Pimp Your Home: Or Why Design Cannot Remain Exclusive – From a Consumer Perspective

Hilde Bouchez

To cite this article: Hilde Bouchez (2012) Pimp Your Home: Or Why Design Cannot Remain Exclusive – From a Consumer Perspective, The Design Journal, 15:4, 461-477

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.2752/175630612X13437472804330

Published online: 28 Apr 2015.

Article views: 48

View related articles

Citing articles: 1 View citing articles
Pimp Your Home: Or Why Design Cannot Remain Exclusive – From a Consumer Perspective

Hilde Bouchez
Sint-Lucas School of Architecture, Brussels/Ghent, Belgium

ABSTRACT This paper looks into the way the consumer moves along the paradigm shift of design from being objects of status identity, towards open design, with a focus on the making rather than the having. In 2005 the magazine *Wallpaper* advertised a lamp designed by Massimo Vignelli (1955), with the slogan: I don’t care what it is for, I want it. This message represents very much the generic meaning in the 2000s, of design being about status and artistic form, rather than about function and practical use. Based on a 2009 study of the way inhabitants in one street in full gentrification in Flanders, think of, buy into and actively participate within the design field, this
paper shows how the Flemish public has very much been influenced by the narratives of lifestyle media and design producers. However, in the way they deal with design at home, it becomes obvious that the majority of respondents do not much buy into mediated design objects, nor do they want to be associated with the non-functional status symbol these products often represent. However, almost all participants have actively been refurbishing their home within the aesthetics of a much promoted design-style, which leads to the conclusion that not only the designer himself, but also the consumer, is recently looking for another meaning of design. Making seems to be more important than having, which coincides with the growing interest in open design.

KEYWORDS: consumer research, DIY, identity, function

Introduction

Design history over the past forty years has become an autonomous field of study, emancipated from the art-historical perspective with its main focus on the analysis of styles, and high cultural productions with a suggestion of the artist as genius (Meikle, 1998). However, design in the everyday public space seems to be represented mainly as a compilation of icons and its genius designers, be that in popular books and magazines on design, or in the window displays of most Western cities. The continuous flow of presenting icons of design is striking, from Taschen publications to McDonald’s interiors.

From the attention design goods are given in our real and virtual public spaces one could conclude that the consumer has appropriated the meaning of design dispersed by producers and highlighted by the media into the private sphere of their home. One could presume that the highly mediated furniture of, for example, Jacobsen, Eames, Panton…, has found its way into the private households, through the acquisition of the highly mediatized products and highly promoted design style, if not in recognition and narrative.

Jeffrey Meikle pointed out in 1998 that although there is a growing attention to design from an academic perspective, it remains difficult for researchers to analyse the extent of the reception and perception of design by consumers. The only way to really know how the mainstream consumer is dealing with design and home improvement in his private domestic space is to go out into the streets and question the Joneses. In line with research by, for example, Daniel Miller (1990, 2001, 2008) and Alison Clarke (2001) in one particular street or building block, this paper looks into appropriation schemes
on design products and designing the home in one particular street in Ghent, Belgium. It questions how the consumer has read into the highly mediated contemporary design narrative, and how this relates to the do-it-yourself (DIY) trend of open design.

**A Gentrified Street**

The street is located just outside the city centre of one of the major cities of Flanders. The area expanded in the second half of the nineteenth century from a small village to a proto-industrial suburb. It is characterized by small workers’ houses, medium-sized traders houses and two industrial complexes, which have been renovated into lofts. Most of the houses are owner-occupied.

The street is in full gentrification (Zukin, 1989). In the early 1990s the internationally known artist Wim Delvoye bought the two old factory buildings and started renovating them as lofts. At first, young people and families working within the creative field settled in the lofts, soon to be followed by young, often creative people, who bought into the smaller and larger family houses. In 2000 one of the factory buildings was sold to two young entrepreneurs, and has been renovated into hip, sophisticated lofts. At the time of research (2009–10) the oldest inhabitant still lived in the house she was originally born in, in 1927. The youngest adult of the street was born in 1984 and shares a medium-large house with a couple of friends. The respondents have very diverse occupations and represent a wide range of ages, education levels and incomes. It was not the aim of the research to find class divergences or convergences, but rather to look into a representation of mainstream urban consumers and how they have appropriated design goods and the highly mediated narratives on design, as well as a kind of design style in the course of the so called ‘aestheticization of the everyday’ ( Featherstone, 2007), promoted so much in this design-conscious era.

