

# Czech (Post)Socialist DIY-Material Culture as Vernacular Art: Inscribed Narratives and Their Urban Materialisation<sup>1</sup>



Tereza Hodúlová<sup>2</sup>

The aim of this paper is to rethink the narratives surrounding Czech (post)socialist Do-It-Yourself material culture (DIY) and to explore how it has become a medium for symbolic expression in urban and rural spaces after the (post)socialist transformation. Employing theoretical frameworks of material culture (Miller, 1998; Sennett, 2008), this paper argues that Czech (post)socialist DIY material culture should be conceptualised as “vernacular art”, an art which harbours and triggers memories of the (socialist) past as well as reflects wider contemporary social relationships, the exchange of materials and ideas and the political-economic milieu. Artefacts as vernacular art represent social, cultural and political dis/continuities in urban and rural spaces brought about by the (post)socialist transformation, which can also act as symbolic manifestations in the sense of the Lefebvre’s social production of space and time (Lefebvre, 1991). Based on my research, vernacular art made by handy/wo/men is a multi-layered concept, which manifests time, space, creative and affective dimensions. Simultaneously, it is a micro-spatial practice driven by authority and autonomy that reshapes urban/rural spaces.

## Keywords

artefact; Czech DIY culture; material culture; vernacular art

## INTRODUCTION

The publicly visible part of the Czech DIY-world consists of diverse self-built artefacts ranging from houses, garden houses, greenhouses, smokehouses and bird-houses to all sorts of decorations and small gadgets. Handmade artefacts can be seen during almost any walk in the Czech countryside as well as in cities. Such manifestations are considered to be a natural part of the Czech rural and urban space, making them a meaningful object of critical anthropological inquiry.

DIY as a vernacular art developed in Czechoslovakia mainly before 1989, a time which was characterized by an unstable economic situation, a lack of consumer goods and services and an unsatisfactory quality of available commodities. As such, Czech DIY culture is mainly associated with the socialist era. However, the present Czech DIY-material culture is not merely a remnant of the past. Self-created

---

1 Tento text vznikl jako výstup projektu *Kutilství a jeho význam pro českou národní a kulturní identitu: současný stav, socio-kulturní a historicko-politické souvislosti, typologie a využití potenciálu pro místní rozvoj* (NAKI II DG18PO2OVV022).

2 Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences; contact: [tereza.hodulova@soc.cas.cz](mailto:tereza.hodulova@soc.cas.cz)



artefacts are still present across the Czech rural and urban space and handy/wo/men<sup>3</sup> still continue to repair or modify them, as well as create new artefacts. This resonates with the work of Kuznetsov and Paulos as they claim that “although modern societies oppose the principle of self-reliance with mass production and consumer economy (...), people all over the world continue to create and modify objects with their own hands” (2010, p. 1). Besides its material form, Czech DIY-material culture includes diverse processes of thinking, creating, making and self-help; it generates an intimate and conscious connection between hand and head. Thus, handmade artefacts need to be researched as not only harbouring and triggering memories of the (socialist) past but also as reflections of the wider political-economic milieu, including contemporary social relationships and the exchange of materials, skills and ideas.

The study at hand is based on ethnographic research (interviews and observations, see the empirical section for details) conducted in the north-western Bohemia region in the Czech Republic, namely in the city of Cheb and its surroundings. While carrying out the ethnographic fieldwork for this paper, it was necessary to define what constitutes self-made artefacts and therefore I identified the term “vernacular art” as a useful concept to be applied to the local context. I argue that “vernacular art” is a term suitable for conceptualising Czech (post)socialist<sup>4</sup> DIY-material culture because it allows us to grasp the multiple ways in which it can be studied. Based on the ethnographic data, the concept of vernacular art implicitly includes an affective dimension (feelings and experiences) and reflects the time-space of Czech DIY-material culture. “Vernacular” refers to temporality, history and cultural specificity, while “art” refers to creativity: instinct and skills captured in space as well as originality and improvisation. Vernacular art can also express opposition to authority through its challenging of the hegemonic values of market, capital, design, professionalism and social expectations. Moreover, vernacular art gives a tangible form to various subjective ideas. On a conceptual level, attention to vernacular art can help illuminate the ways in which different social, cultural and historical processes are manifested. A detailed development of the concept of vernacular art in anthropological debates about Czech DIY-material culture can provide a profound understanding of the interlinkages between creativity (skills and improvisations) and affective-personal narratives, as well as social relationships, exchanges of materials and ideas and the political-economic milieu.

To analyse Czech (post)socialist DIY-material culture as vernacular art, I combine two theoretical perspectives. The first is the theoretical framework of material culture (Miller, 1998; Sennett, 2008), which moves away from a focus on the aesthetics of artefacts to reveal their significance for understanding important social, historical and political relationships. As Miller suggests, the generality of materiality must be

---

3 Since my aim is to draw attention to the implicit connection of mental aspects with the physical and to disrupt the socially anchored idea of a handyman as being exclusively masculine, I use the term handy/wo/men to refer to the people engaging in the production of self-created artefacts.

4 The study refers to the period during and after socialism; thus, I use the term (post)-socialism.

accomplished by another strategy that explores the specificity of material domains and the way form itself is employed to become the fabric of cultural worlds (Miller, 1998, p. 6). The other theoretical perspective I employed is Lefebvre's social production of space (Lefebvre, 1991), which sees material culture as a tool for exploring the power relations that represent social, cultural and political dis/continuities in urban and rural spaces. From this perspective, I attempt to show how the broader historical, social and political context of Czech (post)socialist space can be viewed in connection with Czech vernacular art as forms through which certain value systems have been transformed over many decades.

This paper proceeds as follows: First, I define the field of material culture and DIY culture (Miller, 1998; Sennett, 2008; Wells, 2007) and connect it with Lefebvre's (1991) theoretical perspective of the production of space; second, I frame the issue within the Czech historical context and demonstrate on the basis of the ethnographic data how vernacular art can be studied by looking at the case of two gardens in the Czech north-western region while distinguishing vernacular art from craft and art; finally, I explain why the term vernacular art should be used for the conceptualisation of (post)socialist Czech DIY-material culture.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

From the homes we live in to the practical gadgets we use, material things and objects surround us in our everyday life. Wells addresses this by asking, "Given the centrality of the human subject to the history of the social sciences, why focus on objects and artefacts?" (2007, p. 137). In fact, objects and artefacts play an intimate role in our life and that is why they have recently become one of the vanguard elements in contemporary anthropology. In this section, I combine the approaches of "material culture" and "DIY culture" and attempt to describe their common thread and differences on the basis of categories of material things-artefacts and human subject-handy/wo/men. I then move to interconnect DIY-material culture with Lefebvre's (1991) perspective on the production of space.

