



We Don't Need No Stinking Permits

For do-it-yourselfers, a little city hall bureaucracy may keep your wires from crossing.

BY MICHAEL A. STUSSER

THE HOUSE WAS built in 1919, and things were bound to be a bit, well, archaic, shall we say. Not exactly up to modern standards. OK, falling apart. In fact, half the house was held together with duct tape; it's amazing what that stuff can do, really.

Some work needed to be done—a greenhouse window (glass and duct tape) was tilting, leaking and dangerous. The deck was rotten, probably due to the lack of duct tape support. The kitchen had ceilings so low that the mice had to duck. Oh, and the electrical panel was run by a monkey turning a wheel.

As I said, the place needed work.

Until this point, I'd been a renter my whole life, and home improvements were done by calling the super, who would have the water heater replaced three winters later. But now I was my own super of sorts, and had real work to do. My first call: to my old college roommate, Kevin, a chemistry major and self-taught handyman (you should have seen the robot-operated margarita maker he built for our frat). Kevin's first question was about permits, of all things.

"No, man, you don't need a permit," I assured him. "I trust you."

"No, you idiot, city permits," he said. "If you mess with the electrical and plumbing, it's got to be up to code, man."

I thought he'd gone whack-a-doo on me. "I'm sure the folks at Home Depot speak in whatever 'code' you think is necessary to fix things," I told him. "Just get your ass here ASAP. And bring some duct tape. We're gonna need it."

As we began to tear into sheetrock and trace wires, many of which dead-ended into large piles of insulation and asbestos, Kevin said something that made me pause.

"I gotta tell you. It might be smart to have someone from the city take a look at this," he said, standing over the electrical outlet in the shower. "There's a reason these guys have certain rules and regs. Safety's a *good* thing."

I thanked my macho Martha Stewart and told him to get back to work, pronto. Permits were for people adding a fourth floor, clear-cutting neighbors' trees for better views or building ramps for the handicapped. This was an inside job.

Kevin wrapped up the work in a little over five months and was well paid for someone who is dyslexic and not a licensed member of the union. (FYI, if you ever come to my house, "off" is "on," and vice versa.)

Over the next five years, I began to understand Kevin's warning. I'd blown more appliances than I could afford, light switches were scalding to the touch and there was a small fire in the closet where we moved the old fuse box. OK, not so small.

I'm doing a new remodel this summer, and I decided to get some city bureaucrats involved. They made suggestions about things I'd never considered before, such as ground fault interruption breakers, electrical grounding and emergency egress. Smoke alarms were a good idea, too. Nice guys, really—they even showed me what electrical tape looks like (much smaller than the duct tape I'm used to).

I'm having them back to inspect later, but first I have to hunt down Kevin. We'll get it right this time. **SB**

ILLUSTRATION BY PETER MITCHELL