

This Old House on the Prairie: Extreme Makeover

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I

In the mid '80s I was sitting in the living room of the first house I ever owned, watching the television show *This Old House* on PBS. Bob Vila was doing a rehab project on Cape Cod. As he would on occasion, he took a side trip to view other real estate: a home in Hyannis, on the Cape, with a view of the bay. In front of it was one of the last beachfront lots for sale in the town.

Vila pulled up behind the house, since there was no garage and not much of a front "yard": the house was built on what was still weathered dune. There was bright, blinding light all around, the sun glancing off the water of Cape Cod Bay, and my black-and-white TV seemed luminous, dreamlike, as Vila approached the home's back door.

Dreamlike, certainly, because it was a door I had approached a good number of times before. I sat straight up, finding it hard to believe Bob Vila was about to walk into my past. The house and lot had once belonged to two of my oldest friends, Robert and Inez Kareka. When I was a college student, I had visited them there a number of times and spent the entire summer with them the year before I started graduate school in 1968 at Columbia.

The Karekas owned a craft store in Hyannis that sold handmade enamel jewelry. I had known them since 1965 when I dropped out of college for a semester and lived in Hyannis. At that time, they lived above their shop, which was attached to an old house on Main Street. They had bought the house and the lot with a view of the bay a year later as their business boomed.

By the mid '80s a lot of history had come and gone, mine and theirs. Inez had died in January of 1982. Robert was hanging on by his fingertips in Key West. They had sold their beachfront home and the lot a number of years before and had bought a larger house in Barnstable the

year before Inez's battle with cancer began. Their businesses in Hyannis, Nantucket and Key West were all suffering downturns, and only the Key West business was left as Inez was dying.

By the time Bob Vila walked into their former back/front door (there was no front door, except for sliding glass doors which opened onto a deck across the front of the house), the Key West business was gone and Robert had moved into a trailer on Stock Island.

But it was my youth and my friends' golden years Bob Vila was about to show to his audience. He walked up a set of short stairs and his crew's camera panned into the bedroom I'd occupied that summer before graduate school, where I wrote my first novel (unpublished), *The Armless Warrior*, its title redolent of all my adolescent angst during the early years of the Vietnam war.

The room had little in it and Vila did not stop there; his camera showed the kitchen to the right, still very much as it had been, just a modest kitchen with ordinary cabinets and counters and appliances. The great evolution of trophy living, especially with water views, had not yet overtaken the spec builder who put this house up in the early '60s. But Vila did linger on the balcony above the house's one great room and its wall of glass that faced the bay. It too was an incandescent space; down below, near the wall of glass, were the current owners, blurred by all the reflected light.

Vila had been talking all the while, but I hadn't heard much, other than his pointing out how few (or no) empty lots were available on the waterfront in this part of the Cape. "Tear downs" had yet not come into the typical vocabulary of the building trades. Here in New England, they rehabbed and improved.

Then Vila and his crew departed. I sat in my living room stunned at what I had just seen and all that had happened in both my life and the Karekas' since then. A quarter of a century later, more yet has changed, but what I intend to cover is not my life and Robert's (he, happily, is still alive), but the changes shown by the distance between Bob Vila's original program, *This Old House*, and its newer spawn, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. The evolution from one to the other is similar to, what? The Wright brothers' plane and the B2 bomber?

It is the same but different, and, ultimately, the difference makes it not the same.

II

As with writing about books nowadays, writing about television requires a leap of faith: that the reader has seen (or read) what one is talking about.

Television doesn't tend to be discrete events, but one long spooling of news, entertainment, story; it doesn't much matter. It's largely a continuum. A picture may well be worth a thousand words, but it takes thousands and thousands of words to transcribe television and its endless products. Short of that, allow me the convenience of theorizing, along with its handmaiden or handyman, brief summarizing.

This Old House began at the dawn of the '80s, airing first in 1979. WGBH Public Broadcasting, in Boston, had a hand in its production. One must recall the times, the late '70s. Back then, globalization was not yet an answer to everything: What was soon to take hold was a form of nationalization.

Nationalization was the precursor to globalization. Cable television, national marketing, FedEx, it was all of a piece and the transformation took only a decade or so to happen. When my wife was a Radcliffe Fellow in Cambridge during the mid '80s she was amused by a local radio program hosted by two Italian guys, Click and Clack.

