

The joys of renovating

by ANTHONY CARNOVALE

I remember watching Bob Villa's *This Old House* way back in the early 90s and thinking: why would anybody watch a show about a house renovation? I also remember not being about to change the channel every time the show was on. There was something about the way that Bob Villa carried himself, the way he spoke that made it difficult for me to change the channel. I never heard a tradesman speak like that. I was intrigued, captivated. I was watching Bob the 'storyteller' more than I was watching Bob the 'home renovator.' Whatever happened to Bob Villa?

Today, some of the most popular design celebrities have earned rock-star level fame from their home renovation/design shows like Drew and Jonathan Scott, *The Property Brothers*. They went from renovating homes on television to selling half a billion dollars of their home design products in just one year. A family favourite is the farmhouse-style power couple, Chip and Joanna Gaines of *Fixer Upper*. A roll of Gaines' wallpaper retails for over \$200.

My wife and I recently purchased, sold and renovated a home. We had decided that it was time to find the house that we could grow in as a family. We paid way too much over asking and had little idea what a renovation would entail (and cost). It didn't take long for us to see that the 'reality' of home renovation shows, looked nothing like the 'reality' of a real life reno.

I promised myself that I wouldn't get stressed during the renovation. I tried to keep things in check, to stay grounded. I mean, we were lucky (privileged) to have two roofs over our heads (even if one had a small leak); it didn't matter that the reno was behind schedule and that we'd be moving into only half of our house. There were some heated battles, letdowns and meltdowns. With work, COVID, two young kids and a house with no kitchen, I think we did okay for ourselves. In the end (does it ever end?) we were able to design and pick and choose the things that would make our new house a home. Obviously, we couldn't have done it without the demo guys, electricians, plumbers and trim guy.

I didn't always appreciate the trades. I remember as a kid, being ashamed of my family and the dirt and the smells that they carried home after having worked on a construction site or digging a hole to lay some concrete pipes. I mean, I was dreaming about being an astronaut, not a general laborer (like my grandfather); when I was older, I wanted to be an urban planner, not a welder (like my great-uncle).

To this day, there's still this perception out there that the trades are somehow 'less than,' as though people who can work with their hands have settled for less, or don't have the acumen of those who sit behind a desk and a screen.

I hear it every day in my classroom - students being pressured to go to university to prepare for a job that won't be there for them when they graduate. Economic shifts are making it clear that post-secondary education doesn't guarantee a cushy pay cheque, the cost of tuition is skyrocketing, and boomers who once filled trade jobs are entering retirement. 'Fast Company' named skilled trades one of the five jobs that will be the hardest to fill in 2025, pointing out that there are a 'large number of tradespeople retiring but fewer young people choosing these careers.' According to *Explore the Trades*, only 35 percent of future jobs will require a four-year degree or higher.

A degree on the wall is like a nice car parked in front of your house- it's a way of letting people know what to think about you. Well, I've got a couple of degrees and I only just learned how to hang a towel rack. Those degrees hanging in my study would have nothing to hang on if it weren't for people in the trades.

I've learned a lot about the different trades over the past couple of months:

I learned that when a tradesperson says 'trust me' - you probably shouldn't. I learned the difference between trim and window casings, shoe mold and crown mold; I even know what a door jamb is. I saw a 73-year-old mason put up a scaffold, and rebuild a

chimney, as if he were repairing the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. I hired an electrician after he tried to convince me about all the exciting and funky things he could do with lights. I also learned that each trade likes to talk smack about the other trades, and to blame the other guys for any delays and hiccups. I also learned that contractors don't like it when you take notes in front of them.

In the end, you spend so much time with some of these people, that they can start to feel like family. Take Stanley ? our painter. I don't know his last name. I know he did some work for a company that my father worked for, and that he painted the house that we sold before buying this house. Stanley painted walls and trim and shoe mold like he was painting alongside Picasso. He was meticulous and set in his ways. I loved the white strip that he painted where the ceiling and wall met; I imagined it was his signature strip, a way of leaving an identifiable mark.

We spent plenty of time talking. Some days, he'd call me over and tell me a story, waving his brush around without spilling so much as a single drop of paint on the floor. He told me stories about learning how to caulk; about sleeping on the floor on a bed of hay and sleeping like a little baby. I think the favorite part of his day was when my father showed up with a tumbler of espresso mixed with a shot (or two) of Sambuca. Stanley was the first person to arrive and the last person to leave; my kids would sing songs to him as he walked through the door. One morning we sang him a song, rhyming 'Stanley' with 'he's our family.'

My favorite day during the renos was spent listening to my great-uncle (trim) and Stanley (paint) trade stories about work and life while eating cold pieces of fried veal and sipping wine from a plastic cup. Stanley reminded me of my grandfather (general laborer) and the pride that he took in his work.

I get the sense that there aren't many people like Stanley out there; he does too. On his last day he told me: 'There's not a lot of people out there like me. I'm 74, I work for myself. I'm not sure how much longer Stanley is going to work. Some days I'd hear him groan and sigh as if it were all too much for him.'

Of all the people that came through our home, Stanley was the one that left the greatest impression. I look at these walls and the trim, and the crown mold and admire and value his work ethic, talent and craftsmanship. And judging by how much Stanley charged us, he does too.