made up about every objects origin, relatives which I'm still not sure ever existed where represented in form of couches and kitchen ware. Furniture changed place and the small baby room, so undeniably stating an abrupt departure, got blackened out and became a darkroom. Every guest arriving at the house was asked to mark their height with a pencil stroke on the wall, and when the kids were born these growing marks soon increased to small descriptions of development.

Sanity was kept and safety achieved by overriding history.

These so clearly architectural actions where scarcely questions of form, or even function, but inscriptions of new narratives.

This overwriting of an existing programme can be read in relation to Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*². Certeau understands the act of using as a form of production, as a 'tactic'. He separates 'tactics' from 'strategies', where the latter is that of the proper, institutional power, whereas the former is that of resistance, of the Other³. The reoccupation of Piotra Skargi 42 can be read as a user's tactic. Even if a culture can prescribe what we see and do, it cannot prescribe how we use it; what we do with it. We seize our tactics on the wing; creating our own narratives:

² de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Berkely and London: University of California Press, 2002).

³ *ibid.*, p. XiX.

*“Thus, once the images broadcast by television and the time spent in front of the TV set have been analyzed, it remains to be asked what the consumer makes of these images and during these hours. The thousands of people who buy a health magazine, the customers in a supermarket, the practitioners of urban space, the consumers of newspaper stories and legends – what do they make of what they ‘absorb’, receive or pay for? What do they do with it?”*⁴

Certeau refers back to the linguist Saussure’s distinction between “langue” (a system) and “parole” (an act). And by focusing on parole – the act – as a form of production in itself, he dissolves the very distinction between consumption and production⁵. The tactics of Iwona and Bernard in their use of Piotra Skargi 42, must with this reading be acknowledged as an act of architecture. This recognition of the user as an architectural producer is a viewpoint represented within the architectural discourse of the last 10 years by Jane Rendell, Jonathan Hill and others.

*“Distinct social identities of resistance and difference can be represented through the use (and re-use) of space and materials ”*⁶

In “Doing it, (un)doing it, (over)doing it yourself – rhetorics of architectural abuse”, published in the anthology *Occupying Architecture*, Jane Rendell discusses re-occupation of architecture as strategies of resistance. By describing a squat she once lived in and the changes it went through, Rendell investigates our preconceived ideas about the use of objects and spaces. She reads the squatting and DIY culture as an actively chosen form of self-expression and a questioning of the architectural practice as a privileged activity. Stating that the user’s occupation of space is an architectural making, Rendell questions how the architectural profession presents Architecture as the thought up pure creation of an architect’s mind.

*“As by magic, they imagined architecture, and then, with minimal fuss, and certainly no mess, they made it,[...] just like in their dreams.”*⁷

In the same anthology Jonathan Hill writes in his text “An other architect”, that the user’s role in architectural production is as creative as the architect’s⁸. Inspired by Roland Barthes thoughts on a more “writerly” approach to literature, where the reader is recognized as a creative interpreter of the text, Hill states:

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 31.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 32.

⁶ Rendell, Jane. “Doing It, (Un)Doing it, (Over)Doing It Yourself: Rhetorics of Architectural Abuse”, in Jonathan Hill (ed.), *Occupying Architecture: Between the Architect and the User*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 234

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 230.

⁸ Hill, Jonathan. “An other architect”, in Jonathan Hill (ed.), *Occupying Architecture: Between the Architect and the User*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 140- 1.

“Architecture is the gap between building and using, just as literature is the gap between writing and reading.”⁹

Architecture becomes here an action where objects are inscribed with meaning. What happened at Piotra Skargi 42 was an architectural creation entirely discarding questions of form and functionality. What was available was taken and by forced repeated use incorporated into the family stories. An everyday action, done in a consciously accelerated manner. A table that within days has the legs cut short and serves a couple of dinners, all of them opened with the highly staining Barszcz¹⁰, soon becomes familiar. By actively redefining the house and its elements, concentrated everyday life was forced upon them.

This everyday time, that in the case of Piotra Skargi 42 was an actively driven attempt to create meaning, is strangely dismissed within the modernistic architectural history, or at the most seen as a passive act set in opposition to architecture.

