

Domestic Politics: Home Improvement Can't Repair America's Pandemic Crisis

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Nicole W. has been recording on Instagram the home improvement projects she's completed since she and her wife, Danielle started working from home four months ago. They've renovated their garage to create an outdoor dining space for their craftsman-style home outside Cleveland, Ohio. They've laid out materials for a new patio in the backyard. Most recently, Danielle installed a ceiling fan in their home office, where their dogs like to cuddle alongside them as they work. "When your home becomes your world," she shared in a live video, "you can catch up on things that you wouldn't do on a beautiful Friday if you've been at work for eight hours. But if you've been at home working all week, you figure this is the time to catch up. And then it snowballs, and you just want to do and share more."

According to polling research conducted by the Bank of America in late June of this year, 70% of American homeowners said that they also planned to use their time at home during the coronavirus pandemic as an opportunity to undertake renovation projects. Since April, the twin titans of the DIY industry, Lowe's and Home Depot, have both posted massive bumps in quarterly sales and marked upticks in their target prices for 2021. In turn, Elizabeth Suzuki, a senior analyst at BOA, predicts that home improvement is poised to evolve into a central pillar of post-pandemic life, as Americans further prioritize the spaces where they live, and increasingly, where they work.

There are few images that hold as much meaning for Americans, and in so many different ways, as the cultivation of a home. Home improvement symbolizes a cultural anchor of stability, a crucial financial asset, and a shelter from the precarity of a world in flux. The old adage, "a man's home is his castle," underscores this ideological link between personal home renovation and the consumption of security. On either end of its cultural history, the home improvement industry traffics in middle class fantasies of stability and refuge. Specifically during times of national crisis.

In 1954, for example, the U.S. began televising its atmospheric nuclear weapons tests, searing an ethic of impending catastrophe into the mind of Cold War America. That same year, *Time Magazine* popularized the terms DIY and home improvement with an in-depth cover story on "Mr. and Mrs. Fixup." The story followed a pair of young newlyweds as they self-performed an interior renovation on their brand new Atomic Ranch (an architectural style so-named for its aesthetic sense of heightened concern). At the end, the story even included a bit of a design teaser for its readers, where Mr. Fixup discussed possibilities for a DIY fallout shelter, considering everything from proper ventilation to lighting and furniture choices. Interior designer and *Livemore* magazine contributor,

Barbara Breen recalls a similar response among homeowners after the 9/11 attacks in 2001. “People withdrew into their homes and stayed there,” Breen says. “Then they started looking at their surroundings and saw all the things they wanted to change. Home life was suddenly much more important, and people wanted to make improvements even if they didn’t have the big budget to do anything drastic.”

This history is a reminder that the current, much-publicized turn towards the sanctity of domestic space, which has sparked millions-fold increases in home renovation sales, is not at all a novel reaction to national crisis. But in our shared exposure to the social risks laid bare by COVID-19, the lived realities of domestic isolation are at once common and divergent. For many, especially those who can afford it, investing in home improvement projects may seem like a prudent response. But to a larger extent, these investments have more to do with a collective longing for the way we think things used to be than they do with America’s current socioeconomic realities. During a pandemic that has no end in sight, the season of DIY domesticity will also be one of domestic struggle, revealing divisions of class, self-presentation, and place—something the home improvement industry has always done.

For example, notice the growing digital prevalence of people sharing self-shot videos of the DIY projects and crafts they are doing around the house. Lifestyle television juggernauts like DIY Network and HGTV have followed suit, completely revamping their portrayal of middle class domesticity by what they call “going virtual.” HGTV viewers can now watch *Property Brothers* host Drew Scott and his wife, Linda Phan, as they provide expert advice through Go-Pro documentation while working on their historic 1921 Hancock Park. Also new to the network’s lineup is *Hot Mess House*, which features organization expert, Cas Aarssen, as she uses live-time video calls and online conferencing to help families tackle the chaos and challenges of home organization during the pandemic. But the prize gem of HGTV’s post-Covid, virtual turn is “Design at Your Door.” Premiering in the prime time slot on weeknights at 8 p.m., this self-shot series caters directly to what it rosily calls America’s current “state-at-home state of mind.” It aims to capture what it sees as the core of American life in our pandemic-era—the image of ordinary families, in ordinary homes, self-performing renovations that will “inspire, entertain, and motivate millions of households to take on projects of their own.”

Watch these shows and videos and you’ll very quickly be struck by a sense that home improvement in the time of Covid-19 signifies much more than a timely financial investment. For the growing community of digital-DIYers, the self-presentation of home renovation symbolizes a physical and mental process of stabilization. A tactile and spiritual coming to grips with our country’s ‘new normal.’ Here, the presentation of domestic craftwork becomes the presentation of soulwork. As was clear, however, even before the pandemic slashed the income of millions, DIY projects, and the stability that goes with them, require a substantial amount of financial and temporal wealth, which historically has been unattainable for large swaths of our population—notably black and brown people, single mothers, and blue collar workers.

