Episode Book

EPISODE #5993

Why Every Renovation Show Looks the Same

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SYNOPSIS

Every renovation show ends in the same room: open plan, pale finishes, white quartz counters, generic styling. Is that what homeowners want, or what the production business needs? This episode pulls the wallpaper off the genre — from Fixer Upper's shiplap empire to Love It or List It's lawsuit — and asks who's actually designing: the host, or a team optimizing for the camera. We compare the HGTV transformation model against Grand Designs' process-is-the-drama approach, look at why the formula is really a production calendar in a narrative costume, and find the moment one hit show proved the sameness was a choice, not a market verdict.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Hannah's been watching renovation shows again.



Herman

She has. And she's reached the point where she's stopped enjoying them, which is a particular kind of disappointment — you don't stop watching something you never liked.



Corn

Right, so she sent us the whole thing. Her question, in her words, is essentially: why does every renovation show end up in the same open-plan, pale, generic space, and is that what people actually want or is it what the shows want?



Herman

And then a second layer under it.



Corn

A second layer. Who's actually designing — is the host the designer or the face of a design team? How much of what we see is real versus compressed or staged for television? Who's actually paying for the renovation, the furniture, the styling? And the budgets and timelines — she says they seem impossibly low and impossibly fast once you account for design development, procurement, construction, and permitting. Which, as an architect and a DIY person, she'd notice.



Herman

She would.



Corn

And then the third layer, which is the one I think she actually cares about most: are there any shows that are design-led, architecturally interesting, and honest about how projects actually happen? She names Grand Designs as feeling closer to that than most, even if she doesn't always love the finished buildings.



Herman

That's a very precise thing to say. "Even if I don't always love the finished buildings" — that's not a complaint about Grand Designs. That's the show working.



Corn

Let's pull the wallpaper off this genre and see what's underneath.



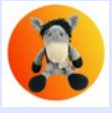
Herman

Start with the obvious thing, which is that we're not talking about a hobby. We're talking about an industry. Renovation television is a production business with ratings logic, legal exposure, insurance, and a house style. And the house style is downstream of the business, not the other way around.



Corn

Say more about "house style" as a term.



Herman

Every production genre develops one. Police procedurals have a look. Cooking shows have a look. Renovation shows have a very specific look — the same open-plan kitchen-dining-living room, the same pale finishes, the same generic styling, the same slightly-too-bright reveal sequence. And the interesting thing is that it's the same look across countries. Love It or List It in Australia, the UK, Canada — same output. Different hosts, different accents, same room.



Corn

Which means it isn't taste.



Herman

It isn't taste, because taste is local. It's structural. There's something about how these shows are made that produces that room regardless of who's making them or where.



Corn

So there are two poles we're going to use the whole episode.



Herman

Two poles. On one side, the HGTV model — Love It or List It, Fixer Upper, Property Brothers, House Hunters. Transformation is the product. The episode ends with a reveal, the reveal is the payoff, and the show is built backward from that payoff. On the other side, the Grand Designs model, where the process is the drama. The build takes two years, things go wrong, the couple runs out of money, and the show is built around the fact that you don't know how it ends.



Corn

And Hannah's question about the underbelly lives in the gap between those two.



Herman

Right. Because one of them is selling you a fantasy of control, and the other one is selling you the reality that there is no control. And the sameness is the fingerprint of the first model.



Corn

What's the actual question we're answering?



Herman

Why does so much of it look the same, and how much of it is real. And then whether anyone's doing it honestly.



Corn

Start with the look itself.



Herman

The clearest case is Fixer Upper. Joanna Gaines became synonymous with shiplap. Barn doors. Open shelving. Neutral, modern-farmhouse styling. And the look was so widely copied that it became a national house style, not a regional one. Jezebel ran a piece in 2016 describing the Gaineses as being in pursuit of — their words — "a nefarious conspiracy to turn every home in the Waco, Texas, area into a damn barn."



Corn

A barn with an open floor plan.



Herman

A barn with an open floor plan and a white quartz countertop.



Corn

The interesting thing is that the backlash is now mainstream. It's not just design critics.



