

1.1. “Houses provide a spatial backbone for virtually everything we do”: An anthropological study of DIY (“do-it-yourself”) house shows in the US

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Abstract

The subject of this article is the phenomena of “DIY house shows” (i.e., “do-it-yourself” house concerts) in the US, which usually incorporate a variety of music genres, from punk and indie rock, to experimental music and singer-songwriters. In this regard, I am mostly concerned with the significance and centrality of “place”, more specifically, DIY venues, and particularly houses, for the American DIY communities in terms of the spatial or venue constitution of scenes, community construction, political aspiration, musical aesthetics, and sound. In terms of community construction, I particularly look into DIY organizational patterns, space policies, and translocal musical interaction. The findings that I present are based on my long-term ethnographic study of American DIY house shows and scenes, particularly on the West Coast. Ethnographic approach consequently informs also the main focus of this paper, in which I am concerned with both *discursive* and *material* aspects of American DIY scenes, as related to the issue of place. In other words, I present *native* or *emic* discourses about the value and importance of place, and particularly houses, for the American DIY communities, while I also demonstrate how these discourses are manifested in the everyday practice of American DIY participants.

Keywords: American DIY scenes, DIY house concerts, music and place, music and community.

1. Introduction

The subject of this article is the phenomena of “DIY house shows” (i.e., “do-it-yourself” house concerts) in the US, which usually incorporate a variety of music genres, from punk and indie rock, to experimental music and singer-songwriters. In this regard, I am mostly concerned with the significance and centrality of “place”, more specifically, DIY venues, and particularly houses, for the American DIY communities in terms of the spatial or venue constitution of scenes, community construction, political aspiration, musical aesthetics, and sound. In terms of community construction, I particularly look into DIY organizational patterns, space policies, and translocal musical interaction.

The findings that I present are based on my long-term ethnographic study of American DIY house shows and scenes, particularly on the West Coast.² Ethnographic approach consequently informs also the main focus of this paper, in which I am concerned with both *discursive* and *material* aspects of American DIY scenes, as related to the issue of place. In other words, I present *native* or *emic* discourses³ about the value and importance of place, and particularly houses, for the American DIY communities, while I also demonstrate how these discourses are manifested in the everyday practice of American DIY participants.

The claim about the centrality of place, and houses in particular, for American DIY communities comes from within these communities themselves. For instance, consider this quote, taken from a Portland DIY zine dedicated to the theme of punk houses:

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² For my research, I conducted interviews, attended concerts, lived in DIY houses, toured with bands, and studies DIY literature (e.g., DIY zines, comic books, and blogs).

³ In anthropology, the terms *emic* and *etic* refer to insider and outsider perspectives, respectively.

In this cartoonish, messy underworld known to some as the punk scene, houses provide a *spatial backbone* for virtually everything we do. They are at once a movie theatre and a venue for touring bands. A sketchy organizing space and a living room for 'fancy' dinners. The place a drunk book club can meet [at]. A living room of weirdos equally ready to lend support to your bad day as they are to your bad idea (May 2013, p. 1; emphasis added).

It is possible to infer several things from this quote. First, the houses are public and communal spaces.⁴ Second, they serve as a place for a multitude of activities, from music concerts and movie nights, to meetings of various sorts. Third, they are considered as a "spatial backbone", or a central place, for everything what happens in American DIY communities.

Before I further elaborate on these issues, and examine the role of houses from the perspective of the spatial or venue constitution of scenes, the construction of communities, and the question of politics, aesthetics, and sound of American DIY communities, I first briefly address the structural and ideological reasons for the centrality of houses and other DIY venues for American DIY communities.