The role of the home and the sum of possessions as a representation of the self has been widely studied (Belk, 1988; Cieraad, 1999; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981). This research, however, aimed specifically to understand more about the way design is consumed, as a set of physical goods, and as a practice: designing your home. Very much in coherence with the work of Alison Clarke (2001), the results show that the contemporary home, in the course of home consumption and decoration, is much more than a representation of the self. It is a laboratory for personal creativity, a process rather than a place, a representation of doing rather than being. But before going into that aspect, we will first look into the way the respondents look upon design objects.

**Design is Artistic, Exclusive and Expensive**

Throughout the interviews, all respondents were asked to describe what design meant to them. Most did not have a pre-cut answer and sometimes came up with contradicting feelings and narratives.
All but one respondent concluded that design is something ‘artistic’, referring to its visual statement, exclusive and in most cases expensive. Interestingly, many respondents somewhere in the course of trying to grasp for themselves what the word design actually means to them and how they relate it to their daily life make use of the products of Alessi, or just the brand name Alessi to explain their feelings. Ian Woodward (2007) refers to these kinds of exemplary objects as ‘epiphany objects’, which allow a sort of control of the narrative within the setting of a research interview.

The single respondent who claims that design refers to all useful products and not solely objects with a strong visual statement is trained as an industrial designer and has thus been introduced to the academic view of design. In his reasoning he adds that his view is not the generic way design is read today and like many respondents indirectly refers to the Juicy Salif of Philippe Starck for Alessi, without actually pinpointing it.

When an Italian producer adds a beautiful form or colour to a juicer then it is considered design. For me any useful fruit juicer is called design.

Functionality versus artistic form is a theme most respondents bring up. Some find the artistic form of design appealing but too extreme for them to buy into. Most experience a problematic contradiction in the fact that the extreme form expresses artistry and status, but leads to products with absolutely no use. A respondent who has actually used the Juicy Salif in the home of his parents expresses his feelings about the juicer, which exemplifies design as following:

It’s not a juicer, it’s a statue. Have you ever tried it? I find it absolutely unwieldy. You have to grab the two legs and then squeeze the lemon.

There are only two respondents who have actually used the Juicy Salif, or any other Alessi product they refer to. This means that hardly any of the respondents conclude from direct experience that design has a problematic, non-functional aspect from a real experience. It is thus a narrative they have somewhere picked up and appropriated. On a direct level we can conclude that the consumers adopt the high design narrative, which Alessi connected to its products. Since the launch of the highly artistic Tea & Coffee Piazza project in 1983, the Italian company has hardly stressed the functionality of their products in advertisements, catalogues and other publications. Research has shown that magazines readily take over this narrative (Bouchez, 2008). Alessi goods have mainly been mediated as works of art. On a second level, Alessi products are deployed as an archetypical example of what design means. This implies that the respondents in their informal knowledge on design in general have appropriated
the fact that for an object to be labelled ‘design’, form comes before function. Thus, design objects are to be categorized within the realm of art. It seems that seeing the goods mainly as published images within a semantic context, appropriates a meta-narrative on design. Consumers readily accept the pre-packaged meaning of high design and associate the strong visual statement with high art.

Of course it is not just Alessi who is responsible for this narrative, since many design companies use a similar strategy in creating a high art status of design through a pre-packaged fixed meaning. Most lifestyle publications adopt and reinforce the iconic representation of design as art. High design within the realms of art has thus been mass mediated as a master or meta-narrative of what design in general stands for. However, the respondents can be grouped into three different categories according to how they incorporate the meaning of design as being artistic, within their daily life: those who buy design, those who claim not to buy design and those who would like, but cannot afford to buy design.