Herman

No. Atlanta designer Tara Fust put it in a newsletter — and this is a direct quote — "the modern farmhouse vibe that has infiltrated our feeds, our eyeballs, the aisles at Target is done. Finito. No mas." That's a designer saying the genre's own signature style is over. And Collider's noted a growing chorus of HGTV viewers admitting the trend didn't quite pan out. Reddit threads full of regret.



Corn

So you have a style that a network effectively manufactured, that a lot of people installed in their homes, and now the network's own audience is saying that was a mistake.



Herman

Which raises the question — did the audience ever want it, or did they want it because it was the only thing on?



Corn

Let's get into the mechanism. Why does every show produce the same room?



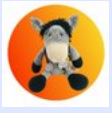
Herman

The production logic is the answer. The needs of the television show come before the needs of the content being featured. That's not a conspiracy — it's just how the incentives line up. Producers need episodes that stay high in the ratings. Ratings come from broad appeal. Broad appeal comes from uncontroversial design. So the safest possible room is the winning room, and the safest possible room looks like every other safest possible room.



Corn

So the pale finish isn't a design decision.



Herman

It's a ratings decision that happens to look like a design decision.



Corn

There's a formula that goes with it.



Herman

Love It or List It has an explicit one. The structure is: the homeowners don't trust Hilary's plan, they hate the first house David shows them, Hilary runs into a major construction or financial problem, and then David finds them their dream house. That's the beat sheet. It's not a paraphrase — it's the actual shape of almost every episode.



Corn

That's a hero's journey for kitchen renovation.



Herman

It's a hero's journey for kitchen renovation where the kitchen isn't the point. The point is the emotional arc, and the emotional arc needs to hit the same beats every week or the audience doesn't know when to feel things.



Corn

So the formula isn't laziness. It's the product.



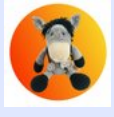
Herman

The formula is the thing being sold. The house is the delivery mechanism.



Corn

And once you see the beat sheet, you can't unsee it. Same act breaks, same crisis point at roughly the same minute.



Herman

That's not an accident either. The act breaks are where the commercials go. The crisis has to land just before a break so you don't change the channel.



Corn

So the emotional arc is cut to the ad schedule.



Herman

The emotional arc is cut to the ad schedule. The homeowner's worst day is timed to a commercial pod.



Corn

And the formula has a second function, which is legal. You mentioned insurance earlier. What does the formula do for the production company?



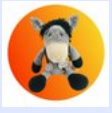
Herman

It de-risks the shoot. If you know the beats in advance, you can schedule them. You know you need a crisis scene, so you can plan a day for it. You know you need a reveal, so you can plan a day for that. You're not waiting for reality to happen — you're slotting reality into a template that a crew can shoot in a fixed number of days. A show that waited for genuine surprises would blow its schedule constantly. The formula is a production calendar wearing a narrative costume.



Corn

So the same thing that makes it emotionally predictable makes it logistically shootable.



Herman

Predictability isn't a side effect of the formula. It's the point of the formula. The emotion is the byproduct.



Corn

And that gets us to the question of who actually wants the safe design. Because the shows' official line is that they're giving people what they want.



Herman

Marci Lew appeared on Love It or List It in 2015, and she said — and this is a direct quote — "We mentioned a few things that we liked and didn't like, but in the end, they've got great designers who make the final choices." So she got input, in the same way you get input on a consultation form. And she noted she probably would have chosen a darker, more practical color than the white quartz the team installed.



Corn

"Probably would have chosen a darker color."



Herman

The white quartz is the giveaway. Nobody with a functioning kitchen chooses white quartz for practicality. You choose it because it photographs well under bright lighting and reads as expensive on camera.



Corn

That's the point where the question answers itself.



Herman

And there's more. Rachel Whyte, who was on Fixer Upper, confirmed the design team — quote — "will also make decisions about what they think the home needs to be a TV-worthy renovation." TV-worthy. That's the operative phrase. The home is being designed to look good on television, and then sold to the homeowner as a design.



Corn

So the design is downstream of the camera.



Herman

The design is downstream of the camera, and the camera is downstream of the ratings, and the ratings are downstream of the advertiser, and the advertiser doesn't care what your kitchen feels like when you're cooking in it at seven in the morning.



Corn

So if the design is shaped by production, is there evidence it could be different?



