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### **Reality hits home**

\* Remodeling projects look easy on television, but they take a lot of time and money.

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During a recent episode of the popular reality TV show "While You Were Out," an industrious crew of five transformed a master bedroom and bath. They tore out carpet, put in wood floors, added white wainscoting, sewed curtains and bedding, built and mounted shutters, beefed up moldings, painted the walls and trim, refinished the armoire and dresser, built a bed and even cooked up homemade spa products, all in two days and for under \$1,500.

What's wrong with this picture?

Although home improvement shows such as the Learning Channel's "While You Were Out," "Trading Spaces" and "In a Fix" have been a boon to the remodeling industry, inspiring many homeowners to rethink and renovate, they misrepresent how much time and money such projects really take. Those in the know -- home remodelers and people in the trade -- are quick to offer a reality check.

"I'm impressed with the creativity and like that the shows expose people to good design," said L.A.-based interior designer Gary Gibson, "but reality doesn't come with all the perks that these TV shows do: Real people don't have crews of free labor."

The shows do a disservice when they lead people to believe a kitchen remodel can be done in a weekend, he said. "In reality, a completely remodeled kitchen takes 12 or more weeks, particularly if you're making structural changes, and you can't do it for \$1,500."

Catherine Grennan, who produces commercials, just finished remodeling her home. Her experience was a lot more reality than reality TV.

Grennan, 40, paid \$1.3 million last year for a 1938 Spanish

Revival-style triplex just south of West Hollywood. The property has 4,500 square feet of living space plus four garages.

She planned to move into one unit and rent out the other two. But first she wanted to bring the plumbing and electrical systems up to date and paint inside and out. Grennan also wanted to upgrade the 1,850-square-foot second-story unit where she would live by redoing the kitchen and bath and adding a veranda overlooking the courtyard.

To save money, Grennan did most of her own purchasing and legwork. But she hired Gibson as interior design consultant. He kept her on track and told her what to look for and where. Grennan estimated the whole project would take three months. It took nine. She hoped to spend around \$100,000. Her costs have exceeded \$150,000.

"People don't realize how many hours of preparation and planning are involved," Grennan said. "Plus, in real life you don't have so many subcontractors focusing on your project at once. To them, you're a small job. Most subcontractors need a lot of small jobs to make a living, and your job is just one on their list. You get in line."

Evan Farmer, 32, host of "While You Were Out," admitted that his crew really does take more than two days to knock out a remodel and that those on the show enjoy advantages real people don't get. What viewers don't see are the three weeks of design time that precede every episode, he said. With the design scheme finished, the crew then meets the day before the shoot to collaborate, prepare and shop.

But the \$1,500 budget is real. Sort of.

"We go to Home Depot and pay the same price anyone else would for materials," he said, even though Home Depot sponsors the show.

But other suppliers, particularly fabric and home accessory sources, donate products to the show in exchange for exposure and a mention on national television. "While You Were Out" reaches more than 10 million viewers.

Big-ticket items such as sofas, which would otherwise break the budget, are thrown in as a quiz prize.

Labor fees, often the most expensive part of any home remodeling job, aren't calculated into the budget either. Although shows differ, they usually have one or two designers, one or two master carpenters and often an assistant, plus one or more people devoted to accessorizing, sewing, painting and applying faux finishes.

Grennan estimated that well over half of her costs have gone toward labor. "I paid \$200 for paint and \$1,000 to the painter," she said.

Labor costs depend on the job, according to Fred Ugast, chief operating officer for HomeTech, a Bethesda, Md.-based company that provides cost data for contractors nationwide. Labor generally accounts for 30% of the cost of a kitchen remodel, 50% of a bedroom remodel and 60% for a bathroom.

Terrence Campbell, a custom cabinetmaker who works in Bellflower, said he's enjoying the bounce he believes the shows have given his business, AC Cabinets, which is up 30% this year over last. But there is a downside. "While a lot more people are calling, most have really low-ball ideas of what cabinets cost," he said.

Although prices vary, custom cabinets for an average L-shaped kitchen can run between \$8,000 and \$14,000, Campbell said. Oak cabinets cost about \$145 a linear foot, and higher-end woods, such as maple, cherry or alder, are about \$165 a linear foot for base cabinets without doors. Pre-made cabinets can cost up to 30% less or as much as custom cabinetry.

Cabinetry takes about eight weeks from start to finish. In that time, the cabinetmaker will measure, write an estimate, draw plans, make the cabinets and install them.

"If the cabinets are all built, then you could install in two to three days," said Campbell, who has consulted on the ABC reality design show "Extreme Makeover." But during his 26 years in the business, he's never seen a kitchen remodel completed in less than 12 weeks.

For other projects, expect installing and staining wood floors or laying tile to take about a week. Applying faux finishes to entire rooms and creating custom window treatments usually require at least a couple of days each.