**IKEA Design?**
The largest group of respondents claims that they do not buy design things because they are too expensive and not practical. This group of respondents shows no aspirations to buy into design. In their reasoning informants often apply terms as ‘extravagant, extraordinary, special’ – feelings that do not coincide with their particular, rational lifestyle. The fact that they radically denounce the conspicuous consumption of expensive, non-functional furniture or kitchenware stresses their identity as responsible consumers. What is, however, striking within this group is that all claim that IKEA products or other modern design products from cheaper and thus more easily available chains and brands do not fit into their categorization of design. A young Turkish woman who has lived all her life in Belgium, describes design as something extraordinary. When she is asked if that is automatically linked to expensive things she answers. ‘Not necessarily. Even if it is cheap, it is never useful, practical’. This respondent concludes, as a result of how she perceives design, that the lamps and other IKEA things she has in her home are not at all to be considered as design.

A young couple with two children, who recently renovated their whole house, firmly dissociate with design. Not because they do not like it, but because they feel that like art, they can enjoy reading about it, or seeing it in a museum, but it is not something they can afford in their own home. And even in an ideal situation, where they would have all the money to buy their desires, they feel that art will never be something they will buy into. They express that they are not experts enough for that. In their kitchen around an old wooden table stand six chairs of different colours, bought in Weba, a local cheap furniture shop. They are a sort of hybrid copy of the Series 7 chair and the Ant chair of Arne Jacobsen, often presented in the...
media and in the Fritz Hansen advertising in a vibrant mix of colours. It is only when the respondents are asked if they know the original design, that they realize that they have seen those images and that they have bought some sort of copy. Their vindication for buying these is the playfulness of the colours and the fact they these chairs were not at all expensive. Once they realize they have bought some sort of copy-design they do not feel that they should have bought the real ones, because they express an aversion to cultural snobbery and keep insisting that these chairs are not at all design.

Respondents seem to have readily adopted the meta-narrative of design being synonymous with art, but improvise a specific meaning around it which fits with their particular lifestyle. Since they identify themselves as a down-to-earth family who does not buy art, all the objects that might be well designed and functional are not categorized as design. In a publication on how art can help to bring order to experience, Csikszentmihalyi (1991) explains how the majority of consumers agree with artistic values created by social consensus, which they attach to visual elements, but alongside of which they create a set of personal references and meanings related to their private experience. In this sense Appadurai (1996: 56) speaks of ‘imagined vistas of mass mediated master narratives’. We can conclude in accordance with Appadurai that the consumer does appropriate the master narrative produced by the elite, new intermediaries, in a Bourdieu (1984) logic, but that the idea of ‘habitus’ needs to be understood as an imagined, fluctuating lifeworld rather than a fixed social class-bound experience and reference.

For the second group of respondents who do recount buying design, the artistic feature and thus master narrative is likewise accepted and expressed. For this group the high art status is not necessarily linked to non-functionality and is in many cases the precise reason why they buy into design. For them design has foremost a symbolic power on a first level as an affirmation of having good taste. On a second level the objects often represent an achieved desired lifestyle. For example, a particular piece of furniture brings a sense of emotional harmony, due to the fact that the object represents a goal that has been achieved. This can be exemplified by the way a couple living in a perfectly decorated loft, which they bought a couple of years ago, answer the question whether design adds a feeling of distinction towards their lifestyle.

Man: I personally don’t think so. I find it a pity that the majority of Belgians show no interest in their interior. If I look at the homes around me I can only conclude that the average person has very little taste. Even on a very low scale of just adding some taste to their living room or bedroom.

Woman: Of course if you want to buy a Van Severen or a Corbusier, that is exclusive because of its price, but design
can also be bought in IKEA and that is affordable for a large
group of people, so there is no reason for not paying attention
to good taste.

These respondents do not consider their own furniture as status-
laden, but as examples of their good taste. It is only on a second,
underlying level that they express the link between their successful
lifestyle and the design pieces in their home, since they do have the
exclusive Le Corbusier furniture and are saving their money to soon
buy Maarten Van Severen chairs. It is striking that all respondents
who do claim to buy design, also consider IKEA and other cheaper
designer brands as design. Most of these respondents do buy things
at IKEA, but many see this as a temporary solution in anticipation of
a high design replacement. What is noticeable in this group of con-
sumers is that the inherent contradiction between art and function,
emphasized by the first group, leads here to confusion about what is
design and what is not. A female architect, who temporarily rents a
loft while she is building her own house, speaks very negatively about
design in general and clearly does not want to be associated with it
anymore. She refers to design as a form of snobbery. But when she
is asked how she would describe the Arne Jacobsen Series 7 chair
she has in her own home, or the Robin Day chairs around her office
table, she realizes that she has an oppositional feeling about what
is design, and solves this contradiction by referring to the objects
she has at home as design classics. In the way she used the Juicy
Salif to exemplify her aversion for design, she uses the work of the
Eameses as an example of the design classics she loves.

