

There are two subjects that are guaranteed to get cocktail conversation going—

real estate, and renovation nightmares. Once you've become engaged with a house, the next step, typically, is to take on a renovation.

Houses work along the same principles as all relationships do. You fall in love, you live with them, and then you realize you have to change them—nothing radical, mind you, just, well, enhancements, to bring out the best. What looked perfect at the beginning seems, upon closer inspection, to have profound problems: rotting foundations; not enough weight-bearing structure; confusion in layout; skimpiness in scale. Too much room where you don't want it—not ample enough where you need it. Sometimes the problems are simply undetectable until it is too late to fix them—and then radical solutions are called for.

But here's the rub: renovation brings its own nightmares. Let's take my house, for instance, the one I have lived in for 20 years. We renovated the kitchen 18 years ago and, naturally, fell in love with our contractor—for a while. Things went smoothly until, of course, the kitchen was reduced to a shell and it was time to build things back. That was when we began to wonder about the quality of our jovial friend's work. He finally left the construction business—and left town. On the upside, because of the renovation, I met the architect who was to become a lifelong hero—Bill McDonough, who designed the project. On the downside, I still had to redo the roof, rebuild rotten balconies, and even get the doorsills turned around the right way (so that water spilled out the door, rather than in).

I'm not even going to begin to tell you about the renovation nightmare that I'm currently involved in—I'm still in shock and not ready to talk about it. My entirely blameless contractor is superb—thorough, efficient, and a great builder—and he is doing what he can to help me get through this. But no one can fight your battles for you, not even your dad. I just can't understand why building has to be so difficult. I mean, everyone does it. You'd think by now we would have some agreed upon operating procedures.

What I am ready to talk about is an age-old question: why do we go back for more? Here I find myself at the middle of my life, rebuilding a house. I'm learning an enormous amount about what goes into construction, to say nothing of all the fascinating stuff I'm discovering about design, scale, materials, and finances—most of which involves the concept of subtraction, doing more with less. It amazes me to see rooms drawn on paper, and

then to watch them come into being. It amazes me to realize that a design can look one way from the outside and be altogether different from the inside.

I'm learning about the process of building itself—how meticulous you have to be every step of the way; how important it is to start strong; how you have to love what you've undertaken, and have fun with it; how you have to confront problems immediately and insist on addressing them, instead of hoping they'll go away if you ignore them. How you have to stop, every once in a while, during the design process, and think back to fundamentals—is this really how I want to live? Is this really going to satisfy me? Why am I ignoring my nagging suspicion that the shape of that room is going to drive me crazy? How you have to ask yourself: am I simply letting go of what I really want to accommodate a compromised situation? Would it be good, in terms of karma, to give up on all those large closets, and learn instead to get rid of baggage?

How much of good design involves letting go and moving on—what we euphemistically call editing? How much involves hope—building toward what you want, rather than what you have? How much involves the benefit of carrying forward the lessons you think you have learned?

Bruised though I am, I'm already fantasizing about my next house. I took a trip to Japan recently, and although I loved seeing the gardens of Kyoto, I was even more moved by the architecture of the temples from which you are meant to view the gardens. Now, that's my idea of a house—simple, straightforward, roomy, and flexible, with deep

overhangs and cozy alcoves, walls that open and close depending on how expansive or defensive you are feeling. (Or perhaps it sounds better to say, how inward or outward turning we are.) Rooms from which every view is considered; rooms, in other words, completely at one with the garden. Rooms in which you have to move with deliberation and care, because if you don't, you will tear down the very fabric of your walls. Rooms that are peaceful and serene and uncluttered. You take out what you need; you put away what you aren't using—just like in kindergarten (and who wasn't happy then?). I think I finally know exactly what I want.



Dominique Browning, EDITOR