According to Ingold (2013), there are two faces of materiality. The first one has a raw material character and encompasses the physical and visible setting of an artefact. The other face shows materiality to be the fulfilment of culture and history; it is the "socially situated agency of human beings who, in appropriating this physicality for their purposes, are alleged to project upon it both design and meaning in the conversion of naturally given raw material into the finished forms of artefact" (Ingold, 2013, p. 27). Miller (1983) focuses on material culture turn from archeology to material culture in the contemporary West. He perceives contemporary material culture as a social anthropology of consumption. According to him, material culture is an integrative field, exploring a core relationship between objects and people across disciplines (Miller, 1983, p. 7). Everything has some meaning and "everything matters" (Miller 1998). Clarke (2008) suggests that material culture is "integral to the construction and negotiation of social worlds and identities" (2008, p. 73). At the same time, material culture is studied to understand the relationship between people,





their built environment, artefacts and practices (Hicks, Beaudry, 2010). It explores the cultural and personal meaning that objects acquire within a certain context. The meaning of an object is not experienced linguistically and yet it needs a medium of communication to express it; in short, the story has to be translated. The place of narrative is fundamental to the development of identity and to situating ourselves in relationship to others (Hinchman, Hinchman 1997, p. 16). To understand the narrative, we need to focus on both material artefacts and human subjects. Artefacts, according to Miller, are a “means which we give form to, and come to an understanding of, ourselves, others, or tractions such as the nation or the modern” (Miller, 2007, p. 167). He argues that material culture does not distinguish systematically between a natural world and an artefactual one, nor is it defined in relation to its artificiality or intentionality: “The micro-element of conscious decision between perceived possibilities can be attributed to intentionality, but the alternatives from which we choose, and the strategies which inform our taste in objects, are usually derived from larger forces” (Miller, 2007: 168).

Material culture might be seen as embodying all objects of a given space, their setting, their interaction with people (Lefebvre, 1991; de Certeau, 1998) and “the vantage points from which bodies see objects and are seen by objects” (Wells, 2007, p. 137). Bodies or, in other words, human subjects as *Homo fabers*, makers or crafters are those who make artefacts and contribute to producing some of their meaning. Arendt (1998) introduces *Homo faber*—man as maker—as the image of men and women doing an everyday sort of work or creation that takes place on a local, everyday scale. According to her, *Homo faber* can include every handmade process of a maker or crafter, yet the terms are not entirely interchangeable and exact (Arendt, 1998). Ingold (2016) puts emphasis on the process of creating and its time dimension when he describes a maker as one “Who stands at the threshold, easing the persons and materials in his or her charge across from one phase of life and growth to the next” (2016, p. 4). On the other hand, a craftsman represents the special human condition of being engaged with three dimensions of skill, commitment and judgement (Sennett, 2008, p. 20). According to this definition, a maker is characterised by the practices, the process of creating and instinct, while a craftsman captures the presence of tradition, skills and certain rules which can be regarded as having a specific type of authority. A rejection of authority and a passive way of life, an active approach to the world and conscious or unconscious autonomy is present in the logic of Do-It-Yourself (DIY) culture<sup>5</sup>. DIY is understood as one’s own production of things for one’s own use in free time. DIY is also based on the ability to repurpose and/or reuse materials and tools. It is any creation, modification or repair of objects without the aid of paid professionals (Kuznetsov, Paulos 2010) and commercial motives. DIY is about “Using anything you can get your hands on to shape your own cultural entity: your own version of whatever you think is missing in mainstream culture” (Spencer, 2008, p. 11). In this

---

5 The term “DIY” emerged in North America at the end of the Second World War to describe hobbies conducted in one’s free time and as an alternative expansion on the collaborative economy, based on the sharing of skills, tools and spaces. In the 1970s, DIY in North America and Western Europe gradually gained social and political status (Reid, 2014).

sense, DIY is related to active and alternative movements (self-expression, lifestyle, activism, protest).

Do-It-Yourself is, in the most general sense, an effort to create and/or transform things and handle them according to the handy/wo/men's own ideas. In addition, DIY is also a reaction. It responds to handy/wo/men's own desires and internal needs, which in itself can be a reaction to the external space (Miller, 2007). There is a range of micro-spatial urban practices that are reshaping urban spaces (Iveson, 2013) and DIY is one of them. Leadbeater (2003) describes DIY as a vibrant part of democratic culture, the culture of amateurism (2003, p. 24); furthermore, Miller describes it as everyday settings, where the nature of the experiences offered by amateur activities provides possibilities for "positive social reproduction" (1987, p. 17). According to Wells (2007), there are two ways that DIY cultures are formed — it can be determined through external forces (e.g., via the government or the market) or it can be generated from below by internal needs or desires. According to Wells (2007), Lefebvre's theory of the production of space can be seen as a useful framework for thinking about material culture and visual artefacts across urban and rural space.

According to Lefebvre (1991), space, as a fundamental complex of our lived experience, is the contemplation of social, physical and mental spaces, which are constantly being shaped by both social and material practices. Every experience is a complex comprised of three interrelated aspects: spatial practice, representation of space and spaces of representation (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 38). The first — spatial practice — represents a spatial set of characteristics of each social formation, places of everyday social activities of moving, labouring, playing, relaxing or basically "doing something". It assumes the use of the body and sensory organs. According to Lefebvre, in capitalism, spatial practice connects the routine of everyday life with ways, networks, work and private life. Spatial practice is never determined by the prevailing system (religious, political, etc.), yet through its existence and action, different groups become fragmented. Second, the representation of space, is the dominant space constructed out of signs, codes, symbols, codifications and is conceived by engineers, architects and urban planners (Lefebvre, 1991). Representation is an abstract form of logic and knowledge, and "the ideological content of codes, theories, and the conceptual depictions of space" (Shields, 1999, p. 163). Although it is abstract, it has a practical impact on special practices and (material) space production. The last interrelated complex, representational space, is a space of subjective lived experience through its associated images and symbols, and hence it is the space of inhabitants, users or inscribers (e.g. artists). Representational spaces are usually described as alternative spaces lived by those who produced the space in their alternative way.

