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# HGTV's *House Hunters* and the Right to Coziness

By Susan Fraiman

Likening the well-defined space of a house to that of a theatrical stage seems to come naturally. Both put a frame around human actions. According to Rebecca Solnit, imagining the home as an artful stage set allows us to conjure beautiful versions of ourselves. “The house,” she muses, “is the stage set for the drama we hope our lives will be or become. And it’s much easier to decorate the set than to control the drama” (149). In Solnit’s description, dream homes are screens onto which we project our desires. I, too, will be approaching houses as sites of fantasy, but the screens in question are literal—the four-sided surfaces of televisions, tablets, laptops, or phones—and pristine rooms come paired with mundane realities.

My project in this article is to explore the complex appeal of house-centred performances—reality series on buying or improving everything from a Texas farmhouse to a London flat—appearing on the cable channel HGTV (Home & Garden Television). With its schedule of closely related, oft-repeating home shows, all tame enough for doctors’ waiting rooms, HGTV’s programming is easily mocked as bland and even trance-inducing. Yet I am not alone in being compelled as well as solaced by it; based on audience size, the channel ranks fourth among cable networks. Though HGTV’s popularity is clear, its political implications are murkier. For many media studies scholars, ‘makeover’ genres (transforming people and/or their homes) are vehicles of consumerism, conformity, and neoliberal nationhood. Others venture a more positive assessment, noting that home shows about ‘ordinary’ households feature a surprising diversity of participants. Building on these views, my own feminist reading defends this genre’s contribution in somewhat different terms. Focusing specifically on *House Hunters* (1999–present), I credit this home-buying series with asserting the primacy of domestic life in tandem with a host of related values, all conventionally coded and subordinated as ‘feminine.’ Adding a further twist, I close with an episode framing the desire for domestic ‘coziness’ as far more than capitulation to bourgeois norms.

## The scholarly debate

The critique of HGTV-type shows is undoubtedly persuasive. It’s hard to argue with the claim that narratives fetishizing home purchase and improvement “promote an all-encompassing and inflexible consumer ethos” (Deery 159). Skeptics point to the reliance of home-makeover shows on overlapping national myths: that happiness lies in material goods, that success can happen overnight, that well-being is up to individuals (not the state), that a fairy-tale ending is freely and universally available. Some are also dismayed by the hyping of professional designers as arbiters of taste—experts who swoop in and ‘upgrade’ a home in accord with prevailing class values. To clinch the case against these shows, if the messaging misleads, placates, and shames participants and viewers alike, beneficiaries include not only the channel but also the corporate likes of Wayfair and Home Depot.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars taking a more positive view typically accept the critique while calling attention to qualities worth defending. Chief among these is HGTV’s casually inclusive roster of participants (and, to some degree, hosts). Relative to the mainstream media, house shows have long been notable for scattering people of colour, interracial families, single women, and queer couples in among the throngs of more normative folks—all similarly preoccupied by hardwood flooring and all guaranteed domestic satisfaction in the end.<sup>2</sup> Bravo’s *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003–2007), in which the Fab Five transform a hapless hetero male, offered an early example of makeover TV serving to increase gay visibility. *Queer Eye’s* bevy of openly gay men was startling enough; bolder still was a premise placing them in non-violent, collaborative encounters with grateful straight men (Heller 4). HGTV programs make a different kind of contribution, treating queerness not as fabulous but as ordinary. Here, the identities of gay male and (less frequently) lesbian participants are unremarked upon, apparently beside the point when it comes to finding and fixing up a place.

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As Anna Everett explains, the same is true regarding other identities more often depicted as sites of social and narrative tension. On home-improvement shows, affluent non-white families are neither threatening nor problematic but simply, in their fervour for a sumptuous master suite, average suburbanites (175). Admitting her own HGTV fandom, Everett recognizes the channel's consumerist imperative but is drawn, above all, by its "non-special treatment of interracial and gay and lesbian couples" (175).

