

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.

Runaway remodeling

By Nancy Chaney

Special to The Seattle Times

The tangle of choked and rusted water pipes has left my backyard. I'd planned to turn in the old brass faucets and pipe cap for a few bucks at the metal recycler, but I'm too late. The builders took it all to the dump. And, of course, brought me the receipt.

Trying to earn back five dollars during a remodeling project costing tens of thousands felt like grabbing at twigs as we went over Niagara Falls. But it was emblematic of how our remodeling project progressed: As a vast, shocking sinkhole of funds, thwarting any small, desperate attempt to save money.

Remodeling was a full-time job, though my husband, Peter MacMillan, and I are not do-it-yourselfers. We paid professionals to perform the actual work — more per hour than we earn at our jobs, mind you — yet this level of expenditure only slightly lessened our responsibility.

I still spent every day consumed by the project. I stumbled around staring down at flooring products, I had nightmares about sewage backups, I surreptitiously researched closet doors online at work. I obsessed about the money we were spending.

How I became convinced that our Seattle house needed grand-scale remodeling for a sum that approached six



NANCY CHANEY

This is what the unfinished basement looked like as the remodeling began.



ELLEN M. BANNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Nancy Chaney and her husband, Peter MacMillan, sit in their newly remodeled basement. Before they knew it, their modest plans to remodel their 90-year-old Seattle bungalow gradually expanded.

figures, is a hazy, incomprehensible mystery to me. I come from a family of misers; we are savers, hoarders, prudent investors, but not spenders. We don't let go of our money unless it's pried out of our precisely balanced checkbooks.

Our remodeling project began innocently. At 90 years old, our Ballard bungalow needed new plumbing before a pipe rusted through and caused a flood. We also wanted to add a modest second bathroom to our daylight basement. We saved judiciously to do this.

Then, through suggestions from contractors and well-meaning family and friends, our project became infected with an insidious remodeling disease known as "scope creep." At first, we hardly noticed the size of our project growing. Planning our project was fun! But that's how scope creep works — like The Blob. It quietly swells and expands, obliterating even well-defined plans and budgets, until the scope of the project grows to overtake nearly every corner of the house. Scope creep happened to us at moments like this:

"Well, since we have to cut holes in your upstairs bathroom walls behind the tub, toilet and sink to connect the new plumbing, it would be a good time to consider any updates or work you might want to do. Your toilet's old, uses a ton of water, and I see you have a mildew problem in your lath and plaster walls."

In the blink of an eye, we were no longer repairing small holes in the walls in our upstairs bathroom.

Instead we gutted it, drywalled, moved the window, replaced the sink and toilet, redesigned the closet, and installed period hexagonal tile flooring. It seemed so obvious, of course, we agreed.

Who wants to waste opportunity? But we agreed here and there, and before we realized it, we made suggestions ourselves. An institutional-style, fiberglass shower stall? No, we wanted the new downstairs



ELLEN M. BANNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

The remodel added this bathroom — which features a green-tiled shower stall — to the basement.



ELLEN M. BANNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

In the spare bedroom downstairs, at right, the couple placed a dresser and chair in an alcove.

bathroom to be nice. We picked out some pretty green tile.

Yes, new double-paned windows would hold in the heat nicely from the new gas fireplace. Yes, we should plumb for a utility sink in the laundry area — might need a place for dirty jobs.

If the swarms descending on Home Depot and Lowe's every weekend are an indication, remodeling is the new national pastime.

Americans spent \$291 billion on home improvement in 2006, according to the National Association of the Remodeling Industry, up from \$107 billion in 1990.

Earlier this year, 103,000 people visited the Seattle Home Show, cruising 600 exhibition booths hawking such products as retractable window awnings, solar-powered hot tubs, genuine slate tile from northern India, and other stylish and convenient additions you didn't know you needed. Ever popular, a second Seattle Home Show took place last weekend.

I wanted to picket home shows and home-improvement stores. I wanted to show people the dark circles under my eyes, the junglelike mayhem engulfing our home, and especially our mammoth expense tally. I wanted to warn them, whatever you think is wrong with your house, it probably isn't so bad. Don't drink the Kool-Aid.

Scope creep, however, had already infested our project. Our bank-account balances plummeted to zero, slapping us back to reality.

Peter and I knew we made every expansion decision ourselves, but I wondered if we inhaled too much sawdust. Even a miser like me was unable to resist the power of The Blob. Having regained my wits, I was desperate to save a few bucks.

To this end, I suggested we demolish our upstairs



ELLEN M. BANNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Nancy Chaney and Peter MacMillan decided against repainting the original door, left, in their basement during the remodeling. Friends said it was nice they kept part of the old look.

The cost of remodeling

Here are the average costs of home-improvement projects in the Washington, Oregon, California, Hawaii and Alaska region.

Attic bedroom: \$52,583

Basement: \$66,861

Bathroom (midrange): \$14,889

Bathroom (upscale): \$43,050

Kitchen (midrange): \$19,366 (minor), \$59,366 (major)

Kitchen (upscale): \$115,549 (major)

Source: Remodeling magazine's "Remodeling Cost vs. Value Report 2006"

bathroom walls and ceiling over the weekend. (We are capable of unskilled labor.) I sat on a board across the rafters in the attic and I kicked through the lath and plaster ceiling with my running shoes.

With each stomp, plaster chunks rained down into the bathroom, followed by fluffy brown clouds of cellulose insulation.

After each little storm settled, Peter re-entered the bathroom to pull down the broken lath stalactites from atop his step stool. We repeated this process for several hours, our breathing masks blackening, and finally the ceiling was gone.

"How much do you think we saved?" my husband wondered, exhausted. "Maybe a couple hundred bucks," I said. He glowered at me over the top of his beer.

Months into our project, we almost got used to the gnawing stress of spending more than we planned and having people in our house wrecking stuff every day. But marathon sessions of tile shopping, cabinet estimating, and the bathroom demo left us doubly batty by the end of the weekend.

Normally depressed at the prospect of beginning another workweek, we looked forward to Monday morning.

We stared at one another with wide eyes. How could we cope with this daily chaos? Part of me wanted to quit the project, quit our jobs, buy a Volkswagen Eurovan and just drive away. (This is the longtime escape plan I've kept stashed in my back pocket for just this type of emergency.)

But the money to buy our Volkswagen was spent. Instead we had clear, fast-flowing water to drink from our fancy new copper plumbing.

"We just have to remember how great it's going to be when it's done," Peter reminded me, gazing at a curved portion of basement ceiling he admiringly coined "the Guggenheim."

The builders had creatively concealed a confluence of gas lines and water pipes with this architectural novelty. I hated it and hated myself for giving in on it. I silently cursed my husband for proclaiming, in his plea to keep the Guggenheim, "But you always get your way."

Crap, I think. Well played, Sweetie.

We opened another beer and set our dinner plates down on top of invoices, drawings, paint chips, and Fine Home Building magazines blanketing our dining-room table.

We clinked bottles and agreed to laugh to keep from crying. We agreed to stick together. We agreed that we would eventually enjoy our beautifully improved home, all by ourselves.

Then, I thought, it will be time to start saving again for the Eurovan.

[Copyright © 2007 The Seattle Times Company](#)