

Naked Ladies and Our Real Estate Project: a COVID19 Transformation

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The naked ladies were an omen. First, though, I'd like to tell you about the project.

Dan, my spouse, and I are seniors –part of that vulnerable elder population constantly urged these last months to stay at home, social distance, be safe. When the pandemic began, I was a contract chaplain at Methodist Hospital. I still am a chaplain, but I'm inactive now and will be until it feels safer for vulnerable elders to be seeing patients. I have time free now that I would not have had before last March. A couple of years ago, Dan, a UNO emeritus biochemistry professor, retired from a part-time business as an owner (and fixer-upper) of apartments. He must have missed this activity, because the first of August, 2019, he bought a single family house that was tiny in 1955 when it was built, but had a 1970s addition plus a HUGE garage that would almost assuredly (he said) be a deal clincher for the right buyer. For a while, we thought a family member would live there, but ultimately that didn't work out, so, we ended up with a new investment project. And lots of creative work!

As it turned out, this house renovation was the perfect pandemic project for the two of us, although, in hindsight we might have chosen one that didn't require *quite* so much sweat equity. Dan is 83; I am 74. We both spent time high on ladders, down on knees, working long hours and, in general, doing things that were fairly demanding and possibly a little dangerous, too, at least for seniors. Still, it's been fun and has kept us from being bored during the social distancing phase of our culture, an experience that sometimes seems to be going on endlessly. Plus, we've gotten a huge amount of exercise, which, I think, goes against the general path people follow when they are forced to stay home. And, most of all, it gave us an opportunity to do something useful and meaningful and unusual during a period of time of tremendous uncertainty and chaos.

So, for about a year we've had two homes – the one we live in and the one about fifteen minutes away by foot that we were refurbishing. We had somewhat different hopes and dreams about this project but, basically, Dan was the builder and I was the stager. We made a good team. If you want to know just what went on inside the walls, how come there is so much copper there now, why the toilet in the basement was really tricky to unplug and to replace, how all the lights and light switches were updated, why we had to have the plumbers, the wood floor refinisher, the furnace and air-conditioning installer, the dry-waller, the tree trimmer, new gutters in the back, the driveway redone and the front sidewalk raised – anything along those lines, ask Dan. And remember we did everything we possibly could ourselves, and it was a lot. For instance, Dan sprayed 15 gallons of paint just on the inside garage walls, tiled the porch floor (after tearing out some 1970's green shag carpet), revamped a basement bathroom and built a brand new third one on the main floor, replaced one of two fireplaces with an electric one, tore out super-glued-down carpet in the basement – he rented a machine, but still dripped sweat like a shower walking. I was worried about him when I saw how much he was exerting himself, but if I protested aloud, he'd only say we could pay lots of money to get this exercise at a gym.

Occasionally we did have help from a family member, but not very often. One of Dan's artsy daughters left an oversized cat on the new stucco wall leading to the basement and, later, painted

the highest parts on the outside of the house. One of my daughters offered suggestions for remodeling and color selections, and my other daughter helped me staple and glue necktie fabric onto the porch ceiling. The part on the ladder over the open stairs was so scary I only went up there once. It was hard even to watch when my daughter climbed up there and finished that section.

Still, if you want to know about how much fun I had decorating the place on the proverbial shoestring, check out the following photo journal. I recycled, reclaimed, used what I found and (pre-pandemic) shopped the sales and second-hand stores. The one firm rule I had was that I wanted to be able to carry everything in (and out) by myself if I had to. I broke this guideline only once – the family-room couch came in four pieces, and I could carry all three of the blue seat cushions by myself (if I had to), but the platform for the seats must have been made of pure cement! It was a Habitat Restore find and it worked perfectly once it was inside. And, yes, Dan and I did it together – without any other human help, just physics! We fell in love with the house, and it became more and more of an art-work for us.