2. Structural and ideological factors contributing to the centrality of DIY venues and houses within American DIY music scenes

Among the structural causes that contribute to the high importance of houses and other DIY venues for American DIY communities are, first, the lack of public, and non-commercial spaces, and the lack of governmental support, for social and cultural activities of the youth in the US, and second, the restrictive role of regulation and age limitation for the people under the age of twenty-one, to attend public concert spaces where the alcohol is served. Both of these structural forces necessitate American DIY youth to seek out alternative spatial solutions, such as houses, or other types of DIY venues. However, American DIY communities also intentionally avoid non-DIY places for ideological reasons, because they strive for creative and social autonomy. To address both structural and ideological aspects, American DIY communities use DIY, or do-it-yourself approach as their central organizing principle, both as a means to an end, and as an end in itself.

Furthermore, the do-it-yourself approach does not only point to the centrality of DIY practice, but also to the centrality of DIY place for the American DIY communities. A quote by Mark Andersen, an organizer and DIY music historian from Washington, D.C. (Andersen and Jenkins, 2001), further illustrates this close relation between DIY practice and place:

[P]unk is about doing what you can with whatever you have, wherever you are right now. As a result, whatever space you can find that is low cost enough and open to what you are doing (at least for that day) is perfectly appropriate for a punk show (personal communication, 14 May, 2012).

This DIA, or "do-it-anyplace" approach leads to the fact that the most commonly available and the least restricted DIY place that almost everybody in the DIY scene has an access to is one's own living space. It is not surprising then that DIY bands often rehearse in their own houses, record music and run DIY labels from there, play or book shows at theirs or other people's houses, and distribute and sell their records at house shows. DIY participants also organize other collective activities and events in their houses, anything from tool, book, and zine libraries, theatre plays,

⁴ Compare to Brian Tucker's experience of living in a punk houses "At the time, our house was the headquarters for Food Not Bombs, Columbus Copwatch, and a splinter faction of Anti-Racist Action. Several book clubs and sundry other organizations held meetings in our living room as well. Columbus, while having a fairly sizable punk scene at the time for a city its size, couldn't support its own meeting place or punk-run music venue, so most radical activism or DIY activities took place in someone's home. House decisions were made using consensus based procedures in weekly house meetings. The house itself served to dissolve distinctions between public and private life; it was a home, a meeting place, and a site of politics. It was a means by which we could, at least in limited ways, live our politics and experience the possibilities of alternative ways of organizing ourselves (...) In our happier moments, we'd claim that privacy was bourgeois; at other times we'd just grumble as people drifted in and out" (Tucker, 2012, p. 204).

reading clubs, comic book workshops, and movie nights, to organizational and political meetings, birthday celebrations, and work and dance parties. Furthermore, there are also hours, days, and months of plain hanging out on the porches, in the gardens, kitchens, and living rooms.

3. Constellation and functionality of DIY venues within American DIY scenes

While the DIY houses are central meeting places for the DIY participants, they are not the only places in the larger constellation of "do-it-anywhere" places, which American DIY communities use for organizing their activities and events. It is possible to conclude this, for instance, already from the following description of the types of venues and events that a group of Portland DIY participants includes in their DIY calendars: "This is a collection of DIY, radical, queer & punk events (...) We prefer all-ages shows in basements, warehouses, at the beach, but some worthwhile bar shows are included [in the event calendar]" (see <http://forming.tumblr.com/tagged/diypdx>).

American DIY communities use a variety of different types of venues, some DIY and some not, and establish a kind of a hierarchy among these places in terms of their importance and function for the scene, as seen in the general typology of DIY venues used by American DIY communities below (see Figure 3). I created this typology of DIY venues based on the information about venues I gathered from the interviews with American DIY organizers and participants. However, for the illustration of the diversity of opinions and approaches to the venues typology, I present first two emic or native DIY typologies and their descriptions (see Figure 1 and Figure 2), and then proceed with the general typology (see Figure 3). The first one is made by a DIY punk participant and organizer Bryan from Portland (see Figure 1), and the second by a DIY experimental musician and organizer John, who used to live in Davis at the time of my research there (see Figure 2). I also include here Bryan's and John's commentaries to their typologies:

I think the physical space does a lot for the overall feeling and level of excitement. so some spaces just lend themselves to an exciting show, like an outdoor generator type thing or a warehouse, where anything can happen. then there's intimacy. certain venues feel more intimate than others (basements/warehouses/infoshops). and also when a space is controlled by us (basements, infoshops etc) or public (outdoor) it feels a lot more special (Bryan, personal communication, 8 August, 2016).