Soon the nation would be amused. The '80s and '90s became a whirlwind of this sort of economic and cultural homogenization. This, of course, wasn't that strange, given that the nation had just elected the first president who had been both bought and sold by corporate America, the former GE spokesperson Ronald Reagan. Reagan with his fake corporate populism did everything he could to enable the business of America to continue to be business and, further, to allow corporations to have free reign, with freedom from most everything, including taxes and those pesky unions and the whole notion of collective bargaining over wages, etc. But as we all became the same, the nature of what we would share changed as well. The evolution from *This Old House*, what it stood for, to *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, can be described in various ways, for one, as a slide in our entertainment choices from liberalism to fascism.

Fascism, not conservatism. It is ironic that Reagan's predecessor, Jimmy Carter, is known in his admired post-presidency for hammering nails, building houses for the poor. Carter, too, was infected by the spirit of *This Old House*, or perhaps it was the other way around, the core values

of *This Old House*, those Jimmy Carter values, so different from the core values of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, which echo some sort of Reaganism on steroids.

The fact is that *This Old House* appealed to its early viewers from a deeply held conservative center: restoration. Bob Vila, the bearded host, crossed a number of cultural boundaries: the professorate, the elfin, a figure of trust and resourcefulness. I didn't know Vila was Cuban-American until I began to research this piece. To think of him as my era's Ricky Ricardo is not that far-fetched. *I Love Lucy* was, more than has been acknowledged, about real estate—that one-bedroom apartment set.

In the '50s there were a number of apartment set television shows, Jackie Gleason's *Honeymooners* the most well-known. One can make the point that the '50s was a period in which the creators of shows, being urban themselves, sent the message of city life out to the agricultural heartland.

This Old House restored the properties it encountered. Complete rebuilding came later, much later. The original show looked to make the old new, not to make it something different. The homes' owners were the lesser workers in the production. Their budgets were mentioned, what they could afford. There was a sense they had to pay for what was to happen, though some accommodations were made. As the show gained viewers, more was done than could reasonably be paid for. Later, New England barns were turned into mansions. Grandiosity crept in, but often withdrew just as quickly.

What didn't change over time was the relationship of Vila to the workers. He dealt with master craftsmen, union electricians and plumbers. The lure of the show was this sort of instruction. It was not unlike the ads one still sees in newspapers and magazines: Take classes with master teachers! Listen to them lecture on the history of the world.

They all were being paid. The cameras of *This Old House* would hover lovingly, admiringly, on their work: the intricacies of installation, of cabinetry, of lighting and heating. How to work, or rework, old materials. Its craftsmanship was a form of populist immortality: how to make something last forever, or how to make something a hundred years old look like its old self, yet brand new. That was part of its philosophical reach: permanence, man the maker making things endure, the wand of the reborn, the fountain of youth, health restored.

I could go on, but you see the appeal. The first shows seemed to take a whole year to redo a house; then slightly less: two houses would be done in a viewing season. Nonetheless, the narrative arc would not be violated: There was a beginning, a middle, an end. The work would often begin in the winter and end in the spring. Seasons would matter. It was a form of television realism, which is a far cry from what is now called reality television. And there were no television stars in the show, but all the repeating characters became part of the family: They all had what TV requires, a certain friendly openness, happy with what they were doing, good at it.

This Old House sampled various tactics that its spin-off shows and imitators would later incorporate. There would be sweat equity, especially early on, the owners helping to tear down walls, or taking on the cruder manual labor: installing insulation, laying tile, some painting.

Bob Vila would show himself to be a jack of all trades, or would attempt to do something for the first time. He was everyman in this way, willing to learn, an old dog eager for new tricks. That appealed to the audience, for the do-it-yourself movement was beginning to heat up. Those warehouse-sized stores, Lowe's, Home Depot, are the result, not the cause, of that gathering grass-roots movement to do it yourself.

III

The argument could be made that the two decades between *This Old House* and *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* chart the stagnation of middle-class incomes. The modus operandi of *This Old House*—hiring master craftsmen, union workers—quickly outpriced the homeowners' ability to hire them. Incomes didn't grow, except on the far end: the upper-middle class and the rich. Middle-class homeowners had to do their work on the cheap, mostly by themselves, or by hiring the slightly less expensive nonunion freelancers. Upper-middle-class professionals could afford the rates; their incomes kept pace. *This Old House* began to film renovations around the country, often going to other spots where appreciation values had skyrocketed (Santa Fe, etc.). New England real estate didn't let them down, either. But the era of house as ATM machine is starting to grind to a halt in most markets as the subprime-lending house of cards is toppling.

One reason for my interest in such shows was that I had a history of doing manual labor, mainly carpentry. I had kept myself alive by

doing these sorts of jobs during my late twenties and early thirties. The tips one would get from watching *This Old House* served the purpose of “empowering” a lot of people to attempt the work themselves. The show acted as a master class and gained a lot of apprentices, not all of them wholly competent.