Mimi White's in-depth analysis of the *House Hunters* franchise reveals the limits as well as merits of these appreciative views. With the exception of "the unemployed and underclass population," White remarks, "the programs otherwise include people buying property across a wide economic spectrum" ("House Hunters" 393). I, too, admire this franchise for its diverse participants, but White's claim stumbles over and severely understates the class exclusivity built into shows about purchasing real estate. In the United States today, one third of the population does not own homes. Among African Americans, well over half are not owners. Indeed, for all too many, the issue isn't ownership but affordable housing of any kind. A minor brouhaha arose when an episode of *House Hunters International* was revealed to have distorted the real sequence of home-buying events.<sup>3</sup> But the greatest distortion of reality is far more general and intrinsic: the implication that home ownership is the national norm.

### **Redeeming the domestic and other 'feminine' values**

Any discussion of HGTV politics must, I think, begin by acknowledging this essentially misleading aspect of reality shows in which, almost without exception, people take for granted the ability to buy and renovate lovely homes. The channel's complicity with an American dream that disappoints and obfuscates as much as it inspires seems clear enough. At the same time, the meanings of its home-centred dramas are arguably more various and contradictory than this, their appeal to our yen for comfort, security, and ornament deserving of closer examination. Building on Everett, White, and others, I use the remaining pages to identify several aspects of *House Hunters* that, like the non-special treatment of interracial and queer families, offer to question rather than reinforce dominant ideologies.

Recall that makeover TV has been accused of dramatizing submission to experts along with salvation through consumption. Unlike the renovation shows, however, *House Hunters* does not glorify the upscale tastes and expertise of hosts. Instead, as we will see, it centres on ordinary people chewing over minute domestic concerns for rewards that are relational as well as material. Along with participants who occasionally deviate from traditional gender roles, for me the show's feminist contribution lies primarily in such implicit challenges to gendered hierarchies of value. In

the hegemonic scheme of things, qualities coded as 'masculine' (the aggressive, historic, large-scale, public-sphere, self-reliant, and individualist) occupy a superior position. *House Hunters* turns this schema upside down by redeeming not only domestic spaces but also associated qualities likewise disparaged as 'feminine': the modest, everyday, small-scale, private-sphere, interdependent, and relational. It does so, moreover, in a gender-neutral way: no longer written off and relegated to women, the little things that happen in houses are made paramount for male and female viewers alike.

### **Ordinary people and lessons in relationality**

HGTV programs appeal in part by invoking realness—the facticity of square footage, unexpected discoveries of mold, recognizable outbursts of emotion. Lured by authenticity, we are also aware of (reassured and sometimes wearied by) their highly scripted nature. But while improvement and buying shows are equally formulaic (and some shows hybridize the two genres), their narrative and affective logics are not identical. In home-makeover shows such as *Fixer Upper* (2013–2018), each self-contained episode proceeds in three acts: the shoddy 'before,' the wizardry of renovation, and the 'after' of a home reinvented as its ideal self. In the climactic third act, known as the Reveal, viewers join homeowners in awed appreciation of newly expansive spaces, kitchens agleam with generous islands, white marble spilling down the sides. The *House Hunters* formula shares this three-part structure and predictably comic ending but changes up the content. Part one introduces home seekers along with their wish list and budget; part two consists of visits to three houses; and part three sees participants weigh their choices and reach a decision. There is also a brief coda that flashes forward to reveal buyers happily ensconced in their new abode.

Both HGTV genres take people from domestic discomfort to feelings of at-homeness. In *House Hunters*, however, the charismatic hosts who plan and execute home makeovers (Joanne and Chip of *Fixer Upper*, for example) are replaced by working realtors who vary with each episode and play at best a supporting role. Seaming it all together is an unseen narrator who gives us the context for the house hunt. More than a renovation, moving to a new place marks a life transition and invites a bit of storytelling: a couple is getting married or expecting; a woman is venturing out on her own; someone is travelling cross-country for a job. Introduced at greater length, the regular folks of *House Hunters* play a larger and more central role. Makeover families, deferring to the professionals, are whisked offstage before a single hammer is raised. Absent in act two, they are ushered back in to bear emotional witness to the Reveal. Participants in *House Hunters*, by contrast, are positioned not as spectators but as characters whose actions and motivations drive all three parts of the narrative. The

result is a shift in emphasis from camera-ready experts to people of average looks and unschooled tastes.

