

THE HOME YOU OWN

When renovating exposes cracks — in your marriage

‘It’s some kind of strange miracle that we didn’t get divorced’



By [Marisa Kashino](#)

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Victoria Barnes and Paul Keifrider spent a decade renovating their Victorian home in Merchantville, N.J., just outside Philadelphia. Their marriage survived — but they say they were miserable with each other throughout the project. (Neal Santos/For the Washington Post)

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It’s been two years since the paint dried on Victoria Barnes and Paul Keifrider’s top-to-bottom, almost entirely DIY renovation of their Victorian house outside Philadelphia — but the angst of the process still feels a little fresh.

“He didn’t want to wait for a plan. He just wanted to start,” says Barnes, of her husband’s impatience for fleshing out the details of a project before swinging a hammer.

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“I could be working on something and I’m 35 percent through, and then Victoria will come in the room and [say] let’s do it this way now,” laments Keifrider. “And I’m back to only having 10 percent done.”

There was the time work on the bathroom stalled because Barnes insisted on a custom-built medicine cabinet that was recessed into the wall. And the time plans for the kitchen changed because she found a free piano on Craigslist that she wanted to transform into an island.

“He’d be pissed at me, incredibly angry,” she says. “He did absolutely think that I was the wrench in the plan constantly.”

Counters Keifrider: “Going backwards and redoing things makes my brain bleed.”

“The only reason [we had] to redo anything,” alleges Barnes, “is because Paul charged forward without consulting me and then later acted surprised when I had an opinion.”



Barnes alleges her husband often moved ahead on projects without consulting her, which led to fights. (Neal Santos/For the Washington Post)

One thing they *can* agree on: “There were lots of times — maybe all of the time — that we were just, like, miserable with each other,” she says. “And yeah, it’s some kind of strange miracle that we didn’t get divorced.”

Offers Keifrider: “We didn’t have time.”

Undertaking a renovation on your own, while living in the construction zone and balancing other jobs (Barnes manages the couple’s rental property; Keifrider repairs machinery full time), is especially extreme. But even couples with the means to hire designers and contractors, and move out during the work, don’t always emerge unscathed from a remodel: “I’ve been involved in three projects that were part of divorces,” says Seth Ballard, principal at high-end D.C. architecture firm Ballard and Mensua.

In a [2018 survey](#) conducted by online home-building resource Houzz, a third of the more than 1,300 respondents said they found renovating with a significant other to be “frustrating.” Seven percent said they considered seeking a separation or divorce during the process. And interviews for this story with homeowners, couple’s therapists, divorce lawyers and renovation pros made one overarching message clear: Before embarking on a remodel with a romantic partner, you’d better make sure your relationship is every bit as solid as the quartz countertops you’ve been eyeing for the new kitchen.



One of the couple's spats was about the kitchen. Barnes delayed the construction, frustrating Keifrider, when she found a free piano on Craigslist and decided she wanted to turn it into the island. (Neal Santos/For the Washington Post)

According to therapists, all kinds of personal baggage gets wrapped up into our homes, including but not limited to our relationships with money; how we want the outside world to perceive us; the experiences we had in the homes in which we grew up; and our quests for happiness.

So, yeah, just a few minor things.

“We’re putting a lot of pressure on the house in terms of what we bring to it emotionally,” says Ginger Sullivan, a couple’s psychotherapist in D.C. “It’s like a third part of your marriage — this house that takes on a life of its own.”

Now add in the thousands of decisions and value judgments that get made during a remodel, and you’ve got a minefield of potential conflict.

“I have one [couple] right now — these people bought a house and they’re changing things around, and it’s beginning to cost a lot of money,” says Irina Firstein, a therapist in New York City. “There’s an argument about what’s necessary, what’s not necessary. ... [One] person is coming from perhaps a more emotional place. This idea that if everything is perfect then we’re going to be happy, [as in] ‘I’m thinking more about our comfort and happiness, and you’re always thinking about money.’”

In such cases, Firstein says she tries to establish what’s at the root of the disagreement, because while the house might have triggered it, there’s usually a deeper cause. “It could be that we lived in kind of a s---hole growing up, and it was awful and I want this perfect thing,” she says. “These are all decisions that are driven by underlying feelings and needs and longings.”



The kitchen, pre-renovation. (Victoria Elizabeth Barnes)



The completed kitchen, with the piano-turned-island in the middle. (Neal Santos/For the Washington Post)

Barnes and Keifrider say their different upbringings probably contributed to the friction during their renovation. “I grew up in a house where if something was broken, it didn’t get fixed,” says Barnes. “It got duct-taped.”

Keifrider, by contrast, comes from a long line of doers. His father was handy. Plus, “I had a grandfather who had, like, every tool you could think of. ... He even built his own table saw.” That history, he says, helps explain his impatience with his wife’s indecisiveness: “If there’s a project hanging over my head, I want to move forward with it.”

But at least he and Barnes can now enjoy the fruits of their labor together. Not every couple can say the same.