This Old House, during the '80s, begat a number of look alikes and competitors. There was a large appetite on cable TV for shows of this sort, including, eventually, entire channels devoted to them. One was *Hometime*. Its web site says its founder, Dean Johnson, planned to “produce a series of videotapes for distribution through hardware stores and home centers.” The show itself began on PBS in 1986. The strangest thing about *Hometime* was the sidekick, a short blond woman who, one was to infer (at least I inferred), was the wife of the host Dean Johnson. She wore jeans, had a leather tool belt, worked alongside on the modest (as the years went on, less modest) do-overs. I would see this show once in a while over the years and was surprised to see that the blond woman kept changing, though the premise didn't: she seemed to be intimately connected to the host, though she was a different woman, but very much always the same physical type. The man stayed the same, the women kept cycling through. That seemed to be its own message in the do-it-yourself-world. The guy in charge could change his help as he wished and there were a lot of those thin, handy blondes in the world to fill the role.

In 1989, at what seemed to be the pinnacle of the popularity of *This Old House*, Bob Vila left the show. It was taken for granted that Vila split for the money. Sears wanted to buy him and his credibility and make him a shill for the store and the host of a new program, *Bob Vila's Home Again*.

This Old House hired a younger guy, a good looking New England prep school sort of fellow, Steve Thomas. Hiring Thomas showed that the show was changing: Vila was no hunk, as were none of the supporting cast. Now television required looks as well as know how. Thomas filled the bill, but Norm the master carpenter was featured more often and eventually got his own spin-off show.

All the various fix-it-up shows went on, each reshaping itself to be different, but the same. A comedy show, *Home Improvement*, began on network TV, making its version of Bob Vila, Tim Allen, a star (an alum and honorary degree recipient of Western Michigan University), with the premise that Allen was the host of a show called *Tool Time*. The actual Vila appeared there a couple of times.

Life went on, real estate prices rose, the rich got richer, the poor got poorer. Then, in 2004, came *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*.

IV

ABC's *EMHE* wasn't the first extreme makeover. Its progenitor was the personal improvement movement, which had taken over from the home improvement world. If property could be restored, made better, forever youthful, why not people? These trends were somewhat parallel. I can remember when jogging started, in the early '80s, and physical fitness became an industry, a common cultural movement, not just a Jack LaLanne subculture. It was part of the nationalization of subcultures and everything else. The avant garde was dying everywhere in the early '80s; soon if there were three or four people doing something weird they would turn up on daytime television and the whole country would be doing it.

But first came *Extreme Makeover*, the cosmetic surgery show. Plastic surgery for the masses. Nip and tuck. In a world of surfaces, no surface can remain untouched.

Here is a chunk of an abstract of an article, in the June 2007 *Feminist Media Studies*, by Sue Tait:

An exploration of the discursive production of cosmetic surgery on the television shows *Extreme Makeover* and *Nip/Tuck* illustrates that these programmes contribute to and reflect the processes through which cosmetic surgery has become domesticated within increasingly globalised contexts. I demonstrate that across a range of cultural sites, including some feminist scholarship, the press, and surgical television, post feminist frames have displaced feminist frames for comprehending cosmetic surgery, enabling the culture's surgical turn. Feminist attention to risk, oppressive standards for appearance, and the cultural and discursive location of suffering around the deviant body is displaced by the post-feminist celebration of physical transformation as the route to happiness and personal empowerment.

Ms. Tait is hip to globalization on some level, at least. But the home edition of *Extreme Makeover* makes explicit some of the implicit in domesticating plastic surgery.

Success in television is often unplanned. If it wasn't, everything would be a success. Producers have to count on what is thought to be luck, but is actually more often the existence of something they haven't foreseen.

Extreme Makeover: Home Edition isn't a direct descendant of *This Old House*. Something of a TV mongrel, it shares a mixed paternity. For one, it's in the "Millionaire" show tradition: Some robber baron writes you a check for a million and waits to see its effects.

This is where the show is vastly different from *This Old House*. *EMHE*'s premise is magic: You are chosen, you win the lottery, your life is about to change forever.

Now these are powerful fantasies. One thing they require is great contrast. The upper-middle-class folk wanting their newly-acquired homes brought up to speed are already a little too close to their wished for result. *EMHE* requires real change. It finds its subjects where the transformation it can render will be stark. This is sort of the *Beverly Hillbillies* effect. But how the hillbillies do after being ensconced in their new digs is not the point and not shown. Indeed, there have been problems for those who received the largesse. More on that later.

The Millionaire was a '50s television show that lasted until 1960. It was a collective yet individualistic enterprise: the plot of the drama, that is. John Beresford Tipton would write a check and make someone a millionaire; his functionary would deliver the money. Tipton would remain in the shadows.

