



Karen Anderson

## Why 'do-it-yourself' projects so often turn into 'what-have-I-done?!' events

*Home improvement TV shows make improving your home look so easy, and fun. But, as Club columnist*

*Karen Anderson notes, the results can often be disappointing.*

Just moved into a new house? Puzzling over the bizarre remodeling done by the previous owners? Shocked by their shoddy maintenance? Now's your chance. Take action while you still can. You have just six months – maybe a year – to fix these oddities. After that point, you could be stuck with them, because you'll be too embarrassed to admit to a contractor that you've been living for months with:

- A laundry room with nine pull-chain, bare-bulb light fixtures, four of them stuck in the "on" position.
- A basement door that requires the weight of two adults to close it.
- A designer sink in the guest bath that sprays water all over the room (and your shirt).
- An attic with a wasps' nest the size of a beach-ball (at least that's how big it was when you last looked, two years ago).
- A two-story laundry chute that deposits your dirty clothes in the middle of your garage.

I know whereof I speak, because two of the household disasters listed above belong to our current dwelling. Yep, after 12 years we've still got the always-on bare light bulbs, a legacy of a previous owner's basement darkroom. And we have the laundry chute with the surprise ending.

I used to grumble and snarl about bad do-it-yourself remodeling. But then I got to thinking about how these strange do-it-yourself projects occur in the first place. People are reluctant to explain their hare-brained home improvement ideas to a professional. It's much easier to explain them to your spouse, and send him or her off to the store for materials and paint.

It's even easier if you've just purchased your first house and the decorating magazines have convinced you that

remodeling is an exciting new adventure. Research has shown that the less experience people have had with stuff like hammers, nails, saws, screws, drywall and tape measures (especially tape measures), the more excited they get about unique and innovative home remodeling ideas.

This all came into focus for me when I was visiting friends in Boston. They have two of those bright, spoiled, out-of-control children you see on TV sit-coms. The mother decided she wanted to work from home to spend more time with her kids (I suspect they'd been blacklisted by the local babysitters). But she realized she needed a way to keep the little darlings from damaging her computer or messing with her papers.

This enterprising woman came up with an original solution and blithely ignored the warning bells that should have sounded when she realized she couldn't face presenting her scheme to a contractor. That's how she and her husband ended up building a lockable, childproof metal-and-Plexiglas cube in the middle of their living room. It looks like the set of a low-budget sci-fi film – the scene where the aliens are attacking the stranded spaceship.

Our laundry chute problem pales by comparison. At first, we simply ignored the strange holes in the walls of two of our closets. But then our cats looked into the situation, and when they did, one of them promptly fell down the chute.

I heard the yowl and the scrabbling of claws, peered into the dark hole, and then ran down two flights of stairs screaming. Yanking open the door to the garage, I found the slightly dazed tabby sitting on a fluffy pillow in the middle of the floor. The previous owners had

stuffed the pillow into the garage ceiling to prevent cold air from coming up through their useless chute. I tossed out the pillow and we nailed plywood over all the chute entrances and exits. When the garage ceilings were insulated last year, all evidence of The Great Laundry Chute Cover-up vanished.

Of course, some future owners of this house will stumble over the closed-off secret passageway and wonder "What on earth were those people thinking?" So I have taped a note in the chute for them with the following advice:

"Ignore this laundry chute! Just do something about the lights in the laundry room while there's still time. And for heaven's sake, get a professional contractor."

