

THE RENOVATION REVOLUTION

BY ALAN BENNETT ILAGAN

Renewal, rebirth, renovation. Lately everywhere one looks there is a new way to improve one's life. Like all self-respecting self-obsessed gay folk, we are starting with ourselves and our own homes ~ the places in which we spend much of our waking (and sleeping) lives. Recent years have seen society flooded by all things to do with home improvement, from the do-it-yourself superstores to the influx of home and garden television programs.

Of course, gay men have been on top of this trend for quite some time, as evinced by our obsession with HGTV and shows like *Trading Spaces*, *While You Were Out*, and *In A Fix* (the entire afternoon line-up on TLC). The kaleidoscopic mix of hunky carpenters, flamboyant designers, and hapless homeowners combine to create a reality show that hits comfortably closer to home, and appeals to our inner desire for improvement, home and otherwise. They also provide a hefty dose of eye candy and entertainment (can you believe what Hildi put on their walls?!) In addition, these shows regularly feature gay couples as their "average" homeowners, obliterating the stereotype that all gay men have taste.

While home decoration has long been the province of many a gay man, the home improvement movement has markedly shifted in tone. Previously our domain was the stuff of silk flowers, trendy paint colors, and the odd window treatment ~ superficial stuff like the paper shade Blanche Dubois placed over a naked light-bulb. Now we are seeing a swing towards the more technical construction aspect of renovation – the nitty gritty, don-a-bad-boy-tool-belt-and-grease-up-those-gym-muscles type of work. We've gone from the sheer gossamer delicacy of Vivien Leigh to the sweat-stained brawn of Marlon Brando, and not necessarily for the better. I've done my share of sanding floors (workboots and a gas mask aren't as sexy as one might think) and painting walls (paint is never sexy) and stripping wallpaper (the least sexy thing in this world), and I have to admit that I long for the simpler days when being gay meant keeping a live orchid for over a year and not killing it.

Yet there is something deeper at work here. A lot of us are purchasing homes, renovating brownstones, and doing-it-ourselves, but instead of merely designing and accessorizing rooms, we are now tearing down walls, putting up plaster, and delving into the construction aspects of home improvement. These are permanent and major changes. Why the sudden surge in such behavior? One possible explanation is that we are finally putting down roots, starting families and settling down.

We have not foregone the desire for the aesthetically pleasing, but our current concerns have gone deeper than the superficial. We are creating homes and setting up the base for our lives and our growing families. For many of us, life no longer revolves around the dancing bar scene. Our bedrooms and bathrooms are not just holding pens or preparation dens – unkept sites of hastily-strewn outfit rejects. They are more than a place to have quick bouts of sex, more than a temporary loading zone for preparatory hygiene and maintenance rituals, and more than a convenient location to pass out in a drunken stupor.

Nights out have been replaced with nights in, and we want our nights to be glorious – high-count Egyptian cotton sheets, dupioni silk window treatments, and a multitude of pleasing paint glazes – enough atmospheric drama to impress all the senses (and overnight guests). Today we spend the majority of our time at home – entertaining, throwing dinner parties, hanging out, watching DVD's – and in our home, like most of our other obsessions, appearance is everything.

While our dabbling in home renovation grows and matures, and we take on the more advanced projects, we still have a need to be fabulous. Our quest for improvement ~ as individuals and as a culture ~ continues, and we will still look great doing it. This time around, however, we're creating something of permanence and lasting value. It's in the homes we make, the gardens we grow and the contributions we give to society. The renovation revolution has begun. Grab a hammer or get out of the way.