Extreme Makeover: Home Edition makes use of this same transformative event. One day you wander around the same old slum, the next you are an instant millionaire. Various game shows dangle this carrot. The sixty-four-thousand dollar question seems, these days, not worth answering, while shows like *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* still have staying power. In each case, the contestant needs to offer him or herself up for grabs. *EMHE* hunts for its lucky families in a variety of ways, but all of them end up producing an "audition" video, shown at the start of every show.

One notes immediately the up-to-dateness of this method: You need to make a short TV show to be the subject of a TV show. So, one requirement to be extremely made over was television literacy: You had to know the medium. Whatever the cultural background of the recipients of makeovers, one thing was central. Television had to be in their blood.

Since 1973 when the Loud family burst upon the well-educated (*An American Family*, the twelve-hour documentary of their life that began on PBS, was viewed first by intellectuals), Americans know how to behave on TV. Some, indeed, act as if the cameras are always on.

The popular culture is just that: it is popular and is the culture most readily transmitted and reflected. All those hours of television viewing have served as models of behavior to generations. Readers of journals are often part of the unpopular culture, as I am.

As any professor of creative writing knows, even college students at elite universities come into a class equipped with an idea of how to tell a story. But most of them, when asked to write a “story,” write some version of a description of a television show.

It is no longer the hours at the kitchen table, or the campfire, or the bedside, or gramps’ or grandma’s knee that sets the model for narrative. It is the television.

There’s a well-known joke in Hollywood when someone self-identifies as a writer: Half hour or hour? is the question.

So, no matter how beset with woe the families who want their houses redone on *EMHE*, they find the wherewithal to make an audition video. It is our TV age’s tin cup, the cardboard sign asking for alms.

In one case on *EMHE* it was clear the audition video was made (or redone) after the fact: one boy of the family is wearing a college sweatshirt he was given at the end of the show in promise of a scholarship at said institution when and if he emerged from high school. So manipulation of these materials remains suspect. But many of them look homemade, an effect not always easy to imitate, even by professionals.

EMHE has turned into this decade’s Miss Lonelyhearts. Nathanael West, in his darkest moments, couldn’t have come up with more appropriate grotesques, more worthy subjects of need. But with a difference: None can be untelegenic, too repulsive to film. There’s some stretching here and it is amazing to see how the misshapen can be made palatable by context as long as the context is cheerful, upbeat.

In the beginning, *EMHE* used to redo actual houses, enlarge them, certainly, but keep some of the original structure. But almost immediately they took to tearing down whatever was there. In the same way, they took relatively whole people with a few difficulties in the beginning and redid their homes, but soon they were taking basket cases and creating a spectacular new basket for them.

In 2006, the web site *The Smoking Gun* reprinted an e-mail forwarded by an “ABC employee to network affiliates” detailing the sorts of families the program was looking for, for next season. The first three in a bulleted list were: “extraordinary mom/dad recently diagnosed with ALS”; “family who has child w/Progeria (aka “little old man disease”)”; “congenital insensitivity to pain with anhidrosis, referred to as CIPA by the few people who know about it. (There are seventeen known cases in US—let me know if one is in your town!) This is where kids cannot feel any physical pain.” (For full article, see <http://www.thesmokinggun.com/archive/0327062extreme1.html>.)

Again, *EMHE* has fashioned a potent brew of popular culture flash points: money and sickness are just the start, more than icing on the cake of the home improvement genre. Its cast brings in the rest of the world: indeed, their deluxe RV (the bus sort) is the new voyage of the *HMS Beagle*, Darwin and his crew sailing the ocean of America seeking out islands of the bizarre and wonderful, bringing a special sort of civilization to the natives.

It isn't just what one would think, urban to rural, à la *The Honeymooners* or *I Love Lucy*. It's a bicoastal, New Age sort of culture, steeped as much in California's brews as the big city's. The cast is a bevy of fairies and I don't mean that in an anti-gay, homophobic sense, even though the men are heavy on the, at least, metro-sexual side of the gender spectrum. It's *The Tempest* sort of fairy I mean, the magical side of things, where they descend into your life, secular angels, and make everything wonderful. Who better to do this than interior decorators, carpenters, designers, all good looking and super friendly and agreeable? You can find bios of the “design team” (and much else) at the show's web site: <http://abc.go.com/primetime/xtrmehome/index.html>. The male designers' backgrounds often include acting as well as carpentry. The women are, in most cases, from the interior decorating realm.

Network television shows, as a friend of mine likes to point out, follow the same strict forms as Elizabethan sonnets. Though few people do, you might sit in front of your TV with a stopwatch and view your favorite program. First, you must realize that television programs exist only as blank spaces in between commercials. The purpose of the show is to fill the blank spaces.