For Lefebvre (1987, p. 30), space is a "social and political product", which has been shaped and modified by political elements. That is why space can be read as a medium of struggle. Today, more than ever, space is dominated by the capitalist structure: social space is distributed according to class and the political economy of space is based on the idea of scarcity (Martins, 1982). In giving dominance to space, Lefebvre has reduced the importance of time: "With the advent of modernity, time has vanished from social space" (Lefebvre, 1991, 95). As Unwin (2000) outlines as one of the critics of Lefebvre's arguments concerning the production of space and time, space must be





conceptualised mutually with time and any sustained analysis of society or culture should incorporate an understanding in terms of space-time (2000, p. 22). Apart from the political dimension, the dimension of time puts an emphasis on historical and natural elements and on the process and practice of creating. Likewise Kinkaid (2019) attempts to revise Lefebvre's vision of differential embodiment as a political and spatial practice. From his point of view, Lefebvre's theory should be articulate from the perspective of different kinds of bodies "marked by race, gender, sexuality, disability, and other forms of social difference—encounter space differently, embodying and enacting its ruptures and contradictions the role" (Kinkaid, 2019, p. 168). If space is a product of the human body, it also takes into consideration the relevance of how, for example, gender is performed in the context of the production of space. Thus, the concept of the production of space can be used as a framework through which space can be grasped in relation to all — through, personal, social and political-economic structures (authority/autonomy) — and through which it can represent dis/continuities in urban and rural spaces over time.

In spite of the many definitions and interest levels, the importance of studying vernacular art lies primarily in the ability to link the physical characteristic of the things — material artefacts — with their creators — handy/wo/men. Whereas material culture (Miller 1998; Senett 2008) embodies personal, social and cultural aspects, DIY culture (Wells, 2007) focuses on the materialisation of an idea as manifestation (Lefebvre, 1991), the process of creating skills and practices with a focus on the dimension of time.

## VERNACULAR (ART) IN ANTHROPOLOGY

Although the concept of "vernacular" has been studied in different fields, the term is not universally known or accepted in the social sciences (Vellinga, 2011). The category of vernacular is often assigned to the "folk" realm — to folk traditions, folk culture or homogeneity of people in contrast to modern everyday life (Revil, 2010). Anthropological studies refer to the distinction between "traditional and modern", between "local and global", "national and international", "handmade and industrial" or "authentic and mass produced" (Vellinga, 2011; Oliver, 1997). Most of the anthropological studies of the vernacular focus on building traditions, on vernacular architecture in rural areas like farmhouses or generally on "architecture without architects" (Rudofsky, 1977). The interest in vernacular architecture in the sense of "architecture of people" emerged during the second half of the 20th century (Vellinga, 2011), where studies focused mainly on the cultural embodiment of the architecture of "others", on design, the building process, the use of local materials and traditional technologies. Vernacular architecture is defined as "the authentic product of a specific place and people, that is produced by non-expert ordinary people through shared knowledge passed down over time" (Brown, Maudlin, 2012, p. 340). Besides architecture, vernacular refers to the entire range of material culture and not only to pre-industrial, colonial and rural expressions, but to all self-built types that are not part of mainstream culture. According to Oliver (2006), the great diversity of the vernacu-

lar tradition reflects the variety of cultures within the broad spectrum of people and places, the specificity of which depends on their local environments. The essential feature of all interpretations is that vernacular refers to the authenticity of the object as a sign of its maker, to the social context of things “built by hand” (May, 2010) and to the things “made by people” (Oliver, 1997).

Talking about art from the anthropological perspective, amateur, authentic and non-commodified art “built by hand” and “made by people” is represented by the “folk-art” paradigm. Folk art is primitive or naive, rather than popular, and is a symbol of traditional and collective culture, which represents an effort to identify the self-taught (Russel, 2011). Folk art is shaped by traditional methods perpetuated from generation to generation. Folk artists create mostly within the bounds of the habitual pattern, and they have a strong sense of the past (Salzmann, 1999, p. 297). Another related field, where tradition is used to signify the historical and unchanging basis for their status and customs, traditional practices are assumed to have greater validity than non-traditional practices, is “hand-craft”, (Jarman, 2004, p. 134). Hand-crafts, as embodiments of this tradition, are things which should be stable, which should preserve certain rules or similarities across space and time. The difference between folk artist and crafts(wo)man is, that crafts(wo)man is required to have certain skills and use precise techniques, because making is a profession for them. Somewhere between “folk art” and “craft” there is the field of “outsider art” or “vernacular art”. From the anthropological perspective, outsider art claims a particular social position of people, who are isolated from the mainstream world, who do not consider themselves as artists, who lack both formal artistic skills and a desire for mainstream recognition (Wojcik, 2008, p. 179). Derived from the Latin “vernaculus” (*native*), vernacular express something that is “home born” and different from the expression that are associated with a position of power and dominant institution. Vernacular designates actual language “in use”, everyday forms such art, architecture, food, music, costumes which are native to a particular place or people (Wojcik, 2008, p. 180).

## EMPIRICAL SECTION

This section deals with the empirical part of the research.<sup>6</sup> Based on the interviews with handy/wo/men, it shows how we can conceptualise Czech (post)socialist DIY/material culture as vernacular art. I first briefly describe the historical context of Czech (post)socialist space and time and place it within the context of material and

---

6 The research was placed in two socio-economically diverse regions — an economically strong region on the one hand, the capital city of Prague, and the relatively poorer North-western region, an area with multiple structural handicaps. This paper is based on data collected in Northwestern region, mainly in the city Cheb and its surrounding. Me and my colleagues used a combination of qualitative research methods, namely interviews and observation. Initially, we focused on examining, identifying and classifying the material manifestations of DIY culture, especially those visible from the street’s public spaces.



DIY culture. Next, we introduce the scheme of vernacular art and its dimensions and how it can be distinguished from craft and art.