My scheme weighs intimacy as the most important factor for performing or witnessing music. I've divided venues between stage and non-stage, with concert halls as the least important (though not unnecessary) and the living room as the most important. To be sure there are times when I've felt alienated at a living room show and connected to a performer on a stage, but the activity of performing in small, intimate spaces and attending concerts in houses is a sort of rare experience that has had a lasting impact (John, personal communication, 8 August, 2016).

Bryan and John made their typologies based on the criteria that they describe in their comments, which also elucidate the value-system implicated in these typologies. As it is evident, they both emphasize the importance of "intimacy," while Bryan also explicitly foregrounds the value of autonomy ("controlled by us"), and "excitement."

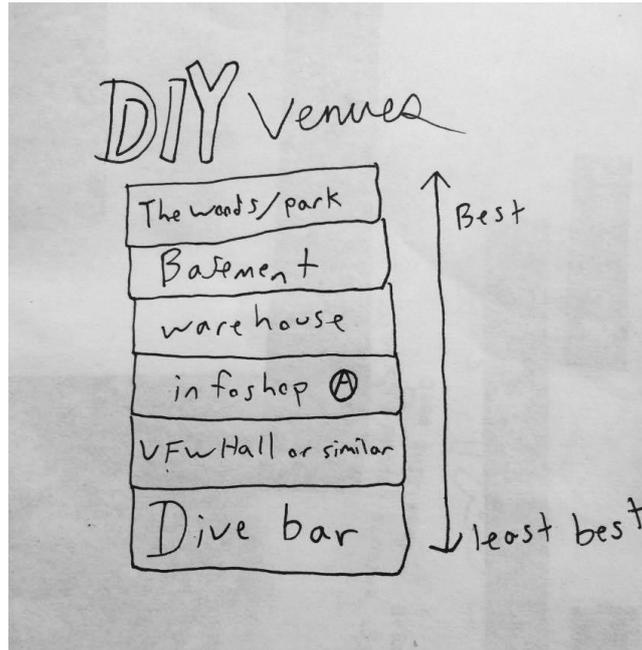


Figure 1: The typology of DIY venues made by a DIY participant and organizer Bryan from Portland.⁵

