

DIY parties may invite disaster

Homeowners looking to save money by having friends for drinks and renovations may discover the results are sobering.

By Jennifer Saranow, The Wall Street Journal



Cocktails and power tools don't mix. But they sure do mingle.

Homeowners looking to save money on renovations are hosting parties where they invite friends over for an evening of ripping out walls and laying floors. But when novices who've had a few drinks get hold of crowbars, drills and Sawzalls, the results are sometimes less than satisfactory.

One reveler near Chicago hung a sheet of drywall backward, while a partygoer in Seattle messed up the host's bathroom floor by installing the tiles crooked.

During her recent "Martini Bash" renovation event in Toronto, Debora Beam wandered upstairs to find one of her friends halfway through sledgehammering out the wrong wall. "I was kind of like, 'Oh my God,' " she says.

Sometimes the problem is inexperience, not alcohol. Although she missed her friends' official "Demolition Party" in Columbus, Ohio, Suzanne Cohan, a 38-year-old massage therapist, dropped by later to pitch in. She was trying to yank a piece of lath from an exposed wall with a crowbar when the wood snapped and popped her between the eyes. Cohan, who'd taken off her safety goggles, had to go home and put a bandage on her face. "I violated the safety code, so it was pretty much my fault," she says.

Contractors say these parties have become a marketing opportunity. Orange County, Calif., handyman Paul Maceyka says a couple in their 30s recently paid his company almost \$4,000 to undo a mess their inexperienced friends had made with a paint sprayer. "There were beer bottles everywhere," he says. Georgia electrical contractor Bill Boots says he's been hired to repair a light fixture one partygoer bashed with a hammer and to restore power at another home after one reveler with a Sawzall -- a power cutting tool often used for demolition -- mistakenly clipped some electrical wires. Johnny Herbert, a general contractor in Nashville, Tenn., has begun offering to supervise these parties for \$40 an hour.

In the past year, William Durkin, an emergency-room doctor in Salisbury, Md., says he's treated about five patients who had hit themselves with hammers or fallen off stepladders during home-renovation parties or gatherings. "One of them was a little drunk," he says.

"These parties are invitations for disasters," says Dean Herriges, secretary of the National Association of the Remodeling Industry. His advice: Don't open the bar until the work is

Something everybody can do

Last November, Julia Denise Fuller, a 47-year-old saleswoman from Tuscaloosa, Ala., handed out invitations to 10 neighbors for a "stripping" party. By her calculations, using friendly labor to rip out the plaster walls and ceilings on the second floor of her new home saved several weeks and at least \$3,500 in contractor fees. Besides, she says, demolition "was something everybody could do, even children."

Blame television for making home renovation an acceptable party theme. HGTV and DIY Network currently air 61 home-improvement shows, a 20% increase in two years. Many such shows, from the Learning Channel's "Trading Spaces" to DIY's "Man Caves," aim to make home improvement look fun. In a coming episode of HGTV's "Over Your Head," for example, members of a wedding party donned black tuxedo T-shirts to help the groom build a backyard fire pit and flagstone patio just in time for a pre-wedding cocktail party. "In all of our shows, you do see groups of people doing projects together," says Kathleen Finch, general manager of DIY Network. "One person tackling a project alone is going to make a kind of sad television show."

The drywall incident

Jason and Jennifer La Fleur of Oak Park, Ill., are renovation party veterans. They've hosted more than a dozen in the past two years, including a New Year's demolition event called the "Wallbanger's Ball" during which they served vodka cocktails and distributed sledgehammers. At about 2 a.m. during one bash, Jason La Fleur noticed that a piece of drywall had been hung backward. Partygoer Scott Jackson, who owned up to the mistake, mentioned several possible factors, including the dim lighting and the fact that he's colorblind. "There might have been a couple of beers at that hour," he adds.

During his two recent alcohol-free renovation parties in Sacramento, Calif., Jim Vanderveen, a 44-year-old computer programmer, narrowly averted disaster twice -- once when a guest nearly fell off the roof and a second time when he noticed that his brother-in-law was about to use a power saw to slice through a wall that was supporting his house. "I tried to yell, but he couldn't hear me," says Vanderveen, who raced over just in time.

For her demolition party, Jessica Banis, a video editor from Bourne, Mass., sent invitations modeled after work permits to about 20 friends. They said: "Permit is void if permit holder or friends do not get drunk and disorderly." Although Banis rented a Dumpster and provided dust masks, burgers and beer, she forgot something rather important: a tarp. It took six months for her and her husband to finish hauling away debris created by their enthusiastic hammer-wielding party guests. "When I vacuumed the last of it up, I was so thrilled," Banis says.

The idea of friends and neighbors coming together to work and socialize stretches back to Colonial barn-raising. Today contractors say they've never seen so many homeowners passing these events off as parties, with invitations, decorations, food, drinks and even party favors such as cordless screwdrivers and laser levels -- not to mention enlisting this sort of help from people with no discernible carpentry skills. Evite, the online party-planning service, says the number of remodeling events for which customers sent invitations rose nearly 40% in April, May and June over the same period two years ago.

Dara O'Neil, 35, an education-policy analyst, and her husband, Kyle Knight, 41, a furniture maker, were planning to have their house bulldozed to make room for a new one, but still decided to invite friends over for an evening of beer and aimless vandalism. The couple had planned to save one drywall section to put in their new house as a memorial, but by the end of the night there wasn't any left. "It just turned into everyone with two hammers in their arms going crazy," O'Neil says.

Partygoer payback

Both guests and hosts say it's generally understood that mistakes are bound to happen and that when they do, there's really no need for an elaborate apology. "I just thought, 'This is the cost of free labor,'" says Roland Dandy, the 44-year-old postal worker who knocked down the wrong wall at Debora Beam's party in Toronto.

Some partygoers are getting tired of the tradition. Gabe Taylor, 33, a geologist in Olympia, Wash., says he's already helped one couple build a split-rail fence and a gazebo in the past year and has since skipped about half of their party invitations. When he's ready to renovate his new house, Taylor says, "I'm going to try to sucker them down to Olympia with the promise of a good time drinking and listening to music and then when they get here, I'm going to hand them a shovel and a paintbrush."

Marketing executives at Home Depot say the company has noticed that women are holding do-it-yourself work parties, and has incorporated that concept into a new promotional campaign. Producers of the HGTV show "Over Your Head," which helps people fix their botched renovation jobs, say they're already getting two or three submissions a week that involve mishaps at renovation parties.

After her do-it-yourself renovation plan went awry in Toronto, Beam contacted producers from a TV show called "Save Our House, Save Our Family," which sent a contractor (and a camera crew) to help her patch things up.

Ken King, a 35-year-old Seattle advertising manager, says he didn't get too frustrated when his brother-in-law, Jonathan Cook, laid a floor's worth of crooked tiles in his bathroom at a party in 2002. The free labor was worth the inconvenience. But he says he did learn a lesson: For his next renovation party later this year, he plans to assign only menial tasks -- or, as he puts it, "things you kind of can't screw up."

Among them: breaking concrete and moving rocks for a backyard wall. "Grunt labor is what I'm looking for," he says.