

MOVE OVER, MARTHA

DAILY NEWS

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With more than 45 home-improvement shows on TV, the diva of domesticity has more to worry about than the feds

By SERENA FRENCH

WORKING THE ROOMS

For years, Martha Stewart had a monopoly on living. But now that she is concentrating on her indictment (and her salad), the competition is thriving.

More than 45 home-related programs are on the air this summer, from MTV's "Crisis" to "Behind the Style" on WNBC. Instead of Martha's annoyingly neutral tone and clipped comments, they feature colorful homes and lots of jokes.

Take the Oxygen Network's hit how-to show "Painted House": Host Debbie Travis scribbles it as "the Osbournes go decorating."

Millions are tuning in to the new style home shows, which are more reality TV in plain DIY. "Trading Spaces" has put the Learning Channel on the map with 18 million viewers a week; home-arts guru Christopher Lowell has an audience of 3 million a week, and "Surprise by Design" is Discovery's most popular daytime series.

What's more, cable stations have introduced spinoffs of their most popular programs. The Learning Channel is expanding "Trading Spaces" — where neighbors are given 48 hours, \$1,000 and help from a cast of eight designers to transform one other's homes — with Sunday-night family episodes, where couples and their

children swap houses. Another new program is "Trading Spaces: Boys vs. Girls," where 12- and 13-year-olds redo parent-decorated bedrooms.

Ruth Lednicer, a 36-year-old marketing director who just moved from the East Side to Chicago, didn't realize how much she had learned from "Trading Spaces," "Designer's Challenge" and "Designing Cents" until she bought chairs for her living and dining rooms. "I got ideas mostly about color on the walls and using fabric to add texture," she said. "I don't think I could have conceptualized that without the shows."

FEATHERING THE NEST

The obsession with home design isn't new, but observers say it has increased since Sept. 11. "Faith Popcorn said things would become so scary in the outside world that people would nest," says Robert Verdi, a fast-talking host of "Surprise by Design." "She attributed it to things like SARS, war, community unrest."

Verdi also points out that good design is more available and affordable than in the past. "Our parents bought furniture when they got married," he said. "There was nothing on TV for them to be inspired by, and they basically kept it their entire marriage. Our generation sees things dif-



SMART STYLE Decorator Sheila Bridges has a show on the Fine Living Network

ferently: They do weird greens for spring, they do a nubby tweed texture for fall. You don't feel bad if you buy something for \$100 and you give it to a friend or donate it to the Salvation Army and buy a

new coffee table. Pottery Barn, Crate & Barrel, Ikea and West Elm are almost as disposable as H&M clothing."

Audiences also identify with average folks struggling with glue guns and sisal floor covering. "In a small way, this kind of show shares something with 'American Idol,'" says Teresa Strasser, host of "While You Were Out," a "Trading Spaces" companion series (it involves a secret two-day design transformation, which participants can upgrade by answering game-show-style questions about their partners). "There's something very compelling about seeing how real people act under real pressure," she adds.

Strasser, who is a comedy writer, not a designer, argues that she represents the average viewer more than Martha Stewart does. "Remember in the late '80s when, if you drank Evian and played racquetball and had a decorator, you were big time? In today's world, you would almost be embarrassed to hire a decorator, because doing it yourself is seen as all that's good and right about Americans."

EXTREME MAKEOVERS

The public also loves radical transformations. "It's all about the drama of the before and after that these shows give," says Natalie Warady, style editor of Budget Living magazine. "That's why they're

more interesting in a way than cooking shows: seeing that terrible room and what it turns into."

Most dramatic are the makeover shows, especially the Discovery Channel's new "Monster House." This "extreme" show turns the home into a theme park: Homeowners choose their ultimate fantasy, be it racecars or a tropical paradise, and a team of experts creates it, in a given period of time, using whatever budget it takes.

The Style Network, whose mainstay home shows are "Area," "Rachel Ashwell's Shabby Chic" and "Homes With Style" (which has featured the digs of such designers as Betsy Johnson and Randolph Duke), is rolling out two new programs. "Clean House," beginning in July, features cleanups and house reorganizations. "Guess Who's Coming to Re-decorate?" (due this winter) is a makeover show on which a person from the homeowner's past is brought in to help.

Wall-to-wall home shows can be found on Home & Garden Television. This month, HGTV airs "Fridays at Home," a two-hour block of its most popular lifestyle programming, including "Design

on a Dime" and "Mission: Organization," to help introduce its upcoming makeover show "Divine Design."

Even though Discovery's Christopher Lowell insists that "90% of the how-to shows on the air right now teach you nothing," some viewers do learn from them.

Karen Peterson, a 38-year-old public-relations executive who lives in the East Village, installed a dimmer light switch after watching shows including "Sheila Bridges: Designer Living" on the Fine Living Network. "Her show is very savvy, with great interior-designer guests, gorgeous locations and practical, stylish advice," says Peterson in praise of the Harlem-based interior decorator. "Most of them are really dumbed-down, talking to the lowest common denominator."

LCD is one thing, but how about catering to the lowest budget?

Budget Living's Warady would like to see a series "with people who just come in and reshape the space without buying anything at all. That's a show that would have lots of appeal right now."