Herman

There is, actually, and this is the part that undercuts the whole "audiences demand sameness" defense. Fixer Upper got rebooted as Welcome Home in 2021, and Gaines evolved. Less shiplap. More wallpaper. Bold accents. Hunter-green cabinets. There's even a scene where she argues with a client about keeping brick natural instead of painting it white.



Corn

The same host, the same audience, a different design.



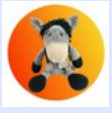
Herman

And it worked. It didn't lose the audience. Which tells you the earlier sameness wasn't a market verdict — it was a formula choice that the production was able to change when it wanted to.



Corn

So the safe look wasn't demanded by viewers. It was imposed by producers, and when producers relaxed, viewers stayed.



Herman

That's the finding. The sameness was a production decision dressed up as a demographic one.



Corn

Which is a strange thing to sit with, because it means the audience has been blamed for something the audience didn't ask for.



Herman

It's a very convenient story for a network. "We're just giving the people what they want" is a sentence that ends the conversation. It makes the sameness sound democratic.



Corn

When it's actually editorial.



Herman

It's editorial. Somebody chose the white quartz. Somebody chose the shiplap. And those somebodies were in a production office, not a living room.



Corn

And that matters beyond the aesthetics. If it's a market verdict, you can't argue with it — the market has spoken. If it's an editorial choice, you can argue with it, because somebody made it and somebody else could make a different one.



Herman

That's the whole stakes of the episode, honestly. Whether the sameness is a fact of nature or a decision. And the Welcome Home evidence says decision.



Corn

Now the harder question. Are the hosts actually doing the design?



Herman

Often no. And the clearest evidence is the Love It or List It lawsuit. Deena Murphy and Tim Sullivan sued, and the filing alleged that Farr and Visentin — and this is the language from the suit — "are actors or television personalities playing a role... none of them played more than a casual role in the actual renovation process." They also alleged Visentin was directed to walk through houses as part of a dramatization of house-hunting.



Corn

A dramatization.



Herman

And there's a broader point underneath that, which is that Love It or List It hosts rarely meet with the homeowners during filming. Scenes are short and rehearsed. And that's not unusual — it's described as standard practice for most home renovation shows on HGTV. Fixer Upper, Windy City Rehab, Curb Appeal — same model.



Corn

Rachel Whyte again.



Herman

Rachel Whyte met Joanna Gaines in person exactly twice. Once on real-estate day, once on design day. Joanna called and texted throughout, so there was contact, but two in-person meetings over the course of a whole renovation.



Corn

Two.



Herman

Two.



Corn

So when the show presents the host as the designer, it's presenting a composite. It's presenting the face of a team as though the face were the whole team.



Herman

Which is how television works generally. Nobody thinks the news anchor writes the news. But renovation TV specifically trades on the idea that the host is the designer. The branding is personal — "Hilary's plan," "Joanna's style." And then the actual design is made by people who don't appear on camera.



Corn

There's a contradiction you have to sit with here, though.



Herman

There is. Hilary Farr insists — and I'm quoting her — "the show is not at all scripted, and the homeowners' reactions to renovation realities and bad news are genuine." And both claims stand. Hers and the lawsuit's. They're not actually in conflict.



Corn

Because "scripted" means different things.



Herman

It means different things to a performer and to a plaintiff. The design decisions are real. The problems the show hits are often real. The budgets overrunning is real. What's shaped is the drama — which scenes get shot, in what order, with what reaction, edited into what arc. The renovation is real; the storytelling is constructed.



Corn

So the honest way to say it is that the show isn't fake, but it isn't documentary either.



Herman

It's a produced version of a real event. Which is fine, as long as everyone knows it. The problem is when the production is hidden and the audience thinks they're watching a process.



Corn

And the audience does think that. That's the whole appeal. You watch it because it feels like you're watching a process.



Herman

You watch it because it feels documentary-adjacent. That's the trick. It borrows the credibility of a documentary and spends it on a commercial.



Corn

Let's talk about who's paying.



Herman

The homeowners. Almost always. It's in the contracts. Homeowners foot the bill for their own renovations, and perks like free materials — quote — "come at the discretion of the show's producers." So the gift isn't a gift. It's a discretionary decision by a producer who's balancing a budget.



Corn

And there are entry requirements.