A family, who lives in a large, renovated modern house with quite
a lot of design, use a chair by Joe Colombo to exemplify what they
understand by a good piece of design. They were introduced to the
work of Joe Colombo in the Vitra Design Museum. After they had
visited the museum they bought a Universale chair in a second-hand
shop. It stands in the living room against the wall, in between the
dining area and the sitting area. When they are asked why they do
not use it around the table with the other chairs the lady replies that
the chair is not comfortable to sit in, and even adds:

I don’t really like that chair, but I do admire Colombo.

Man: We discovered Colombo in the Vitra Museum in Bazem.
There was an exhibition of that Colombo and that was very
impressive. And then you feel a sort of sympathy for that guy,
also because he died so young.

When asked if they buy a lot of design in design shops the husband
replies in the negative:
The kind of design you see in those interior magazines? It’s always the same furniture you get to see. It’s like ... well you see it everywhere... It is the IKEA for the rich!

The fairly exclusive, and little mediatized design of Colombo symbolizes their distinctive lifestyle. They describe their house as eclectic, different and personal. The chair is a token for the cultural capital of being acquainted with a high designer as presented in a museum and distinguishes them from non-creative snobs who buy design as a status. At first glance these consumers do not see any burden with the not so functional design piece in their home. That is, for all, it represents far more a symbolic value than a use value. The man living in the highly renovated loft stresses the fact, that since his teens he has on his bucket list a loft, Le Corbusier furniture and the Barcelona chair by Mies van der Rohe. It is only the last piece on his wish list that he has not bought yet. The two LC2 sofas in the middle of the loft are the symbolic representation of his achievements in life: working hard and being able to buy the objects of his dreams.

McCracken (1988) introduces the idea of displaced meaning, referring to the fact that certain objects symbolize a whole lifestyle. The acquisition of such an object bridges the real and the ideal. These objects are so to speak tagged with symbolic values. Knowing the tag adds to one’s cultural capital, owning the object adds to one’s expressed lifestyle. In agreement, Colin Campbell (1987: 90) states that consumption is largely a form of imagination. Central to consumerism is the fantasy of a specific lifestyle. It is not so much the object in itself that the consumer desires, but rather the obtaining of ‘dreams and the pleasurable dramas, which they have already enjoyed in imagination’. As Baudrillard (1996) pointed out in 1968 in the *The System of Objects*, in an affluent society we are not consuming physical objects, but the idea of an object. The consumer is then driven by a psychological motivation rather than utility. And although Baudrillard, McCracken and Campbell stress the fact that consumption leads to an endless cycle of disappointments and new desires, most respondents who bought a specific design piece that represents a particular dream, did not give the impression that they had to buy much more to accomplish the dream. One or a few objects embody the whole dream. Although the interviewed consumers who buy high design mainly buy into the symbolic meaning, they are not to be seen as mere dupes. The owner of the Le Corbusier sofas for example, bought copies and claims he would never pay the price Cassina asks for a real LC2. Another respondent owning a loft in the same building, in explaining what design means for him, states:

There is design and there is design. There is design with crazy and odd forms, from an artist’s mind, which I mostly dislike. And then there is design like our sofa from Weba, of which people think we bought it in the Directeurswoning. I prefer this second kind of design.
For these respondents the design they own represents for the owner a successful, personal and tasteful lifestyle, but it does not represent mere show or economic status, linked to a brand logo. It is more a playful, momentary representation of their lifestyle. In general, all respondents see the objects they bought and the style of their house as a temporary state. It is part of a continuous process, where the doing seems to be more important than the being or the having.

This last and smallest group of informants does express a frustration of not being able to buy into design. There are only three families that experience this, all related to financial deficits and for two of the respondents the frustration is very much linked to the fact that they are renting a house and therefore are not able to build the house of their dreams. For these correspondents a modern home with a lot of design is what they dream of, and do not have, living themselves in a house with very little comfort (single glazing, no central heating, no option for any kind of renovation works...).

