

# Is that home renovation your idea or the media's?

Although it's too late for me to turn back now, maybe it's not for you.

I had bought the new, creamy quartzite stone slabs for my kitchen counters; had part of the old counters torn out; and had installers scheduled for next week. Then I saw the article "Do You Really Want a New Kitchen Counter?" in a recent issue of *The Atlantic*.

Yes, I do, obviously! Though I really didn't want to read any article that would cause me to second guess myself, I read it anyway with one eye and one ear closed. The article begged the question, why, and insinuated that many of us home remodelers are victims of home-renovation brainwashing. I mean, what if what I want is not really what I want but what marketers and media have convinced me I want?

I went looking for the Advil.

Then I called one of the researchers cited. Dr. Annetta Grant is professor of marketing at Bucknell University, where she studies consumer behavior, specifically what makes homeowners do what they do to their homes.

She became interested in the question over 20 years ago when she went backpacking through Central and South America, where she noticed many families lived in homes that were handed down. Homes stayed in the family and were not assets to liquidate as in North America.

"Homes there take on a very different meaning," she said. "They're heavily personalized pieces of family heritage."

Then she moved to Calgary, Alberta, in the mid-2000s, during the big oil boom. "People were using the money to remodel," she said. "I saw people ripping out



AT HOME WITH  
Marni Jameson

kitchens that were five to 10 years old to put in new ones."

That contrast inspired her to study what drives people to pull out and replace fully functional home amenities to replace them with something newer.

OK, so, I was already feeling guilty about tearing out the perfectly good 20-year-old brown granite counters in my kitchen because I was tired of the look, and also because, I do not apologize, I thought it would increase the home's value, but now I feel guiltier.

"Meanwhile," she continued, "I was noticing the strong influence of TV home shows and home magazines increasingly featuring what a home 'should be.'"

Well, now she's in my wheelchair. Knowing that she was going to make me question everything I have ever done and written about home design, I nonetheless bravely dove into our conversation to learn more about Grant's findings. Here's the gist of our conversation:

**Marni:** How did you go about studying this?

**Grant:** My research team and I conducted in-depth interviews with 17 homeowners over a series of years. We talked to them pre-renovation, during renovation

and years after. I was with them when they talked to their contractors, made decisions, and had disagreements. A topic that often surfaced was what changes would be good for market value, even if they didn't plan to sell anytime soon. We also watched a lot of HGTV, read home magazines, and looked at home improvement posts on social media, such as Pinterest and Instagram.

**Marni:** What role did you find media played in home renovations?

**Grant:** The script for many of these TV shows is the same. A show host takes potential buyers through houses and points out all the problems. You hear both parties make comments like, "What were they thinking when they put in that backsplash?"

It's one thing when the TV show host is critical, but when the buyers, regular people, become critical, that sends the message, "If I don't get it right at home, that would be such an embarrassment that I shouldn't even have people over."

**Marni:** How has our concept of home changed?

**Grant:** Post-war homes reflected the taste and personality of their homeowners. You saw that on display in yellow, pink, and green appliances and tile. Home was a place you bought and lived in your whole life.

Today, people believe in an ideal based on images they see of how their homes are supposed to look. It's causing people to look around and not be happy with their homes. As homeowners trying to align their homes with market standards, we commonly see gray walls and floors, white countertops, open concept kitchen

ens, spa-like bathrooms, and institutional appliances. These homes seem to say, "Look I match the standard of what is trending."

People have turned their homes into less a place of personalization, and more into an asset whose success depends on how well it meets the ideal of what others want not what the owner wants.

And we don't stay in our homes. We have starter homes and buy

up. The attachment to home lessens when you know your stay is temporary and you make improvements thinking about the person you're going to sell it to.

**Marni:** What is so bad about wanting to meet market standards?

**Grant:** Our need for a sense of home is primitive and involves having a place that reflects who

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