Cheryl New, a partner at the divorce firm New & Lowinger in Bethesda, Md., represents a client whose split was the direct result of a renovation gone sour. “One of the parties, I won’t say who, let the designer go off and gave no budget,” says New. “The other party was sort of not privy to that until contracts were signed.” Ninety-five percent of the marital assets, according to the lawyer, have since been sunk into the home.

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“Grease on the fire — there’s a mold problem,” she adds. “As we sit here

today, no one's in that house.”

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Dealing with relationship drama is such a common occurrence for those in the home renovation business that many professionals say they try to screen out clients who seem like trouble.

After more than two decades in the industry, Ballard, the D.C. architect, says he's learned to keep an eye out for certain red flags. Among them: If one partner attempts to schedule a meeting without the other, and if one spouse routinely talks over, or for, the other.

“There are ways to not even have to tell them that I'm not taking them,” he says. “Sometimes I talk them out of the project just because I explain how difficult it will be.”

Even so, the occasional doomed duo still slips by.

The three divorces that Ballard has seen unfold were somewhat varied in their causes. He says he suspected one of them might be in the offing when he noticed the husband's clothes were in a guest bedroom while taking measurements at the couple's home. That pair (both of whom, according to the architect, are boldface names) was planning a project to the tune of \$2.5 million, with an HGTV crew on standby to document it. But then one day, the wife called Ballard in tears to let him know it was off.

“They had the money, but putting the money into something together when their relationship was already strained, it was the tipping point,” he says.

Another couple subjected him to their constant arguing during meetings — “everything was painful,” Ballard recalls — but made it through construction nonetheless. He wasn't terribly surprised to learn a month after they moved into the finished house that they were separating.

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In the third scenario, the husband “came from money and finer things” and pushed the budget to the max against his wife's wishes. When, about a year after moving into the completed home, he lost his job and the wife was “carrying the lion's share,” Ballard's impression was that the strain of being “house poor” broke the marriage. “He had pushed to add a floor to the project,” he recalls. “She would have been happy with less.”

Once they're in the middle of a renovation with an unhappy couple, pros say they have to tread lightly. "I use a slightly different tone of voice to try to calm down the situations," says Ballard. "I can usually bring the meeting back around. I've steered ships through a lot of rough waters like that."

Stuart Pumpelly, a team leader at Four Brothers Design and Build in

Stuart Pumpelly, a team leader at Four Brothers Design and Build in D.C., stresses the importance of remaining neutral. "Most of the time, it's just offering helpful advice on both sides," he says. "You just try to give them the pros and the cons of the decision they're trying to make."



After years of angst, Barnes and Keifrider can now enjoy the fruits of their labor. But not every couple makes it that far. (Neal Santos/For the Washington Post)

So, what's the secret to surviving a renovation with your relationship intact? Communication, of course.

Before you start, advises New, the divorce lawyer, talk openly "about the emotional toll it might take on your marriage, and the financial toll on your bank account."

Once you're in the thick of it, don't let disagreements fester, says Kristin Harrison, founder of Bungalow 10 Interiors in Virginia: "What happens is [clients] let things go for the first couple months and then all of a sudden something happens and they explode. Which is why I always try to tell people, 'Be very open with your feelings every day.'"

Barnes and Keifrider would agree, to an extent. Sometimes, they say, the best solution was to walk away from an argument and revisit it once they'd cooled off. Other fights probably could've been avoided with clearer communication: "Because I'm talking about apples and Victoria's talking about oranges, and we both think we're talking about the same thing," recalls Keifrider.

Some blowups, however, had more to do with being considerate of each other. The couple's worst fight of the entire renovation — which took a decade, by the way — stemmed from a pile of old rags that, in Barnes's telling, "could not have been filthier if you went to a nuclear waste site."

Keifrider had used them in the course of doing some type of work involving an old sewage pipe and replacing a toilet — he and Barnes still

dispute the particulars, though they can at least agree the job was foul. Rather than throw them away, Keifrider put the rags through a cycle in the brand-new washing machine.



Despite all the pain, Barnes and Keifrider say they would renovate together again. "I'm an idiot and Paul has a short memory," says Barnes. (Neal Santos/For the Washington Post)

"I had never been so angry in my entire life that the person I am married to didn't stop and think to himself, 'Is this going to affect Victoria's enjoyment of the new washer and dryer?'" Barnes says. "My brain melted because it couldn't compute. It was just, like, smoking and short-circuiting, like, why would you do that?"

And yet, now that they're on the other side of all that misery, they say they're only stronger because of it. Cast them on "The Amazing Race," says Barnes, and they'll win while blindfolded. "No other couple will come close."

In fact, not long ago, she sent Keifrider a listing for another fixer-upper — a cabin that she describes as something out of "Dirty Dancing."

Does that mean they'd be willing to go through the entire painful process all over again?

"We would do it again because we're idiots," says Barnes. "Or, I'm an idiot and Paul has a short memory."

Echoes Keifrider: "We love to suffer."

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