My friend was a producer/writer for *Law & Order*, *Miami Vice*, and other such programs. He once tried to open a door for me in the television writing world, but, though I was willing, I seemed to lack the magic words for that particular portal.

Hour shows follow this format: First there is a teaser that goes on, in an actual *L&O* script, for three pages. In the case of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, the teaser begins on the fancy RV/bus and includes meeting the family, viewing the sad house that will be torn down, and sending the family off. *Law & Order* has four acts after the teaser and *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* has the same: the first act is gathering the hordes of volunteers and construction folk, smashing the house and letting the family see, while the viewers see the family at their vacation spot. The second act is construction, designing the “special” rooms; the third act is finishing the house, then filling it with goodies, including side trips to Sears; in the fourth act the family returns, sees the house, tours the house; then there is an epilogue, the outpouring of gratitude by the family to the sponsors. All these pieces are timebound: they take exactly the same number of minutes in each episode.

But—there are different kinds of sonnets—*EMHE* upends the amount of time of the teaser, which is long, not short: thirteen full minutes. Then come the four acts, each five minutes long, each followed by four minutes of commercials, a ratio of almost one to one. Then there is a three-minute epilogue, where the results are assessed, featuring testimonials of gratitude by the family; these conclude, but as the credits roll by for two minutes, clips of the family are shown, if they are cute enough, along with previews of the next show. Then an hour is gone and so is the show.

The teaser begins on the bus, where Ty Pennington, the leader of the *EMHE*'s gang, exhorts his concerned crew after they have watched the audition video, hardly ever a dry-eyed experience. Can we do this? Ty bleats. Yes, and they do the athletic sort of mass handshake/push off demonstrating their fealty and purpose. Its effect, both in the corporate world and this television program, is the “Let’s put on a show!” gumption of Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland, a theatrical Americanism of gung-ho, but let’s have fun doing it.

Ty Pennington, himself, has become a model for a new leadership figure. He’s a shop steward and a supervisor, an independent craftsman

and the local primary contact, the seeming general contractor. He talks to the family, but his role is to be a boss without seeming to be a boss. Ty is everyone's friend, encourager extraordinaire. He came from a home improvement predecessor, *Trading Places*, a show that attempted to combine elements of other successful shows, the kind where one trades wives or husbands for a week, though, in this case, redoing living spaces was the central event.

The group of elves and fairies from *EMHE* needed a leader who was more like than unlike them. They all come from planet television and have the sophistications of a lot of familiar places: New York, LA, the Hamptons; they are the denizens of hip establishments, bars in South Beach, the sorts of places twenty-somethings hang out at. They are, in a Shakespearean way, a band of merry players—all probably in their thirties, but all seem younger than they are. One is a Brit; there is a tilt toward transnational fun. These are not brazen New Yorkers who are going to show you intrusively how to redo your lives; this is more primal, stripped of regionalism, of bias or clichés of race (except no black designer is in the mix), beyond political correctness, just Americans helping Americans.

The team-building aspect echoes a lot of the country's new industries: those wacky people in software and computers, playing ping pong in the office, an old converted industrial loft. The sort of world that produced huge businesses called Apple or Google. That's Ty Pennington's workforce. Ty looks the part of the modern facilitator, with his Sting-ish gelled hair, his sincere listening repose, his very slight not-quite-a-lisp speech impairment.

Hey good buddy, the audience collectively responds. Ty's the guy. He has a bit of both Beaver Cleaver and his blond not quite without malevolence friend Eddie Haskell. Ty channels both Jerry Mathers, who played Beaver, and Ken Osmond, who played Eddie, with just a touch of James Dean, the doomed movie star of the fifties, in the mix. Ty is both sincere and edgy, with the sincere side most in force. Likable. In the television rating world he must have a very high Q score rating, the measurement of familiarity and appeal.

Bob Vila must have had a high Q score, too. When he left *This Old House* he had his name in the titles of his shows. He had become a brand. Ty is still far from becoming a brand, though he is now doing commercials.

But Ty's crew is a world apart, since they are from planet TV and do not resemble their beneficiaries—not even those who aren't the classic

lame and halt—in the slightest. On *This Old House*, everyone looked more or less the same; if anyone stood out, it was the owners of the property. They might look a class, a cut, above; somewhat polished, especially if they weren't wearing work clothes.