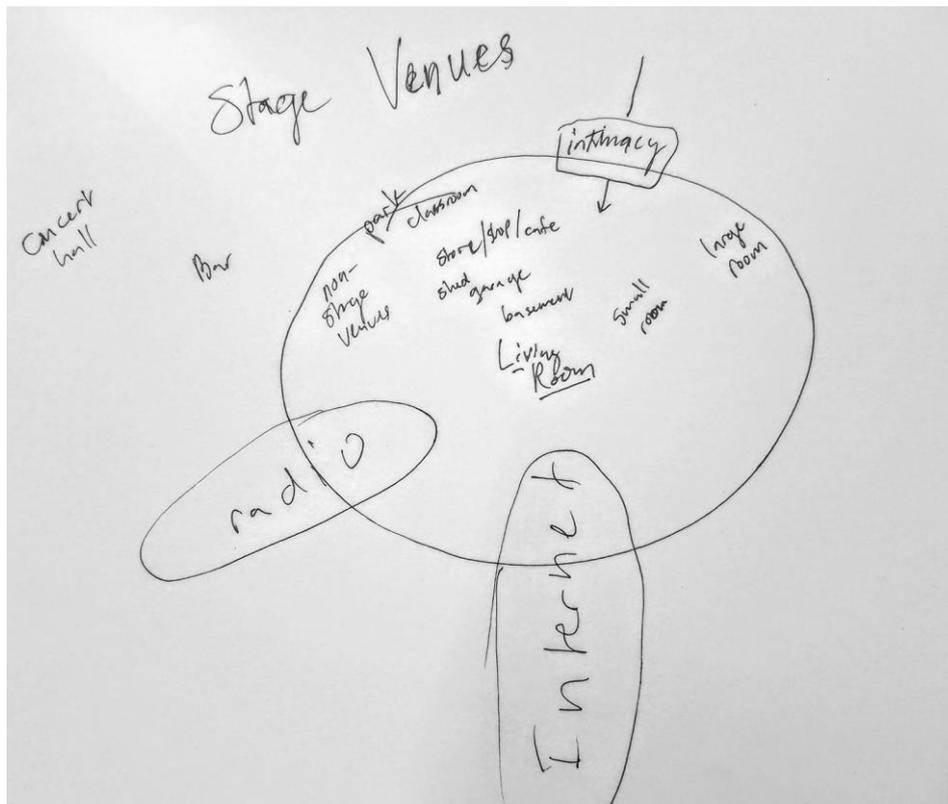


Figure 2: The typology of DIY venues made by a DIY musician John who used to live in Davis.

⁵ VFW Hall or similar refers to Veterans of Foreign War Halls and similar community spaces that are sometimes rented for low price by the DIY organizers.

These two emic DIY typologies significantly overlap with my general DIY venue typology (Figure 3), but also add some individual perspectives to it. For instance, Bryan mentions anarchist info shops, because he is coming from an anarchist punk community and is involved in the organization of Portland's anarchist info shop. John, on the other hand, comes from a more academic and experimental music background, and thus also mentions concert halls, although these are found on the bottom of his list. What also significantly informs John's typology is that his formative DIY years hail from Davis, CA, which is a college town with a dearth of industrial warehouses on the one hand, and a lack of anarchist and punk spaces and events on the other. In addition, John de-prioritizes outdoor and park shows because they do not satisfy his criteria of intimate sociability, but he also considers alternative possibilities in which case some guerilla shows could be ranked higher:

I was basing my typology on intimacy and personal spaces I felt that parks were too public, open, more like passageways or temporary spaces to pause but not stay, maybe for the sort of ephemeral magic that can happen with impromptu happenings and emergent collective collaborations in these public zones I might rank them a bit higher (a street corner or a parking garage or an empty lot would carry the same kind of weight) (...) there's always a sort of tension between connecting with as many people as possible and connecting with people at a deeply personal level (personal communication, September 3, 2016).

The general DIY venue typology I represent (Figure 3), is a compilation and a summary of a variety of different views and opinions about DIY venues made by the DIY participants themselves (including Bryan's and John's). This hierarchy is organized on the continuum, spanning the guerilla shows on one side, and bars and other similar commercial venues on the other. It ranges from the least to most regular, legal, permanent, public, and hierarchical, and from most to least accessible, socially and artistically innovative, and radically political spaces.

Houses or warehouses, the latter often found in more industrial cities and areas, are considered as ideal DIY venues, since DIY participants can attain the greatest social and musical autonomy in these kinds of places (see Bryan's quote above), and are also able to organize shows and events in a more or less non-hierarchical manner.⁶ Warehouses are sometimes even a better option for them. Since they are located outside of residential areas, it means that the DIY participants do not have to worry about noise complaints while the shows can run later into the night. However, these show spaces also often tend to be semi-legal or illegal, and are therefore also more transitory and precarious in their nature.⁷ Houses and warehouses are on the one hand sometimes more secretive about their activities, or situated in more remote neighborhoods, sometimes considered as "dangerous". On the other hand, they are often also more accessible in terms of age and class difference (e.g., they usually have all-ages door policies, based on donations). In addition, houses and warehouses are also considered as the most "intimate" (see Bryan's and John's quotes above), and also often practice safe(r) space policy that provides for greater inclusivity based on ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Guerilla shows are particularly exalted, and considered as even more fun and exciting (see Bryan's quote above), but they are also more difficult to organize, and contain a greater risk of police intervention. Communities that rather organize DIY shows outside of official legal structure (i.e., house, warehouse, or guerilla shows) are often more radical in their political views (e.g., anarchist), and have a tendency toward cultural and political organizing outside of the dominant institutions.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are more legal and secure options of working within or with the system. These include renting of all-ages community spaces, or organizing one-night