Herman

Love It or List It requires contestants to have at least seventy-five to a hundred thousand dollars saved. They have to move out for roughly eight weeks at their own expense. And production does not cover temporary housing — except in "unexpected circumstances such as delays due to COVID." So the show requires you to have a hundred grand and a place to live for two months while your kitchen is demolished, and it doesn't pay for the second one.



Corn

Because the show isn't paying for the renovation either.



Herman

The show is paying for access.



Corn

Which is the actual transaction.



Herman

The homeowner brings money, house, time, and drama. The show brings cameras. And in exchange for the cameras, the homeowner gets the renovation they were going to pay for anyway, plus a design they didn't choose, minus the furniture.



Corn

Right — the furniture.



Herman

The furniture is the bit that gets people. Staging furniture is not included. On Fixer Upper, any furniture used to stage the home is taken away afterward unless the homeowners have an additional budget for it. Clients get an itemized list so they can buy the pieces back at a discounted price.



Corn

So the reveal isn't a home. It's a set that gets struck.



Herman

That's the cleanest way to put it. You watch the reveal, the family walks in, everyone cries, the camera lingers on the sofa and the rug and the styled shelf, and then a crew comes in and takes the sofa and the rug and most of the shelf.



Corn

And the shelf stays.



Herman

The shelf might stay, if it was built. The shelf is fine.



Corn

So the family is left with a beautiful shell and no furniture.



Herman

Which is a real thing that people have described. You end up with a gorgeous kitchen and nowhere to sit.



Corn

There's something almost funny about that. You've spent a hundred grand. You've moved out for two months. You've been on television. And then you're sitting on the floor of your new kitchen because the sofa was a rental.



Herman

The sofa was a rental. The rug was a rental. The lamp was a rental. The books on the shelf were probably a rental.



Corn

The books?



Herman

Styling is styling. You don't leave your own books on a set.



Corn

So what does the homeowner actually walk away with, if we're being precise?



Herman

The built things. The countertops, the cabinets, the floors, the walls, the fixtures. Anything that's part of the house. And that's not nothing — they did get a renovation. But the layer that made it look finished on camera, the layer that made it look like a home, is the layer that leaves. So the gap between what they saw in the reveal and what they came home to is the gap between a set and a house.



Corn

And that gap is never shown.



Herman

It's never shown, because the show ends at the reveal. The episode's job is done at the moment of maximum beauty. What happens the next morning isn't in the format.



Corn

Let's talk about the numbers, because Hannah's specific point is that the budgets don't survive contact with reality.



Herman

They don't, and the sharpest case is Murphy versus Sullivan again. They paid a hundred and forty thousand dollars. Plus ten thousand in what were described as change fees. They alleged irreparably damaged floors and shoddy work. And — this is the number that matters — only about eighty-five thousand, seven hundred and eighty-six dollars of the roughly hundred and fifty thousand they paid reached the actual contractor, a man named Aaron Fitz.



Corn

Say the gap again.



Herman

Roughly a hundred and fifty thousand paid by the homeowner. Roughly eighty-six thousand to the build.



Corn

So about sixty-four thousand dollars went somewhere that wasn't the renovation.



Herman

Which is a significant line item. And there was a further wrinkle — the on-camera contractor, Eric Eremita, was allegedly unlicensed in North Carolina, which is where the project was. So the person the show presented as the contractor may not have held the license required to do the work in that state.



Corn

And the case ended?



Herman

Dismissed April twenty-fourth, 2017. Settlement confidential. They were countersued for libel and slander along the way, so the lot got tangled up and then resolved quietly. And that's the pattern — at least a dozen lawsuits against renovation shows have been settled



Herman (continued)

out of court, with the details shrouded by strict confidentiality agreements. Which means the public record of how these shows actually go is mostly invisible.



Corn

Twelve lawsuits, no public record.



Herman

Twelve suits, no public record, and a settled case that everyone agreed not to talk about. So the claimant you hear about is the rare one.



Corn

And the hosts got paid how much?



Herman

Farr and Visentin were reported at about twenty-three thousand dollars per episode, which works out to around three hundred thousand per season.



Corn

For the season.



Herman

So the money in the show is not in the renovation. It's in the show.



Corn

Which reframes all of it. The renovation is the content. The show is the business.



Herman

The renovation is the raw material the business processes.



Corn

Now, how much of what we see is staged?



