

Home TV: It Hits Us Where We Live

Home improvement is like cooking: if we spent as much time doing it ourselves as watching others do it on TV, there would be no need for KFC or contractors. So why is it that you can't swing a hammer on cable TV nowadays without hitting, well, a hammer? In one of the homilies that end his Discovery Channel show, designer Christopher Lowell offers a hint. "I hope I've given you some great ideas," he says, "so the next time you have



LOREN SANTON—TLC

guests, they'll feel as if they've walked into a warm and loving environment."

You've gotta love that "as if." You see, what Lowell and his peers know is that our homes are built out of hope and anxiety. Are we warm? Are we loving? If not, can we fake it with a few houseplants? Our homes are where our personalities and imaginations are nakedly on display, and we continually suspect they are lacking. And judging by the number of hideous paneled rec rooms being redone on TLC, Discovery, HGTV, BBC America, DIY Network and beyond, we just may be right.

It's this dramatic, emotional side of homemaking that today's home shows appeal to, more than the nuts-and-bolts of nuts and bolts. Sure, there are still hard-core shows for

people who actually own power sanders. But these new shows—light on the how-to, heavy on the effervescent patter—are more like daytime-TV makeovers: if only someone with a discerning eye looked at you, they say, you could discover your true, unique beauty. (They're not about doing it yourself; they're about redoing yourself.)

So on TLC's megahit *Trading Spaces* (where pairs of friends fix up, or ruin, each other's homes), the drama is, Do your friends really know you? Could you live their lives better than they do? And *Trading Spaces'* success has inspired a raft of shows that are as much about love as about louvers. Take HGTV's *Designing for the Sexes*, where spouses gamely spar over home projects, Mars-and-Venus style; one husband wants angular stones for the new fireplace because they're more "manly" than curvy river rocks. On Discovery's *Surprise by Design*, people race against the clock to give their unsuspecting spouses a room or garden makeover (TLC's *While You Were Out* takes a similar tack). Supplemented with wedding videos and gushy when-we-first-met stories and ending with a climactic unveiling, it's like *The Newlywed Game* with nail guns: If you really loved me, you'd know I hated pastels!

Which raises the question, If home design can jeopardize a relationship, can it begin one too? Since Sept. 30, HGTV has been trying to find out on the blind-date home show *Love by Design*. (Notice that buzzword design again. Who does anything as déclassé as "decorating" anymore?) One single visits a stranger's pad for a surprise home renovation and, just maybe, a little somethin'-somethin' afterward. A silly idea, sure, but what better way to preview your future than to see what your prospective mate, given the chance, would do to your piles of CD jewel boxes? The eyes may be the window to the soul. But so are the window treatments. —By James Poniewozik

The Next Martha?

Home queen Martha Stewart is in hiding. These designers are the likeliest to ascend to her throne:



Chris Madden With 13 books, a furniture line and a show on HGTV, she's "bringing design to the heartland." A nice home, she adds, "is a birthright."



Sheila Bridges Since TIME named her America's best decorator last year, she has published a furnishing guide and got a cable-TV gig.



Christopher Lowell His "You Can Do It" slogan and telegenic style on Discovery help move his own line of linens, furniture, paint, artwork and luggage.



Katie Brown A Gen X-er who's featured on the Style network, the effervescent Brown makes a table runner using sand and twigs. So Martha!