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IKEA Hacking

by Jonathan Bean & Daniela Rosner

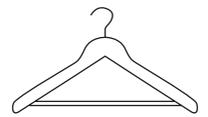
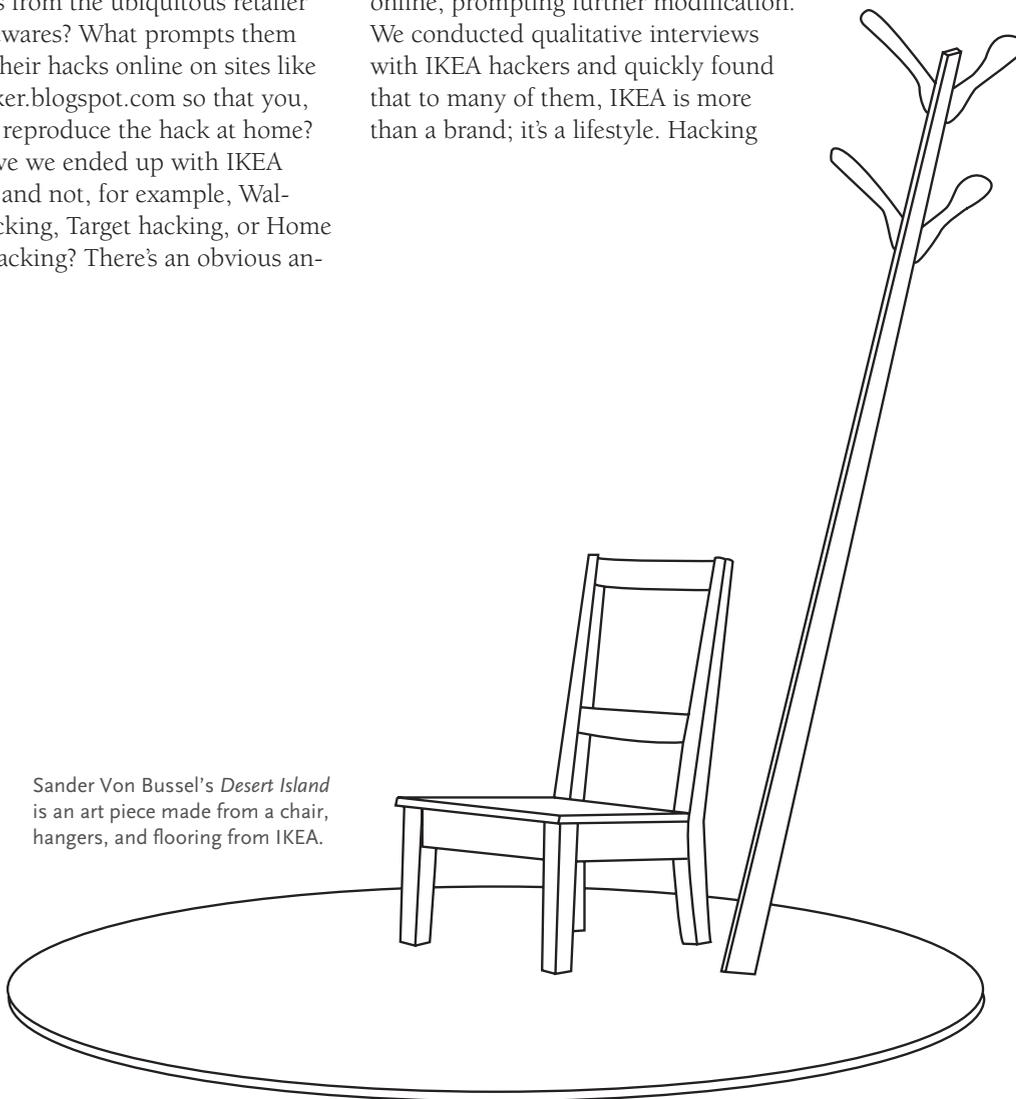
Make a guitar amp from a broken alarm clock. Turn a pair of salad bowls into a speaker. Or transform a cabinet door into a sleek writing surface. Exhibit a more or less puckish disregard for an IKEA product's intended use and assembly instructions—and, bam!, you're an IKEA hacker. What is it about IKEA that drives some people to reuse, recombine, or modify products from the ubiquitous retailer of housewares? What prompts them to post their hacks online on sites like ikeahacker.blogspot.com so that you, too, can reproduce the hack at home? Why have we ended up with IKEA hacking and not, for example, Wal-Mart hacking, Target hacking, or Home Depot hacking? There's an obvious an-

swer: accessibility and price. But IKEA is more than just cheap.

As design researchers at UC Berkeley, we became interested in IKEA hacking because of its merging of craft, domesticity and consumer culture. Today more and more people creatively fix, reuse, and customize consumer products, and then codify and share their production process with others online, prompting further modification. We conducted qualitative interviews with IKEA hackers and quickly found that to many of them, IKEA is more than a brand; it's a lifestyle. Hacking

IKEA meant adapting its aesthetic, milking its accessibility, and mocking its modularity. That's not a \$19 chair, says the IKEA hacker. That's a neatly boxed and affordable stash of "raw materials." Ubiquity, standardization, and modernism become invaluable components of the creative process.

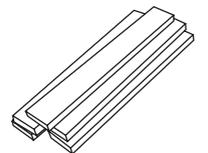
Sander Von Bussel's *Desert Island* is an art piece made from a chair, hangers, and flooring from IKEA.



