

CLOTHESLINES

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When Loren Lutzenhiser and I began to study apartment energy consumption in Davis, California we encountered a conflict between the apartment management and a number of tenants over clothesline use. The complex we were studying did have lines, but they were few in number and located next to the trash bins, a good indicator, in the view of those who wanted to "hang out," of what the management thought of the practice. And this, the tenants noted, in a town that had been called "solar city" for its energy-conserving housing. A little investigation indicated that the "look" of the line carried different meanings for each side: it indicated a "tenement," on the one side, or it made the place familial and "homey" on the other.

This was certainly a "side issue" for us, but we thought it potentially an important one: technologies are complexes of *signs* that convey a lot more meaning than their narrowly-defined functions would suggest, and perhaps the electric dryer isn't so much a "time-saver" (one of its most important rationales) as a social "upscaling" device. So in 1989 I interviewed 39 clothesline-users, about half each in California and Wisconsin, regarding the pleasures and pains of clothes hanging. Since I didn't interview *non-users* this is a particularly biased sample; this will have to be corrected, but the work thus far has uncovered a rich vein. In general, however, what is revealed is that tools aren't simply tools; persons' identities, self-conceptions, "ways of life" are "embodied" in the tools that people use.

The interviews brought forth data that I sorted roughly into four categories: first there were the rules for clothesline use, about which users could apparently feel quite strongly; then there were the "games" that users play when using the line; third, the sense in which the line can be said to be a kind of "art form," a mosaic or kinetic sculpture or

painting as well as a subject *for* artists, especially photographers; finally, the clothesline as what the French call a *bricolage*: a useful device that "accumulates" new uses insofar as its use is somewhat open-ended and not altogether "dedicated" (probably a characteristic of any tool, to varying degrees). These four categories bear upon but are also somewhat independent of the line's significance as a "status marker." They reveal the issues that arise for, and among, users.

The first category, "rules," includes a rich and complex lore that mixes thinly disguised moral injunction ("how" to hang underwear presumes that one wants to hide it; one should properly start hanging "early," and "use pins efficiently," for example) with what Lutzenhiser calls a kind of "practical physics"--knowing the effect of the sun on different materials, especially as a bleach, or how to manage the wind, or the properties of various kinds of line, or the consequences for subsequent ironing of hanging clothes in particular ways, or what to expect from varying cloud formations. The rules or injunctions here are usually implicit in the "matters-of-fact" stories--e.g., a wooden clothes pole is a mistake: imagine the "disaster" of having its hidden decay revealed when it collapses under a full load of wet clothes. There is also an acknowledged variety of organizational rules governing "what goes with what: "hang" like with like," or hang by ironing order, or by gender, sometimes by person (not likely in a family), or in one case--a 16-year-old female--by "outfit."

Under the heading of games we find some evidence of competition regarding timing--to be "first hung" is good, although I heard several stories in which hangers-out claimed that their *mothers* had played this game but not themselves--and the virtual definition of virtue itself is to have a job and to

have one's clothes on the line before leaving for work. There is also a kind of "whiter than thou" competition--surely in part, at least, an accomplishment of the soap industry. There are also "personal" competitions--to see if, for example, through judicious hanging one can best one's own previous fastest ironing time. And there is what I came to call a kind of "all of the clothes and all of the line" game, in which one tries to fill the line but accommodate all of the wash and not have to re-position anything in order to hang the last items. Perhaps the best known of these games is what might be termed the "all of the sun and none of the rain" game: the clothes are *just* dry, and the line is cleared, as the first drops of rain appear.

The sense in which the line may be said to be an "art form" is encompassed in much of what has been said thus far, but there were several indications of concern with plainly aesthetic matters--the "curve" of the line, for example, or the movement of the laundry in the wind, or the proper juxtaposition of colors and shapes so that the line "looks right." I also found it revealing that photographers frequently choose clotheslines as a subject--one artist's activity becoming, one might say, the subject for another. Of course there is a sense in which I am stretching the idea of an "art form" here; there appears, however, to be at least some of the same care given to hanging clothing on the line as there is when one hangs them on the body--and certainly the body, if not precisely a kinetic sculpture, is also not a drying rack.

Finally I note that the uses to which the line is put are not only established but emergent. Clothesline posts can become goal posts, and hold swings for toddlers or take on plant hangers, and the line can

substitute for a volleyball net or become the ridge pole for a tent, and by attaching a leash to the line the line can become a "run" for the dog. I also suspect that the clothesline is the way, or at least one important way, in which generic "rope" historically entered the household--and rope is of course in itself a large topic, a significant tool that has spawned its own array of utilities, game forms, competencies, and hence reputations and identities.

In gathering this information I was impressed by the California/Wisconsin comparison: Wisconsin back yards seem much less likely to be enclosed by fencing than those in California; in the "old country" the activities of a household are, comparatively speaking, accessible to the inspection of neighbors, and hanging laundry there is a form of signage that projects the household into the neighborhood, doing so not only as a set of waving flags but through the social interaction that clothes hanging normally involves. In that setting, and by virtue of this type of landscape, the household "belongs" to the neighborhood and the neighborhood itself seems to have more of a reality than in the more privatized settings characterized by the fenced yard and the electric clothes dryer. The dryer, then, may be implicated, in a small but perhaps significant way, in social changes that are themselves of large significance, and implicated in a way that certainly would not be predicted from its minimal and very utilitarian definition as a remover of moisture and a saver of time. This is of course to beg the question of whether those changes have more or less desirable consequences but it argues for attention to that question. The issue in tool-use is not simply that of efficiency, but includes the viability of personal identities and entire social structures.