The *House Hunters* formula deviates further by replacing the Reveal with what we might call the Decision. Though a cursory reveal of the property is tacked on at the end, it is by then mere denouement. Instead, the moment we wait for, lean into, and most strongly identify with occurs when two people (partners or single buyer and confidante) sit down over drinks, review their options, reiterate divergent views, and finally reach an agreement as to which property 'feels like home.' Although these conversations are often stilted, as the choices are laid out, each with their pros and cons, viewers are drawn into making their own assessments. None of the houses checks all the boxes. Will location trump budget or vice versa? Jesse loves the charming bungalow while Sam is pushing for a third bedroom. Whose wishes will predominate? Which house will they choose? Which one would *we* choose? The *House Hunters* formula does not permit regret; buyers always manage to make the right choice. Yet unlike the Reveal's fantasy of perfection, the Decision is an exercise in realism. What's on offer for viewers is not, in this case, the house as a flawless stage set but the messier drama of people at odds talking each other through to a workable compromise.

The interpersonal dynamic is set in motion when buyers first meet with their realtor and articulate wildly different desires: one person wants city-living while the other insists on suburbia. Other recurrent points of difference include 'modern' houses versus those with 'character'; staying on budget or drifting above it; fixer-upper versus move-in-ready; convenience to work or proximity to schools. In the case of straight couples, we might expect these binaries to line up with traditional gender roles. According to normative views, men would stress a short commute, prefer an unfussy aesthetic, hold the line on costs, and welcome a chance to be handy; women would focus on schools and play spaces, prefer a cozy aesthetic, ignore the budget, and veto a messy renovation. Certainly there are episodes reinforcing these and other such stereotypes: men who want grills, garages, and man caves; women who can never get enough closet space (White, "Gender" 236–37). But just as often we encounter emotive men who find modern too cold and are drawn to pastoral settings; hard-headed women who are sticklers for the budget and ready with a sledgehammer; fathers and mothers equally concerned about the safety and needs of children.

## Routines of everyday life

*House Hunters* thus includes, along with queer participants, straight ones whose gender performances at least occasionally pull against the grain. The more sustained feminist intervention lies, however, in the simple assumption that where and how we dwell is a rich and broadly compelling topic. As I have discussed elsewhere, there is a tendency in our culture to overlook or disparage things occurring in and around the home (Fraiman 3–9). Such daily routines as chopping vegetables, washing clothes, arranging or putting away objects, scrubbing a floor, shopping for dinner, or tending a child are devalued in numerous ways. Disdained as trivial, housekeeping and caregiving are presumed to require little competence or creativity. Seen as repetitive and non-productive, the work they involve goes unrecognized as such and is unpaid or underpaid accordingly. Misconstrued as places set apart from work, houses are reportedly



A couple debates the merits of house number 1. "Meager in San Francisco," season 165, episode 6, 17 December 2019. Copyright HGTV. Courtesy of Discovery Access

not only idle but static. Adventure, challenge, and growth—the exciting stuff of male-centred stories—are thought to begin with departure from stifling interiors.

Overlapping with this view is the sense that domestic preoccupations are ideologically suspect. The 'happy housewife' is not only physically passive but also complacent, her purchasing of household goods no more than blithe consumerism. Notions of proper domesticity can, of course, be invoked to support pernicious ideas about family, race, class, and nation. These notions do not, however, begin to capture the diversity, complexity, and necessity of lived domestic arrangements—structures that, at a very basic level, preserve lives and underpin culture. As Marxist feminists explain, houses oversee the labour of social reproduction—the maintenance of bodies without which there would be no production of goods.<sup>4</sup> Scarcely visible, much less appreciated, this labour continues to be largely shouldered by and associated with women, often as a second shift on top of employment outside the home. It is primarily this association, the coding of houses and homemaking as 'feminine,' that drives the belittling of all things domestic.

Given the gendered bias against interiors, I credit *House Hunters* with fostering an alternative view. Touring one domestic space after another, the show frames houses as objects of importance, visual interest, and debate. Significantly, it does so in formats featuring and addressed to men as well as women. Breaking with a tradition of materials aimed exclusively at housewives, *House Hunters* joins other lifestyle programs in assuming the relevance of domestic knowledge to a general audience (Lewis 404–05).<sup>5</sup> Far from inert, on *House Hunters*, each room has dramatic potential. Comments by buyers evince the churn and

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sociality of everyday life. "I like how open this is. I can see myself making dinner while keeping an eye on the kids." "Ooh, double sinks. We've been wanting that." "I think our bed would fit here. Imagine waking up to that view!" "This dining room's too small. What would we do when family comes over?" So saying, ordinary humans unfurl the scroll of average days: kids, cooking, family visits, washing up, and sharing a bed. Instead of dismissing such feminized matters as boring and conventional, I would recognize not only the labour and pleasure they entail but also their address to our shared need for some degree of day-to-day predictability, security, and sense of connection.