BUMERANG: \$0.50



BERTIL: \$39.99



HEMSE: \$7.00 / m²

1 WHAT GETS HACKED

When we first started to study IKEA hacking, we asked if hacks could be sorted into different categories. One of the hackers we interviewed described a continuum of IKEA hacks on which purely practical hacks are at one end (ones that increase a product's utility—a bookshelf slimmed down to fit in a narrow hallway) and more whimsical expressions are at the other end (ones that reveal personal taste or creativity, such as Sander Von Bussel's Desert Island, represented below). Overall, it is the ubiquity of IKEA's products and the company's accessibility that IKEA hackers challenge and take to the extreme.

2 WHY HACK IKEA

At some level, shopping at IKEA means embracing the DIY spirit. An IKEA store is different from a standard department store—it has high expectations for customer involvement. A trip to IKEA requires you to wander through showrooms, locate the items in the warehouse, and schlep heavy boxes (often full of dense particleboard) to your cart. In addition, each furniture item obliges you to assemble it yourself using wordless instructions. A shelving system for your living room, for example, may consist of five modules, each an assembly of separately sold components: a frame, drawers, cabinet door, shelves and hardware. This added work is part of the company's corporate identity: more choice for less money.

5 THE ONLINE LIFE OF IKEA HACKING

IKEA hacking is not often something people do behind closed doors. All the people we interviewed enjoyed sharing their hacks, and even getting a certain level of fame for their hacks, by posting online on sites like IkeaHacker or Instructables. Sharing one's hacks seemed to cement one's identity as an IKEA hacker.

One hacker, who goes by the online handle "Vince P", to screen off his bed from the rest of the studio, used frosted glass IKEA wardrobe doors held in place with Stolmen tension poles so that he wouldn't have to drive screws into the floor of his apartment. The materials for the doors cost \$813—cheap in comparison to the cost of sliding glass interior doors installed by a contractor. His hack became well-known after it appeared on the Apartment Therapy home decor blog as part of the 2006 "smallest, coolest" contest. Comments on the site praise Vince's taste and ingenuity and link to IKEA's website to specify the exact parts he used. One commenter posted a link to an-

other person's blog with exacting directions for assembling a similar hack.

We saw that IKEA hacks get shared online because hackers often feel obligation to the community. They have used online forums and blogs to learn the techniques used in their own hacks, so they feel that they ought to explain their own hacks to others (in much the same way that you might expect a neighbor to whom you've loaned a tool to return the favor). IKEA hacking can also lead people to learn new skills. For example, when one of our participants, John, decided he wanted to remodel his kitchen as a mark of devotion to his new wife and children, he used online forums to build the knowledge and work up the courage he would need to tackle the project. "I'm not a 'real' builder," he said. "I'm a web designer," but still he tackled his kitchen project, which he blogged from start to finish and that involved everything from foundation work—he used the jack from his car to help install a new beam—to the exacting work of resizing IKEA cabinets.

3 AESTHETICS

The IKEA aesthetic, hovering somewhere between economy and Modernism, is very important to IKEA hackers. The spare, sleek design of a Bollö chair or the smooth, unornamented finish of an Ädel cabinet performs the role of a blank canvas. People use the materials like modular blocks—reconfiguring individual pieces to form a more customized whole. One hacker we interviewed explained that part of the fun of IKEA hacking was figuring out products' construction methods—such as the board on frame construction of the inexpensive Lack shelves—and finding ways to work with it while maintaining the IKEA aesthetic. With some ingenuity and tinkering, the \$19 chair quickly becomes a more elegant and expensive commodity.

4 UBIQUITY

We learned that particular “raw materials” are commonly used across different hacks. Some, such as Blanda Matt salad bowls, Produkt milk frothers and Lack tables, probably are commonly hacked because they are cheap—with a more accessible price point, they are a more likely target for customization than other IKEA products. But other products are valued for hacks because of distinctive qualities that make them useful in an assemblage. For example, take the tension poles sold as part of the Stolmen closet organization system (think large, heavy-duty, vertical versions of those shower curtain rods that squeeze into place between walls). IKEA hackers have used the tension poles as supports for bike racks, desks, and cat trees.

6 STANDARDIZATION

Standardization of IKEA's product names across the world lends itself to a global community of IKEA hackers. From Germany to Malaysia, a Blanda Matt bowl is a Blanda Matt bowl. This means that IKEA hackers worldwide can easily purchase and discuss the same products, the product names becoming a common language for hackers. Like that Lack shelf hack? You can reproduce it this weekend by running out to your local IKEA, buying the exact same “raw materials,” and finding the instructions online.

It is the ubiquity of IKEA's products and the company's accessibility that IKEA hackers challenge and take to the extreme.

7 CONCLUSION

In the hands of IKEA hackers, ready-to-assemble chipboard and plastic bits are transformed into symbols of individuality. For some, they become symbols of mastery over the consumer marketplace. To others, they mark creative explorations and pragmatic goals. They are ideas given material form, assembled with a dash of creativity. In 2008, a contest held in parallel with the Amsterdam museum's exhibition on IKEA hacking generated around 100 entries from all over the world. One of the winning hackers bought an Arstid lamp, removed it from the box, returned the lamp for a refund without the box—cheap indeed!—and then turned the box itself into a lamp. Hacking IKEA means hacking any part of the company: its products, its process and its identity. The final hack, it seems, is the transformation of IKEA hacking into a phenomenon that is as global and powerful as the brand so carefully crafted by the company itself.

