

The wacky world of renos gone wrong

Many a do-it-yourselfer's fine idea looks less brilliant a few years later

BY PEDRO ARRAIS, TIMES COLONIST FEBRUARY 17, 2010



Home renovations are often not as simple as they seem.

Photograph by: Files, Times Colonist

A lack of skill is no obstacle for homeowners who see it as a point of pride to take on any task around the house. Others seek to add glitz and glamour to their humble homes with more inspiration than taste. Why call in a professional when one can do it oneself?

It's often said that a person's house is his castle. In one house, builder Rov Dosanjh found a throne -- at least a seat fit for the king of the castle. He was hired to do some renovation work in a house a few years ago. On his first day he went to use the bathroom and found the toilet sitting atop a 60-centimetre base.

The homeowner casually explained that he had experienced unsatisfactory results with waste removal when he flushed the toilet. He reckoned if the water bowl in his gravity-fed toilet was placed higher, the water flow would be greater.

In yet another bathroom, Dosanjh, owner of Rayn Properties, found an electrical receptacle in a shower stall. The plug was live and wasn't protected by a Ground Fault Interrupter switch -- required for plugs found around water.

The husband casually explained he installed it there because his wife liked to use a hair trimmer in the shower stall because it was easier to just wash away the hair after a trim.

"People just watch all those do-it-yourself shows on TV and think they can do a quick fix," says Dosanjh. "It's just scary what they do."

Because renovation work is usually done by a homeowner without a permit, there is no inspection by a qualified professional. Because the homeowner was trying to save a few dollars to begin with, the work is not overseen by a licensed tradesperson.

He says builders and designers earn their keep by using their experience to avoid costly mistakes in design and construction.

At one house, he was asked to relocate a doorway. He was puzzled because the house was brand new.

It turned out the homeowner had insisted the house designer create a layout in such a way that the doors to the bedrooms would be hidden from view. The designer complied, locating the doors around a corner at the end of a hallway. Unfortunately, nobody thought about the repercussions until moving day when the movers could not get the bedroom furniture into the room. The owners ended up sleeping on a futon, which was the only bedding that could be bent around the corner to get into the room.

While builders can compensate for bad layouts and questionable renovations, designers have to tackle a lack of taste.

Tacky dropped ceilings, shag carpets on hardwood floors and flat door skins glued over classic six-panel solid fir doors are indignities Russ Collins finds inflicted on older houses. These are the result of renovations by previous owners who wanted to reflect the style of the day. Now these trendy touches look dated rather than classic.

"People try to force a style and try to turn a house into something it's not," says Collins, owner of Zebra Design and Interiors. "Doing so destroys the character of it. They would be better off buying something that's closer to what they're looking for."

That's a point to ponder for people planning to rip down the walls around their kitchen. Maybe in 15 years, people won't want to look at the kitchen clutter from the living room.

Perhaps a future generation will find the open-plan living area as attractive as some of the bygone trends Collins has seen.

He recalls touring the house of a man who took wall-to-wall carpeting to new heights.

Early in the 1970s, a gentleman had purchased a heritage home in Victoria. Needing to furnish it, this frugal fellow went to the local auction house looking for bargains.

What he came upon was an auction lot that consisted of an assortment of out-of-date carpet samples. To his delight, his was the highest bid for the lot -- which included carpets in different styles, fabrics and colours, including shags in avocado green, dusty rose and other shades popular in the era.

He brought his bargain home and proceeded to lay the various pieces in rooms around the house. After successfully covering all the flooring, he still had quite a few pieces left. Being happy with the results so far, and being a thrifty guy, he contemplated what to do with the surplus.

Having gone wall-to-wall, he starting carpeting up the walls from floor to ceiling -- and even over the ceiling in some rooms. He was disappointed when he ran out of carpet samples before he could cover every ceiling.

Collins recalls how proud that owner was of his astonishing result. A real estate agent who was accompanying Collins seemed less enthusiastic about the house's resale prospects.

After a few years in business, every builder and designer has more than a few stories to tell. But some are sympathetic to their customers' plight and reluctant to reminisce publicly about their follies.

"I have done my share of correcting renovations done by homeowners. However flawed, I keep in mind the work done at the time was the best way the homeowner knew to get the job done based on available money and know-how," says Stephen Lentz, principal of A1 Constructo Group. "It was what was needed at that time."

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