⁶ In 2008, Tim Jones and Tim Wood counted 95 all-ages and DIY clubs in the US. They made a survey of 51 of them, out of which 53% defined themselves as having a non-hierarchical structure (2008, pp. 13-18). In addition, many people, among them DIY participants, argue that lesser commercial, organizational, and spatial restrictions in music venues usually enable greater social and artistic innovativeness at these same places (Stump, 2003; Chatterton and Holland, 2003, p. 210; Becker, [1951] 2004; Muršič, 2012, p. 19).

⁷ They are precarious also because of the gentrification processes of which these venues are often a constitutive part of.

shows in bars or clubs. Because of their legality, these types of venues can function on a more permanent basis; they can organize more regular shows, and advertise their events more openly and publicly. However, these types of venues can have other kinds of limitations for the DIY communities (especially in case of bars and clubs): they are not always accessible to all-ages audiences, and can sometimes charge high admissions; they are usually organized hierarchically, and have a greater tendency toward artistic and cultural standardization, while the DIY organizers and participants often find lesser artistic and organizational autonomy there.

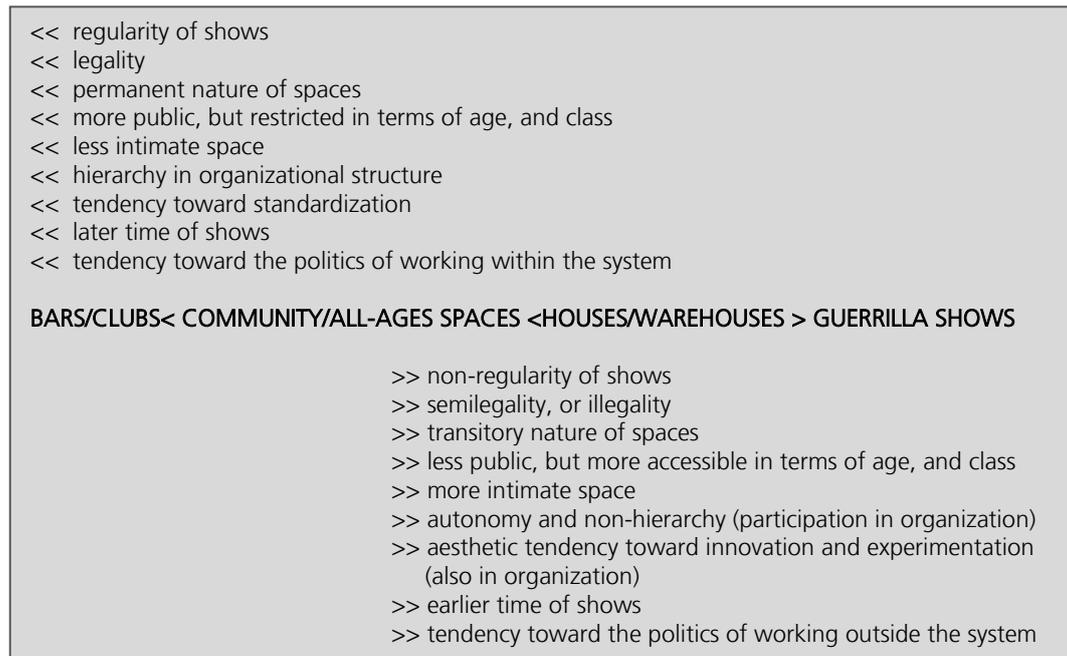


Figure 3: A functional typology of American DIY venues.