What Ty and company are handing out is charity. They have the heart and soul of a Jerry Lewis telethon. Most of the show's families are poor, no matter how hard working, and often could not pay the mortgage on the old property, to say nothing of the higher taxes on the new, reassessed house. *This Old House* had some of that, the IRS or local tax collectors gumming up the transformational fun. But *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, in the wake of criticisms of this paradoxical condition (its subjects living in houses they couldn't afford), now has the builders pay off the old mortgage, and various fundraisers are held during the week it takes to build the house, so that a minor endowment will stave off the bill collectors from the front door. Mean tax people. Why can't they get with the program?

This Old House made use of sweat equity and showed the owners taking on a second job (working on one's property), creating more wealth literally under one's feet, and paying taxes, in the beginning, was rarely an issue. The owners weren't, for the most part, jumping class.

EMHE is about luck, hitting the jackpot, charity. The show sends the family away for a week, usually to some all-American family vacation spot, something garish and corporate, a fun spot associated with cartoon characters. They appear via videotape once or twice during the show to reward whatever location is hosting them and to participate in one fixed feature: They watch while their house is demolished.

In the beginning, houses were enlarged, so demolition was minor, but quickly the show's creators realized the power and effect of starting fresh. The homes weren't being improved, they were replaced, disappeared: The family watches as Ty leads the way to a new life. He holds the video camera in front of his face and films, supposedly, what the family sees on a computer while they vacation.

After a few shows they began to vary how the homes were torn down. Attempts were made to personalize the destruction, something different from the old bulldozers and backhoes—one show used monster trucks, those with huge tires.

Regardless, this moment in the show is the one filled with the most ambivalence, one of the few which actually slides off the surface, and, for a fleeting second, goes beneath it.

It's illuminating to watch the faces of the family as they see their old home destroyed. They know they are supposed to look happy and cheer the process on, but occasionally you can see true alarm in their eyes, something, at times, that even approaches horror at the spectacle, and regret. It just flickers there for a second and we are back to Ty's enthusiasm for the rack and ruin that is taking place. No one reacts with the shock one would display at watching a loved one hit by a car, but some family members, especially the children, do show a twinge of non joyous emotion as their pasts are being obliterated.

The telethon aspect is reinforced by the weeklong deadline imposed. Day and night, 24/7, the new and preferred workweek of twenty-first century American business. This is one reason Ty and company don't dwell on the craftsmanship aspect of building the house. They don't even comment on how they force the concrete to dry so quickly. (A short-lived spin off—let no videotape go unused—of how they did what they did ran during the 2004–2005 season; I did not see any of those.) The house is literally thrown up, debouched on the site. Magic. What craftsmanship we are treated to comes from the design team, what bric-a-brac one or another of them is installing in one of the kids' bedrooms.

These are usually done in stereotypical boy/girl themes, making beds out of cars, or sports paraphernalia everywhere; or girly themes, acting or dancing, or tropical island retreats, fantasy lands. We see the team cutting out the stars, making the palm trees, doing the appliqué.

Ty has a “secret room” project, most often the master bedroom, because Ty has a special place with the progenitors of the family. Again, he deals with them.

VII

Here's part of a February 5, 2007, AP story, originating from Brandon, Mississippi:

Extreme Makeover: Home Edition surprised a Brandon family with its new home Monday afternoon. The show's host, Ty Pennington, surprised Sabrena Jones and her children

last Monday with the news that their home had been selected for a makeover Jones and her three children, Marjon, 18, Mardaireus, 17, and Marjiya, 9, have lived in their West Jasper home for the past 15 years. Marjon plays football at Mississippi College, and the two younger ones attend University Christian School. Mississippi College is giving scholarships worth a total of \$150,000 to all three children....

Hundreds of fans of the show, volunteers and others caught shuttle buses from Shiloh Park in Brandon to be on hand for the celebration Monday. Jones is a nurse at the Scott Regional Hospital in Forest, but wasn't able to afford to make the necessary repairs to her aging home.

I watched that show on April 8th, 2007. In many ways it was a typical outing, in others, a one-of-a-kind spectacle.

EMHE often visits poverty, but it is usually disguised, shown as a working-class lifestyle, people down on their luck. But here was poverty on the level of the Mississippi Delta, circa 1967. Well, the home, one step above a windowless shack, was in Mississippi.

And Ty Pennington, forty years later, in 2007, gets to fill the role of Bobby Kennedy, wandering among the children with distended bellies. Of course, there were no distended bellies, just a home where the family defecated into plastic bags, since the bathroom plumbing had gone bad.

Ty did his best not to look shocked; his face is usually a study in calm, neutral empathy, right up there with Bill Clinton and other great feelers of others' pain.

But this was a bit much even for Ty. His expression of empathy drifted toward the appalled. The owner of the house, Sabrena Jones, identified as a nurse in the AP article above, had a retail shop in the house's front room, selling used and new nurses' uniforms. It appeared that was her source of income.