**Pimp your Home: Designing the Home as a Process**

Besides the actual consumption of designer goods, the act of arranging goods in a continuous process of adding new objects, reconsidering new styles, improving practicalities ... probably says more about why people are interested in design as a means to negotiate identity. Alison Clarke (2001) and others (for example Auslander, 1996; Cieraad, 1999; Hollows, 2008) have already stressed the importance of understanding the home as process rather than a place. The process is inherently linked with the continuous gap between the real and the ideal, even for the affluent. This research shows that most respondents, even if they claim to be fully happy in their home, still have other ideals. The young couple living in a fancy loft claim, for example, that one day, when they have children, they will move to a house in the country with a completely different style. The Chesterfield sofa, almost hidden in a corner of the loft, so as not to spoil the image of the hip loft, is a daily reminder of that ideal. In a similar way to McCracken (1988) who introduces the idea of displaced objects, Clarke looks into the role of refurbishing and redecorating the home within the trajectory of realizing one’s dreams, and of course this process has more underlying motivations than merely style-related ones.

Clarke’s conclusions are no doubt applicable to the Flemish households. However, this research wants to stress that the process Clarke is emphasizing has more to it than social aspirations and relations. As Shove et al in *The Design of the Everyday Life* (2007) have pointed out, most researchers focus on acquisition rather than use and too easily understand consumption as merely a social act. Besides the symbolic value of things, there is the actual using of the goods. Shove *et al* stress, in agreement with Clarke, the fact that modifying one’s home through the acquisition of new products is ‘an attempt to synchronize or manage gaps between existing
possessions and visions of future performances’, but add that research tends to overlook the pleasure of the creative process.

Ruth Madigan and Moira Munro (1996) researched in 1991 how commercially inspired styles and fashions have entered the private homes of middle-class families. They concluded that amongst their respondents there is not a strong involvement with design and style. Most respondents are aware of the changing fashions, but express an anxiety about not being able to buy into the latest trends. Not so much due to financial reasons, but rather because they feel they do not know how to style their house as such. The authors conclude at that time in Glasgow the view of consumption as pleasurable leisure activity and a means of self-expression is easily overdrawn (Madigan and Munro, 1996: 53). This research conducted in 2009 shows a different finding. Almost all participants claim to enjoy redecorating their home very much. The only two respondents who do not express any positive feelings, are two families who rent a house and who very much feel that they have been let down by the landlord. Their frustrations express that they feel that the house is not at all theirs. An overall feeling of alienation dominates this interview. Miller (2001) speaks in this respect of a haunted house. The other respondents experience a great joy not so much in the ownership of products, but in the creative process of making their house into a home, through designing their private spaces. For some that is to move around the furniture they already have, for others it is the complete renovation of the house. Daniel Miller (2011: 95) stresses in this respect that householders should be considered as designers and interior designers since they may care just as much about the aesthetics and the order of their display as for the content.

Since the 1980s our society has seen a continuous promotion of the creative, through the growing impact of the cultural industries and the state emphasis on a creative economy. As Featherstone (2007) pointed out, in a postmodern society ‘cultural intermediaries’ promote several different lifestyles and consumption possibilities throughout the media. In the last decades, designing one’s house, from the point of view of modernizing and styling a home according to the latest design fashion, has been mediated as the consumption of design products. Leslie and Riemer (2003), who analysed home-design magazines such as Elle Décor and Wallpaper* explain that contemporary magazines view the home as an extension of fashion, and of the body, implying that ‘it is acceptable for women to have an interest in the more masculine realm of design’. They also explain that these magazines promote modern aesthetics with an emphasis on urban rather than rural homes. The same can be said of the majority of home-decoration magazines in Flanders. Successful DIY television programmes not only spur consumers to change their homes, they also show how easily this can be done. Home decoration as a playful leisure pursuit has now, in Flanders, become commonplace.
There is no doubt that consumers have, since the 1990s, gradually been more and more exposed to modern aesthetics and styles within reach of the majority of consumers, but not just through the media. On the one hand a growing number of design shops has to be considered, but on the other the booming out-of-town stores like IKEA, who sell lifestyle concepts and show through realistic displays and mock-up interiors a range of different style possibilities, have been very influential. Both of these types of shops have taken part in the process of stimulating home improvement. No doubt their impact has been largely beyond the immediate customer. It is, however, important to also point out the less evident but vast role of the DIY shops in featuring ideal kitchens, bathrooms, wall decoration possibilities etc. in their showrooms (real or through pictures). It is striking in Flanders how the DIY shops like Brico and Gamma have upgraded their corporate identity and redesigned their style towards a more modern, ‘design’ look.

