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## **The homesick and the sick home**

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### **Abstract**

This short article explores the popular property renovation series *DIY SOS: The Big Build* (2010-present) to examine what it can tell us about the textual, affective and political modes of nostalgia on television. Inverting the homesick at the heart of nostalgia it considers, instead, the idea of the sick home by examining the ways in which the series represents and remedies lives affected by chronic illness and/or disability. The nostalgic promise of *The Big Build* is of a home to return to *in the future* and I argue that by placing the programme within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the series reveals a complex dynamic of loss and recuperation and a powerful nostalgic fantasy of community, care and (public service) television.

**Keywords:** nostalgia, home, property TV, chronic illness, disability, COVID-19

The last eighteen months have illuminated for many the indeterminate meanings and experiences of home: as both haven and prison, a site of welcome returns and desperate

escapes, and domestic comforts and anxieties. In response to the uncertainties and disruption to normal service brought about by the pandemic and the subsequent national and local lockdowns, commentators have remarked on the turn to nostalgic viewing, and in particular the comfort and security to be found in past television or old box sets (Aron 2021). Formulaic forms of television have found a renewed popularity, with the repetitive pleasures of the sitcom and the procedural (re)discovered by new and old audiences on streaming services. In the context of public service broadcasting in the United Kingdom, television has also found renewed focus and visibility as central to our daily routines and rituals but also as a social glue – imagining, building and reasserting community relations in response to ‘stay at home’ orders, shielding, and social distancing. Nostalgia, here, emerges in a slightly different way, as a celebration of the possibilities and promises of the broadcast schedule and the BBC (see Ellis 2021).

These uses of televisual nostalgia – the retreat to the relative safety of the past and the comfort of the routine in the face of often overwhelming change and uncertainty – signal some of the affordances of television but also point towards the ambivalences and ambiguities that underpin the medium’s structures of feeling. It is important to recognise for instance, as television theorists have previously suggested, the role of television in generating these frightening feelings in the first place. But our experience of lockdown also invites us to recognise another temporal dynamic of nostalgia and one that can be drawn from its historical use as a diagnostic term for homesickness: as a longing for a home to be returned to in the *future* rather than a wistful memory of a time left in the past. In the context of the pandemic, the promise of that future tense symbolises the recuperation of past freedoms and the assurances of our eventual return to our old normal: here the homesick may very well be those who are sick of home. Yet neither purely backwards or forwards looking, nostalgia can be understood as caught in an oscillation between the two – looping between past, present

and future in ways that continually activate and reactivate, make and unmake our ideas and experiences of home. As feminist scholars have continually shown us, home is an intertextual site that weaves together multiple times and spaces, memories and identities in the service of both comfort and anxiety. Television, as I have argued elsewhere (Holdsworth 2021), becomes a potent fulcrum within this intertextual site and emerges as a similarly complex and ambivalent point of connection between the pasts, presents and futures of people and places.

It is perhaps not unsurprising that an unassuming ‘hit’ of lockdown viewing in the United Kingdom has been *The Repair Shop* (2017–present), where battered and beloved heirlooms and antiques are restored by a team of expert craftspeople. The acts of repair and stories of loss and recuperation illustrate the safe returns that televisual forms of nostalgia remain invested in. They are stories that, once again, emphasise the looping movements of nostalgia and the promise of a future that can be found in acts of recovery and restoration. It is here that I want to turn my attention to a different example and a format popularised long before the pandemic struck – the home renovation series *DIY SOS: The Big Build* (2010–present) – in order to investigate in more detail the textual and temporal characteristics of nostalgia that are the focus of this article. As both domestic object and visual medium, television remains invested in presenting its own idea of home. As Helen Powell has written, ‘since its inception television has informed how we visualize our homes’ (2009: 96) manufacturing particular dreams of domestic bliss alongside nightmares of domestic strife. It is here that I want to play on that historical link between ‘home’ and ‘sickness’: inverting the homesick at the heart of nostalgia to consider instead the idea of the sick home. The last eighteen months have also offered an insight into the lives of those whose ‘new normal’ looks a lot like their ‘old normal’, highlighting health and social inequalities that remain and persist. This is particularly pertinent to those with lived experiences of disabilities and/or chronic illnesses that can restrict mobility within and beyond the home. Pre-pandemic, these

are the kinds of stories that form the core of the major renovation projects seen in programmes such as *DIY SOS: The Big Build* and *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* (2003–12; 2020–present) as they focus on family narratives and homes that have been disrupted by illness and/or disability. In these formats the sick home is remedied through the intervention of the programme-makers, experts, presenters and the surrounding community. These are therapeutic narratives that insist on the primacy of the family and on the necessity of charity and volunteerism.<sup>1</sup> They are formats that reveal much about the textual and temporal layers and oscillations of both home and television and where nostalgia emerges as a formal, affective and political framework.