“...I will let time enter my spaces, but only that thick time of the everyday. It is a time which will disrupt the iconic, perfected autonomy of the frozen building, not just in terms of weather and dirt, but in terms of those repetitive, habitual actions so overlooked by architects clinging to illusions of a detached monumental time.”¹¹

In canonical architectural representations there are no signs of dirt and aging. The most conventional forms of representation – the plan and the section – present space as an abstract aesthetic matter, liberated from the user and from time. In an attempt to preserve the architectural professions status and myths, architecture is presented as “a stable power”¹². J.Hill derives this mystification from the fact that architecture is “a weak discipline”¹³, the borders of the discipline are not defined in a clear sense as e.g. in math or medicine, but must over and over be defined in order to sustain. The architect’s iconic status is threatened, and the threats according to Hill are the “illegal” architects from outside the profession whose work becomes recognized as architecture, and the users who refuse to read the architecture as prescribed.

In the conflict Hill presents, RIBA, the Royal Institute of British Architects, represents a modernistic and highly aestheticized approach to architecture, with a clear distinction between using and producing, while Hill is searching for a user including architecture.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 141.

¹⁰ Polish beetroot soup.

¹¹ Till, Jeremy. “Thick time: architecture and the traces of time, in Iain Borden and Jane Rendell (eds.), *InterSections: Architectural Histories and Critical Theories*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) p. 292.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 285.

¹³ Hill, Jonathan. “An other architect”, in Jonathan Hill (ed.), *Occupying Architecture: Between the Architect and the User*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 146.

*"Welcome to RIBApix, a growing database dedicated to providing you with exceptional and unique images from the collections of the British Architectural Library at the Royal Institute of British Architects, the world's most extensive visual archive devoted to architecture. "*¹⁴

In November 2005 the Royal Institute of British Architects opened their database ribapix.com. At the moment the database contains 7278 images, but the aim is to include 20 000 images out of RIBAs collection of 1,5 million. The vast majority of the images are strict geometrical exercises in black and white. Images saying "Look what I can do! Now admire, don't touch but contemplate!". Streets deserted and buildings sterile. Pure. No hair in the pipes, no crumbs in the sheets. No records of other. The images are organised in 43 categories. Categories like Art, Commerce, Decoration, Planning and People. It looks rather pessimistic. Out of these 7278 images, less than one tenth include a human figure.

Under the category People there are 306 images, 208 of them portraits of architects, 63 portraits of artists, photographers, engineers etc. and 42 images with so called people. Under the category sport, which usually is understood as a bodily activity, there are 110 images. On 8 of them there is an active person and on 16 a human figure as a scale-indicator. Out of the 213 images in the food and drink category, there are 22 images with people¹⁵.

These photographs are a significant evidence of the still ongoing mystification of the architectural profession. Architecture today is a commodity as most of our artefacts, but the difficulty to consume buildings reduces them into seductive pictures in countless architectural magazines. J.Hill sees the lack of people and the everyday in these glossy images, as a proof of the architectural professions fear of the user, the emptiness giving the illusion of an architect in control¹⁶. These photos not only represent architecture as high art meant for contemplation rather than action, and state the visual culture as architectures main sphere, but they write the canon of architecture. Not only do the photos protect the architectural profession - they create it.

*"The major currency in contemporary architecture is the image, the photograph not the building."*¹⁷

In *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* Beatriz Colomina discusses the relationship between modern architecture and photography. Focusing on the work by Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier, Colomina shows how the mass media was as much the site of architectural production as the building site.

¹⁴ <http://www.ribapix.com/>

¹⁵ <http://www.ribapix.com> , as accessed 20 December 2005.

¹⁶ Hill, Jonathan. "An other architect", in Jonathan Hill (ed.), *Occupying Architecture: Between the Architect and the User*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 139.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 137.

"The organizing geometry of architecture slips from the perspectival cone of vision, from the humanist eye, to the camera angle. It is precisely in this slippage that modern architecture becomes modern by engaging with the media."¹⁸

Colomina points out that many of the major works that shaped the modernist canon were immaterial pieces. The Mies van der Rohe's projects – the Glass Skyscraper and the Brick Country House were for example never built, while the main modernistic icon, van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavillion, was a temporary building that between 1929 and 1986 only existed in print.

