

Le Bon Journal

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Volume 2 Issue 12: Home improvement and renovations, do it yourself

From a builder's customer to a builder's apprentice and assistant, I learned that the building trade is like any other. It requires patience, practice, and planning.

Here are stories of a damsel in distress who learned to overcome her helplessness by doing it herself, from builder's customer to builder's apprentice.

Builder's customer

The building trade belongs to the category of being judged by what's not done or what's visibly missing. As a result, it's difficult to please a customer. It's also difficult because the customer usually has something else in mind and the result of what a builder does is either irreversible or highly costly to undo.

I envisioned my downstairs with only two walls painted solid white, so that I could retain the special yellow and white feel of the others. It was also to allow me to test how I would feel in a room that's all white.

I envisioned a working brick shed by the time I returned. Instead I found a big slab of concrete on top of a high brick monstrosity.

I envisioned climbing up vertical wall steps into my loft, the way firemen do. Instead, I found an ugly aluminium ladder fixed on the landing.

Blinding white

I returned to a new home today. Instead of repainting just two walls white, my builder had painted all eight walls very white. In the process, he and his apprentice had removed my books and put them back in the wrong order. My century-old mahogany parquet floor was covered with white paint dust.

The brick shed they built in front of my house was a monstrosity from a horror movie. My builder had warned me that it would be high. But he didn't tell me it was going to be big. A week of foundation

digging and bricklaying all for the sake of giving me the convenience of parking and storing my bicycle!

I walked upstairs. They didn't move the mirror I had requested. My builder told me it was not wise to attach ladder steps to the wall as it would be impossible to climb into the loft. Instead, he fixed a ladder for me to test.

The extra kitchen cabinets were nowhere to be seen.

So what did the builder and his apprentice do? The shed was not finished. The neighbouring fence was not erected. The kitchen cabinets weren't made. The loft stairs and hall mirror...

But they sure did a good job of painting everything blinding white!!!

Rescue operation

Something was not right. The half-finished brick shed for the bicycle standing in front of my house has been built to my specification. The bricks have been perfectly laid. What's wrong?

Everyday I walked to my front window and looked out. I walked outside and looked at it. I looked down from my bedroom.

It looked like an upside-down skip. It looked like a big brick bunker, a brick cave.

One day I woke up, from yet another restless and mostly sleepless night. What if this brick monstrosity lowered the value of my house?

That's what's wrong! It might be functional, but it's an eyesore.

So I asked my builder to remove three layers of brick but something was still not right.

At 9:30 pm I called the sixth architect I had met. I was a damsel in distress begging him to come over.

He walked with me up and down my street. How can we make my

front brickwork conform with the rest, and even blur into obscurity?

With a few measurements and pen sketches, he drew what looked like a cornered brick fence.

I instructed my builder to follow the sketch.

Now, instead of the biggest eyesore in the neighbourhood, it has become the most unique brick fence - designer style!

Brownian motion

It doesn't feel right. But I don't know what it is.

My architect friend walked around my living room. He paced around my dining room. He walked outside.

Finally, he said, "You have too many browns."

"I hate brown. I don't have any brown clothes. I don't even wear brown shoes," I said.

"Your floor is brown. Your door is a different brown. Your piano is brown. Your chair is a different shade of brown. Your "

No wonder I couldn't bear to do anything else in the room besides playing the piano. The cacophony of brown was deafening to my ear.

"... Your stairs are brown. Your picture frame is brown."

After convincing me that I'm suffering from a brown overdose, my friend suggested that I paint the fireplaces and staircase white and bleach my floor.

"But it's an expensive, ancient and dark mahogany," I protested.

"That might be so," he replied wisely. "But look at the different shades of brown on the floor. These are scrap mahogany, left over from carvings, and made into floor tiles. Look at the different colours here."

In physics, brownian motion refers to the way particles move - and in finance, it refers to the way stock prices move - randomly. In my case,

I've let the browns take over my life.
Or perhaps I should call it
"emotional brownout"!

Reputation to lose

"So how do you decide which architect to choose?" I asked the director of a software company.

"Choose the one that has the reputation to lose."

