



FLAIR FOR THE FLIP

RYAN BROWN SHARES THE SECRET TO MAKING A SPEC HOME FEEL SPECIAL AND MORE, AHEAD OF LEGENDS 2018

Ryan Brown has seen his fair share of ugly-duckling properties. Crumbling foundations. Soil irregularities. Failing structural systems. Through it all, the 22-year design veteran maintains his trademark cool and pragmatism — two qualities that were often on full display during Bravo's first three seasons of "Flipping Out," filmed with his then-partner, Jeff Lewis. "The nastier the home, the better" became his flipping motto — which has led to stunning before-and-after transformations of more than 25 homes throughout Los Angeles.

Today, the founder and director of Brown Design Group has mastered the art of the flip — and elevated the

design-for-spec process, working primarily with investors at higher price points in neighborhoods like Bel Air. He also continues to create effortlessly stylish, casual and contemporary spaces for private clients, who value his lifetime of experience in construction, residential and commercial design, furniture, real estate and development.

On the heels of the "Flipping for Design" panel he is headlining with Bradley Bayou and Chris Cortazzo of Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage in Malibu during Legends 2018 (May 8–10, 2018), we asked Brown to share his best tricks of the trade.

Tell me about your first flip.

It was about 1996. I was moving into full-time design work at the time, and I had started to flip houses. Jeff Lewis had been doing it as well. We would go on caravan on Tuesdays, and we kept running into each other. We would write competing offers on the same houses. At one point, Jeff said, "This is ridiculous. We're bidding against each other. Maybe we should work together." Our first house was in Miracle Mile on Hauser. A little Spanish style house. We gutted it, like every house we ended up flipping. Our flips were never superficial. We tore it apart, and installed all new plumbing, electrical, new doors, floors, etc. At



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first, we did one at a time. We would fix it up; Jeff would move into it, and then we would take the funds from that and purchase the next one. We usually did one, two or maybe three houses per year. At one point, we were carrying as many as five. That was stressful.

What do you typically look for when you're buying a property to flip?

It ultimately comes down to profit. We go after the houses that nobody wants. A lot of times, people look at the house and say, "Oh, my God, there is no way to fix this house." It usually has major flaws — either systems-wise, foundation or mold — scaring away most buyers, but I know I could make it better. We don't get into bidding wars.

Do you have any Ryan Brown calling cards that you implement in all of your flips?

Our firm tries to do the opposite, actually. We try not to repeat. We don't want a cookie-cutter look. It's more fun and challenging to do something different each time.

How important is it to you to maintain the architectural character of the homes you flip?

We're not going to take a Spanish-style home and make it modern, or we're not going to take a Cape Cod-style home and make it post-and-beam. We do contemporize the homes, as most of these homes have small kitchens and compartmentalized first floors. We will often open up the kitchen, dining and living rooms to create that open feel. People in Los Angeles also want the indoor/outdoor aspect of living. For a classic Spanish home, I might put steel glass doors that open up to the backyard, but we never go in and change the style of the home.

What's your No. 1 rule when it comes to your flip projects?

My only rule before going into a project: Whatever you think your profit is going to be, cut it in half. Everything is going to cost way more than you think. Have a good contingency built into your budget — like 20%. If you don't end up spending that 20%, then great.

Can you tell us about a project that really challenged you?

Every project challenges me. We problem-solve all day long. That's the nature of the business. I recently worked on a house in Hollywood Hills, and I know this area very well, having completed many projects here. But the geology was completely different than anything I'd ever encountered before. When we got into construction and we started digging, the soil was unfavorable. It shut the project down for six to eight months. We had to call in soil engineers and structural engineers, and we had to go back to the city to get re-permitted. There were a number of parties involved. Flipping can be a big juggling act. You have all of these plans in place, and you start moving ahead, and instead of seeing a straight line, you encounter roadblock after roadblock.

Has there ever been an idea that just didn't work on a flip project? Or one that didn't work initially that you were able to turn into something great?

That happens all the time. It happens a lot with stone or some sort of material we've specified. We've picked a certain product for the design, and we're all excited about it, and then we find out that the product has a four-month lead time. So we have to go back and change everything. Nine times out of 10, we find something better.

Are there a few secrets you can impart that flippers may not already know?

I think it's important when you're doing a spec house to have a mix of highs and lows — like combining a J. Crew dress with Gucci loafers. Spend money on the elements that matter most — the things that people will interact with on a daily basis. And by "interact," I mean touch, like hardware and faucets. You want something that's going to last a long time and feels substantial. I would spend less money on things like tile, because you can buy inexpensive tile and set it in a cool or unique pattern.

What's your view on following design trends when you are designing for spec?

You have to ride the line. You have to take into consideration what appeals to the masses. Luckily, I have a number of years under my belt, and I'm pretty confident that I know what products will appeal to people. There was a time when I was afraid to take any sort of risk. Not so much now.

What sorts of design risks might you take now that you wouldn't have taken earlier in your career?

Paint colors are a good example. Color is very subjective. People can have a very strong reaction to color, whether it be paint or tile. A lot of people are afraid to go dark with colors. If you have a small room, people think you can't paint it dark because it will feel smaller. That's not necessarily true. A small room can feel more intimate with a dark color. A lot of spec builders tend to stay with whites, because they are afraid to put any color on the walls. But color can create an emotional experience in a home. One client recently went to a few open houses for spec homes, and it felt like walking into the same house over and over again. My goal is to create a spec home that doesn't feel like a spec home. I want it to feel special.

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