*DIY SOS: The Big Build* is, at the time of writing, in its 31st series. Hosted by blokey presenter Nick Knowles and his regular team of electricians, plasterers and plumbers, *The Big Build* also solicits an army of volunteers from local firms and community groups to stage large scale home interventions for families in need. Whilst the home as building site is charged with macho banter and humour, the programme is peppered and framed by highly emotional gestures – these are builders who are not afraid to cry. In an episode of the series initially broadcast in 2014 (series 25, episode 4), the team are called upon to help out the McCartney family from Warrington in the North West of England. It is this episode that I want to focus on in more detail to unravel the temporal organization of the series and how this creates a particular idea of home that is informed by my understanding of nostalgia. The

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<sup>1</sup> Similar to the strategies of the charity campaign film they assert the power of intervention and transformation through the voluntary act of charity. So much so that Ouellette and Hay have referred to *Home Edition* as ‘Charity TV’ working to situate the programme within a tradition of US television’s charitable engagements and as emblematic of what they have termed post-welfare citizenship (2008: 32-62).

McCartneys, a mother, father and two teenage daughters, are a regular working family living in a three-bedroom post-war semi-detached house. Father, Dave, is an electrician by trade, that is, until he is 'struck down' by a stroke that leaves him partially paralyzed and dependent on a wheelchair. Like most makeover formats, transformation is the central narrative drive as the programme works to 'heal' the break that was so suddenly visited on this particular family. What I want to stress, though, is that this narrative does not follow a simple linear trajectory of 'before' and 'after' but loops between past, present and future to build a complex and iterative portrait of loss and hope, illness and recovery.

The opening of the episode, consistent with the format, is a montage of images and voices that introduce the viewer to the featured family, the build, and the intervention the programme is seeking to make. Here the story centres on the effect of Dave's illness on the family and their domestic lives as they struggle to adapt to a life 'turned upside down' by his new disabilities. Soundbites from interviews with the McCartneys are carefully selected to highlight the rapidity of change that the family encountered but also to emphasise the contrast between the before and after of Dave's life altering stroke. Close-ups of family photographs on display in their home are utilised to introduce the key family members but also to allude to a past reality: the happy couple kiss in a wedding photo, another image pictures the family together at a sporting event with Dave flanked by his loving daughters. Presenting an idealised past for the family, the photographs in this context become resonant with the knowledge of mortality and change. The formerly happy, healthy electrician is now 'trapped' within a body (he refers to as a 'shell') and a home that was worked hard for and once suited the young family but was not built with disabled bodies in mind. The introductory montage continues with shots of the living arrangements and architectural features and of the family negotiating narrow doorways and domestic obstacles. Images that are intentionally darkened and drained of colour emphasize a house that is now topsy-turvy. Dave has to use a commode

in the kitchen and sleeps on a hospital bed in the dining room: entrances and exits, steps and stoops prevent his access to, from and within the family home and garden. This home is sick. It is where the 'simplest of everyday tasks have become a gruelling ordeal'. It is also, we are told by presenter Nick Knowles, having an impact on the family's emotional life, for example, modest tears are shed by the family in interview and Dave expresses how aspects of his and his wife's new reality are having a profound effect on his sense of dignity. Images confirm the new role taken on by Anna as she helps Dave to get up and dressed from his hospital bed in the dining room and allude to his lack of privacy and independence; a shot of a commode positioned by the patio windows is followed by a close-up of a toilet roll and baby wipes underneath the seat seeming to deliberately emphasize the horror of vulnerability, dependency and infantilization so often associated with disability.

In contrast to the photos of the family's past, in Dave's unhappy present he is seen as isolated and imprisoned by his new disability. In similarly darkened images we see him in medium shot from behind, sat in his wheelchair and looking out from the kitchen to a garden we are told he 'once loved'. A reverse shot sees Dave from the vantage point of the garden, framed by the narrow patio doors as he dolefully looks out onto the lawn. Such imagery is certainly in line with the representational strategies identified by Martin F. Norden in his account of a *Cinema of Isolation*. Norden's study of the history of representations of physical disability in Hollywood cinema examines the ways in which disabled characters are physically and symbolically separated from the rest of society (1994: 1). In some senses it is a visual regime that highlights a social model of disability that understands disability as a product of material and environmental constraints rather than bodily impairment. Within such a model it is the lived environment that is understood to be disabling and isolating – it is the home itself that is sick. But as Norden is clear to point out these are images constructed predominantly by and for an able-bodied audience reinforcing the 'Otherness' and isolation

of the character with a physical disability and couching their presence in a visual regime that connotes tragedy, pity and even horror.