What follows, with minimal commentary, are some images which show the *inside* story, followed by a few more which tell the *outside* story. The inside one starts with the entrances. This house has three main entries: an apple red North front door which is seldom used, an apple red East entry which leads either to the basement or to the kitchen, and a frequently used porch entry on the South side of the building.

This *Inside Photo Journal* begins with the porch:



The year-round porch: All the artwork in this room was done by a life-sentenced resident of the Iowa Women's State Prison. The coffee table was fashioned from a glass light fixture, anchored with stones and topped with a round glass. The flower "pot" is an old tea kettle left by the former owners.



The porch fireplace got new tile on the base of its hearth, a repurposed light overhead, new privacy curtains by the windows (like the entire room). This gas-starting woodburning fireplace keeps the room cozy even in winter.



Before: Porch at time house was purchased.



After: Five of the door-sized windows and two of the screens on the closed-in porch were replaced. The shag green carpet was torn up and Dan tiled the entire area, steps to the basement and all.



Sarah putting fabric on the porch ceiling. The original "paneling" was paper which disintegrated when painted. The necktie fabric was left over from another project. There was just exactly enough! The fabric covered lots of unsightly nail ends which could not be cut off.



Dan after scraping green shag rug off stairs to basement, but before putting stucco on the walls.



Original bath was refreshed, made more spacious with tile, paint, a smaller sink, new toilet.



Biggest bedroom. Bathroom is across the hallway. The queen-size bed is a self-filling airbed raised to normal height (placed on a found collection of plastic bottle crates). The "canopy" is hand crocheted yarn, hung on chicken wire. The headboard is a repurposed cover for the defunct hot tub once in the basement. Closet has an original pocket door.



Renovated dining room has a greenhouse feel with large picture windows. New plastic chairs are dressed in old deer skins, purchased from the previous owner, whose father, the original owner of the house, liked to hunt with his son. Note that the bench underneath the East window was the desk in the former office, here cut down to seat height.



The door in the corner of the dining room leads to a small hallway with six doors off it – bath, two bedrooms, kitchen/family room, storage closet, and, of course, this room. Front door of the house is to the right of the mirror.



Before: Front room, set up as the living room.



Before: This office became a new bathroom. The desk became a bench in the dining room.



View from the front door, which currently opens into the dining room.



Before: View of 1970s addition as seen from the front door shortly after the house was purchased. At left (not seen) is the tiny kitchen. The 1955 house ended where the big archway between kitchen and dining room begins.



Old dining room became new family room. Dan extended the kitchen counter to offer breakfast seating (lower left corner). The pictures over the couch are original blueprints of the house. The new window/door leads to the porch.



First room to be repainted. Child's bedroom. Or possible office. White stripes were hand-crafted. Refinished floor is from the original house, before the addition. The view here is into what once was part of an office, now a passageway with space and hookups for a stacked washer/dryer. To the left is the family room. At far end is the third bedroom.



This new bathroom partially replaced the space of the old office and is now accessed from the back bedroom. Shower (see below) is semi-circular.





Dan designed and built the frame for the new bathroom but had the drywall and plumbing professionally done.



Back bedroom: queen-sized bed is defined by red chalk paint. Bird pictures, strung on twine, are from a calendar. Bath to the right (unseen) is private.



Sarah painted the kitchen cabinets and Dan installed new disposal and appliances, including a first-ever dishwasher.



Sarah sits in sink to paint kitchen corner window.



Kitchen, Before and After





Kitchen in process



Kitchen with new sink, tiled counters



After: The basement, which can be accessed from the kitchen or the porch, has new paint, lights, floor. The old bar, a great place for root beer floats, was updated but still is faithful to the original intent. An electric fireplace replaces an old gas one. The table and folding chairs (seat covers are washable), are in keeping with the ease of furnishing, then unfurnishing when the time comes. The table consists of a freshly painted, galvanized trash can salvaged from those left behind by the previous owner, then topped with a handmade, octagonal game table top. That's a gun cabinet built into the wall, and a door to the left leads to the furnace room and former laundry.



