

# Building home with a plastic bag

Let me tell you a secret. I am probably one of the only people in the world with a framed plastic carrier bag hanging on the wall of my study. Strange as that might seem, this piece of 'art' – entitled 'Bag of Life' – reminds me of a particular period in the story of my life, ponders *David Willows*.

I had just arrived in Brussels – new country, new language, new people, and no job. Everything I owned – a passport, a few other official papers, bills and a couple of photos – could be fitted into a single plastic carrier bag. It was not a particularly elegant or memorable bag, but it was a memorable time in my life.

So when the handle finally gave way under the weight of 'too much stuff', I decided to keep the bag as a memento. Framed and

hanging in my study, it is a reminder of simpler days, where there was less to distract me from the important things in life like love and family.

## Who's to blame?

Seven years later, as I look at the stack of cardboard boxes that still need to be packed into what I now realise is an impossibly small white van, I wonder how I could have acquired so much 'stuff' in such a short time. So, I comfort myself by blaming it on the kids, and get back to the job in hand.

My own story actually began several years ago, with a theory: *All expatriates are running away from something*, hence they are expatriates. I am not sure that this theory has any grounding, but I have to admit that I have met many expatriates who prove it to be correct.

The point is, though, that I too became an expatriate seven years ago and joined the ranks of a group of people who, running

away from something or not, *do* tend to resist putting down roots. Let's face it, we are the kind of people that IKEA directors love. And we love them. We don't care if it doesn't last, it just saves us the painful task of dismantling the damn thing and packing it into an impossibly small white van three years after we bought it.

Obsessed with my 'theory', I never wanted to buy a house again. Too much commitment ... But even putting any theory aside for a moment, the practice was absolutely a bridge too far.

## Breaking down

Walking into Brico to purchase a simple screw had always been a challenge for me. Any confidence I had in my DIY ability was invariably knocked out of me as I tried to explain what I wanted in a language that was not my own. Actually *buying* a house in another language, therefore, seemed totally out of the question.



But then, as stories often go, I did exactly what I said I would never do. I bought one. And not only that, but I bought a house that would have had the local manager of Brico jumping for joy. Heating, walls, electricity, floors, plumbing... it was strange to be spending more money than at any other moment in my life, only to have this precious object pulled down, thrown into a skip and carted off to the local rubbish dump. But then that's what they say: "sometimes you have to break a story to tell a truer story".

And I guess that's just what we did.

The house had been a family home for close on 50 years and hadn't really changed

much over time. You could still find stickers on doors and nick-nacks around the place dating back to the now grown-up children who had always known the place as 'home'.

And so it was our turn to 'inherit' a plot of land and make our mark. One day we will leave this place, whether in three or 30 years, and another family will move in and build their own story of love, family, possessions, 'stuff', and endless trips to Brico. But for now we have decided to stop running, put down some roots and pass our own 'happy memories' to our children.

So, back to the boxes ...

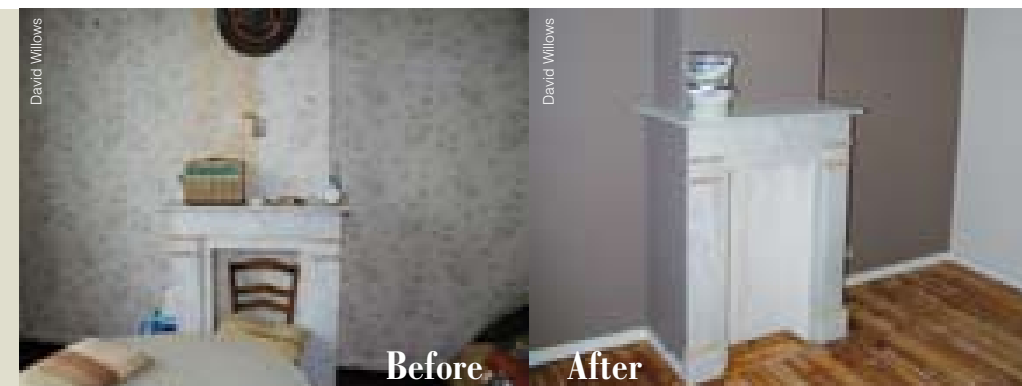
## Renovating for dummies

Ten lessons we learned while renovating our house in Brussels.

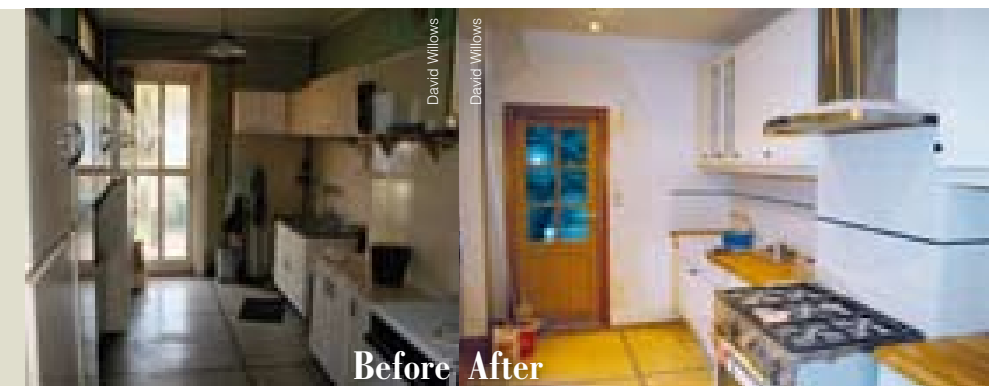
- 1. Love at first sight?** Probably not; it will be hard to see through the faded wallpaper, linoleum-covered floors and leaky roofs. But close your eyes and try to imagine a little.
- 2. Define the project.** Have a clear idea of what you *need* your home to be. Don't design in four bathrooms and then regret not having a spare room.
- 3. Circle the magic number.** Decide on a financial ceiling for the project – and stick to it!
- 4. It's good to talk.** Visit the house regularly with friends. The more you discuss your options, the clearer your ideas on the finer points will become.
- 5. Take care with contractors.** Most of us will need expert help. Ask friends for recommendations. Find someone you trust and who seems to understand your project and constraints.
- 6. Roll up your sleeves.** Don't be afraid of tackling the work yourself. Save money and enjoy learning some new skills.
- 7. Become obsessed with detail.** Remember that if you aren't, then no one will be. So give it all plenty of quality time.
- 8. Stay loyal.** This is one time when a loyalty card with a local DIY store will come in really handy, so get one at the outset.
- 9. Remember your loved ones.** Make a point of forgetting all about it over a romantic meal every once in a while.
- 10. Enjoy the moment.** Let's face it, the ride will be a roller coaster. But the first meal in your new home will make it all seem worthwhile.



Before After



Before After



Before After