Herman

HGTV's own senior vice president of production, Betsy Ayala, said — and this is her, on the record — "Most if not all of our flipping shows are staged." That's the network saying it. Not a critic, not a plaintiff. The network.



Corn

That's a very useful sentence.



Herman

It's the sentence you'd want if you were only going to get one. And then you get the specific practices. Property Brothers plaintiffs said they were made to reshoot the ending at least four takes while feigning excitement. Four other contestants relayed similar stories of aggressive coaching — being told how to react.



Corn

Four takes of the same delight.



Herman

Four takes. And House Hunters — the families typically already own the chosen home before the episode airs. Sometimes for months. So the "decision" you watch them make was made before the cameras arrived.



Corn

And Love It or List It films both endings.



Herman

Both. They film the love ending and the list ending, and the producers pick which one goes to air in post. So the entire premise of the show — did they stay or did they go — is a post-production decision.



Corn

Wait. So the emotional climax of the series is a coin flip they make in an editing bay.



Herman

Visentin's own estimate is that the split runs roughly sixty-forty in her favour. So the show's central question resolves the way an editor wants it to resolve, and the homeowners' actual decision is one input among several.



Corn

One input among several is a very generous way to put it.



Herman

It's the generous way. The less generous way is that the homeowners' actual decision is a spoiler the producers get to ignore.



Corn

There's a phrase from one of the Property Brothers plaintiffs that keeps coming back to me.



Herman

Paul King. "We're trapped... What they did was build a really nice studio to shoot their show."



Corn

And his wife Mindy said: "They put the fear of God in you when you do these shows."



Herman

Which is the sharpest version of the critique. The homeowner's money is funding a set. The show is shot in a house the homeowner paid to renovate, with a design the homeowner didn't choose, with furniture that gets taken away, and the emotional content of the episode is produced in an edit room afterwards.



Corn

And the funniest thing is the studio line. He says they built a studio.



Herman

They built a studio that happens to be someone's house.



Corn

Let's get to Grand Designs.



Herman

Grand Designs is the counter-model, and the interesting thing is that Kevin McCloud is explicit about not being part of the genre he's adjacent to. Direct quote: "Makeover is my worst kind of television. Whatever's happening in front of the camera is being orchestrated by the team... the viewer is being sold an idea as hard as the victims on the television are."



Corn

The victims.



Herman

That's his word. And he positions himself — again, his words — "on the side of the viewer." And he says he's "not involved in their design." He describes his role as being like a therapist.



Corn

A therapist who shows up once an episode and asks how the money's going.



Herman

He's explicit about keeping an emotional barrier, too. He says if he's too pally with the guys doing the building, he thinks he's betrayed his relationship with the viewer. So he's deliberately not becoming part of the production's social circle.



Corn

It's a strange posture for a television host, because the incentive is usually the opposite.



Herman

And he pays for it. He's the one who said — this is at the Architects' Journal — "the more you lock in architecture as an idea, generally speaking, the smaller your television audience." That's the direct indictment. Architectural ambition on television costs you viewers. Which is why there's almost none of it.



Corn

So Grand Designs exists at the top of a funnel that narrows sharply.



Herman

That's what he's saying. The audience shrinks as the architecture gets more specific. And he's made peace with running a show at that narrower end, rather than a bigger show at the wider one.



Corn

And it's honest about money in a way that no HGTV show is.



Herman

It's honest about money in a way that no HGTV show is, and sometimes brutally. Edward Short built a clifftop house, and it left him seven million pounds in debt and cost him his marriage. He told McCloud, on camera, "My vanity and ambition probably collapsed the marriage." And McCloud's line about it is: "That ambition can destroy the beauty that we strive to find in life."



Corn

So the show's willingness to show that isn't a kindness.



Herman

No. It's the show letting a real thing be real. Which is the opposite of the HGTV move, where the worst thing that can happen is a snag with the tile and it's resolved in the last eight minutes.



Corn

But Grand Designs isn't only carnage.



Herman

It's not. McCloud praises cheap builds. Patrick Bradley's four-shipping-container house came in at a hundred and fifty thousand pounds, and McCloud has said "some of our most loved buildings are those built for under three hundred thousand." So the show's affection isn't for expense. It's for ambition and honesty and the specificness of a particular home.



