

ROMINA DE SANTIS, technical adviser at Master Builders WA, answers your questions about home building



THE QUESTION

Whilst we are building our new home we are renting in a small house with some furniture in storage and the essentials in our rental. Over the weekend our daughter climbed on a bookshelf that she pulled on herself. Fortunately, something fell out and wedged the shelf above her, so it was a frightening thing for us and her, but she was not hurt.

I have rung my agent, and they have confirmed I cannot secure the furniture to the wall even though I have offered to patch and paint the wall. Are there products I can use to secure furniture? I haven't been able to find anything.

THE ANSWER

Seems a reasonable request. Perhaps try putting your request in writing, as instructions are provided to the managing agent from the owner generally regarding pets and fixing to walls, but a specific request may be more favourably responded to given the circumstances and your offer to reinstate the wall to its original standard.

The main offenders for tipping over are chests of drawers, tables and desks and chairs. Although televisions are becoming lighter, they are still the most common electrical appliance to fall on children.

The unfortunate statistics are that since the year 2000 at least 14 children under the age of nine have died from these types of accidents in the home.

You cannot be watching over children 24 hours a day, so I agree you need to do something. Reasonable safety measures should be taken when arranging and selecting furniture in your home where young children live or visit.

The most logical option looks like it is unavailable, so perhaps consider alternatives to prevent access rather than prevent failure.

The features to start with are safety gates, childproofing the furniture and removing the attractions.

The gates could be used to prevent access to areas that have identifiable dangers.

These gates are available from baby and hardware stores and can be friction mounted so there are no screws or bolts into the walls.

You can gate off rooms or areas from free access by children.

Installing child-resistant locks to drawers prevents them being opened.

This reduces the risk of a child climbing the furniture, preventing it from being put out of balance and tipped over.

Keep toys or items of interest in their reach or away from view so they are not climbing to get to them.

Given recent concerns with the safety of glass, if you have a glass table, you should check the type of glass used.

This should be thick toughened glass that does not break in sharp shards.

Kidsafe WA has some great ideas on safety for kids in and around the home, both on their website and a demonstration house at 140 Railway Parade, West Leederville.

For more information about building, visit the Master Builders A-Z Building Information Directory at www.mbawa.com. If you have any questions about home building or purchase issues, email romina@mbawa.com

THE HENRY PROJECT

Perth-based registered architect Meriam Salama has created a new housing model that aims to foster social connections while tackling housing affordability, Master Builders communications coordinator Sandra Peterson reports.

LOCAL registered architect and founder of a trailblazing initiative called The Henry Project, Meriam Salama is tapping into the sharing economy in a bid to tackle today's housing affordability challenges.

Master Builders recently caught up with Meriam and discovered that The Henry Project was named after philosopher Henry David Thoreau, whose writing questioned societal norms in the 19th century.

"Back then, he observed his neighbours taking on excessive debt to buy farms and then spending their lives working to pay the debt off," Meriam says. "It's a similar situation to the one many Australians find themselves in now."

"If we genuinely want solutions to these big social issues we need to ask if we are prepared to do things differently. Will we keep paying lip service to solutions or are we willing to act by adopting and encouraging new models of living?"

Shared homeownership is Meriam's answer.

Under her model people pool their resources to share ownership of, and responsibility for, one dwelling.

Meriam is currently working with empty nesters who have big homes that they are happy to renovate into separate living quarters and sell off the plan to other like-minded people.

While the driver is to avoid taking on massive debt, The Henry Project isn't just about creating affordable housing, it also aims to boost social connectivity.

"To date, older single women have been interested because many of them feel isolated and struggle with home maintenance," Meriam says.

"Younger people who understand the sharing economy have also been drawn to the concept. You don't have to be best friends, as long as the relationships are clear and well managed. People who feel socially connected reportedly enjoy greater health and well being than those who feel isolated."

Meriam says sharing with multiple people is a great way to address issues of affordability and social isolation, given around a quarter of households are single-person and about 55 per cent have two or more spare bedrooms.

The Henry Project is currently in its pilot phase and an online forum has been launched for people to chat with each other about potential projects.

The contracts are ready to go and The Henry Project even has letters of intent from banks that are willing to provide finance to people who are interested in the model.

At this stage, the process looks like this:

1. Start with an owner who has a home to share.
2. Work with the owner to develop a very clear set of documents that outline all

the important parts of the project. This includes how the house will be altered, how the relationships will be managed and the legal and financial structure, including costs to buy in.

3. Potential co-owners then need to see the house, meet the owner and review these documents. They might have a dinner party or enjoy a gardening session together.

4. Once buyers make an offer and contribute a deposit, the original owner undertakes a renovation project to create private living quarters within the existing dwelling. These may include an ensuite bathroom and kitchenette. Important community aspects are incorporated into the renovation, like shared amenity and places designed for incidental interactions.

5. Signing a co-ownership agreement is very important so everyone knows what's expected and is aware of their financial commitments. One of the biggest questions is, 'what if I want to sell my portion?'

According to Meriam, people who are attracted to this idea tend to have similar values, but it is important to acknowledge there are risks and try to mitigate them.

"The social side will be managed, and we engage facilitators and mediators as required," she says. "People who adopt The Henry Project model don't have to go it alone. We're constantly evolving to respond to what people need as much as saying, 'this is our process'."

Not overcapitalising on the existing dwellings and creating a fair outcome for the original owner is something else Meriam is conscious of when she sits down with people who are keen to explore their shared housing options.

"The style of the home and its location tend to dictate what we'll do renovation-wise," she says.

The Henry Project has a database of buyers looking to buy into shared ownership. Repurposing existing buildings is currently being explored, but building new homes can create the same outcomes.

Meriam says she would like to work with a larger builder who might want to license her model.

Opening a display home with a layout that's been deliberately designed for better social connection (by balancing private spaces with purposeful shared spaces) would be an ideal way to demonstrate the idea.

Builders, designers, and architects wanting to license the model are welcome to contact Meriam and learn what The Henry Project is about.

Visit www.henryproject.com for more information.