

South Jersey remodelers reveal the truth behind home-makeover shows

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Robert Matera, a builder for 30 years, knows firsthand the power of the home-renovation reality television series.

Customers started coming into his business asking for oil-rubbed bronze door handle sets after seeing them on Bravo's "Flipping Out" series.

"Half of my clients will bring up something they have seen on TV," said Matera, president of Matera Builders Inc. of Ocean City.

What started with Bob Vila's "This Old House" in 1979 on PBS has exploded into more than 100 different series since then, from now-defunct shows such as HGTV's "Designed to Sell" to current programs such as "Texas Flip N Move" on the DIY Network.

These house-makeover TV shows have contributed to home remodeling rising to become a \$380 billion industry, said Elizabeth McKenna, director of marketing communications, the National Association of the Remodeling Industry.

South Jersey home builders, remodelers and architects who watch some of these shows say they're grateful they exist, even though they don't always accurately reflect what happens in their line of work.

People will contact them to do or re-create ideas they saw on television or hire them for their expertise if they are buying a house for the express purpose of selling it for a profit.

A lot of the shows now are about flipping — buying a house, renovating and quickly reselling it — said Robi Kirsic, president-elect of the National Association of the Remodeling Industry.

Because of the downturn in the economy during the last decade, more people became involved with renovating inexpensive properties with the hopes of making a profit on the sale, Kirsic said.

"The housing market was so affordable that a lot of people went into that business, and overnight, you became a remodeler, an investor, entrepreneur and real estate mogul," Kirsic said.

Twenty-five percent to 30 percent of new homeowners renovate as soon as they move in, while others get the itch after living in the same home for 20 years, Kirsic said.

The home-makeover shows significantly helped the remodeling industry, Kirsic said. The shows give people ideas about what they can do, he said.

"How simple is it to do a quick paint job to your living room? Change the wall color, and it feels brand new," Kirsic said.

Mark-Anthony Rassman, owner of Levi Construction, a residential and commercial general contracting company based in Egg Harbor Township, is a fan of multiple home renovation shows, including HGTV's "Property Brothers" and "Flip or Flop."

Rassman even attended a seminar in Atlantic City given by Peter Souhleris and Dave Seymour, hosts of the A&E show "Flipping Boston."

"You need to have the right contractor. That's first and foremost. If you don't have the right contractor, you will lose your shirt," Rassman said of house flipping.

Gary Madrigal, owner of By Word of Mouth, a home restoration and remodeling business in Ventnor, was a fan of "This Old House," which is more of a problem-solving, restoration-type show.

"That's basically what I do, so I used to watch that a lot," Madrigal said.

But when it comes to the house-flipping shows, Madrigal liked the 2006-08 seasons of "Flip This House," because they showed, for instance, that when a wall was opened up, water damage could be found. They would explain how much it would cost to fix it and how that amount had to be taken off the top.

Todd Miller, owner and founder of QMA Architects in Ventnor, said reality TV home renovation shows are popular because people want to do home remodeling work, and they think they will learn about the process of building or renovating a home.

"I spend a lot of my time helping customers understand the difference between what they saw on reality TV and the reality of the situation," said Miller, who has been in business since 1991.

These are issues that shows either leave out completely or can give a false impression of, Miller said, such as how much a project costs, how long it takes, how involved the process can be, the complexities of dealing with existing structures, dealing with building departments and zoning boards, and environmental reviews.

"It's hard to make a broad statement because there are so many of these shows, but I would look at them as entertainment as opposed to education," Miller said.