Ty sends them off on their fun vacation for a week, to a resort with better plumbing. There follows the usual videotaping of the structure's destruction, but none of the vacationing family looks distraught at its obliteration.

It is odd that large American audiences are exposed to the poverty of the working poor on this show more than any other, expect perhaps for documentaries of the sort usually shown on PBS. Here you will see people missing teeth, not a usual sight on prime time television.

The design crew of *EMHE* play social workers and pop psychologists as they discuss how children's rooms are to be decorated. There is always something too momentary about the results, as if the snapshot in time they are constructing will live on forever. So, if the boy is a basketball fan, that motif is carried through in spades. Even to jerseys and balls signed by the kid's favorite players. As if the boy will remain the same age forever, with the same interests. The room, with its bolted-on appurtenances, will be hard to change. How long will one sleep in a bed built out of a race car?

But the world of TV is the world of the here and now, not the then and gone. And when the kids reach eighteen, they may well not be living there anymore. In fact, the matter of children reaching their majority has been one of the scandals of *EMHE*. A houseful of foster children, part of the feel good lure of the show, were kicked out when they became legal adults (the Higgins family).

In the case of the Jones family, since everyone was saddled with scholarships to Mississippi College, the plan is that all the children should go. But to college: Mississippi College bills itself as "A Christian University," and its web site shows a lot of white kids, along with one black kid toting a backpack, on its home page.

Back from their week vacation comes the Jones family, the bus is rolled away, and their new domicile is revealed.

The matriarch does the usual screaming-in-joy routine, falling to the ground, rendered speechless, the standard I-can't-believe-it dance of ecstasy, which oddly resembles women keening at funerals around the world.

Ty and crew have fashioned one other exception to the norm. A retail shop has been constructed, attached to the house in the front, and they tour it, along with the house. Her used and new clothing shop now resembles a Coach store at an outlet mall, all display: recessed shelving and theatrical lighting. Before, it looked like a downscale Goodwill store, stuffed with sad, discarded work clothing.

Sabrena Jones does utter a metaphysical remark to Ty upon viewing the splendor that is now hers: "I couldn't of dreamed it, but it is a dream come true."

A metaphysical noise may well be heard as cultures collide when class is jumped. If a family is used to living in a shack without plumbing, what will the McMansion look like six months later? In the world of *This Old House*, people caught up to their class dreams by upgrading, by restoration,

remodeling. But most of the families of *EMHE* view the new home as if it is a strange place, never imagined. We don't get to see how they actually live in their new digs.

VIII

The economic structure of *EMHE* may be simple charity, but in the world of philanthropy are many styles of giving.

Most heads of households on *EMHE* are women. Even when a man is in evidence, he is either infirm or in some way compromised. The woman of the family is the leader, the mover, of the enterprise. She, in almost every case, deals with Ty. In this sense, a feudal sense, Ty's principal role is that of lord of the manor. Or, given Ty's demeanor, perhaps lord of the manor's representative. ABC is the lord of the manor.

In the universe of *EMHE*, men are ineffectual and marginalized, except for the men who swoop down on the family and set things right. The household males of the sad stories are relegated to bit players, there only to be grateful and full of praise of the lady of the house.

On April 22, 2007, a show aired about a paraplegic Iraq war veteran. For once, the show featured at greater length the male of the family. But it was not enough to be a wounded veteran. The twist here was that his van had been in a car wreck, the circumstances of which remained opaque. The accident caused the son, too, to be paralyzed. So now we have two generations of men in wheelchairs. The emotional tone, as usual, is upbeat: love, love, love, the chosen emotional state of this segment of TV, the talk show sort where psychologists and marriage counselors are involved.

The injured boy has the same gapped teeth as his mother, who is the mover of the project. The immobile vet is provided with a chair that will allow him to stand up. No journalism, of course, is done in any of these shows, though the program ends with shots of soldiers in Iraq, buddies or at least fellow soldiers from the same unit, who are wearing blue *EMHE* T-shirts. One of the magic acts of TV is that it can go anywhere in the world for a bit of videotape.

When the man isn't a symbol of war and patriotism, Ty's connection to the female head of household is pronounced. The man, if on the premises, is a hopeless serf. Ty's virile elf persona, his slight lisp, mutes the overlord's role a bit, but you can see in a variety of episodes how the women offer themselves to him. We're in the age of chivalry,

primogeniture, squires and knights, droit du seigneur. It's not the right of the first night in question here, it's the right of any night Ty might choose. Anyone's wife belongs first to the lord of the manor.