Czechoslovakia before 1989 was characterised by an unstable economic situation, a lack of consumer goods and services and an unsatisfactory quality of available commodities. The modern home under state socialism was more and more tied to and dependent on state and municipal networks. According to Reid (2014, p. 90), the “lack of the freedom to participate in the design of urban living environment is seen as a fundamental obstacle to establishing a relation between self-identity and place, where place is defined as a site of meaningful identity and immediate agency: that is, to make oneself “at home” in modernity”. Although one might assume that the socialist economy of scarcity would have led to a dampening of creativity and subjectivisation, it was precisely a period of untouchability that created a remarkable wave of improvisation and ingenuity in the search for alternative solutions. According to Reid, “the cultural practices associated with shortages can be and are — unexpectedly diverse” (Reid, 2014, p. 93). Being a passive recipient could be overcome through the act of creativity (Miller, 1987). Local improvisation as an adaptation to state-controlled consumption and production became the culture of everyday life. Such improvisation took on many forms, and one of them was materialised in the form of vernacular art. Vernacular art as a materialisation of local improvisation reflected the relation between the state and the individuals, between production and consumption, between authority and autonomy. It blurs and breaks down the binary opposition of production and consumption, work and leisure, expert and amateur (Reid, 2014, p. 99). In this context, homes and gardens became territories for the expression of improvisation on social and political settings. The lack of goods and materials characteristic of this time, prompted a proliferation of creativity, self-help and DIY activities across Czech urban and rural spaces and created the new micro-spatial urban practices that reshaped both urban and rural spaces into spaces of authority and autonomy. Houses, garages, greenhouses and practical gadgets built in this way, as well as decorations made from recycled materials, became an indivisible part of the Czech (post)socialist space.

---

In practice, this meant walking around and looking closely at areas such as gardens, windows, and exteriors. An emphasis was placed on publicly accessible buildings in visible areas (window decorations, outdoor decorations, private and community gardens, garden settlements, self-built buildings like houses, cottages, etc.) and objects which seemed to be self-built. During 2018–2019 we conducted dozens of interviews with handy(wo)mans, collecting and analysing stories about the relationship between them and artefacts about the motivations, inspirations and practices of the creation. We also conducted archival research in order to gain an understanding of the historical context, focusing especially on magazines. For the purpose of this article, I focus on two different narratives behind artefacts. These narratives contain topics that have emerged across subsequent interviews, therefore, they serve as appropriate example of (post)socialist Czech vernacular art.



## COFFEE UNDER THE EIFFEL TOWER IN NORTHERN BOHEMIA

It's a sunny Sunday as I walk around a cottage settlement in Northern Bohemia. It's not my first time here, so I know exactly where I'm headed. My goal is to finally catch up with a cottage owner whose cottage at first sight looks different than the others: the dominant material in his garden is actually glass. The glass planes and old windows of all possible shapes and sizes form in their various clusters and combinations distinct artefacts. The front part of the house is glass, as is the garden shed and the five greenhouses of various shapes and sizes. I approach the house from the street in front — the gate is open, although there is no one to be seen in the garden. A neighbour who is watering his garden advises me to go around to the back. I walk around a few cottages and approach the house from the back. There I finally come across an older woman, where else than in the greenhouse, who I address. Immediately she takes off her gardening gloves and invites me over. She offers me coffee and a seat in the wooden pergola made from various small intertwined laths. I sit down and have a look around. In that moment I am still unaware that I am sitting under the Eiffel Tower. A white wooden house with glass elements towers dominantly over the garden like a cathedral. I look all around and see everything from a different perspective than the one afforded from outside behind the fence. Apart from the small and other even smaller glass artefacts, I can also see wooden totem poles, a birdhouse, flower pots, decorations, a wooden shack, a beautifully attended garden plot and bushes trimmed in the shape of a bear and a bird — all of which are completely handmade and produced with love and DIY care.

Husband and wife sit down next to me in the pergola. Their talk of DIY is also about the story of their lives. Their narrative reflects the limits and obstacles embodied in the adverse period of (post)socialist Czechoslovakia, a lack of materials and services, a lack of building experience, but also enthusiasm for the cause — a desire to overcome obstacles and find alternatives. Their story comprises several dimensions of DIY culture. (Post)socialist Czechoslovakia reflects dimensions of time and space that are stirred up by DIY culture. On the one hand, external circumstances define the dimension of authority in the form of little to no building experience and an ignorance of the process and a lack of money, material and limited services; on the other hand, the dimension of personal distinctness and a conscious need for independence is expressed by the zeal of youth, the desire to try and the ability to improvise and find solutions, methods and alternatives by means of self-help.

*Nothing was available back then. We were young and in love and wanted to build a cottage, a place where we could be together. However, we weren't skilled in any way and didn't know how to work with the few materials which we had.*

The Doubek's did not have any previous building experience and yet they built everything on their own without professional help. Mrs. Doubek was a teacher and Mr. Doubek's profession concerned technical designs. They found building materials wherever possible and gradually started storing them, which of course had an influence on the amount of time that it took them to build their cottage; they transported





**FIGURE 1:** The Doubek's little glass house.  
Source: Author's archive.

bricks and cinder blocks, for example, from old houses that had been torn down. The only source of inspiration that they had (and the only available source for different building methods) was a magazine subscription to *Urob si sám* (*Do-It-Yourself*), according to which they were able to construct their roof. Practicing DIY and thinking about how to utilise all of the left over materials was at first primarily a necessity, although gradually it became a voluntary way how to spend free time. Mrs. Doubek described it as something that became a way of life. Their DIY projects did not even cease after the Velvet Revolution — quite the contrary, as Mrs. Doubek remarked that “today’s commercial times” hardly resulted in a decline in DIY work. In fact, the greenhouses in their garden are only a few years old.

*Today, everyone wants plastic. You can buy a ready-made greenhouse at the store and simply set it up in your garden. Of course, there will be seven similar greenhouses in any given village, so how will your friends be able to recognize yours apart from the others?*

For the Doubeks, creating therefore embodies both a particular stance as well as self-expression. I was interested in finding out where the Doubeks found so many different window panes for the building of their greenhouses.

*There is a window company located in the neighbouring village. Today people want plastic windows, so the company simply breaks the good old wooden ones. So it occurred to us to go there and inquire about them. And it just so happened that they were willing to give*

*us the old windows. Of course, they weren't for free, but we only had to give them a bottle of alcohol in return. So if you're not lazy, you can really get anything you need from the surrounding area without having to buy anything.*



The Doubek's imprint on the artefacts which they create a certain stance or lifestyle (zero waste, recycling) and also a piece of themselves (the need to distinguish themselves from others). An original idea is born in the head of the DIYer and their hands then provide it with an authentic form. First and foremost, Mrs. Doubek sees DIY work as a natural part of their lives today, although originally it was "necessary" in order to overcome a lack of freedom (authority in the form of the political system, authority in the form of a lack of knowledge/experience) and gradually it became a voluntary necessity, an inner need to create something with one's own hands that, in turn, is transformed into a feeling of independence and freedom (autonomy).