But the experiences of Dave and his family, as documented by the programme, also call upon Titchkosky and Michalko's understanding of disability as 'a rupture in the clarity and unquestioned flow of daily life' (2012: 140) revealing that television's idea of home, in this instance, is, in part, an ableist construction. *DIY SOS: The Big Build* is underpinned by an idea of home which reflects an emphasis on order, co-ordination, and planning: homes, for example, that are envisaged as being 'future proof' or that offer the family 'room to grow' but only in a certain direction. The episode also asserts a particular vision of home that remains in line with the 'modernist rationalisation of space' brought about by Victorian reformers in the nineteenth century (Morley 2000: 22). Here the rules and rooms of the British home became organized and segregated by status and function, enforcing clearer separations between 'the private and the public, home and work, and between feminine and masculine spheres' (Morley 2000: 22). It is these logics of both modern rational space and family narrative that are ruptured by the illnesses and disabilities experienced by the majority of participants selected to feature in the series. The programme often revels in the gross inflection of historically contingent notions of privacy and domestic boundaries before remedying the 'sickness' of the home.

Writing on lifestyle television has emphasized the centrality of the transformation and the importance of the makeover to multiple formats. For *The Big Build* these transformations are twofold. The first is an account of loss and deficiency, of a happy family whose lives and home are turned upside down. The second is one of recovery with the work of the programme reinstating the promise of a happy future. With the renovation complete, and as the programme enters its final act and the upcoming reveal, the anticipated fulfilment of that promise is teased in a shot of the sunrise over the suburbs of Warrington accompanied by the



opening bars of Israel Kamakawiwo'ole's wistful ukulele version of the Judy Garland classic 'Over the Rainbow' (Harold Allen and Yip Harburg, 1939).

The subsequent reveal unfolds through the repetition of those images and voices that opened the episode: Dave imprisoned by the patio doors, Anna struggling to manoeuvre his wheelchair, the daughters recalling the way their lives changed 'in a second'. At this point the results of the second transformation are revealed as, in voice over, presenter Knowles re-introduces the viewer to the new family home. Consistent with the logic of the 'before' and 'after' of the makeover and its presentation of 'good' and 'bad' detail (see Zborowski 2012), the programme continues through a tour of the main spaces of the house cutting between juxtaposed shots of various rooms and spaces pre- and post- transformation. For example, repeated images of the commode and baby wipes are now replaced by a series of bright new shots that reveal a sparkling shower room with disabled access and state of the art adaptive toilet. The photos of the family members tragically framed in the opening to the programme are revisited once again in the new context of hope and an upbeat soundtrack. Following the explanatory and cheerful account of the design changes the new home is then 'revealed' once again, this time to the returning family before, finally, the grateful and tearful McCartneys are revealed to the community of workers to offer their thanks.

As the episode concludes, Knowles asserts that Dave can now 'face the future with dignity', the unruly home reorganized and rationalized with domestic (and intimate) boundaries reinstalled. Dave can now rejoin the family: an updated kitchen and living room with widened door frames and lowered surface will enable Dave to fully participate in family life, whilst privacy has been reinserted for the individuals. Dave has a fully accessible bathroom downstairs and a potting shed at the bottom of the garden, Anna has a 'peaceful haven' upstairs for when she is in need of respite. The programme loops into a future for the family that both anticipates its revised future needs and that recalls the 'happy home' built

with the family in mind prior to Dave's illness. Within the temporal logic of the television makeover (as a 'before' and 'after') the journeys taken between past and present homes return us then to the realm of nostalgia. Both in its articulations of kinship and community but also, for Dave and his family, as a longing for (and fantasy of) a home and a lifestyle to be returned to in the *future* informed by a time left in the past. Here the journey is, as Knowles also concludes, a movement from home to house and back again.

From the vantage point of 2021, *The Big Build* is alive with resonances and ironies: the disruptions of illness enforcing a new set of daily realities, the blurring of the boundaries that previously rationalised the space of the family home, and the investment in a longing for (and the promise to) rebuild the ideal home. Whilst this dream of home comes true for the McCartney family it remains at the level of fantasy and aspiration for the majority of viewers whose own stories resonate with the show's participants. It is an injustice that the programme itself often recognises as presenter Nick Knowles concludes each episode with a direct message to the audience at home. He speaks to camera of the unimaginable pressures on the family unit and the isolation of those imprisoned in their own homes whilst they battle illnesses for want of better facilities: 'As a nation we should be able to do something about that. These people thought it was unfair and did something about it. Maybe you know somebody who needs your help?' Yet the onus that the series places is on the community to care for itself. As each episode concludes with the crowd of workers and volunteers gathered together on the streets and applauding their collective efforts, it is an image that also invokes the affective communities that emerged in the context of the pandemic, in particular the weekly 'Clap for Carers' that accompanied the first lockdown in the UK. *The Big Build* offers this promise without cynicism and denies its impossibility, articulating instead a nostalgic fantasy for a home that no longer or perhaps never existed and never will. In the context of a decade of austerity cuts and the impacts of a global pandemic which have disproportionately

affected the lives of those with chronic illness and/or disabilities, the series' final articulation of nostalgia, then, is a fantasy of civic duty, public service, and a safety net that catches all who fall.

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