Manuals, DIY Instructions, Cookbooks: Tools of Architectural Self-Empowerment

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Deadline: Dec 20, 2026

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Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on how architectural knowledge was produced, transformed, and disseminated in the postwar era. One prominent area of investigation has been architectural education, including the reform of existing institutions, the founding of new ones, curricular revisions, novel pedagogical methods, and the influence of student activism on educational practices. A second field of inquiry has examined the concurrent proliferation of “little” architectural magazines, which reshaped building culture by fostering innovation, critical debate, and oppositional discourse. A third, comparatively understudied realm concerns tools of architectural self-empowerment, such as manuals, handbooks, DIY instructional materials, newsletters, and educational videos, that enabled non-experts to participate in shaping the built environment.

Advances in office technology, including the commercialization of the photocopier, the increasing affordability of offset printing, and the introduction of inexpensive handheld cameras and amateur video equipment in the late 1960s, enabled practitioners and activists alike to share spatial expertise with unprecedentedly large audiences. These tools varied significantly in scope and intention. Some translated technical knowledge into accessible terms, explaining how to build low-tech everyday structures, harvest sustainable energy, or cultivate land. Others conveyed organizational knowledge, instructing readers on how to create feminist and queer spaces, retrofit structures for people with disabilities, establish safe houses, squat buildings, run cooperatives and communes, or organize urban protests.

Their impact and longevity also varied considerably. Many were one-off underground publications, such as the 1971 Italian countercultural anthology …ma l’amor mio non muore, which combined critiques of the status quo with practical instructions ranging from the construction of ephemeral self-defense structures to strategies for staging demonstrations and guidance on informal organizational infrastructures. The publication became a reference point for the existential and political revolts that shaped Italy in the 1970s. Other publications appeared in multiple issues and helped establish alternative discourses on architecture, urbanism, and spatial practice outside institutional frameworks. For example, Shelter, a 1973 countercultural manual by Lloyd Kahn on constructing geodesic domes and other improvised structures, sold over 160,000 copies, surpassing the sales of many canonical architectural publications. By comparison, Learning from Las Vegas by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour sold approximately 112,000 fewer copies. Shelter not only provided construction guidance but also featured user testimonies and theoreti-

cal reflections, helping to establish an architectural paradigm distinct from mainstream discourse.

These tools of self-empowerment operated across the political spectrum and were shaped by broader political and economic forces, often occupying ambiguous terrain. Bottom-up initiatives could be co-opted by market actors, as manufacturers recognized their commercial potential and used them to stimulate demand for materials and tools. Similarly, regional, national, and supranational institutions appropriated such resources as instruments of governance and the devolution of power, advancing the interests of specific constituencies. For instance, the architect Yona Friedman produced comic-like instructional materials for UNESCO in the 1970s and 1980s that aligned closely with the organization's developmental agenda.

In preparation for an exhibition at the German Architecture Museum (DAM) and an accompanying edited volume in late 2028, we invite submissions that critically engage with tools of architectural self-empowerment from the 1960s onward. Contributions should examine the sociopolitical, cultural, and economic contexts in which these tools were produced, their modes of dissemination and adaptation, and their architectural and spatial strategies, sensibilities, and aesthetics. We particularly encourage case studies addressing geographies and communities historically underrepresented in architectural history, as well as actors whose spatial knowledge has been marginalized or overlooked.
Possible contributions include, but are not limited to:
- Meta-formats: manuals that instruct on manual-making, as well as directories or compilations of manuals
- Politically motivated tools of self-empowerment, ranging from environmentalist, autarchic, and prepper approaches to queer, feminist, social justice, and decolonial activism; from far-left and anarchist movements to far-right or nationalist groups
- Economically and institutionally embedded tools that engage with commercial or governmental channels and analyze the ambiguities inherent in their production, circulation, and use
- Other formats of spatial self-empowerment not traditionally considered part of the architectural canon, such as cookbooks, comics, or songs

We welcome proposals of up to 300 words, to be sent to both carnelli@arch.ethz.ch and linsin@kunst.uni-frankfurt.de by December 20, 2026. Please indicate whether you intend to submit a short article (2,000–3,000 words) or a long article (5,000–6,000 words). Applicants will be notified by the end of January 2027. Full texts must be submitted before the two-day hybrid workshop, scheduled to take place in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, in early September 2027.

Reference:

CFP: Manuals, DIY Instructions, Cookbooks: Tools of Architectural Self-Empowerment. In: ArtHist.net, Oct 15, 2026 (accessed Nov 9, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/54613>.