

Underdone

At least 19 unfinished renovation projects currently reside within the crotchety old puzzle box of a house that I share with my wife, Keri.

Together, the 21 of us live in a spirit of communal acceptance—an unlikely family, but a family nonetheless.

In theory, Keri and I could take a series of 19 deep breaths over the course of a year and finish each project one by one. This is what normal people do. Or we could pay a contractor to finish them—normal people do that, too. But, alas, we are not normal. Like many design lovers, we both suffer from compulsive renovation syndrome (CRS), a variant of attention deficit disorder. More than raw pheromonal attraction or our shared love of Hostess Ding Dongs, it is what draws us together. A pernicious affliction, it convinces us time after time that the incompleteness of a project is beyond our control and that the next project—simple and highly finishable—will improve our lives dramatically.

We never finish, of course, but we often get close. We got close on Project Number Seven, for instance—a 150-foot-long galvanized steel-and-corrugated Cor-Ten fence that wraps around our backyard. A single steel fence post, one of 22 similar posts, sticks out about four degrees off-kilter. We should have straightened the post out when we first noticed it was out of whack, but we didn't. (I distinctly remember a Willem Dafoe-like voice inside my head, compelling me to "leave it, friend, leave it for another day.") All we'd have to do to fix the fence is walk out there, loosen three bolts on the errant post, shim up the base plate, and tighten it all back up. It's an hour's task, but I don't see it happening: It is a physical and spiritual impossibility. Due to CRS, the odds of me learning to fly—literally to soar through the air from tree to tree—are greater than either of us ever straightening that post.

Each of our 19 unfinished projects interfaces with us in its own uniquely



charming way. Each has a personality and voice that aligns specifically with its degree of near-finishedness. Number Seven sounds like an intoxicated mattress salesman. Number Twelve, a "temporary" plywood-faced banquette in our dining room, sounds like that kid from middle school who used to deep-pick his nose and who is now a successful screenwriter with four well-behaved, non-nose-picking boys. When Keri and I sit down to eat, he whispers friendly dominance in a slow drawl.

Number Three—the ceiling light in our living room—sounds like a flatulent but affable Russian fellow whose 1983 Ford Taurus won't start. All we needed to do was take down a hulking, light-squelching Soviet-era fixture from our living-room ceiling and install the sleek Italian fixture we'd bought to replace it. I didn't think this would be that hard (the box contained but a single pictogram), but as I unscrewed the Stalinist fixture, it came apart like a rusty box of flour. Parts of it crashed to the ground with cymbal-clashing, floor-marring fanfare. Other parts atomized in my hands, cloaking the room and my lungs with a thin layer of asbestos. Within ten minutes, after it occurred to me that I would need to replace the decades-old, Satanic-looking junction box and then repaint the entire ceiling, my will to finish evaporated. Paint the ceiling? Are you kidding me? Why not bench press a live water buffalo and learn to speak the language of the Kung while I'm at it? Humiliated, my male ancestors booing and throwing trash onto the playing field of my subconscious, I hastily installed a "temporary" \$1.29 porcelain socket as Keri boxed up the Italian fixture and banished it to the basement.

With each failure our resolve increases commensurately. Living with CRS has a way of strengthening bonds between the afflicted. Project Number Twenty looms in our near future, rising nefariously from the ▶

Story by Dan Maginn
Illustrations by Keith Shore

ashes of Number Nineteen like Lord Voldemort. Keri and I revel in its inevitability. It will be a thing of sublime violence and great beauty—a major skirmish in the holy war that has thus defined our relationship with the grumpy box of walls that is our house. (I hasten to disclose that our 80-year-old house doesn't like us anymore. Not in the least. It expresses displeasure when we start talking about a new project. It groans audibly.)

It matches our well-intended offensives with enthusiastic counteroffensives. In the name of Number Twenty (the creation of a fully functioning man-closet from a previously underfunctioning “bonus room”) we will smash its outdated partitions, and it will, in turn, smash our fingers and give us sinus infections from inhaled plaster dust. We will shock it with aggressive extractions with our wrecking bars, and it will singe us with playful jolts from its ancient circuits. We will jam shelves and cabinets onto its sturdy frame; it will jam cruel splinters into our tender digits.

Keri and I will initially hold back the insurgency. We will shout orders at each other above the din of sledgehammers and reciprocal saws. We will carefully bandage each other's partially severed fingertips until they can be professionally reattached at the emergency room. We will make steady progress. We will drink cold beers and eat processed snacks amidst the rubble. We will speak in straightforward sentences like Ernest Hemingway. “It is satisfying to think about this project,” we will say, and “After this one, we are out of Ding Dongs.”

We will not win the battle, of course. We never win. Though our house is old, it is wiser and far stronger than we are—and it knows our weaknesses. As we near completion of Number Twenty, it will regroup. It will adopt a defensive posture, forcing us to deal with a host of energy-sucking underestimations and miniprojects. Obscurely shaped pieces of trim will go missing and need to be replaced. Petrified wallpaper mucus will need to be scraped from complex intersections. Mouse skeletons, and their attendant mouse searches, will require our focused attention.

Keri and I will address these contingencies, one after another, for



a few weekends, but eventually, we'll run out of steam and money. Deflated, with the stack of Ding Dong boxes collapsed in a corner, we'll convince ourselves that we've got to get on with our damn lives. We'll overlook the missing eight-inch piece of wall base and convince ourselves that the man-closet looks fine. Glowering, we'll paint over the petrified mucus and schlep in my sawdusted man-clothes. We'll ignore that we were unable to find the mouse source while screwing stainless steel covers onto the paint-splattered sockets. And that will be that. I can already hear the faint voice of Number Twenty in the air. It sounds like Richard Simmons shrieking aerobic instructions through a box fan.

We are not alone in the experience of CRS: Many architects and design aficionados suffer, too. We go to cocktail parties at their houses and see the telltale signs: the stack of Home Depot receipts on the kitchen counter; the loosely coiled orange electrical cords on the floor; the shapeless globs of drywall mud on the porch. We can smell their latex paint. We hear the whispers of their unfinished projects. We do not feel sorry for these people—on the contrary, we feel at home with them. When we leave their houses, we embrace them a moment or two longer than expected and whisper the secret word of our tribe.

We also interact with people who live in finished houses—“normal” people who do not have CRS. These people—the others—wear small round glasses and have functioning espresso machines. They offer us little in the way of companionship, and we stay away from them. If forced by social necessity to interact, we are appropriately polite, but when they're not looking, we roll our eyes and kick their baseboards with our chunky boots.

Having CRS has become a point of pride for Keri and me. We accept our genetic predisposition to compulsively renovate. We start bigger projects, more elaborate projects—for that is what we are hardwired to do. After Number Twenty has run its course, we'll start Number Twenty-one. And after that, we'll start Number Twenty-two. We will start these projects willfully and with great enthusiasm. And upon their incompleteness, we will welcome them into our growing family. ■■■