

# HOME IMPROVEMENT Judging Transcript

Contributed by Sarah Browne

*As a parallel event to the des/IRE conference, I was commissioned as an artist to respond to its primary themes. I picked up on the ideas of taste, quality, choice and the 'common good'. I was keen that my contribution as an artist would not be to create a silent art object, but rather to enable a parallel discussion with the 'everybody' demographic highlighted in the conference materials. I made available €1000 of my materials budget to the public, for a 'home improvement' of their choosing, a process to be run as an open competition. A total of ten video entries were submitted.*

*The competition structure mimicked that of the home-makeover programme and pseudo-democratic reality TV. Initial entries were shortlisted by three expert judges before being put to a general public vote. These judges were interior designer Trixie Leahy; sustainable architecture consultant Alan Wiseman; and architect and artist's housing cooperative representative Michael McDonnell. What follows here is an edited transcript of the judge's shortlisting process. It was left to the judges to determine the criteria for selection and to settle questions of worthiness and 'need'.*

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*[Following a short silence after viewing the videos]*

**Trixie** There was no....

**Michael** There was no luxury. You wanted the luxury!

**T** Not necessarily! But there's nothing say, nothing of design. They're not picking out say, a Bauhaus lamp; you know what I'm saying? There's no....

**M** You mean, they're not actually coming up with a 'design' idea...

**Alan** There was nothing specific.

**T** Yes, therefore you're making a decision more at the human level, need.

**A** I think whoever gets the money should put it to use, should make the most out of it. I think that should be one of the things, like. You know.

**M** That seems fair enough. So value for money for a thousand quid...

**A** I thought that from a health point of view, from a safety point of view, Kathleen had a valid... you know. I'd give it to her, shed be one to pick.

**M** I think there's a very good possibility she'll get picked by the public, but I think that's down to her age. And I don't necessarily agree that it's down to a health and safety need. I thought the whole documentary style of it worked, I thought they really played up the personal touch, which was well thought out, if dragged on a bit. But at least they knew their selling point was 'This is an eighty eight year old lady who needs something in her house, *how* could you not give her the money?' So it was very well presented that way. As to whether she actually needs the money, or if its value for money for *Home Improvement*, I'm not convinced of that. But I will say - good presentation.

**A** Annie and Mourad I thought were... from what I thought about these being about a home improvement, I thought these would be the least valid.

**T** In another way, it would be the most... for him.

**A** Ah yeah, he wants to move house, like.

**M** I don't think you get a grand for saying 'I'd like a nicer place'. That's my conviction - he's at the bottom of my list. He's joining the rest of the population in that wish. No design, no idea...

**A** Basically [for Sheila's entry] they just want to paint up the room and put new furnishings into it. Of all of the ones we saw... it wouldn't be on my list of those who should go forward.

**M** there's no *need*. Or there wasn't much need. And there wasn't much innovation. If those are something like criteria.

**A** They wanted to brighten up the room with a lick of paint and a few throws over the furniture and stuff...

**M** You'll be in trouble with the interior designer here! *[Laughter]* I can see the claws coming out!

**A** very stylish, classy, silk throws!

**T** Well, I like the whole kind of 1950s thing. What I would do with that room would be to put in a real fireplace, and that would make it much more homely for the woman.

**A** But this is *Home Improvement*, it's meant to be kind of eco-based as well isn't it?

**M** Well, you're right, that should be part of it too. Something like a wood pellet stove, that would give a sense of hearth and home...

**T** There's also the question of different generations. What's right for one generation is completely different from what another generation wants. To me, what the lady has there herself, if she didn't have her relations there, is perfect. It's just three generations, wanting three different looks.

Aside from a looks point of view, it's from a mental health point of view, that's one of their concerns. *[Sheila's entry was made by relatives on her behalf].*

**A, M** Yes

**T** It's just that we didn't get any insight into the lady herself, into what she particularly wanted, even if she just said *something*, not even on camera. Then there might have been some indication if she's happy with the way she's had her home for the last forty years.