Architecture has become the story about the discipline. Architects soothe each other with yet another representation of their high art, while the buildings create other stories in companion with their dwellers. But actually there is no need to worry. Iwona and Bernard would presumably have acted the same way whether they would have arrived in the house at Piotra Skargi 42 or the Barcelona Pavillion. After some time they would turn the building into their home. A more or less functional home, but probably with the same amount of life-supporting anecdotes. The headache here is rather the architect's. In reducing architecture to aesthetized forms with defined readings, the architect is accepting the modernistic division between the architect and the user, between idea and matter. And while the advertising world is absorbing the idea of resistance in its strategies, parts of the architectural discourse are still looking for it.

One of the more recognized Architects that have dealt with the question of architectural narratives is Bernard Tschumi. In his 1981 *The Manhattan Transcripts*¹⁹, Tschumi investigated new forms of architectural signs as a means to an architecture of experience rather than contemplation. An architecture that included events and movements just as much as spaces, in a dynamic relationship. By inventing new modes of architectural notation, Tschumi pointed towards architecture as an event. Movement symbols influenced by choreographic scripts, becomes diagrams describing the imaginary volumes created by dancers, athletes and army tacticians among others. Photographs are used in a cinematic manner pointing towards what happened the moment before them and what will happen next, in contrast to a plan and section or traditional architectural photography where the image is presented as an everlasting status quo. In telling stories about murder and desire, *The Manhattan Transcripts* adds another narrative to the story of New York

"Any new attitude to architecture had to question its mode of representation."²⁰

What Tschumi proposed is essentially a relational reading of architecture. Architecture as something which occurs in the meeting between the user and the built environment. Dissolving the distinction between the act of building and the act of building narratives, *The Manhattan Transcripts* becomes architecture in itself.

¹⁸ Colomina, Beatriz. *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*, (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1996), p.335.

¹⁹ Tschumi, Bernard. *The Manhattan Transcripts*, (London: Academy, 1981).

²⁰ Tschumi, Bernard. *Question of Space: Lectures on Architecture*, (London: AA Publications, 1990), p. 90.

If we accept this notion of architecture, we must of course ask ourselves, who is the architect? If what architects do is to write narratives in relation to a built environment or architectural realm, the notion of the architect needs radical expanding and could easily include writers, photographers, film-makers and tv-producers.

Jane Rendell's text "Doing it, (un)doing it, (over)doing it yourself – rhetorics of architectural abuse" was published 1998 in the anthology *Occupying Architecture* edited by Jonathan Hill. As mentioned previously, Rendell discusses the DIY and squatting culture as a subversive alternative to a deterministic acceptance of architecture. But during the last 8 years a lot has happened, and today DIY brings forth quite different connotations. Among the best selling magazines and most popular tv programs, there are plenty of different variations on home improvement, or rather self improvement through consumption of interiors. Much of the focus is on DIY, and suddenly there is a DIY boom all over the western world.

*"The British DIY market was worth more than £23bn in 2001, meaning each household spent an average of £900 on home improvements. And the boom looks set to continue, with eager DIYers expected to borrow a whopping £17.6bn to build conservatories, knock through walls and repaint in a Tuscan style by 2006."*²¹

This is sometimes called the "Changing Rooms" effect, after the home improvement program launched in 1996 by Endemol Productions UK for BBC Two, and running until the 22nd November 2004.

This program was based on a couple of friends (or rather two couples), redecorating each other's houses with a small budget and with the help of some professional designers. At the peak "Changing Rooms" regularly attracted 20 million prime-time viewers to the weekly programmes. DIY, it seems, is not so much about resistance anymore.

While RIBA's webpages are showing graphical exercises, on BBC's webpage²² there is a whole section on home improvement, from help in calculating the costs and estimating the amount of paint needed, to learning which colours to combine to get the perfect Georgian living room. While the part on studying on RIBA's page starts with the words "*It takes a minimum of 7 years to train to be an architect*"²³, BBC teaches you how to wire a plug and how to tile a wall.