There are some generalizations in this typography of DIY venues, and there exist several exceptions to it, often depending on geographical and regulatory, or pragmatic and contingency factors. For instance, some houses can have longer shows, depending on the type of neighborhood. DIY communities that I studied also liked to organize more well-known touring bands or their own album release shows in bigger and legal places, such as bars and clubs, or official all-ages venues, partly because they considered these shows as more important, and therefore wanted to reduce the risk of their cancellation. Moreover, some of them organized house and warehouse shows, or guerilla shows, not necessarily because of their anarchist political convictions, but also for pragmatic reasons, out of necessity, or for pure fun and excitement.

Nevertheless, this scheme clearly demonstrates what some of the main values and ideologies that exist within American DIY communities are, and what compromises or sacrifices do American DIY participants have to make, to achieve them. For example, it indicates how they accept greater risks to attain greater autonomy. It also shows how these values integrate different aspects of DIY culture, from the types of places and the types of social and spatial organization, to the types of politics and aesthetics related to them (see more about the aesthetic aspect below).

Since American DIY communities experience the most limitations on both extremes of this continuum, for instance, either by not having enough freedom and autonomy when organizing bar shows, or by risking police intervention in case of guerilla shows, they most commonly resort to house or warehouse shows as their ideal option (thus the arrows going in both directions from the central position of houses/warehouses in the typology represented in Figure 3). In addition, these kinds of venues also often feel the most intimate to them (see Bryan's and John's quotes above).

However, this scheme shows the total constellation of DIY venues and shows, and how they functions within certain materially and discursively determined parameters.

4. DIY values and ideals as manifested in DIY social and spatial patterns and policies

There exist particular organizational, interactional, and spatial DIY patterns that are favored by American DIY participants, and are seen as essential for the material establishment of an ideal DIY community at DIY shows. It is instructive to read the following two quotes in this regard, to get a sense of how place and spatial relations within it contribute to the establishment of a particular type of community:

Shows at Louigi's, it's a nice venue, all-ages (...) but they have a stage. It bummed me out, if you are in a front row, right next to the performer, and you're still looking up at them. Didn't feel (...) it's not interactive. I really like that about house shows (...) we're all the same, we're equal, and when [the performers] they're done playing then you talk to them and hang out with them. Eat the food with them, and it's like no separation. And it's to the point that I don't even enjoy going to the concerts anymore. Such a completely different experience! Even to be able to talk to the people while they're performing instead of being this anonymous person, and yelling out the requests, like, you have a conversation with them if you want (...) It's very comfortable (Elisa Hough from Davis, personal communication, 20 June, 2011).

And I think that's what's so special about house shows in general is their ability to make people feel united in ways a normal venue never could. They make us feel closer to the band, closer to the music, but most importantly, closer to our friends and each other. They provide a feeling of intimacy totally unmatched in any other setting, and that feeling is something that is ours forever, and the companies can never commoditize (Kuhns, 2011).

What is apparent from these two quotes is an emphasis on the values of equality, intimacy, participation, and community and on the methods of how to achieve them through particular spatial patterns that entail spatial or architectural features (e.g., absence of stages), organizational patterns (e.g., aiming toward equality and autonomy), and "intimate" social space, i.e., personal, friendly, and non-anonymous interaction among all of the participants at DIY shows, including audiences, performers, and organizers. These values are further reinforced through a variety of DIY space policies:

- (1) accessible all-ages and donation-based door policies,
- (2) programming policies inclusive to local, amateur, and often commercially non-attractive performers, and
- (3) safe space policies that advocate against racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia.⁸