**A** I thought [Maggie] had put a lot of thought into it and the presentation was good. She had very clear ideas in what she wanted and everything.

**M** Very workmanlike. She kind of was right about the problems that she had, and the fact that she gave us drawings was great. I didn't really like the design, her proposal for what she was going to do. I don't think, from what I saw, it was the *correct* thing to do.

**T** In a house of that style?

**M** Yes. So hate to say it but... if we said, 'You can have a thousand euros what do you wanna do?' And she said, 'I want you to design it for me,' then I'd go, *Yes, give the lady a thousand quid*. That would be money well spent. But apart from that, there was a clarity of design, so that if she did get the money and did exactly what she told us she was going to do, I think it would be pretty horrible and require knocking down again at some stage in the future. Even if it does give her the cellular spaces that she wants, it wasn't good value. But it could have been.

**A** The thing is, you could always say... *we'll give you the money if you apply Michael's designs...* *[Laughter]*

**A** Well, are we going to decide between the three of us, or...?

**T** You eliminate the ones you want to eliminate there. Then we'll see who's left.

*[Discussion follows on who has voted for different entries – each judge selected three which they thought should go forward. Anne, Annie, Maggie, and Sheila are all eliminated as they have no votes. Joanie & Rowan have been voted for by all three judges; Kathleen and Jessica & Peter have two votes; Janet, Mourad, Peter & Tara all have a single vote.*

*The proposals by Janet and Jessica & Peter are somewhat similar as they both want to ecologically refurbish unconventional homes; Janet is living in a Dodge van and Jessica & Peter have bought a horsebox to live in. Two of Trixie's three votes were in accordance with neither Michael nor Alan].*

*[To Trixie:]*

**A** Well, if you wanna keep one so, which one do you wanna keep?

**M** Tell us why you want them.

**T** Okay, well, the whole thing for me, there's nothing like staying at home, for some comfort. So if you use that whole notion of home, no matter what it looks like, you know, it doesn't matter how good or how bad it is.

**M** If we're voting for money, I think [Jessica and Peter are] crazy enough to... do something with it.

**T** Do you think that for Janet it's more feasible, and would make a greater difference, an immediate difference? They have an-empty-horse truck... which has *nothing*. She has windows in the Dodge; it's more of a home.

**A** That's why I think it would be better for Jessica and Peter; because it's at the start. That's where you get that significant change for the least amount of money... it's the finishings that cost the most, and the time, you know? They want it for a solar panel, so that's very feasible.

**T** So they'll have a horsebox with no windows, with nothing else in it, and a solar panel?

**A** Ah no, no, they *would* put the windows into it.

**M** You know, if you assume that this *is* their home, I think if you could accept that, a thousand euros....

**T** It's not their home, because they're not *living* in it at the moment. No one's sleeping in that. That's a horse truck. With a ramp. It even has...

**M** You just called their home a horsebox!

**T** Even on the ramp it has that stuff, what do you call that stuff, the non-slip stuff? So it's been an active horsebox up until quite recently. Do you know what I mean? It's not a home yet - it has the potential to be a home, but Janet has a better home than Jessica and Peter have, at this present moment in time.

**M** What you're saying is you only want to allow one of them? We're only going to allow one of the horsebox people through is that it?

**T** It's not that... but if you're to take the point of view that it's *Home Improvement*, and there isn't a home yet, at least Janet's *is* a home. What are they living on, the floor?

**M** Man, then they *really* need the money.

**T** Whatever.

**M** You're just not convinced that it is a home, and that's why they're out.

**T** It's the *dream* of being a home. It's great to have aspirations about it being a home... but I think Janet *lives* in her place, and therefore, from a *Home Improvement* point of view, her home being improved would be greater. She'd have the solar panel, and whatever you get, the electricity in the pump... rather than having an empty shell horsebox, which could be used to transport horses again tomorrow, we don't know.

**M** We don't trust them?

**T** It's not a question of trust!

[*Laughter*]

**M** So, would you give the money, say you *had* to give away the thousand, between one of them, ... Would you give the money to the person who was going to create a home where it never existed before, or one who's going to improve it?