These home improvement programs and magazines are in RIBA's eyes doubtlessly seen as threats, serving highly conventional ideas about good taste and turning architecture into a question of styles. But they are representing, and thereby creating, one of the biggest architectural narratives we have today. The Make-over-delirium is architecture presented as an assemblage of possibilities and a cure for almost anything.

²¹ "Guardian Unlimited", <http://www.guardian.co.uk/chemicalworld/story/0,14534,1220280,00.html>, (accessed 20 December 2005).

²² "BBC Homes", <http://www.bbc.co.uk/homes>, (accessed 20 December 2005).

²³ "RIBA", http://www.riba.org/go/RIBA/Also/Education_460.html, (accessed 20 December 2005).

Even though the main protagonist in these DIY programs is the user, it is hard to see the home improvement culture, thoroughly established within the mainstream, as acts of resistance in the same sense as the squatting sub-culture represented for Rendell or even in the sense of Iwona's and Bernard's take-over of Piotra Skargi 42. Still the home improvement culture succeeds in thoroughly disregarding any distinction between the user and the architect, between the consumer and the producer.

This development calls for a reconsideration of the critique formulated by Rendell, Hill and others. Merely criticizing RIBA and the modernist architectural establishment while seeing the user as a way out of architectural determinism seems misplaced, or at least insufficient, in today's context. Although RIBA may not have understood it, their fight against the (mis)user is, at least in some senses, already lost.

A possible reading of the home improvement culture is that it has repositioned architectural determinism in the hands of the user. Is this liberation? Or is it self-control? It could easily be argued that the architectural narratives emerging from mainstream DIY are closely related to consumer-capitalism. The notion of consuming being an act of producing (ultimately the production of self) has been popular in management literature over the last decade. Can the user still present a point of resistance in this scenario or has the intruder ultimately become the prosumer?

In Gilles Deleuze's comment on Foucault's *disciplinary societies*, "Postscript on the Societies of Control", he describes the shift from fordist to post-fordist capitalism, summarized as a shift from the Factory to the Corporation²⁴. The flexible and ever-changing becomes the system of distributed control, Foucaultian bio-politics at its most effective stage.

Similarly Paolo Virno, in "A Grammar of the Multitude" speaks of post-fordist production as one incorporating all of life²⁵. Not merely employing body-hours but rather our socio-cultural abilities, our creativity and problem-solving. This is a decisive shift, he argues, because it seems to exclude an outside from where resistance would be possible.

It's from a similar, or analogous, viewpoint that I propose a reading of the architectural narrative that the DIY-culture of today establishes. When Iwona and Bernard took possession of the house at Piotra Skargi 42, we could still read it as a 'tactic' of 'making use' in Certeau's sense. They were in no position to reject the aesthetic decisions of the previous owners, but could make them their own by inserting new narratives. The occupation of space seemed to carry a resistance. But this 'tactic' has turned into a 'strategy'. It now inhabits the space of the 'proper', the institutionalized. We must ask ourselves if resistance against the molds of programmatic architecture still is viable in a time of constant modulation and re-work?

²⁴ Deleuze, Gilles. "Postscript on the Societies of Control", in Neil Leach (ed.), *Rethinking Architecture: A reader in cultural theory*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 309- 13.

²⁵ Virno, Paolo. *A grammar of the multitude*, (Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 2004).

I spent my first 6 years in the house on Piotra Skargi 42 before another political crisis forced my Mother to take me and flee. Iwona, my grandmother, still lives there with her son Zygmunt, who after grandfather's death took on the task to never ever letting the house be set. Having given up on a family of his own, his main aim became to redo everything in the house. This time though, the glossy images of success had caught up with Piotra Skargi. Coming back after 8 years I arrived in a different house. Where my grandmother once had actively encouraged the leaving of marks, the home had now turned shiny and untouchable. Uncle Zygmunt was redecorating it all. With a family in exile for years and the most stable company in the form of Latin American soap operas, it was an undeniable time for a change of stories.

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