

The Politics and Practice of Designing It Yourself

A conversation with Julia Lupton

by Lilly Irani

Design: a profession or an approach? Design as a profession suggests that those who do design go through years of training and pays their dues, sometimes literally. Design as an approach, on the other hand, is a way of conceptualizing an activity that anyone can bring to bear. Jonathan Ive designs iPods, but does 17-year-old Jenny from Omaha design her MySpace page?

This question, often not explicitly articulated by the design community, burst to the surface in 2006 when Ellen Lupton put out *D.I.Y.: Design It Yourself*, an edited volume of design-it-yourself (D.I.Y.) projects and thinking. Julia Lupton, Ellen's sister, is author of the "D.I.Y. Theory" section in the book and co-author with Ellen of the more recent *D.I.Y. Kids*. She is also a professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Irvine. Julia has balanced her career as an academic with her love of making things—working on crafts with her kids, designing her own wedding invitations, and creating press materials

for campus events. As someone who writes about the politics of D.I.Y. and tries to make design a part of everything she does at home and at work, Julia has a unique perspective on what is at stake in who gets to design.

Design it yourself and do it yourself (the more common meaning for D.I.Y.) are related but not the same. Do it yourself at its simplest can mean rigging a minimalist solution together instead of buying a custom gadget to do the job. It can be repairing your bike, growing vegetables, or creating bookshelves out of milk crates strapped together. As defined by Julia, designing it yourself means going further than getting the job done—it means doing it with an aesthetic that adds meaning to the end result. Instead of creating a reasonably laid-out meeting agenda, for example, design it yourself suggests designing an agenda by choosing fonts, colors, and graphics to have maximum impact. It means elevating an agenda from a run-of-the-mill record to an expression of organizational identity.

"Design can do things like create group spirit on a shoestring. Just having a logo gives a group that has almost no budget a sense of coherence and momentum," Julia says. "The symbol can project a future that the new thing can grow into—a surplus generated by the design."

Since D.I.Y. thinking champions design at any scale, it empowers anyone to design. In addition, any task or object becomes worthy of being designed. Because women's skills and activities have historically been described as leisure and niceties of the private sphere, understanding the politics and economics of design it yourself is in fact a political act of recovering the value of these everyday activities. In this respect, Julia acknowledges the importance of Martha Stewart as an unlikely advocate for devoting design thinking to the mundane, everyday details that shape our worlds. "Stewart has made a huge impact on raising the values of activities like hospitality, kids, and reciprocity. [She] opened up possibilities about

thinking creatively and seriously about stuff that largely women and gay men spent their time worrying about.”

Some professional designers feel threatened by D.I.Y. because it puts power and responsibility into amateur hands. Design critic Steven Heller, in a blog exchange with Ellen, worried about D.I.Y.’s potential effects on the design profession: “I recoil when I

encouraged efficiency and assumed an appreciation of functional form. Fashion designers attempt to predict and lead clothing trends. And designers often take on the Freudian mind-reading task of designing for people’s latent needs and desires, surprising the “consumer” with the thing they never knew they wanted. Central to this trendsetting and needfinding is

signs online for people to vote on. The T-shirts with the most votes are mass-produced and sold on the site.

Ultimately, D.I.Y. empowers individuals with the means and tools to get their ideas taken seriously. It can create a sense of camaraderie with few monetary resources and little institutional recognition. Designing something, like a letterhead or a T-shirt, provides traction for grassroots movements and ideas in a way that simple spoken or written words cannot. D.I.Y. encourages people to prototype new ways of thinking and living, at any scale.

While much of Julia and Ellen’s writings in *D.I.Y.* and *D.I.Y. Kids* have been focused on graphic design, identity, and craft, the sisters have considered a broader space of environmental, industrial, and interaction design issues on their blog “Design Your Life.” This has inspired their current book project, *The Design Files: Delight and Dysfunction in Daily Life*, which will include their thoughts on issues ranging from non-functional home spaces, roller bags (Ellen’s pet peeve), and personal manifestos.

D.I.Y. is about creating cultural alternatives to the free-market story of consumer choice—the one that tells people that their power mainly stems from choosing what they buy. “D.I.Y. designs are acts of shaping that are conscious. They send messages and are part of traditions. The more we can build discourses that make us aware of those things, the more powerful the act of communication can be,” Julia says. Design it yourself reminds people that they can do more than just choose: they can create their own choices and their own alternatives too.



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think of mediocre designers ‘doing it themselves.’ People should not think they are Designers because they can fiddle with type on a computer template. If people start thinking that graphic design is as easy as one, two, three, it will diminish designers’ authority and clients’ respect.”

Julia, in response, argues that the projects she works on herself are rarely those for which she would hire designer: web sites for her courses, invitations for get-togethers, or pamphlets for neighborhood organizations. If anything, she believes D.I.Y. increases appreciation for design professionals. Acting upon personal initiative to design allows one to see how challenging it is and to better understand the value of that effort.

That said, D.I.Y. questions some of the assumptions frequently made in design. Design has traditionally had a prescriptive streak. Modernist home designers created spaces that

the figure of the professional designer, who claims access to knowledge that consumers do not have about society or themselves.

D.I.Y. thinking can reform this relationship between the designer-producer and the supposedly passive consumer. “It’s not just about buying the object or living in the house that will shape your outlook,” Julia says, “but having access to tools that will help you shape your outlook in dialogue with other people, in ways that might not be predicted by the design.”

This can potentially shake up ideas about what “mediocre” or amateur design is and who gets to be the judge of that. Web sites in particular are a conduit for this trend: their ability to become popular overnight and their access to large and diverse user bases support the trend towards D.I.Y. design as a means for prototyping. One such web site, Threadless, allows artists to post their proposed T-shirt de-