

Crumbling walls and leaky roofs make Bob Vila a celebrity

Bob Vila is different from most contractors who specialize in building renovation. When Vila goes to work, millions of people across the country are right there to watch.

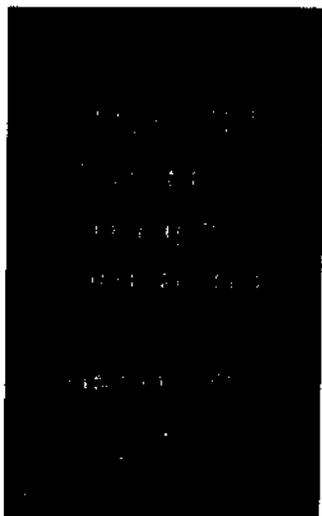
As host of the Public Broadcasting System's (PBS) popular home-restoration program, "This Old House," Vila and his ensemble crew of expert carpenters, plumbers, paperhangers and roofers guide millions of viewers week after week through a haze of plaster dust and a maze of pipes and wiring. The program traces the renovation of derelict homes from their initial state of disrepair to their final rehabilitation. Each week a different aspect of the renovation work is highlighted.

"At the beginning of the program, I had the feeling that the audience was made up of people who were 'old-house people' as well as all sorts of men and women who had nothing to do with old houses but were taken in by the drama. You know, 'Are those guys crazy or what?' 'Can they transform the wreck in thirteen weeks?' Now I think we also hook a group of people in the trades who say, 'Let the kids stay up late tonight. I want them to see what I do.'"

Vila believes that some of the show's appeal is derived from the tight economy and the tight housing market. People are buying down; they are fixing up houses they can afford. Or they aren't moving but are making do with what they have, and renovating what they have to suit their needs. By showing them one contractor's endeavors as he works with subcontractors and other trades people, "This Old House" offers potential home renovators the problem-solving and how-to tactics they'll need to get the job done.

Down-to-earth roofing advice

Vila shows viewers how they, as homeowners, can be a part of the renovation team. He tells people they can get involved in roofing their homes "as long as it does not involve physically climbing up on the roof."



Vila believes the roof is one of the most complex elements of any building and requires a trained professional to make sure it's properly applied. He adds, "Some minor stripping or applying of shingles may be handled by capable amateurs, but for most, it's best if they participate more in the clean-up by hauling the replaced materials off to the dump. That, in itself, can save the homeowner one or even two hundred dollars," Vila claims.

A low-key star

At age 35, Vila is every bit as low-key and down-to-earth on the phone as he is on television. He is straight-forward and approachable, with a kind of gentle humor.



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the Dear Abby of
home repair.

Since "This Old House" first aired in Boston six years ago, Vila has gone from being a contractor, one of hundreds listed in Boston's Yellow Pages, to a prestigious developer and celebrity. Yet even as a well-known television personality, Vila does what he has always loved—designing and building—but on a larger scale.

"I think my thing about houses was always there," Vila says. "I grew up in one in Miami that was not an old house. It was built by my father during World War II, and it was always in the process of being enlarged and repaired."

Among his many building credits, Vila has supervised the upgrading of a run-down urban Victorian; transformed into five condominiums a historic estate that was designed by Henry Richard Hobson; worked a miracle make-over on a 1950s ranch house; and introduced a wine cellar and such amenities as a sauna and media center into an 1850s farm house.

Vila contracts his way to fame

Vila's career can be traced back to the University of Florida, where he studied architecture briefly before switching to journalism. He spent time in the Peace Corps, worked abroad for four years, and moved to Boston in the early 1970s, where he started his contracting business. He lived in relative obscurity until 1975, when he and his wife, a graduate of the Harvard Business School, bought and renovated a "junkie" in a Boston suburb.

That house was written up in the *The Boston Globe Magazine*, a Sunday supplement of the *Globe* newspaper. The article caught the eye of Russ Morash, a successful producer of many fine programs on Boston's public broadcasting station, WGBH-TV. Morash was in the market for a host of a "nuts-and-bolts" program about home renovation. Within a year after Vila and Morash met, "This Old House" was on the air and drawing raves in the Boston area.

The program began to be distributed nationally in 1979. Today, more than 260 public television stations across the country air "This Old House," and Vila's remodeling tips reach an estimated 6 to 7 million viewers.

For the last five years, Owens-Corning has underwritten "This Old House," paying the lion's share of the program's production expenses. The company has also recently begun to use Vila as a spokesperson, although he doesn't help Owens-Corning merchandise specific products. Vila was an integral part of the company's professional contractor workshops. Dur-

ing a videotaped segment of the workshop, Vila gave participating Owens-Corning residential contractors an overview of what homeowners are looking for when hiring a roofing contractor.

Vila is also becoming the Dear Abby of home repair. Each week, more than 750,000 subscribers to the *Chicago Tribune* get the chance to read Vila's advice to homeowners troubled by flaking paint and leaking roofs. Vila's column appears in the paper's home section and features his answers to four or five homeowners' questions.

Restoring confidence

With "This Old House," Vila reaches a broad audience, and he does his utmost to show them the possibilities inherent in their environment. When he travels to home shows, as he does frequently, people want to talk to him, share the details of their latest home project, and shake his hand. He gets the distinct impression that thanks to him, scores of new quarry tile floors have been laid and countless skylights have been installed by virgin do-it-yourselfers.

One couple in Florida told Vila that "This Old House" gave them the courage to cut a house in half, move it and completely renovate it. "They showed me pictures; it was great," he recalls. "Of course, I hear from husbands who wish their wives wouldn't watch the program as well."

But Vila doesn't underrate something he calls "the soap opera element." Viewers watch week after week, just as they do with "Dallas" or "Dynasty," to discover how "this old house" is faring. Can the heating system be installed within the budget? Will the kitchen cabinets fit? Should the sash cords be replaced? How much insulation can the attic take? "There's only one way to find out," says Vila. "Tune in next week . . ."

Some portions of this article were excerpted with permission from the July 1983 edition of Dial, the magazine of public television station WGBH, Boston.