The strong influence of the mediated modern aesthetic style can be deduced from the designs of the researched households. In most of the homes at least one picture could be taken that would fit the pages of a home-decoration magazine. Only rarely would a home be fully decorated according to the standards of these magazines, but at least one area, which in some cases was a complete room, in others a corner, reflected the latest design styles. One respondent is particularly proud of the ‘accent wall’ she has created in her living room. This is one wall covered with a flashy colour or wallpaper. About this improvement she says: ‘this is very much in vogue lately, and it gives immediately a new, modern look to our home’. Once the walls were redone, a new sofa was bought and a television cabinet, ‘to get the picture right’.

Although in many cases the changing of one aspect of a particular area of the house led to changing more, the respondents hardly ever changed their complete home, due to financial restrictions. Negotiations have to be made on what will be changed and what will not and creativity has to be applied to mix and match the old styles with the new ones. Most respondents felt not only a pleasure in redecorating, but also expressed a certain pride over the success of their actions. Although the majority of the respondents do not consume high design, they all seem to be impregnated by a sort of design consciousness, which empowered them in controlling the creation of a home that reflects their personal taste, and their ability in creating it themselves. The doing seems to be of great importance.

Daniel Miller (2010: 96) explains, through a study of Jean-Sebastien Marcoux on people moving houses in Montreal, that besides the negative anxieties there seem to be a lot of reasons why people actually enjoy moving: ‘It allows them to reconstruct their personal biography as represented in memories of associated objects and thereby the sense the family has of itself’. Moving furniture around or changing the decoration in rooms has a similar positive
effect. It does not only give the respondents the feeling of actually being able to create a new style, but more profoundly that they are able to adapt to societal changes. An elderly respondent explains very proudly how the red modern sofa she recently bought gives her a feeling of respect from her grandchild. Although she is happy with her old furniture, that sofa, which is given a prominent place in the house, symbolizes the fact that she is not too old to deal with the changing society. She explains that she does not understand anything of computers, but that she and her husband took the bus to a furniture shop and decided on their own to buy the bright red, very modern, leather sofa. The sofa is not a symbol of good taste, or status, but a symbol of empowerment and of the capacity to change. Every little movement of an object or small change in the decor gives the respondents the power to refuse the daily rut. It expresses their agency over things, but likewise over the daily stress of ‘being lived’ quite quintessential of our society. It is considered as play, as opposed to the daily routine of work.

In the researched street, most young informants totally rebuilt their house after they bought it. Most of them did the renovation themselves, while they lived in the house. There were no architects or contractors involved. The respondents express being proud in having physically renovated one’s own house. This is very much in tune with Daniel Miller’s (1997) findings in his research on council houses, where the inhabitants make the house their own through physical engagement. Through one’s own labour a feeling of alienation evolves into a sense of belonging. Although the result does undeniably have symbolic meanings related to status and social distinction, it is for most respondents the actual accomplishment of creating a nice home for themselves that is important. Many of them state to be inspired in style but also in practicalities by home DIY programmes on television and are particularly proud of the fact that they created a modern ambience without the help of an expert. In talking about the renovations the respondents eagerly shared the process of decisions, mistakes, challenges, annoyances and, especially when the job is finished, total satisfaction.

Shove et al (2007) emphasize that very little research looks into the joy of the creative process. Theorists tend to be more interested in the underlying social meanings. This research, however, wants to emphasize that the creative process of the average consumer is allowed as much interest as that of the high-end artist. In our contemporary society the media is loaded with messages on creative empowerment. It is therefore not so unusual that the common man shows more interest in being creative.

When the respondents who bought the Joe Colombo chair were asked if that object could represent their lifestyle, as people who are always looking for new things to discover, they both firmly refused this idea. It is the lampshades, made out of empty tomato tins, and other stuff they have made themselves that represent who they are.
For them and for most of the young and middle-aged respondents, home is experienced as a creative laboratory. For the fireman living a few houses up the street, his home is constantly in process. When he is not painting the walls or rearranging the furniture, he is thinking about the colours he will apply next time. A young girl who shares a house with a couple of friends shows how she painted the ‘quite ugly’ second-hand cupboard in green and matched this with some affordable green IKEA items into an aesthetic ensemble.