There also exist seeming contradictions in this regard. American DIY communities should be seen both as counter-public spaces that challenge oppressive policies of dominant spaces, and at the same time as "subsidiary" or "damaged" spaces that mirror some of these same dominant practices (Nguyen, 2002, p. 110; Warner, 2002, p. 63). However, as I argue elsewhere (Verbuč, 2014), what is important in this relation is that there exist intense critical debates within American

⁸ Two quotes by American DIY participants illustrate their efforts to create utopian social spaces: "It would seem like, actually, there is plenty of space, right, but the spaces that exist, are not spaces that feel like places that we can have the kind of culture that we want to create. So then, we're talking about a different kind of space, which is the search for sort of like a free, sort of utopian space, the kind of space that doesn't really exist in the world" (Eric Lyle, personal communication, 24 October, 2012). Mike from Villanova house in Davis talks about DIY spaces in a similar way: "I think coming back to politics too, [it might be] a stretch, but (...) you could think of a house show or a house scene as a model of democracy: every actor is really important, and there's a lot of very small amount of barriers between (...), going between roles, going up and down the scene" (personal communication; 20 January, 2011).

DIY spaces and communities about these issues that at the same time also reveal inherently heterogeneous constitution of American DIY communities, both in terms of social identity and political position of American DIY participants.

5. Translocal networks of American DIY communities

On the translocal level, DIY communities resort to particular spatial practices that enable them to constitute themselves not only as “virtual”, technologically mediated and imagined translocal communities (Duncombe, [1997] 2008, pp. 60-61; Anderson, [1983] 2006), but also as intimate and face-to-face communities at a distance. DIY touring musicians generate face-to-face translocal DIY community through the reciprocal relation of playing and booking each other’s shows. To be able to tour, touring bands use favors of local DIY participants, who organize shows for them, in their houses, or other DIY venues, while these local DIY participants, when they go on their own tours, later seek out the return of the same favor. Within this social and spatial arrangement, *place* (as a *venue*) is treated as an “item” in a translocal reciprocal exchange of shows, or booking “favors”, among touring and translocal DIY participants (Verbuč, 2015).



Figure 4: A drawing from a comic book, showing audience members from a DIY touring band perspective as “one-night-stand-best-friends”.

Source: Lewis, [2007] 2009, p. 73.

The type of translocal community generated through DIY touring is a network of participants that are not seen as "fans," as in most non-DIY music scenes, but more of as "friends." As Danielle from the Portland band Taxpayers noted to me, the whole translocal DIY network is based on the "network of favors," and added that "friendships are born out of that" (personal communication, 26 April, 2012; see Figure 4). Furthermore, the *place* also determines the quality of relations established between the touring band and the locals. As DIY participants acknowledge, playing in small and non-commercial "intimate" venues, hanging out with locals and sleeping in their houses instead of in motels not only reduces traveling costs but also generates more close and personal relationships, and establishes for them the feeling of "home," and intimate community, wherever they go. This feeling is, for example, also expressed the following excerpts from Kimya Dawson's song "My Rollercoaster":

(...)
 And if we keep up this pace
 pretty soon we'll know the name
 of every kid and every grown up
 booking house shows in their town
 (...)
 And if home is really where the heart is
 Then we're the smartest kids I know
 Because wherever we are in this great big world
 We'll never be more than a few hours from home...
 (...)
 On the road again
 Just can't wait to get on the road again
 The life I love is makin' music with my friends
 And I can't wait to get on the road again
 (...)
 I've got my scrabble game, food on my plate, good friends and family
 And now there's you understanding why I do the things I do
 Knowing that you do them too makes me really happy (...)
 (Dawson, 2006)

6. DIY place and DIY music aesthetics and sound

For the end, I also examine the relationship between DIY place, and DIY sound and aesthetics within American DIY scenes. DIY venues can be quite diverse in terms of architectural styles and how they might affect the sounds (examples include houses, warehouses, all-ages shows, guerrilla shows, and squat shows — Verbuč, 2014), but I am only emphasizing two types here: basement shows and living room shows in houses. This is, for example, how some American DIY participants talk about basement shows in terms of atmosphere, sound, and aesthetics:

I think the quality of sound is usually different and that changes the way you approach the set. Obviously the sound won't be as crisp or clear as in a venue, so there's a lot more emoting, a lot more creating atmosphere (C.T. Ballentine as cited in Carroll, 2007).