### Coziness in the context of precarity

We tend to identify domestic preoccupations with comfortable, middle-class lives; in fact, however, preparing meals, caring for others, and having privacy for bathing and sleeping are issues that are all the more pressing when housing cannot be taken for granted (Fraiman 154–91). Though *House Hunters* typically rules out economic hardship, I will close by citing an episode whose participants are well aware that many in the United States struggle just to pay the rent. "Glam vs. Land in New York," which aired in June 2021, features actress Dominique and fiancé/manager Edwin, an interracial couple looking outside the city for their first home. She worries about commuting time; he wants several acres. She loves a two-storey colonial; he prefers a one-storey farmhouse. Her must-haves include a spa bathroom; he hopes for a fireplace reminding him of his grandfather. Dominique's budget is higher, but they both want room for his kids and her relatives, and they agree that coziness is paramount.

All this is true to *House Hunters* form, just as her closet mania and his man-cave notions are true to gender norms. Breaking with both, however, is Dominique's statement early on that "as a Black transwoman, I thought it was impossible to own a home. All I knew I could do was survive." As Edwin explains, "Owning a home . . . means so much. Both of us were homeless at one time. We know what it is to struggle." With this revelation, the usual tension produced by a couple's varying wishes is replaced by a more significant one: between their homeownership future and the spectre of a traumatic past. As viewers soon learn, Dominique's wish for a two-storey colonial is not a mere style preference. Instead, it stems from her terror, based on childhood experience, of people entering through first-floor windows. Dominique's oft-repeated desire for a "spa oasis" also echoes differently in this context; "oasis" may connote not luxury but a refuge from threat. Given this couple's history of marginality, the same might be said of their emphasis on "coziness" and "homeyness," which I take to reference not just decor but feelings of safety, rightness, and belonging in relation to place.

Revising the *House Hunters* formula, the crux of "Glam vs. Land" is no longer which house the couple will choose but their improbable ability to buy a house at all. Atypical, too, is the special attention paid to their identities. Yet if this episode departs from the *House Hunters* norm, it may also distill what I have wanted to



Dominique and Edwin explain what home ownership means to them. "Glam vs. Land in New York," season 201, episode 8, 1 June 2021. Copyright HGTV. Courtesy of Discovery Access

suggest may be its essential appeal: an appreciation of houses as sites of life-sustaining routines and as symbols of the coziness we all, every one of us, deserve.

### Notes

- 1 In addition to June Deery, those stressing the conservative effects of home-makeover shows include Deborah Philips, Gareth Palmer, Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, Alison Hearn, and Brenda Weber. See also the essays in Dana Heller's *The Great American Makeover: Television, History, Nation* (2007). On HGTV's rise coinciding with soaring net sales at Home Depot and Lowe's Home Improvement, see Ciampaglia.
- 2 As early as 1999, garden makeover shows in the UK included non-white, mixed-race, and gay participants; according to Charlotte Brunson, such shows made "a considerable contribution to changing ideas of what it is to be British" (83). In 2020, with gay couples par for the course on HGTV, *House Hunters* took the further step in "Three's Not a Crowd in Colorado Springs" of featuring a polyamorous threesome.
- 3 In 2011, blogger Gabrielle Blair let slip that the *House Hunters International* version of her family's move to France had scrambled the actual chronology. In fact, the Blairs had already selected their home when filming began; the TV story of serendipitous discovery was the result of clever "back-production" (White, "House Hunters" 386–87).
- 4 On women's discounted reproductive labour, see Federici.
- 5 British television led the way in mainstreaming domestic topics by moving them to primetime (see Moseley; Brunson).

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Susan Fraiman is Professor of English at the University of Virginia. Her most recent book, *Extreme Domesticity: A View from the Margins* (2017), explores domestic precarity and creativity among queer, working-class, immigrant, and other marginal figures.