Shove et al. (2007) highlight that practical competence is the central attraction to home decoration. This research would like to add that for the majority of the respondents it is not so much the competence of knowing how to paint or how to rebuild a kitchen cabinet, but the competence of designing the space that matters. Whereas the earlier DIY movement might have been driven through a technical empowerment, it seems that the current DIY is rather creativity- and style-driven. For one of the female respondents just moving around the furniture and creating a new picture frame arrangement is a satisfying act. Csikszentmihalyi (1994) points out in *Flow* that an optimal experience is not attained by the skills we actually have, but determined by the skills we think we have. Flow, or the feeling of optimal satisfaction or happiness is autotelic, meaning that it is not the expectation of the future benefit that counts, but the doing itself that generates this feeling. Being satisfied in doing a DIY job, or a simple restyling of the home by moving around furniture implies that the practitioner somehow has the belief that what he or she is doing, is good. As Csikszentmihalyi (1994: 56) explains:

> The artist might not have a visual image of what the finished painting should look like, but when the picture has progressed to a certain point, she knows whether this is what she wanted to achieve or not. And a painter who enjoys painting must have internalized criteria for ‘good’ or ‘bad’ so that after each brush stroke she can say: ‘Yes, this works; no, this doesn’t’. Without such internal guidelines, it is impossible to experience flow.

The media interest in DIY subjects on home decoration and improvement, and the commercially aimed attention to aesthetic ensembles in home furnishing stores as well as DIY shops, seems to have given the respondents the idea that they are able to design their homes themselves. This empowerment leads to the feeling that they have control over situations. Csikszentmihalyi (1994: 61) continues:

> …what people enjoy is not the sense of being in control, but the sense of exercising control in difficult situations. It is not possible to experience a feeling of control unless one is willing to give up the safety of protective routines. Only when a doubtful outcome is at stake, and one is able to influence that outcome, can a person really know whether she is in control.
Several respondents express the doubts they had throughout the process of changing things and the pleasure from the outcome. Others express the fact that they just like to try something out, and if it is no good, no-one’s leg got broken. Satisfaction in acquiring knowledge is a primal draw. Shove et al (2007) point out the importance of product evolution in enabling amateur home decorators both technically and practically, and, in the same way, this research study aims to add the role of design mediation as a process in empowering the consumer. Working on and improving the home allows the consumer to experience control over the alienating effects of contemporary society.

Charles Leadbeater and Paul Miller (2004), the begetters of the Pro-Am revolution, claim that there is a growing number of what they call professional amateurs. The most popular activities of this growing group are gardening and DIY. They state that one of the reasons more people get involved in creative work has to do with the fact that through DIY activities people ‘get far more intense, pleasurable and satisfying experiences from their activities than they do from work, formal learning or passive consumption. Pro-Ams feel more themselves and more fulfilled when they engage in these activities’.

In conjunction with the findings of this research a reference to Alan Warde (2005) is useful, in a quest to understand design consumption as a process, rather than a mere acquisition of status-laden goods. It seems that design practices, rather than the individual desire to buy high design creates wants. Warde explains this through the practice of motorsports. The same can be said about redecorating the house. The majority of design consumption results from the engaging in the practice of decorating/designing the home, rather than as a direct result of taste or choice dictated by status aims. This approach leads to a different perspective, as Warde (2005: 146) puts it, in general on a shifting view of consumption in general:

... attending less to individual choices and more to the collective development of modes of appropriate conduct in everyday life. The analytic focus shifts from the insatiable wants of the human animal to the instituted conventions of collective culture, from personal expression to social competence, from mildly constrained choice to disciplined participation. From this angle the concept of ‘the consumer’, a figure who has bewitched political and social scientists as well as economists, evaporates. Instead the key focal points become the organization of the practice and the moments of consumption enjoined. Persons confront moments of consumption neither as sovereign choosers nor as dupes.