Before: Basement family room., same view.



Hallway from basement 1970s addition to current basement rec room. The addition housed a huge hot tub at the time of purchase. Now the room is staged as a funky game room, but, with a private bath and two exit doors leading to the outside, it could easily be turned into a mother-in-law or teenager suite.



Before: Same hallway, opposite view, pre-paint job!



Before: Basement defunct hot tub. Basement bathroom. The old green shag carpeting used throughout on the porch is visible through the new door.



After: No more hot tub. No more outdated carpet. White trim pops the two red doors (to the bathroom and to porch/outside). A close look at the wall just past the open door shows that cat hiding in the stucco. (see below)





Basement bathroom looks like new – and most of it is.

The Outside Photo Journal



House and garage in August 2019



Before the picnic area was defined. The shed was from a railroad box.



West side.



These marble stones, found abandoned by the shed, became a small patio outside the porch.



Small patio in process.



Close up of water damage on the driveway.



Before view from the back. On the right is the west side of the huge garage. At left in foreground is one of three metal firewood holders left by the previous owner.



East side of house, before addition of dirt and plantings.



Landscaping in process!



After view, with a few plantings, too.



Backyard picnic area, now defined by old firewood racks, which have been painted and converted into a place to set and/or hang flower pots.



The previous owner held frequent garage sales, some parts of which lingered for a while after the purchase.



That's a 1931 Model A in the front-left of the freshly painted garage.



Here is a view of the office. The garage can hold 4-6 vehicles.



Dan, painting the garage. The year's hard work was not kind to one of his knees and one hip, but it didn't stop him.



Painting in process. The outside color is called "elephant ear." In certain lights, it looks tan.



The finished house has a new set of shutters in the front. Here I am tending the cannas I planted in April. That's a new brace on my right wrist. I'm one of the 10% for whom the carpal tunnel surgery did NOT last. Oops. Was this relapse one of the by-products of this otherwise health-enhancing project?



August, 2020.

This project was, for us, proof that some good things can even come out of a pandemic. The house went on the market on August 4, 2020. *Professional* pictures of the house can (currently) be seen online at <https://www.bhhsamb.com/real-estate/8805-seward-street-omaha-ne-68144-000/22019256/97587651>. These pictures are superior to the ones in this photo-journal, which I took with my iPad, but they do not show the process of transformation that Dan and I underwent this past year, about half of which was under the shadow of the coronavirus pandemic. This transformation, at first, seems to be one of house renovation and renewal, but I suspect the real transformation was our own internal change. We rose to the challenge of this work in spite of the limitations of social distancing, closed stores, constant bad news on the media, increasing age, and the inability to see our family and friends as we were accustomed to seeing them. We were each other's best (and sometimes only) company, and now that this project is essentially finished, we are proud of ourselves for what we have accomplished together, and will live the rest of our lives with increased gratitude for the multitude of our blessings. Among those blessings were the naked ladies.

The Naked Ladies

They grew in two spots, and not many –
in the large planter under the bedroom window
and somewhat smothered under the peonies
west side of the front lawn.

They were old, remnants of an earlier time,
of earlier owners young, vigorous, hopeful,
but they were still beautiful, poking straight up,
a delicate pink bloom on the barest of stems.

I wanted them in my own yard, so I dug them
just when there was only green foliage,
with no hint of their eventual emergence,
probably the wrong time to transplant them,

yet I was game anyway, and circumstances
were I didn't need anyone's permission
so my spouse and I, together, planted them
in a horseshoe 'round the flagpole by the street

in front of our retirement house, then we
went on doing our various projects, living
our pandemic-limited lives, trying not to worry
about age, money, COVID19, dying

losing hope, interest, insight, desire
and memory until one afternoon
when I'd nearly forgotten all about
those strange naked ladies, I walked

out to get the mail and there they were –
six of them, long stems rising, dancing.