*There's no denying the fruits of our labour. Of course, it's not perfect or as good as work done by professionals or as something that can be bought from the store. Nevertheless, I'm very conscious of the fact that I am able to create something from so little that is according to my own specifications — this is what I really like about DIY work.*

The Doubek's DIY narrative also attests to their relationship, feelings, emotions, and frame of mind and thus expresses another dimension of DIY culture:

*You need to have a partner who has a passion for this work and then it will be a piece of cake. If I were on my own, I'd probably only dream about such projects without carrying them out. Also, you have to work well together. Each person has to pull their own weight without relying completely on the other person. For example, we meet in the evening, discuss what we need to do and how we will proceed and each person gets to express their opinion. The next day we get to work. Both people have to contribute to the project.*

The emotions and frame of mind that can be found within DIY culture and its resulting artefacts cannot be interpreted without taking into account its creators. In addition to the surface-level context of the artefacts, they also reflect a subjective and sensitive aspect in terms of expressing a reaction in the present, a need, a frame of mind and feeling. We move over to the garden where Mr. Doubek shows me a bush that has been trimmed into a shape of a bear. I look around and once again let my sights rest on the pergola. It looks extraordinary from a distance. Mr. Doubek notices that I am checking it out.

*I don't like the standard pergola that everyone has with the terribly huge wooden posts. It's so clunky. A pergola rather should be a place where you can have some tea or some good coffee, where you can rest after work in the garden. A few years ago I was thinking about how our pergola should look when I came across a picture of the Eiffel Tower in a magazine. My dream was to go to France, but it didn't work out. So that's why I made an Eiffel Tower in my very own garden. Who else can say that they drink coffee under the*



**FIGURE 2:** Greenhouse interior.  
Source: Author's archive.

*Eiffel Tower with their wife every day? It's beautiful and practical at the same time and is made completely from small laths. It will hold up for a long time and won't crack just like that.*

The same principle was applied to the interior of their greenhouse. It's important to them how the thing they are creating will look. Not only does it need to fulfil a practical function but it also needs to be aesthetically pleasing. That's why Mr. Doubek improved upon the interior of the greenhouse with coloured tiles.

DIY work for the Doubek's goes hand in hand with a never-ending learning process, inspiration and creativity. The creative dimension of DIY encompasses experience and methods, knowledge transfer, ideas and both practical and aesthetic functions. As we walk around their garden, I'm left with the impression that the DIY is omnipresent. Under the pergola hangs a birdhouse made from baking pans and in the back part of the garden is a grill made from a washing machine drum. In the windows sit homemade wooden flower boxes and a handmade sack truck with wheels from a child's stroller rests upon the greenhouse. And since Easter is fast approaching, small knitted decorations with Easter motifs hang from the trees near the fence. Apparently there will be more, as Mrs. Doubek is working on the next batch.

## GREENHOUSE FOR A BASKET OF CHERRIES

Greenhouses made from massive pickle jars can be found in the Czech countryside and even in gardening colonies in the city. Such greenhouses can be seen as a visually un/attractive element in the garden, as a purely functional and purposeful object for growing vegetables or as vernacular art symbolic of shortages brought on by the social and political condition of Czechoslovakia under socialism. A greenhouse made from pickle jars for me is an indicator that a handy/wo/man is in the vicinity. I came across two of these greenhouses at once on two separate properties at the cottage colony<sup>7</sup> in Northern Bohemia. As I took a look over a fence, a middle-aged man working in his garden noticed me. I asked him if I could take a look at the greenhouse so he invited me over. In contrast to his neighbour's greenhouse, his looked like it was in much better condition. None of the jars were cracked nor were they very grey. The man said, "I built this greenhouse with my father-in law, who lives next door. We had more than enough jars to be put to use." He stopped to ponder and all of a sudden started telling me about another greenhouse, one that his father had in his own garden. He recalled how long they had to collect the pickle jars, until there were 600, enough to build with; he also had helped his father to build that greenhouse. At that moment, an older man leaned over the fence and shouts, "I prefer polycarbonate instead of glass jars. The glass jars burst!"

My interest in greenhouses surprises the older man, so he invites me over to his garden. He is the other man's father-in-law. He shows me his greenhouse and gripes that today he would build it differently. It took him and his wife a month to build it according to the design of a friend's greenhouse. He recalls how greenhouses sprouted up one after another in the cottage colony, as there was an abundance of these non-recyclable pickle jars. According to him, greenhouses from pickle jars illustrate the ability to improvise, a trait unique to Czechs. Today, there are not many of these greenhouses left as most people have already torn them down. That has worked out in this couple's favour since they have been able to take some of the good jars left over from their neighbours since the jars crack over time and need to be replaced. To build their greenhouse they needed 450 jars, which they managed to acquire from different sources, yet most often from cafeterias.

*These pickle jar greenhouses used to be in fashion, so everyone wanted one. Cafeterias would set out the jars in the dining room for people to take. We would give them a basket of cherries and they would give us the jars for free as they were happy to get rid of them.*

I saw greenhouses made from pickle jars in other gardens and other cottage colonies as well. At first impression, the objects appear to be the same, yet each has its own diverse story. Every story of a handy/wo/men's greenhouse evoked a different sentiment. The words of some reflected nostalgia and sentimentality or a complaint about the past regime, while others described a merry incident or a purely technical de-

---

<sup>7</sup> Cottage colony is a remarkable phenomenon of recreation in the Czech Republic. The colonies are generally located in the landscape area, in the wider surroundings of big towns.



**FIGURE 3:** Greenhouse from pickle jars. Source: Author's archive.

scription of the building. Thus, the same object gave way to a diversity of narratives including:

- shortage: “There were not any building materials, so we had had to improvise”.
- creativity, ingenuity, praxes: “I washed the jars with blue vitriol water so that they would not turn green. My big hands got stuck in the jars”.
- knowledge transfer: “I built this greenhouse with my dad”.
- neighbourhood solidarity: “When they came to visit us, they brought along a few pickle jars. We collected or traded them for a few months until we had around 400 and could start building”.
- narrative of conflict: “We were the first to have such a greenhouse. Then our neighbour made the same one and it spread”.