In other words, don't choose the one who has no reputation, and therefore none to lose. Choose the one who cannot afford to lose his reputation.

In that case, I should choose the architect who lives in my neighbourhood. Surely he can't afford to mess it up.

But suppose all four architects have good track record. And it's not a question of who might do a bad or worse job, but a question of selecting one who will give me the best value for money. How then should I choose?

There's only one who doesn't charge value added tax. So that's a savings of 17.5% for me right there.

Although he was to the first to see me, he was also the last to deliver his quote.

Like many people who are overwhelmed by too many choices or difficult trade-offs, I decided to call a fifth architect for yet another quote.

Builder's apprentice

The son of a carpenter told me that he grew up in houses that needed major fixing. He was used to living in a mess. His dad built three of the houses he lived in. He and his brothers helped out. And he, the second son, learned the tricks of the trade.

His hands were rough from the manual labour. This experience of building and renovating houses gave him the confidence to change his house.

Soon after he moved into this house, he ripped out the grey plastic walls that the former owners erected. That exposed the soaking brick walls underneath.

One of the previous owners, both chain smokers, had died in his forties. The ceilings were yellow from their cigarette smoke.

There was nothing this carpenter's son liked about the former owners' tastes. He didn't like the wallpaper, the colour combination, and even the new vanity unit in the bathroom.

I am a novice at doing the renovations myself. I've always sought and employed outside help. But this time, I decided to apprentice under him to see if I can cut through the mystique.

Yesterday, I started ripping out the wallpaper. My right hand became numb from holding the scraper for too long. It was hard work - tedious, repetitive, physical, manual, and mind-numbing. After scraping the walls clean, my next step was to fill the holes and then paint the ceiling.

Unlike the carpenter's son, I didn't grow up in houses that needed work. We didn't own the houses we lived in. If there was anything that needed repairing or replacing, we only had to call a central number. It was someone else's responsibility.

Now, as builder's apprentice, I'm learning just what "owning" your house means --- making it your own responsibility.

Builder's assistant

Why does vacuuming (hoovering) up the mess seem so familiar? Ah! I am to the builder as the dental assistant is to the dentist. On my last visit to the dentist, she vacuumed up the mess the dentist created in my mouth. The dental assistant prepares utensils called for by the dentist. My services are far less sophisticated.

Home renovations require the destruction of what is there and building a replacement or an addition. It's not just manual labour. There are calculations to be made, scenarios to be drawn, and plans to be discussed.

I tried my turn at the paintbrush but soon complained of pains in my shoulders, neck, back, and wrists. I tried my hand at sanding down the walls but soon complained about the

dust and boredom. Alas! The only thing I'm really good at - is cleaning up after the builder's mess. And thank goodness for that!

Painting colours

After the second layer of ground paint has dried, use water-based sandpaper to make the surface smooth before applying colour.

Water-based sandpaper is finer than normal sandpaper. It also doesn't create flying dust!

I sound like an expert, having only recently gained the confidence to do it alone. My days of damsel in distress in the home renovation department are rapidly disappearing.



Anne Ku, editor

This issue marks the last of the 2-page Le Bon Journal newsletters, edited compilations of Anne Ku's original online writing around individual themes. Volume 3 of Le Bon Journal will be an e-zine (electronic magazine) for self-expression by invited contributors.

Feedback from a reader

What a laborious task it is to renovate a house. Your late grandpa had his unforgettable, painful experience. He, at 50, bought his house for the first time in his life and used it as his two room residence and two evening classrooms 1960. As the student numbers increased, he planned and had the house renovated into two floors. While this was going on, his classrooms were still being used and so was his residence. He felt he aged five years when the renovation was completed. By 1985, when the five classrooms were overpopulated, he again launched a renovation project, the result of which was what you already saw. This time he said he felt remorsefully growing still more than five years older, seeing his nine classrooms, one office room, a courtyard, plus a 3 bedroom house. It became a 4-story building. When the fourth renovation was completed in June 1996, he was able to enjoy the comfortable conveniences (his bedroom on the ground floor) for only two months. He was almost bedridden by then, having lost his memory and appetite.

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