

The death of DIY: why can't I do it myself?

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First it was independent hardware stores, then Homebase, and now B&Q is announcing closures. But how are you supposed to mourn them when you can barely rewire a plug? Stuart Heritage goes in search of his inner handyman (with a little help from his dad)



Generation gap ... Stuart Heritage and his tradesman dad, from whom he failed to learn any DIY skills. Photograph: Martin Godwin/Guardian

A little more than a year ago, my toilet started running. For reasons I genuinely couldn't comprehend, each flush would end in a gurgling, four-hour ellipsis rather than the satisfying full stop of old. It was driving me berserk. I lifted the lid of the cistern, played around with the flush, prodded at the float ball. Nothing would fix it. I searched the internet for clues, watched hours of YouTube videos to get a handle on the problem, but I kept coming up short.

In the end, after days of soul-searching, I bit the bullet and called a man out. He nodded hello, walked into my bathroom, lifted the cistern, pulled out a leaf that had somehow got lodged in there, flushed the toilet, nodded again and left. He was in and out in under three minutes, and it cost me £60. Technically it was a call-out fee, but I prefer to think of it as a stupidity tax.

You might scoff at my monumental lack of prowess – and you'd be right to – but I'm not alone. We live in a country full of people like me, each of us less likely to know the right sort of Rawlplug to use for a load-bearing wall than the next, and more likely to tentatively consult Google to see if Rawlplugs are actually a thing or not, just like I did a second ago.

And our collective uselessness is killing the DIY store. The tiny independent hardware shops that were once common on our high streets are long gone, swallowed by chains of behemoths. But now even the behemoths are on their way out. This week, B&Q announced that it's about to shut one in six of its stores. It insisted that "home improvement is not dead" – and yet five months ago, Homebase ditched a quarter of its outlets, and specifically blamed "a less-skilled generation". Little by little, our industrial parks are turning into ghost towns, and it's all our fault.

Our biggest DIY warehouses – the ones you spent every weekend being dragged around as a child, the ones that devolved from lampshades into planks of wood the further right you walked, the ones that had vending machines in them as if to tacitly acknowledge the bloody-minded stamina it took to walk all the way around one – have become dinosaurs trapped in a world they can't understand. They no longer reflect the fickle whims of taste. They're the Jeremy Clarkson of the out-of-town retail sector.

Véronique Laury, head of B&Q's parent company Kingfisher, told the Guardian this week that the business will only survive if it recalibrates itself towards the clueless. "We have the choice of leaving them with a crap home and little knowledge or doing something for them," she said. In other words, dumb down or die.

In a way, Laury has borrowed her approach from Alison Winfield-Chislett. She runs the Goodlife centre in London, a learning facility dedicated to helping the DIY-averse. And she thinks the most DIY-averse are renters. "I get a lot of new homeowners who have just discovered that their house doesn't come with a landlord," she told me. "I have a theory that this fashion for propping your pictures up against the mantelpiece developed because people have landlords who won't let them drill."

This is my situation. I'll turn 35 this year and, like millions of people who also see the property ladder as a distant pipe dream, I've never owned a house. I've rented rooms in student houses, bedsits owned by my employers and a long succession of flats and houses. And the one thing that's linked them is the phrase "damage to the property may result in a claim against your deposit".



B&Q is to close one in six of its stores. Photograph: Johnny Armstead/Demotix/Corbis



Unlike Winfield-Chislett, whose 1970s landlords were so easygoing that they let her shave down her bathroom door to fit shagpile carpets, modern letting agents are so scared of tenants mucking up their clients' investments that they get antsy if you so much as mention Blu-Tack around them.

My current landlords even went to the effort of listing the welcome note they sent us on the inventory. As a result, whatever happy memories I gain during my time here – and there should be lots, because this is my son's first home – are offset by a constant low-level fear that I'll accidentally bin a greetings card and get billed for £1,500.

There are benefits to renting, of course. Moving house – from what I've heard – isn't the legal and financial cluster-migraine that it is for homeowners, and it's nice to know that whatever goes wrong is someone else's problem. But the downside is that as soon as it looks like I'll have to do anything even vaguely manual, I still end up calling my dad.