Corn

So the answer to Hannah's question is roughly that Grand Designs is the closest thing to design-led television, but it isn't a clean answer, because the show's drama depends on things going wrong.



Herman

Which is McCloud's own ambivalence. He admits he doesn't always love the finished buildings. And there's a structural truth in that — if a Grand Designs project went perfectly and came in under budget, it would be a very short episode.



Corn

So the honest version of the question isn't whether there's a completely honest renovation show. It's whether the show has to be a disaster to be honest.



Herman

And the answer is probably no, but the drama of the show is correlated with the disaster, which means the honest version of the format has a natural bias toward catastrophe. The construction is the content. When the construction goes well, there's less content.



Corn

Which is a weird equilibrium.



Herman

It's the opposite of the HGTV equilibrium. HGTV suppresses risk because risk hurts ratings. Grand Designs showcases risk because risk is the ratings. Both of them are following the audience. They just have different audiences.



Corn

Which is a reasonable place to be, philosophically.



Herman

It's a reasonable place, and it's where McCloud would probably land. He's not pretending Grand Designs is some kind of documentary ideal. He's arguing that the honest version is worth making for a smaller audience.



Corn

There's one thing about open-plan that we haven't talked about at all.



Herman

Open-plan as such, meaning what it's actually like to live in one.



Corn

Because every renovation show ends with the same open-plan kitchen-dining-living arrangement, and everyone on the show describes it as the flow.



Herman

The flow.



Corn

Nobody ever mentions what happens when you run the dishwasher.



Hilbert

I had a house once where the previous owner had done that. Opened it up. Knocked through what I'm fairly sure was a structural wall between the kitchen and what had been a dining room, to make one big space. And the beam they'd put in to carry whatever was above it, because once you've taken a wall out you've got to put something back in, was a length of timber. From a skip. Painted the same colour as the ceiling so you couldn't see it.



Corn

Painted to match the ceiling.



Hilbert

Off-white. Same as the ceiling. The idea being, if you look up, you don't notice the beam. If you don't notice the beam, you don't ask what the beam is doing. And I've got photographs of it — you can see the paint flaking off the end where the moisture's got in, and you can see the grain, and if you know anything about timber, you can see it's not the kind of piece you'd select for that job. It's the kind of piece that was already in the skip.



Corn

Was it load-bearing?



Hilbert

It was bearing something. I'll tell you that much.



Herman

What was above it?



Hilbert

A roof. As far as I could tell.



Herman

So a roof, being held up by a piece of wood out of a skip.



Hilbert

Painted to match the ceiling.



Corn

Did you keep the beam?



Hilbert

I kept the beam.



Corn

You kept the beam.



Hilbert

I kept the beam. Not a photograph of the beam. I've got the photographs too. I mean I kept the beam. When the house was sold I wasn't going to let it end up in someone else's skip.



Herman

So where is it now?



Hilbert

It's in the garage. I call it the evidence.



Corn

The evidence.



Hilbert

And I've been meaning to take it to a structural engineer. Just to find out what it was actually holding up. But I haven't, because once you know, you have to do something about it.



Herman

Do something about what? It's not in the house anymore.



Hilbert

That's the question, isn't it.



Corn

You're keeping a piece of timber in a garage specifically so you don't have to know whether it was holding up a roof.



Hilbert

I know it was holding up a roof. I want to know how much roof.



Herman

That's a very different question.



Hilbert

It's the only question.



Corn

The shows never do that. They never show you the dishwasher.



Hilbert

The dishwasher is the whole point. You open a kitchen into a living room, and now every time you run the wash at night, the person on the sofa hears it. You get out of bed in the morning and you clatter a spoon and it lands in the other room. The pale finishes show every mark. The flow everyone talks about — the flow is a corridor with a sofa in it. It was a corridor when it was two rooms. Now it's a corridor with a sofa in it, and a dishwasher at one end.



Herman

I'll take that seriously, actually. The open-plan thing works if you're running the kind of household where the kitchen is social. If you're running the kind where one person cooks and the other person is reading, the open plan is a bad deal for the reader.



Hilbert

The reader.



Corn

The shows never mention that.



Hilbert

The shows never mention it because it doesn't photograph as a change. You can't show a sound leak. You can show a new beam, if it's not painted the same colour as the ceiling. You can show a wall coming down. You can show the before and after. You can't show "now you can hear the washing machine while you eat."