### **ANALYSIS: VERNACULAR ART AS A CONCEPTUALISATION OF CZECH DIY CULTURE**

Vernacular art creates a multi-layered space, a conceptual framework which can also be studied as its own field of research. It includes a range of artefacts from decorations, clothes, practical gadgets, home accessories, houses, garages, greenhouses to varied activities like knitting, creating, repairing, modifying, building to narratives of handy/women's skills, motives, improvisation and memories. The

context and the narratives behind vernacular art are essential for our understanding of memory, time and place and can be seen as “a core means of constructing, developing and maintaining a sense of identity, woven out of memories and experience” (Hecht, 2001, p. 129). Within historical and social expression, vernacular art is also a vehicle for individual self-expression. It offers powerful indicators of self-identity and provides references to the broader sociocultural context within which these are constructed (Brown, 2007, p. 267). The term vernacular art includes diverse DIY practices as well as DIY motives, sign systems and networks of material cultures; it can represent a mix of different environments, economies, technologies and can also reflect inherited skills, social and family structures, belief systems and symbolism.

Greenhouses made from pickle jars as well as the Eiffel Tower pergola reflect two faces of materiality (Ingold, 2013). The raw physical setting can reflect the creative dimension of vernacular art, experiences, ideas, processes and practices, while the other invisible side reflects the inscribed personal signs and manifests the affective dimension full of emotions, feelings or memories (Ingold, 2013). According to Miller, an artefact as a whole represents a network of narratives which are very specific to a particular society (Miller, 1998), just as the example of the pickle jar greenhouse can be seen both as a symbol of Czech post(socialist) space and time and handy/wo/men’s creativity as well as a reflection of the creator’s personal story. The following section is divided into the four categories (time and space dimension, creative and affective dimension) which were present in the stories of my informants and which simultaneously create the core of vernacular art.

## TIME AND SPACE DIMENSION

The idea of Czech vernacular art reflects the nation’s specific historical experience and social memory, mainly from state socialism and in particular from the 1970s and 1980s. In the Eastern Bloc in the second half of the 20th century, DIY culture had a very different content given the totalitarian political system. The absence of certain products on the market or their limited quantity, as well as shortcomings in terms of quality and suitability of available goods, motivated many to produce their own goods. Despite its physical and visual form and relation to its creators, vernacular art is the product of human creativity and for some it might also be a legitimate democratic reaction against the political regime, a practice of resistance (Lefebvre, 1991) or a reaction to the market and state, as the example of the Doubek’s Eiffel Tower illustrates. Formerly, for some handy/wo/men, vernacular art was an individual act of freedom to gain access to urban resources, a manifestation of the production of space (Lefebvre, 1991). The narratives about greenhouses include memory, reaction to political, economic or social contexts, protest or activism, place attachment and self-identity. Thus, vernacular art can also be perceived as a visual materialisation of socialist space characterised by a lack of resources, as the example of the greenhouse illustrates or, alternatively, the manifest outcome of fewer opportunities, as is demonstrated by the example of the pergola (Lefebvre, 1991).





## CREATIVE AND AFFECTIVE DIMENSION

Vernacular art is based on the ability to reuse or repurpose materials, tools and skills. This creative dimension, which also embraces DIY logic (Reid, 2014), is a reaction or manifestation and furthermore also a lifestyle. It can provide a practical, local and accessible means of circumventing the power of capitalist structures by creating substantive alternatives through means of cultural production, undermining exchange-value and replacing it with a value based on social relationships (Shukaitis, 2007). The creative dimension also relates to improvisation. It is the sudden emergence of something out of nothing, which evokes emotions, a certain type of admiration and, above all, a sense of self-satisfaction. For handy/wo/men, improvisation rules out any kind of dependence. That is why vernacular art very often includes some elements of joy or a hobby.

From the interviews that were carried out, the creative dimension was present in the ability to improvise, which is illustrated by both the ability to build a greenhouse without professional know-how from a material that was ubiquitous, albeit not intended for building purposes, as well as acquiring the material thanks to acquaintances' contributions. In the second case, creativity was embodied in the idea of providing old, discarded windows with a new purpose by building a greenhouse with them or by realising a personal dream of having coffee under the Eiffel Tower "in one's own place and in one's own way".

Through the artefacts, we can understand the particular context of space and time but also ourselves, just like the pergola in the Doubek's garden manifests the personal story of an unrealised dream. Vernacular art is always a dynamic process and the resulting product will always be influenced by the handy/wo/man's personality. Unlike handicrafts, vernacular art is not just a reflection of knowledge and mastered technology, but above all is a reflection of the handy/wo/man themselves. It is represented by an affective dimension that is based on the personal signs, emotions, feelings of the handy/wo/man which, in turn, are (consciously or unconsciously) inscribed on the artefacts. This is why the final product will never be the same even if the same technique, materials and skills are used. Vernacular art is represent an idea, the process of making based on personal expression.

## AUTHORITY AND AUTONOMY

Vernacular art as the product of Czech DIY culture generally represents everyday life and the social, cultural and political setting of the past and present. Thus, vernacular art can be seen as a reaction to urban and rural dis/continuities, inequalities or shortages brought about by the (post)socialist transformation. It acts, as well, as a raw symbolic expression and in this way can be seen as an informal mode of spatial production as discussed by Lefebvre (1991). At times, the creation of objects can be stimulated by the influence of authority in society. It reveals the close relationship between space and political power, represented by different forms of authority and the disagreements against them. Disagreements can be expressed through autonomy and opposition (sometimes ineffective) to authority by challenging the hegemonic



values of the market, capital, design, professionalism or expectations. Instead, vernacular art gives tangible form to various unique and subjective ideas, which is why it is never replicable. In both interviews with informants, authority was present in the sense of “we didn’t have anything else”, “we didn’t have a choice” and “we had to learn everything on our own”.