My dad is a plumber. He's a big, practically minded man who has spent 50 years contorted uncomfortably beneath an endless procession of kitchen sinks and boilers, fixing things for people. Meanwhile, the highlight of my DIY career came eight years ago when I fixed a squeaky door with a can of WD-40. I was so proud of this accomplishment that I took a selfie. If the ghosts of my ancestors – all farmers and carpenters and mechanics and labourers – saw me doing this, they'd wish they'd been able to haunt my dad and make him sterile somehow.

My parents' house caught fire just before Christmas. They've essentially been homeless for four months and, while I would have taken that as an excuse to slack off and eat pizza, my dad turned it into the biggest DIY project of his life. He's spent weeks sanding and painting and putting things up in an effort to make the place liveable again. They finally moved back in this week. So, while I was helping him cart a fridge-freezer back from their temporary accommodation, I decided to quiz my dad about my lack of dexterity.

"The thought of you with an electric drill in your hand is worrying," he said. "I don't understand people who can't do things themselves. I've never seen you do anything, except mess up your bedroom." He's referring to the time when I, as a teenager, decided to rag-roll some shelves, without really knowing what rag-rolling was. (Painting with a sponge to get a ritzy, mottled effect.) "That's indelibly printed on my mind."

Shouldn't you have taught me how to do things like that? "Not really. I thought it was a man's skill. I thought most men were capable of doing things, but apparently not. This is it, you see," – at this point I'm wheeling the freezer around the back of the house – "I'm watching you, and I'm worried that you're going to veer off to one side and tip the whole thing over. See? Exactly like that. Exactly like that."

According to my dad, practical skills are something you're either born with or not. "There are two types of people in this world: practical people and non-practical people. I'm not sure it can be taught. Some people can use their hands but don't use their heads much, and some people can do maths but are a danger when you put a tool in their hand. Leave the freezer there so your mum can put it on Tumblr."

He means Gumtree, but at this stage I didn't want to infuriate him with any more of my confounded book smarts.

During our earlier chat – which quickly devolved into a kind of impromptu therapy session, for reasons you might have picked up upon – Winfield-Chislett was quick to defend my dad for not showing me basic DIY skills. “It’s actually very difficult to teach,” she said. “DIY is the most despairing of all activities. Whoever is doing the DIY is up there holding something with a face full of dust, shouting, ‘Pass me the screwdriver!’ and the son goes, ‘What, Dad?’ and the dad goes, ‘Oh for god’s sake, go and help your mum.’”

But still, to revert back to ugly gender stereotypes for a moment, there’s something deeply emasculating about getting someone in to do stuff for you. (Happily, my wife is equally hopeless.) Especially now that I’m a dad myself. The time will come – and I suspect it’ll come sooner than I’d like – when my son will ask me to fix something for him. Now, I want him to be relatively self-sufficient, and not to think that he can make problems go away by chucking money at a stranger. But at the same time, I don’t want him to watch me cack-handedly smash my hands into goo by trying to bang a picture hook into a wall with the sole of a boot, as I did a fortnight ago.

I like to think that I’ve made up for my failings by doing well in other areas. I remain the only member of my family to go to university, for example, and I suspect that I’ve cooked more dinners this week than my dad has in 25 years – but these skills don’t feel as satisfying, or as useful, as the ability to mend things with my hands.

Even now, in the minuscule box room we’re attempting to pass off as my son’s nursery, there’s a curtain rail propped up against a wall. I’ve been stalling for months now, not quite confident enough to put it up myself, but too embarrassed to ask for help. But this is a bank holiday weekend. This is what projects like this were made for. DIY might be on the way out, but I’m going to commemorate its life by climbing up on a stepladder, choosing the right drill bit and putting it up on my own. I’ll be doing it for my father, and for my son, and for myself as both a father and a son. Hell, I’ll be doing it for all the fathers and sons in this hamfisted excuse for a country. If DIY is dying, I’m going to make damn sure that it doesn’t die in vain.

Obviously, I’ll get Dad to come round first, though. You can’t be too careful.

Link: <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/apr/04/the-death-of-diy-why-cant-i-do-it-myself>