**Generative Design**
To evolve from a *Push* (value-driven, downstream) to a *Pull* (bottom-up value chains) business model, Michel Avital (2011: 54) promotes
‘generative design’, meaning that designers should design systems ‘that are conducive to the ability of a person or a group to produce new configurations and possibilities…’. For Avital, a generative infra-structure is evocative, engaging, adaptive and open. It is interesting to see that some of the companies who have been empowering consumers also focus on these four aspects. Take IKEA as a prime example. Shopping at IKEA is a fun experience, where the consumer is pushed into creation, through a semi-open model. The website, for example, has the means for every consumer to design his own kitchen through the modular system. Although IKEA is only open within its own system and thus not modular at all, it does, however, give its consumers the feeling that they are the creators of their own home (Garvey, 2011). In a sense, IKEA could be considered an easily accessible Fablab, even inspiring hackers to add some feeling of openness to the system. This research shows that the ‘responsible contemporary consumer is eager to co-create and buy into generative design’.

Also, the value-driven consumer is likely to show a growing interest in the open design movement. Several open design projects by Belgian designers (e.g. Thomas Lommeé, Unfold) and companies (e.g. Extremis) have recently received large media attention in Belgian and international hip design and architecture magazines. As explained, for the status-laden consumer, the idea of an object is essential and the hipness of the so-called DIY/T (Do-It-Yourself/Together) trend is likely to attract the design-aware consumer. Where Alessi products, Le Corbusier sofas, lofts and Eames chairs were once high on the bucket list of these consumers, in the near future it is easily imaginable that a rapid prototyper might become the symbol of their achievements. And with it, the risk that open design will evolve into the design-art scene, as is already exemplified by Lidewij Edelkoort’s recent Pop-up Generation exhibition in the Museum of the Image in Breda.

Conclusion
Although the media has been stressing the consumption of design things, this research shows that the consumer is in fact more inspired by design as a process. There is a growing interest in the DIY practice of designing one’s home as a dynamic negotiation between the real and the ideal. Consumption as a practice can be understood within the logic of social stratification and self-identity, but should likewise be seen as an empowerment of the consumer. Due to the mediation of the multiplicity of practices of home decoration, the consumption of design through the practice of designing one’s home leads to a sense of well-being or a degree of happiness through self-deployment. The role of the consumption of design is today more about being through doing, than being through having. Although open design seems still a small, but developing new phenomena within design discourse, it has numerous links with DIY movements...
and is at this time in history coinciding with the general interest of 
the active design consumer. Strangely enough, it is precisely the 
consumer who dissociates himself from design who seems to be 
closely linked to the newest design movement. Where in history de-
sign professionals used to deter the consumer from getting involved 
in the amateur pastime of DIY, the current open designer and the 
active consumer both seem to focus rather on the evocative and the 
engagement of physically being able to sculpt part of their personal 
environment. We can, therefore, speak of an empowerment rather 
than a pastime. If and when these two groups collide, design prac-
tice could enter a real phase of co-creation and might lead to realistic 
bottom-up business models, since producer and consumer seem to 
have become one.

References
Avital, M. (2011). ‘The generative bedrock of open design’. In van 
Abel, Bas, Evers, Lucas, Klaassen, Roel and Troxler, Peter (eds), 
Amsterdam: BIS Publishers, pp. 48–58.
Bouchez, H. (2008). ‘Could the recent success of design be 
based on a photographic misapprehension?’ Proceedings of 
the Networks of Design Conference, Falmouth, 3–6 December 
2011].
Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
Clarke, A. (2001). ‘The aesthetics of social aspiration’. In Miller, D. 
(ed.), Home Possessions: Material Culture behind Closed Doors. 
Design Issues, 8(1): 26–34.
of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self. Cambridge: Cambridge 
University Press.


**Biography**

*Hilde Bouchez* is lecturer of Design History and Contemporary Design at Sint-Lucas, Department of Architecture, Interior Architecture and Interior Design, Brussels/Ghent (Belgium) and MA thesis supervisor at Design Cultures, VU Amsterdam. She is also a freelance advisor for different design initiatives. Currently, as design manager for Designregio Kortrijk, she is involved in the launch of an Innovation Hub/Fablab in Kortrijk (Belgium) within the European PROUD project.

**Address for Correspondence**

*Hilde Bouchez*, Kliniekstraat 90, 9050 Gentbrugge, Belgium.
Tel: +32 475894436
Email: hilde.bouchez@pandora.be