Corporations are medieval structures. They can dispense favor and often life itself. If Ty had a less ambiguous sexuality, if he looked like, for television, the typical leading man, this aspect of the woman falling for him, offering herself to him, would look too obvious, too blatant. As it is, he gets kissed a lot. Luckily, most of the women look a little too medieval themselves for Ty to want to cash in on his position. Though there was one show (season four, episode twenty-two) in which Ty asked the divorced single mom to hug him, since she, a dancer, was the most attractive needy mom he had encountered. At the show's end, she didn't utter the usual formula of gratitude; she said, "Thank you for taking care of me."

IX

The harshest critique one wants to make of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* is that it is, at its heart, fascist. *This Old House*, in this formulation, would be liberal. In *This Old House*, workers are paid, their dignity and the craft of their labor is emphasized. In *EMHE* the workers are volunteers. The mob literally descends every week upon the site to tear and rend and then construct and vanish. They pillage, but they also bestow. If you are a friend of this ideology, like the Bush family, you would see a thousand points of light here, not the Albert Speer-designed spectacles taking place in the outdoor stadiums of the Third Reich. In *EMHE*, crowds are manipulated with periodic hortatory speeches. Ty is no führer, of course, not even the Charlie Chaplin sort, though Ty has the same pint-size frenetic enthusiasm, but he's there as the center of attention, yelling through his megaphone, working up the crowd. They are doing it for Ty, and this is what Ty stands for.

Ty Pennington does do commercials for Bayer Aspirin, descendant of the infamous German firm I.G. Farben, maker of concentration camp gasses, but Ty works for Bayer owing to his popularity with the demographic that takes aspirin: *EMHE* appeals to the old and the chairbound.

EMHE's is the kind of fascism that completely embraces capitalism and its message of how to deal with poverty. According to this model,

the plight of Sabrena Jones' family—defecating in bags, not dreaming (“I couldn’t dream it, but...”), yet, with her nurse uniform business, striving—was not caused by capitalism, by a job or jobs that don’t pay her enough (or Wal-Mart that eats the dreams of small business owners for lunch), or the rich, or the maldistribution of income and opportunity, but by—just what? The Joneses aren’t the result of unbridled capitalism and the free market coup of the last two decades; they are what they are, always with us, and the rich are going to save at least one or two of them.

This model of the few helping the few, one at a time, is the preferred solution; not the many, via the tax base, helping the many.

Just as the rich are unique in their ability to be rich, since they work for it, deserve it, have the special talents that created it (see “The Richest of the Rich, Proud of a New Gilded Age,” by Louis Uchitelle, July 15, 2007, *New York Times*), the Jones family and others have the rare good fortune to have *EMHE* pick them for their transformation. Somehow that video beseechment they sent in showed they understood how to succeed on TV. *Voilà*. Each according not to their needs, but to their abilities.

X

But, ultimately, *EMHE* is in many ways beyond satire, safe from analysis, at least in the sense that they know what they are and don’t care what anyone says. In a recent movie, *Wild Hogs*, Tim Allen (who, you will recall, was the TV sit-com version of Bob Vila, in a show which debuted on ABC in 1991), plays one of a bunch of professionals (John Travolta, Martin Lawrence, and William Macy) who ride motorcycles together on weekends. They take a cross-country trip with the usual cultural clashes, dillittante bikers meeting up disastrously with the real thing. *EMHE*, in the form of Ty, makes an appearance at the end of the movie, during the credits. The suburban types have caused the destruction of the real bikers’ headquarters and social club. As the credits roll, Ty appears in his *EMHE* role, having rebuilt the bar with the program’s usual embellishments, bigger and better, with motorcycles attached to the roof. The biker beneficiaries react with the now well-known mixture of pathos and glee.

All of this is, after all, the Walt Disney Corporation, which owns both the studio, Touchstone, and the distributor, Buena Vista, as well as ABC. This interconnection is way beyond product placement.

Yes, they are making fun of themselves, or Ty was making fun of himself and them, and the Walt Disney Corporation is making fun of itself—or, at least, having the last laugh. This sort of intellectual critique, self-parody, making fun of oneself, the dominant one in academia for decades, has proven to be as ineffectual in changing things as most of the males who receive the largesse of Ty's crew. Nothing will change *EMHE* except the shrinking of its audience, the usual capitalist bottom line.

We've come a long way since *This Old House*, which might as well be called *This Old House on the Prairie* by now. Corporations mirror their world on television. Who among us would expect any different?

At the end of nearly every episode of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, the newly housed family, dressed in brand new clothes, yells collectively and singly, Thank you, ABC, thank you, ABC, and they mean it.

And what can I say, too, given the subject of this piece, but the same: Thank you, ABC, thank you, ABC. Thank you.