

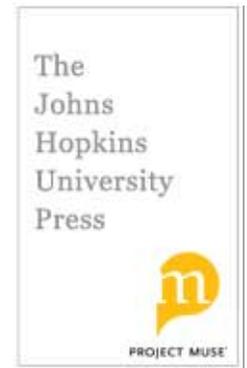


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Do It Yourself: Home Improvement in Twentieth-Century
America (review)

Ronald Jager

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Do It Yourself: Home Improvement in Twentieth-Century America.

By Carolyn M. Goldstein. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998.

Pp. 109; illustrations, notes/references, bibliography. \$17.95.

For several decades my wife and I have been intermittently restoring a two-hundred-year-old farmhouse. Nothing unusual about that. In the process it has become our home—as it did for two previous families, each for several generations. They, too, did it themselves. The farmer who built this little house back in 1780 just did what every farmer of the time did: cut the logs and hewed them, placed the foundation rocks and dug the well, put up posts and beams, curried his oxen for hair to mix with the lime plaster, split thin hemlock boards for lath. Glass and nails, lime and bricks he imported, but not much else. And he did the work himself. Nothing unusual about that. So it was, all across rural America: the pioneer families who moved to the frontier, wherever it was, whoever they were, were the real prototype of the American “do-it-yourselfer.”

Unfortunately, they are forgotten in Carolyn Goldstein’s book. Too bad, since it is a good book—if you overlook its parochial assumption that America has historically been an urban and suburban society, the lives and works of rural folks incidental to the national ethos. Okay, you have to start somewhere, and this book starts in suburban, middle-class America at the turn of the century. With a wealth of wonderfully nostalgic graphics, it

sketches the private impulses, social forces, needs, consumer fantasies, and marketing strategies that converged in the 1940s and 1950s as the “do it yourself” movement. Rich on marketing, the book is thin on cultural issues.

Readers may find themselves recalling their earliest encounters with the term “do-it-yourself.” For me it was as a Michigan farm boy in the late 1940s, leafing through the magazines that came to our home: I recall being puzzled by the accents of value attached to the term. Do it yourself? How else did things normally get done? This was a movement? The book does not linger over the ironies of its very suburban point of view.

And, of course, it was a movement, of sorts. Turn-of-the-century periodicals (*Popular Mechanics*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, many others) had created an atmosphere for the movement, and so had the Sears, Roebuck catalog (addressed mainly to rural America, incidentally). “World War II and its social and economic legacy accelerated the growth of the emerging home-improvement infrastructure and launched a widespread do-it-yourself craze in the United States. The war provided men and women with technical skills, confidence, and a predisposition toward using their resourcefulness to realize their dreams of domestic living. It exposed Americans at home and abroad to new materials and construction techniques” (p. 31). Exposed them also, of course, to new advertising; and capturing and reproducing these old do-it-yourself graphics is the book’s real strength. A concluding chapter, alas too brief, “Love Affair With the Past,” links the do-it-yourself movement with the home-restoration impulse that became prominent in the 1960s. No big news here, but many poignant reminders of how Americans have been in love with their homes.

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