Grennan's veranda is a good example of a project that might have been finished in two days on TV, but actually took a more typical nine months.

First she consulted a landscaper and studied books on outdoor living. Then she hired an architect and an engineer to draw up plans for the 9-by-14-foot space, which has a stairway to the backyard.

Next she went to the city to get a permit. Elapsed time: four months.

Once she got her permit, she learned her contractor was working on another job and couldn't start for two more months. Three months after he started, the veranda was finished.

"It was a slow process, but realistic. I needed the time to process all the decisions," Grennan said. "Now I'm glad the project didn't go faster, because I got exactly what I wanted."

Farmer insists that the timelines on television are real. The reason the crew finishes so quickly is that all the prep work is done the day before and they have a well-stocked work truck.

"We have access to every tool we need, and the truck is well-organized, so tools are easy to find," he said. "Most people doing projects at home don't have the right tools and have to go to the hardware store three times."

And a final perk: "We don't have to clean up after the show. We have a crew that does that."

In the rush to get the job done and also entertain, do TV shows sacrifice the end result?

"A lot of these design shows are made strictly for entertainment value," said Lauri Ward, author of "Use What You Have Decorating" (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1998) and owner of a New York design firm of the same name. "These shows are more about pleasing the audience than the homeowner."

Furthermore, what's entertaining isn't always practical, added designer Gibson.

"A muted, sophisticated environment done in earth tones might look great, but won't appear that exciting on television," he said. "People want flash. The best designs for television tend to be flamboyant. They're clever, but I don't know how long people can live with them."

Ward also criticized the shows for their quality. "So much of the work is slapdash, you wonder how long it will hold up."

Crew members do strive for quality, Farmer said. When things fall apart, such as when the team glued floor tiles to a wall and a few months later learned that the tiles had fallen off, the show makes

good. "When we heard about the tiles, we went back to the home and put them back on with better adhesive."

But for Farmer, who studied architecture and is single, the maxims of speed and low cost don't apply to his home. He's currently remodeling his 286-square-foot apartment in New York City.

"I didn't give myself a budget. I'm doing everything high end, which is the luxury you have when you live in a closet."

So far the project has taken a year. And he's not done.

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### **It takes time**

Think a kitchen can be remodeled in a weekend? Not so fast. A more realistic timeline might look like this:

\* Designing. Selecting materials, hardware and finishes: three weeks.

\* Creating a budget. Interviewing subcontractors, gathering measurements and bids: one week.

\* Ordering. Placing orders and waiting for all parts, such as faucets, cabinets, tile, lights, appliances, flooring: 12 weeks.

\* Prepping. Demolition, framing and preliminary electrical work and plumbing can take place during the ordering phase.

\* Building. Line up subcontractors. The usual sequence is cabinets, flooring, tile, lights, paint and appliance installation: six weeks.

\* Total: 22 weeks.

### **Tricks of the trade**

Since he's been the host of the Learning Channel's "While You Were Out," Evan Farmer has learned some tricks about home makeovers:

\* Don't underestimate the power of paint. Too many people are trapped inside white or beige walls. No one thing transforms a room

more than paint. It's cheap and easy to do yourself.

\* The 90/10 rule. Start by taking everything out of a room. Then put only 10% back. Most stuff doesn't belong or is clutter.

\* Focus. When the room is stripped, look for a focal point, such as a window or fireplace, or make one. Then arrange the room around that.

\* Think outside the box. Allow a huge amount of time. And, above all, have patience.

-- Marnell Jameson

PHOTO: UNDERWAY: Grennan completely redid her bathroom, adding new tile and cabinets. She says a lot of time was spent waiting for the materials to arrive.

ID NUMBER:20040905i30vt8kf

PHOTOGRAPHER: Catherine Grennan

PHOTO: HAPPY RESULTS: Homeowner Catherine Grennan, with her cat Sammy in her newly redone bathroom, says her home's remodeling work took longer than expected and went over budget. But she's glad she didn't rush the makeover of her Spanish Revival-style triplex. "I got exactly what I wanted," she says.

ID NUMBER:20040905i2o99lkf

PHOTOGRAPHER: Beatrice de Gea Los Angeles Times

PHOTO: AFTER: A breezy veranda and stairway overlook the courtyard of the 1938 triplex. Project time: nine months.

ID NUMBER:20040905i30xbwkf

PHOTOGRAPHER: Photographs by Catherine Grennan

PHOTO: BEFORE: The backyard before construction.

ID NUMBER:20040905i30xb6kf

PHOTOGRAPHER: Catherine Grennan

PHOTO: DURING: The new design takes shape.

ID NUMBER:20040905i30xbmkf

PHOTOGRAPHER: Catherine Grennan

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