The sound is usually horrible, and the space is usually cramped, so you have to make adjustments. (...) To me, basement shows mean that you play sloppy and loud, and the songs are usually twice as fast (Liam Kimball as cited in Carroll, 2007).

The shows I have the most fun at are the ones where you're in a packed basement where you can't breathe, can't move and are covered in sweat (Gaworski as cited in Connor, 2012, p. 71).

House shows are better. They're smaller, more intimate, your gear is at stake because of this, but it's worth it because we're fucking punk (...) It's louder, you're in the crowd, it's in your face. Quality often does not matter as much as community and fucking family and the ways, like being emotional and playing, and could be one of the band (Chris from Religious Girls, personal communication, 23 January, 2011).

What is obvious from these quotes is the following. First, small concert places like house basements create special kind of atmosphere, which is considered as more intimate, energetic, and communal. Second, material circumstances for playing music at these kinds of shows are not always the best, so the musicians adjust by playing louder, faster, and more energetic music, sometimes also more sloppy. Third, aesthetical preferences at these kinds of shows are a combination of the first two factors: musical and technical quality does not matter as much as the feeling of community, and the energy that these kinds of shows generate for many of the American DIY participants.

On the other hand, while not being a rule, living room shows usually require quieter sets, because of a lesser sound isolation of living rooms which contributes to the greater possibility of noise disturbance and consequently police intervention at DIY house shows in residential areas. In addition, because of the furniture, electric appliances, and decorations, living rooms often encourage less rowdy behavior and require greater care at shows. Consequently, the DIY house show residents as organizers usually but not always prefer booking quieter acoustic or “laptop” performers, and bands with no electric guitars or drums. Moreover, the musicians from louder bands sometimes adjust by preparing softer sets for these kinds of spaces. Members from the band ALTO! from Portland, for instance, told me in this relation about the adaptability of their sets for different kinds of environments: “we have intimate living room sets and blow out noise sets for clubs” (Stone, personal communication, 3 June, 2013).⁹

7. Conclusion

My aim in this paper is to present a multi-dimensional perspective on the centrality of place, and particularly house shows and DIY venues, for the American DIY communities. I argue, first, that the centrality of DIY places, and particularly houses and warehouses for the American DIY participants, is the outcome of structural and social limitations and therefore a material necessity for the assemblage of American DIY communities. Second, DIY venues are also a result of the ideological orientations of American DIY communities toward social, cultural, and political autonomy. Third, there exists a larger constellation of DIY venues within the local American DIY scenes, among which house shows and warehouses are the most desirable options. Fourth, I emphasize the importance of physical place and social space at DIY shows for the constitution of American DIY communities, which means everything from architecture to spatial organizational patterns, spatial policies, and spatial relations at DIY shows. Five, I demonstrate how in the larger space of translocal DIY networks, DIY houses serve both as central items in the reciprocal economy of exchange of shows, and as central places for the constitution of intimate and face-to-face communities at a distance. Six, I establish there is a relation between DIY places, DIY sounds, and DIY aesthetics within American DIY scenes.

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⁹ In relation to acoustic music being played at punk shows, Aaron Scott wrote the following thoughts on his blog: “Maybe I’m wrong, but it seems to me that there’s more acoustic music being integrated into the DIY show circuit these days. More musicians are realizing the versatility of traveling without drum sets and guitar cabs, and more show house hosts are realizing the advantage of the lower decibel levels of acoustic music. I hesitate to suggest what, if anything, this trend represents. But I think that there is a tangible benefit to broadening the definition of DIY music and art to encompass all genres that want in, including acoustic music” (Scott, 2011).

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