

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB108207859551884655>

AT LEISURE MAIN

Give Them Shelter

By Cameron Stracher

Updated April 16, 2004 12:01 a.m. ET

The Jacksons made us do it. They lived in a 1950s Cape, with sloping roofs, and an ancient kitchen. It simply would not fit their expanding and energetic family, their desire to entertain, their love of complicated salads, rosemary, grilled fish. When they announced their plans for renovation, we were pleased for them. We had often been the beneficiary of their culinary largesse, and imagined weekends filled with home-baked focaccia and mesquite-blackened salmon.

Then the home-improvement demon reared its rapacious green-eyed head.

"I'd love to do the floors," said my wife, the way that Genghis Kahn said "I'd love a bigger backyard."

Soon, we had engaged our own contractor, a fellow my wife found who had rebuilt a friend's house when her pantry caught fire. Out of the ashes he fashioned a family room with attached bath. For us he promised bedrooms, a second floor where our children could sleep close at hand. What we lacked in culinary power, we would gain in snoring capacity. We took the plunge.

Seven months later it's springtime, and the air is thick with the buzz of saws. On our street, alone, four of the 15 houses are under construction. Last year, a fifth was torn down and rebuilt. Fiberglass insulation protrudes between two-by-fours like cotton candy on steroids. Tyvek covers plywood like banners for a Scandinavian exposition. All of it announcing the arrival of something big, beautiful and new.

We've come a long way since "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit." As David Brooks has noted in "Bobos in Paradise," the old distinctions between conformist suburbanites and urban counter-culturalists no longer make sense. Where the suburbs were once filled with "little boxes on the hillside," these days those boxes have become a lot bigger and a lot less square. The home has become an expression of the individual's will, even as each presents the same Marvin windows, the same Viking stoves, the same sub-Zero refrigerators to the outside world. It's conformity in the guise of individuality. We build to our tastes, tearing down the old to make way for the double-paned, argon-filled, low-e glass. It's a peculiarly American phenomenon, reflecting our belief in the transformative power of sheetrock. In fact, in the next 10 years the National Association of Homebuilders expects that the size of the remodeling market may exceed the market for new homes. But as anyone who has suffered through a Dumpster in the driveway knows, the end result is not necessarily what you expect.

"Our roof is gone," said my wife one day.

Sure enough, after several days of loud pounding on the inside, a posse of men took chain saws to the outside, carving our roof into pieces small enough to fit into a Dumpster. The house looked as if it had been struck by a tornado -- leaving it sheared horizontally like a slightly swollen trailer. Cold wind blew down our staircase, despite the plastic sheeting meant to block it. Cracks appeared in the ceiling, and 50-year-old nails popped from the sheetrock. A chunk of plaster the size of Texas fell onto my daughter's bed. The lights stopped working in the downstairs bathroom. But that was the good news.

The hurricane gave us three days' warning. A category-five storm boiling up the coast, threatening to landfall anywhere from Maryland to Maine. In Connecticut, we watched the skies with more than trepidation: A light sprinkle was a disaster; wind and heavy rain would be ruinous. A crew of eight worked feverishly to raise the roof beams and cover them with tarpaulin. They succeeded on the night before the storm, pounding in the last nail with either the confidence of the righteous or the resignation of the damned. We held our breath as the hurricane swirled and dipped, then made a sharp right at Delaware and left us slightly soggy but relatively dry. The tarpaulin held steady; our lives, however, would not.

Soon, the mess spread to the downstairs. New bathrooms required new plumbing, which required the removal of all the sheetrock in our kitchen. In its absence, the exposed studs yielded a trove of historical detritus. Rusty razor blades that had been pushed through the back of an old medicine cabinet into the wall. Heating pipes that led from the basement and dead-ended in the ceiling. We learned that the previous owner had committed every code violation in the book, burying electrical boxes in places that threatened combustion, running beams across spans too long for their burden.

Our contractor made his share of errors, too. He covered the chimney with plastic, impeding the exhaust of carbon monoxide from the burner. He installed windows in the wrong places, so that the front of our house looked like a painting by Picasso. He laid sub-flooring, then had to rip it up when it proved to be the wrong size. To his credit, he repaired the work without complaint, and without charge to us. But each misstep left us wondering how many mistakes we had not caught, and would discover only when he pulled up camp and was long gone.

Here's the thing you learn about construction: It comes in fits and starts. The speed with which the basic framing and roofing is completed lures you into a false sense of progress. The real work, as we know now, is in the details. Within weeks we had a new roof; we are still missing a bathtub. Waiting for subcontractors can be like waiting for Godot. Getting them to return is like waiting for the sequel: It won't happen in this lifetime. You learn to live with the annoying things like light switches in the wrong location, and save your energy for the bigger battles like heat. In the end, you're grateful just to have your house back again, free from the clutter of sheetrock and molding, and the constant tramping of work boots.

The Jacksons got their beautiful new kitchen, and we have three new bedrooms and two new bathrooms. It hasn't changed our lives, though it's made the walk to the bathroom at night a lot shorter. Ultimately, we learned that we couldn't build ourselves out of conformity. After all the hassles and false alarms, the stress, noise and commotion, what we ended up with was the same thing with which we started: a house. It may be slightly bigger, or oddly shaped; it may have vaulted ceilings or 10-foot doors. But it still has walls and windows, floors and a roof. It keeps the rain out, and the heat in. In the mornings our children can wake us in the comfort of our beds. For that, we should be grateful.

Mr. Stracher is the publisher of the New York Law School Law Review.