**T** Will we move on from them, because they mightn't even be in the last three anyway?

**A** Yeah, sure. The way we're working it out so far, Joanie and Rowan are definitely in.

**T** Joanie is definitely in.

**A** That has to be, like, we all voted for them. Peter and Tara didn't get any votes except yourself [*to Michael*].

**T** Peter and Tara want to build a shed and take away the other one.

**M** Yep.

**T** I think someone else is more valid. See.... they've got love to keep them going, the others don't. Do you know what I mean?

**M** They *what*?

**T** They've got love to keep them going. I don't want to gang up against couples, but they have the love to keep them going. They're there five months, you know everything's perfect for them... it would mean more to somebody else. That's my point of view.

**A** I think...

**M** Home improvement means more to someone who's sad and lonely than to somebody who's in love?

**T** *Absolutely.*

[*Laughter*]

**A** Of course it does. And they could knock that shed down themselves.

**M** Are we here to judge home improvement or people who are happy?

**T** Well, its part of their stuff that they're doing, you know, they've included it in...

**M** But even if you take it like that, say they're happy people, they're in love, let's give them a chance!

**T** They need no legups, as far as I'm concerned. You know, they'll survive, they're young, they're happy. They have a long life ahead of them. They'll be getting married in another few years as well...

**M** Ah, no. I don't think you can rule anyone out for having a good idea.

**T** It's a good idea, but my premise is, it's *Home Improvement*, what would substantially... make *their* lives better? If they went out with a hammer, a big hammer, what do you call it?

**A** A sledgehammer.

**T** A sledgehammer, they would have that view [*ie. remove the visual obstruction of the shed as they proposed*]. And they could do that straight away. And they should, it's oppressive.

**M** Costs money...

**A** To knock that yourself, it wouldn't.

**M** Any of those people could do an awful lot on their own, without money. It's a very valid project though. And it's kind of achievable.

**T** Oh, it's a perfectly valid project.

**M** It's a genuine home improvement.

**T** Yeah, but they want this... like, this studio. They don't want your common garden shed, they want a *fancy* shed.

**A** It would cost more than a grand, like. For something like what they want.

**M** But the most important thing for them is to get that one grand. It's very achievable. Very worthwhile.

**T** They should have knocked it day one when they went in.

**M** You can't do it all... you said it, they've got the love! They can do it!

**T** You can't have it all.

**M** You can't knock them because they've got the love!

**A** We've got to make a decision anyway.

**T** Do you know them?

**M** What?

**T** Do you know them personally?

[*Laughter*]

**M** Can we see the ballot sheet?

**T** The ballot sheet is... Joanie and Rowan, they're definitely for the final three. Then the choice is between Kathleen, Jessica & Peter, Peter & Tara, and I think I'm going to include Mourad as well.

**M** Mourad's getting through on one vote?

**T** Peter and Tara are one vote as well.

**A** Jessica and Peter are two votes.

**T** So's Kathleen.

**M** Peter and Tara only have one vote?

**A** Tell you what, we need to whittle it down to three.

**M** Let's whip out the two people with only one vote. That's Mourad and Peter and Tara. Even though it means Peter and Tara lose out... and they probably *should* win... that's my vote, but it's fair.

**T** Yes, I can say the same. So it's Kathleen, Joanie, Jessica and Peter. Grand. That's a good interpretation of the proposals.

**A** There's good diversity too, there, isn't there?

**T** Even though we all know Janet and the Dodge would be better than Jessica and Peter...

**A** Well, that's the democratic process.

**T** That's true.

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*The three shortlisted entries were put to public vote, at an exhibition in the Webworks Building, Cork, and on the internet site, YouTube. The first day of public voting coincided with the May 2007 general election. 233 individuals voted in the competition and Jessica and Peter were announced as the overall winners, winning 49% of the overall votes cast. The horsebox is currently undergoing improvement and will be showcased at an event at the National Sculpture Factory in November 2007.*