The history of home ownership, home improvement, and class is instructive here. “Most of what we think about in terms of homeownership and autonomy in America exists within a feedback loop of finance capitalism,” said Miranda Martinez, a professor who studies urban housing and gentrification at Ohio State University. “Accumulating the wealth necessary for buying a home,” she continued, “is just as critical as having the wealth needed to maintain the security that home provides.” I’d had the chance to catch up with her in the parking lot of a credit union in Columbus, where she was conducting research on financial literacy programs in Latinx communities. She and I talked about the sociology of homeownership, understood as the financial, emotional, and material activities inside a home that contribute to its economic growth or contraction. She emphasized that such processes have always been shaped by structural inequality.

The growing racial wealth gap in America, which is so heavily influenced by the history of housing discrimination (most notably the redlining of non-white neighborhoods), continues to serve as both a product and a process that leads to the uneven accumulation of wealth in domestic space. This has a direct influence on investments in home improvement. Low wages, unemployment, and lack of access to affordable child care often keep many non-white and low-income households from engaging in costly and time consuming renovations. Cultural consumer theorist, Risto Moiso underlines this last point in a recent study, suggesting that many low-income homeowners approach DIY and home improvement projects as extensions of unremunerated work, rather than as auto-therapeutic forms of leisure and productive consumption.

The structural imbalances between class and home renovation are even more noticeable for Americans that rent their homes. Stretching back to the racist histories of antebellum sharecropping, the Jim Crow South, and urban gentrification, rental housing in America has long perpetuated an unequal dynamic between the owner of a property and the tenet of that property. This uneven relationship drastically constricts the scope of domestic leisure activities for tenants, a fact recently illustrated by Chicago's passing of a city ordinance that allows landlords to ban social gatherings on fire escapes, stoops, and apartment balconies of rental properties. This same form of property policing also affects renters' prospects of undertaking DIY home improvement projects. Most leases and rental agreements contain provisions that prevent renters from making improvements or alterations to a rental property without the written consent of the landlord. To this end, landlords are under no obligation to front the bill for anything they deem 'non-essential' home improvements, while any improvements and alterations generally become the property of the landlord. For those who do not own a home, the very ability to autonomously shape one's sense of domestic well-being is shaped from the outset by a lack of private property. A country of renters would present a contradiction for the image of autonomy that the home improvement industry pedals.

Since the great housing crisis in 2008, American demographics have trended increasingly towards a society of renters. Today, more Americans rent their domestic space than at any other time since 1965. From 1975 to 2019, the number of tenants in America nearly doubled, from an estimated 25.66 million to roughly 44 million. A 2018 study from UCLA Berkeley's Turner Center shows that this shift away from ownership has been less a result of buyer wariness and more directly tied to the foreclosure crisis, reflecting a disproportionate number of low-income families losing their homes and being forced to rent. As a result, single-family rentals now comprise the fastest-growing segment of America's housing market, suggesting that the great housing crisis of 2008 never really ended, but has rather just shifted its terrain of struggle.

In a July 4 article, the *New York Times* reported that an estimated 40% of Americans would be unable to pay rent in the month of August. That same week, and within numerous committees of Congress, there were mounting bipartisan rumblings about making a home improvement tax credit central to any new round of coronavirus stimulus money. Proponents of the home improvement stimulus don't mention rent vouchers, increased unemployment benefits, or a nationwide extension of the moratorium on evictions and foreclosures. Rather they are championing a "recognition of the unique importance of homeownership in American life, and helping households rebuild their wealth through property renovation." It remains to be seen how a home improvement tax credit would benefit the growing number of individuals who cannot pay rent this month or next.

What is clear, however, is the emergence of a consensus, shared across cable channels like HGTV, live videos on social media, and now the halls of Congress, that home improvement is a vital activity, necessary for retaining a collective semblance of middle class security and stability during this pandemic. But the prospects of an impending unemployment and housing crisis, which could prove catastrophic for millions, makes the performance of middle class domesticity just that—an individual

household performance, a hearkening back to collective fantasies about the way we never were. This may explain, in part, why the digital documentation of DIY domesticity has become a nearly-compulsory social act, a demonstration of how well we are “hanging in there” or “making the best of it”—both exceedingly popular hashtags right now.

This pandemic threatens to continue engulfing crucial public spaces—schools, public-works projects, and the freedom of assembly, to name a few. The way people respond (or are capable of responding) to their time at home will be largely dictated by their social circumstances. Meanwhile, the private enterprises of the home improvement industry, while not exactly making their product more accessible, foster a sense of social cohesion through the consumption of middle class experience—allowing a public made of personally branded domestic spaces to assert their belonging to a national narrative of self-reliance and security. Such visions portend a reckoning between America’s dreams and the realities of its population, a synecdoche for the ongoing instability between an imagined and a real middle-class. Imagined communities are nothing new, but belonging to one when you’re at home all day now comes with a surcharge. It seems that many are willing to pay to play. In a moment defined by social isolation and virtual belonging, a new contract is forming. They who can afford the fantasy control the reality.