Furthermore, vernacular art produces a dialogue between concrete practices and thinking. As is the case for craftsmen, “this dialogue evolves into sustaining habits, and these habits establish a rhythm between problem solving and problem finding” (Sennett, 2008, p. 9), yet unlike them, this dialogue represents autonomy for handy/wo/men. Autonomy stands in contrast to the rules and authority as handy/wo/men seek to eliminate the principle of reliance on professionals, companies and corporations which provide services in exchange for money. Handy/wo/men materialise an idea rather than simply buying the things that they want. They do it for themselves. For some, creating is an escape from the ordinary world, from its everyday duties. A workshop as a work space is common for handy/wo/men as well as for crafts/wo/men, yet these same places are imbued with different meanings. Historically, for crafts/wo/men, the workshop was a productive space in which people dealt face-to-face with issues of authority (Sennett, 2008:55). An apprenticeship was based on inequalities in skill and experience, where a superior trained and set the standards for novices. Today, beyond the workshop, crafts/wo/men participate in the market, with a goal of funds and profits in mind — which can be seen as a form of authority as well. For the crafts/wo/man, authority resides as well in the demands placed upon the quality of his/her skills. There is no room for inaccuracies and imperfections. Craft refers to a tradition, which means adherence to a process, to a technique passed on from generation to generation. Crafts/wo/men are professionals. Handy/wo/men, on the other hand, deliberately or not work autonomously in opposition to authority — it is self-sufficient work conducted without interference from another person, which indeed has its own seductive power (Sennett, 2008, p. 70). A lack of skills and experience are not a hindrance for handy/wo/man, as they are a natural and necessary part of vernacular art. Inaccuracies are present not only in the process and imperfect knowledge and techniques, but also in the visualisation of the end-product. Handy/wo/men do not create for profit, nor do they sell their products, and therefore they are free from market authority. The handy/wo/man is attached to the authority of the state and the market involuntarily, especially when s/he creates due to a lack of materials or in protest. However, it is again creation against authority rather than adhering to it. Being a handy/wo/men may be a way of life, a basic human impulse, desire to create something. Handy/wo/men’s autonomy is also reflected in improvisation, which is characterised by the creative dimensions of vernacular art.

Vernacular expression is excluded from considerations of “art”. Unlike handy/wo/men, artists have professional skills, creating is a profession for them. Handy/wo/men, on the other hand, lack professional training, do not have any motives for making art and are removed from the public’s expectations of what art should be. In talking about art, handy/wo/men differ from the field of “self-taught art”, “folk” or “outsider art”. In the field of art, handy/wo/men are the closest to the concept of



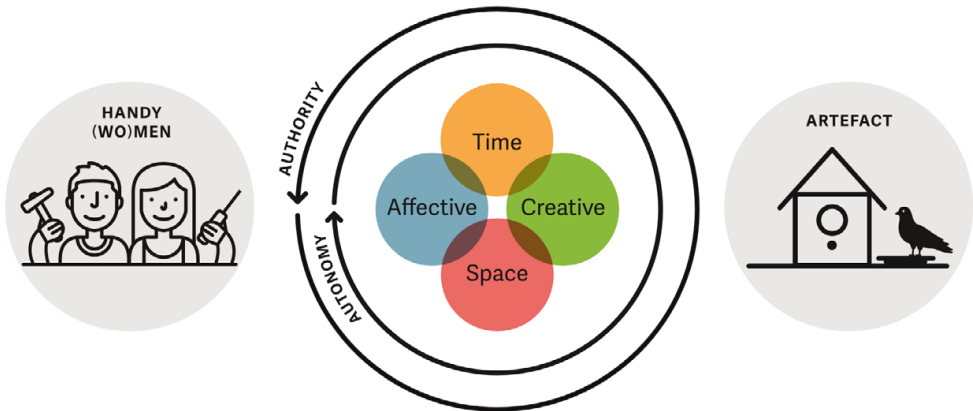


FIGURE 4: Vernacular art and its dimensions.

“outsider artists”, who do not consider themselves as artists, who are isolated from the mainstream art world and who lack both formal artistic skills and a desire for mainstream recognition (Wojcik, 2008, p. 179). Even if there are many similar aspects between artists and handy/wo/man — e.g., creating with one’s own hands or principles of self-expression, originality and authenticity — the main difference between them lies in the purpose of creating. Art “made by artists” is created because it should be seen; it puts more of an emphasis on exhibiting, presenting and discussing and interacting with a recipient. Nonetheless, vernacular art “made by handy/wo/men” is created for personal need and use, regardless of whether artefacts are presented in visible spaces like gardens or windows — they are still an inscribed part of handy/wo/men’s personal spaces (e.g., homes).

In summary, Czech (post)socialist vernacular art made by handy/wo/men, incorporates four dimensions: 1) time dimension (temporality, history, memory); 2) space dimension (environments, historical and cultural specificity); 3) creative dimension (skills, originality, improvisation); and 4) affective dimension (social or personal feelings, experiences, manifestations). Furthermore, vernacular art can be perceived as one of various micro-spatial practices, which powered by authority or autonomy, is reshaping urban/rural spaces. These aspects are not mutually exclusive and coexist with each other in many different contexts.

Although vernacular art is a multi-layered concept, it has certain specific characteristics:

1. Vernacular art is made by handy/wo/men who have neither professional skills nor formal artistic training. It is not a craft, nor is it art.
2. Vernacular art is made in handy/wo/men’s free time to serve their own needs or pleasure.
3. Although sometimes vernacular art can have a function as an item of exchange, it is never produced primarily for profit. It is never expediently manufactured as a commodity.

4. Vernacular art manifests the time, space, creative and affective dimensions described above.
5. Vernacular art incorporates spaces of autonomy or authority (intentionally or unintentionally).