Corn

The format is designed around what's photographable, and the things that matter to living in the house are not photographable.



Hilbert

Which is why they all end up looking the same. If they were honest about the living part, they'd all look different, because people live differently. But they're not honest about the living part. They're honest about the photograph. And the photograph is the same every time, because the camera doesn't care who's in the room.



Herman

There's a version of this that's about smell, too. Nobody ever puts a kitchen next to a living room and talks about what the house smells like for the rest of the evening.



Hilbert

Nobody does. And the smell is the same problem as the sound. It travels. And it doesn't photograph either.



Corn

The two things that actually define living in an open-plan house — sound and smell — are the two things the format can't show you.



Hilbert

Which is a strange thing for a genre that claims to be about how you live.



Corn

It's not just open-plan. It's the same logic underneath the white quartz and the pale oak floors and the stainless appliances. They're all chosen because they read clean on camera. A dark worktop shows every crumb under studio lighting. A patterned floor fights the camera. The design isn't optimized for the person standing at the counter. It's optimized for the lens pointed at the counter.



Hilbert

The lens doesn't cook.



Corn

The lens doesn't cook.



Hilbert

There's one more thing about the beam, Hilbert.



Hilbert

Go on.



Corn

You said you haven't taken it in because once you know, you have to do something about it. But there's nothing to do. The house isn't yours. The beam is in your garage.



Hilbert

Right.



Corn

The reason you haven't taken it in is that you like not knowing.



Hilbert

I like not knowing. I don't want to know whether I spent eight years under something that was about to come down. I want to keep the option.



Corn

You want to keep the option of having been safe.



Hilbert

I want to keep the option of having been safe, yes.



Herman

That's a very human thing to want.



Hilbert

It is. And it's also, if I'm honest, exactly what the shows sell you. The option of having been safe. You watch the show, the beam goes in, the paint dries, the family cries, everybody's fine. And you feel safe. And then you go and knock a wall out and you don't ask anybody.



Corn

...So the beam in your garage isn't evidence about the guy who put it in.



Hilbert

No.



Corn

It's evidence about the audience.



Hilbert

Yeah.



Herman

Well there's a closing thought. The beam is the audience.



Hilbert

Something like that.



Herman

If the sameness is a production choice and not a market verdict — and Welcome Home's evolution does suggest it's a choice, since Gaines moved to bolder design and the audience stayed — then the question is what renovation television could be if it trusted viewers with actual risk.



Corn

It could look like Grand Designs. Which means it would also look like Edward Short, seven million pounds in debt, marriage ending on camera.



Herman

The honest version of the format costs the subjects a great deal, and produces a smaller audience. Which is the paradox of the entire business. The shows that are most truthful about how a build actually goes are also the ones where the build most often goes badly for the people inside it.



Corn

The shows that keep everyone safe are the ones where nobody actually built anything — they built a set, and then they struck it.



Herman

Which is where Hilbert's beam actually lands. Once you know, you have to do something about it. The audience for these shows has been keeping the option of not knowing for a very long time.



Corn

The streaming era might change that. As audiences fragment across YouTube and Netflix, the mass-appeal logic that produced the pale kitchen gets weaker — you don't need everyone in the country to watch one channel anymore. But the economics of production don't go away. You just get a different sameness, made by fifteen smaller shows instead of one big one.



Herman

Which means the honest version probably doesn't arrive because the audience demands it. It arrives because a production team decides to make it.



Corn

That's the piece that's actually optimistic, if you squint. It means the thing that's been stopping it isn't us.



Herman

It means the thing that's been stopping it is a decision somebody made, and decisions can be unmade.



Corn

That's a good place to leave it.



Herman

Producer Hilbert Flumingtop, who has been sitting on a piece of timber in a garage for reasons best not investigated.



Corn

If you want more of this, try episode twenty, Architectural AI; episode twenty-one, Is Your AI Secretly American; and episode nineteen, AI Images. This has been My Weird Prompts, the human-AI collaboration podcast.



Herman

If you want more, the archive, the RSS feed, and everything else is at my weird prompts dot com. And if you want to send us your own prompt, we take them on Telegram at t dot me slash MWP listener bot.



Corn

We'll be back soon.



Herman

See you tomorrow.

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