## CONCLUSION

In this article I argued that “vernacular art” is a term suitable for conceptualising Czech DIY-material culture. It incorporates the multiple ways in which different social, cultural and historical processes can be studied. By further developing the concept of vernacular art in anthropological debates on Czech DIY culture, we can provide a deeper understanding of the interlinkages of creativity, skills and improvisations as well as social relationships, exchange of materials and ideas and the political-economic milieu. According to this approach, Czech (post)socialist vernacular art made by handy/wo/men reflects the material culture, while it includes both the external, raw form and the internal, inscribed personal face of an artefact (Ingold, 2013). At the same time, it generates an intimate and conscious connection between hand and head (Sennett, 2008) and places an emphasis on the practice-creative dimension and personal feelings-affective dimension. Simultaneously, Czech (post)socialist vernacular art manifests a reaction to authority which results in autonomy, and thus it represents the logic of DIY culture (Wells, 2007). By representing the lived experience composed of social, physical and mental aspects and modified by political-economic elements, vernacular art can also be seen as a micro-spatial urban practice which produces space and time (Lefebvre, 1991). It incorporates four mutual dimensions powered by authority or autonomy: 1) time dimension (temporality, history, memory); 2) space dimension (environments, historical and cultural specificity); 3) creative dimension (skills, originality, improvisation); and 4) affective dimension (social or personal feelings, experiences, manifestations). Therefore, “vernacular art” is a term suitable for conceptualising (post)socialist Czech DIY-material culture, as it allows us to grasp the multiple ways in which it can be studied while not losing awareness of the others.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to warmly thank Petr Gibas and Blanka Nyklová for their careful reading of earlier drafts and for their very useful comments.

## REFERENCES

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>Arendt, H. 1958. <i>The Human Condition</i>. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.</p> <p>Bourdieu, P. 1977. <i>Outline of a Theory of Practice</i>. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.</p> | <p>Brown, R., Maudlin, D. 2012. “Concepts of vernacular architecture”. Pp. 340-368 in <i>The SAGE handbook of architecture theory</i>. Sage.</p> |
|--|--|



- Clark, A. 2008. "Pressing the flesh: a tension in the study of the embodied, embedded mind". *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 76 (1): 37-59.
- Cox, R. 2016. "Materials, skills and gender identities: men, women and home improvement practices in New Zealand". *Gender, Place & Culture* 23 (4): 572-588.
- De Certeau, M., Mayol P. 1998. *The Practice of Everyday Life: Living and cooking. Volume 2*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press.
- Elden, S. 2007. "There is a politics of space because space is political: Henri Lefebvre and the production of space". *Radical philosophy review* 10 (2): 101-116.
- Gelber, S. M. 1997. "Do-It-Yourself: Constructing, Repairing and Maintaining Domestic Masculinity". *American Quarterly* 49 (1): 66-112.
- Hallam, E., Ingold, T. 2016. *Making and growing: Anthropological studies of organisms and artefacts*. London: Routledge.
- Hecht, A. 2001. "Home sweet home: Tangible memories of an uprooted childhood". Pp. 123-48 in D. Miller (ed.) *Home Possessions*. Oxford: Berg.
- Hicks, D., Beaudry, M.C. 2010. *The Oxford handbook of material culture studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hinchman, L. P., Hinchman, S. 1997. *Memory, identity, community: The idea of narrative in the human sciences*. SUNY Press.
- Ingold, T. 2013. *Making: Anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture*. London: Routledge.
- Iveson, K. 2013. "Cities within the city: Do-it-yourself urbanism and the right to the city". *International journal of urban and regional research* 37 (3): 941-956.
- Jarman, J. 2004. "What is occupation? Interdisciplinary perspectives on defining and classifying human activity". Pp. 47-61. in Christiansen, C. and Townsend, E. (eds.) *Introduction to occupation: The art and science of living*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Kinkaid, E. 2020. "Re-encountering Lefebvre: Toward a critical phenomenology of social space". *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. 38 (1): 167-186.
- Kuznetsov, S., Paulos, E. 2010. "Rise of the expert amateur: DIY projects, communities, and cultures". *Proceedings of the 6th Nordic conference on human-computer interaction: extending boundaries*.
- Leadbeater, C., Miller, P. 2004. *The Pro-Am Revolution*. London: Demos.
- Lefebvre, H., 1991. *The production of space*. Vol. 142. Blackwell: Oxford.
- Martins, M. R., 1982. "The Theory of Social Space in the Work of Henri Lefebvre". Pp. 160-185 in J. F. Henderson, P. Williams (eds.). *Urban Political Economy and Social Theory: Critical Essays in Urban Studies*. Default journal.
- Miller, D. 1983. "Things ain't what they used to be". *Royal Anthropological Institute News* 59: 5-7.
- Miller, D. 1987. *Material culture and mass consumption*. Blackwell: Oxford.
- Miller, D. 1998. "Why some things matter". Pp. 3-21 in D. Miller (ed.) *Material Cultures: why some things matter*. University of Chicago Press.
- Miller, D. 2007. "Artefacts and the meaning of things". Pp. 166-168 in Knell, S. (ed.) *Museums in the material world*. New York: Routledge.
- Miller, D. 1994. *Modernity, an ethnographic approach: Dualism and mass consumption in Trinidad*. Oxford: Berg.
- Oliver, P. 1997. "Aesthetic". Pp. 3 in *Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Reid, S., E. 2014. "Makeshift Modernity. DIY, Craft and the Virtuous Homemaker in New Soviet Housing of the 1960s". *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity* 2(2): 87-124.
- Rudofsky, B. 1977. *The Prodigious Builders: Notes Toward a Natural History of Architecture with Special Regard to those Species that are Traditionally Neglected or Downright Ignored*. London: Seeker and Warburg.
- Russell, Ch. 2001. *Self-taught art: the culture and aesthetics of American vernacular art*. Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi.
- Salzmann, Z. 1999. "Jak se antropolog dívá na výtvarná umění". *Český lid* 86 (4): 293-301.

- Sennett, R. 2008. *The craftsman*. Yale University Press.
- Shields, R. 1999. *Lefebvre, love and struggle: spatial dialectics*. London: Routledge.
- Shukaitis, S. 2007. "Affective composition and aesthetics: on dissolving the audience and facilitating the mob". *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest* 5: 39–42.
- Spencer, A. 2008. *DIY: The rise of lo-fi culture*. London: Marion Boyars Publishers.
- Unwin, T. 2000. "A waste of space? Towards a critique of the social production of space...". *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 25(1): 11–29.
- Vellinga, M. 2011. "The End of the Vernacular: Anthropology and the Architecture of the Other". *Etnofoor* 23 (1): 171–192.
- Watkins, C. 2005. "Representations of Space, Spatial Practices and Spaces of Representation: An Application of Lefebvre's Spatial Triad". *Culture and Organization* 11 (3): 209–220.
- Wells, K. 2007. "The material and visual cultures of cities". *Space and culture* 10 (2):136–144.
- Wojcik, D. 2008. "Outsider Art, Vernacular Traditions, Trauma, and Creativity". *Western Folklore* 67(2): 179–198.

