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HOUSE & HOME/STYLE DESK

ROOM TO IMPROVE; A Woman in Search Of a Closet Whisperer

By MARCO PASANELLA (New York Times)

IF life were fair, we would all have closets like that of Candy Spelling, the wife of the television producer Aaron Spelling. Built in the couple's mansion in the Holmby Hills section of Los Angeles, her enormous dressing chambers are equipped with motorized racks like the ones dry cleaners use, which instantly summon sables and Valentinos to her side.

Alas, most of us have more in common with Amy Janis, 29, an advertising research manager, who has a 2-foot-by-6-foot closet in the bedroom of her Greenwich Village apartment. Ms. Janis stashes her stuff behind closed doors and dreams of the day she can afford a cedar-lined boudoir the size of a two-bedroom apartment.

Closets may account for only a few square feet of our homes, but they have an outsize grip on our fantasy lives. "Whenever I read shelter magazines, I find myself drooling, not over some divine divan but over the California Closet ads," Paul Rudnick, who wrote the screenplay for "The Stepford Wives," said from his apartment in New York City.

Closets, along with kitchens and bathrooms, now form a holy trinity of domestic obsession. Last year, Americans spent more than \$2 billion on closet renovations, said Helen Kuhl, the editor in chief of Closets, a new magazine devoted to home organization.

But can you really get Candy Spelling fantasies at penny candy prices?

To find out, I asked four closet renovators to propose plans for Ms. Janis's crammed bedroom closet. My goal was to determine which company, if any, provided enough value to induce her to spend money on her closet, instead of on more clothes to stuff inside it.

A closet by one of the cost-conscious renovation companies can come in at under \$1,000, including a free initial consultation. A dressing area designed by an architect can easily set you back \$10,000 (more if you spring for fancy hardware, lots of drawers and few dozen bubinga wood hangers).

California Closets (www.calclosets.com) was among the first companies to offer sleek storage for those doing without an architect, and it showed in the presentation. A company designer came to Ms. Janis's apartment for a consultation armed with brochures, sample materials and handy laminated templates with pictures of hanging clothes to help her envision the finished product. First he sized up her needs -- what in the

closet did she use most often? What precisely was in there? Then he made a sketch showing the location of every sundress and pair of jeans and gave her a price and estimated installation date.

A representative for Clos-ette (www.clos-ette.com) also came to the apartment, but equipped with a pitch instead of pamphlets or a portfolio. Espousing a "holistic" approach to storage, Clos-ette seeks to understand its clients before designing for them. The company develops a scheme, for which it charges you \$200 an hour. You are then given three estimates from custom mill workers to make and install this layout. You select and pay the contractor.

To avoid the intrusion of having a designer come to your home, EasyClosets.com (www.easyclosets.com) offers an online design tool that allows you to plan the closet yourself. Assuming you have the right browser (Safari on my Mac was incompatible), the planner is easy to use.

Of course, the drawback to doing it yourself is that, well, you are doing it yourself. It is the face-to-face meeting that allows a designer to work out what you really need, as opposed to what you think you need. It may not occur to you, for example, to create a place for your vacuum cleaner. Or, in Ms. Janis's case, to provide for that pile of photos lying next those Miu Miu pumps. Anticipating that some of us need to talk to a person rather than tap at a keyboard, EasyClosets also gives customers the option of faxing closet dimensions to its designers. Still, there is no substitute for actually seeing where and how a person lives.

Customers working with the Container Store (www.containerstore.com), distributors of the prosaic Elfa system, generally meet with a designer at one of its stores. The designer I talked to was patient and competent, but shared EasyCloset's long-distance disadvantage: without having been to the apartment, she was hard pressed to imagine solutions to anything I had forgotten or to correct measurements I might have messed up.

Installation is as important as design in determining which supplier works best for you. California Closets uses its own crew, which provides the most streamlined solution. EasyClosets and the Container Store require that you install their shelves and hanging rods, although both companies will refer you to services that will do it at additional cost. And both companies say that you need little expertise to do it yourself, though EasyClosets requires that you cut the metal track and closet rods with a hacksaw, hardly a standard toolbox item.

The Container Store designer demonstrated the installation, making clear that success depends upon choosing the right way to anchor the apparatus into the wall. Plaster, wood, plasterboard and metal studs all require different anchors, which my designer assured me I could "feel" by drilling a pilot hole. I was not so sure. And suddenly I began wondering who was going to help pull out the old shelves, patch the walls and repaint in preparation for that new closet.

Clos-ette is unusual, in that demolition, painting and patching are part of the package.

And now for the results. The companies all had to contend with Ms. Janis's 6-foot-long closet with a 30-inch door opening, an awkward layout that leaves her reaching into dark corners.

Ms. Janis was lukewarm about the ease of EasyCloset, the online company. "I'd like to think I could design it online but it still seems a little overwhelming," she said. "And the installation definitely seems like too much work."

I found the computer-generated layout better than the scheme offered by EasyCloset's house professional, who suggested flanking a small shelving unit with two spaces for hanging clothes at both ends of the closet. That would require Ms. Janis to stand inside the closet to reach the clothes.

Despite a nifty design program and a thorough knowledge of the product, the Container Store designer suggested a rolling wire shelving rack, which Ms. Janis would have to move into the bedroom if she wanted to get to the hamper in the back of the closet.

All the companies tended to focus on shelves and rods and to overlook details. What about a hook for Ms. Janis's boa or a hanging shoe organizer like the one available at Lowe's for \$14.97 (www.lowes.com)?

So who won our competition? Clos-ette's meter, at \$200 an hour, with a typical fee of \$15,000 to \$20,000, knocked it out of the running. (At that price you might consider hiring an architect.)

And of the other three, Ms. Janis liked California Closet's scheme the best. Calling it the "most practical by far," she did not mind that it would cost almost twice as much, \$1,300, and would take weeks longer to install than a similar closet offered by EasyClosets.

But efficiency is not necessarily luxury. Most of companies offer finishes that are good but not spectacular. White melamine, a popular plastic laminate, is inexpensive and durable but is never going to be more than primly utilitarian. Wire shelving may allow air to circulate, but do you really want to store your cashmere sweaters on an oven rack?

Natural wood veneers, like maple and birch are the most handsome. Stained finishes tend to look like fake fancy furniture. Again, Clos-ette, the most custom of the four, allows a greater choice of finishes, as magnificent as you wish.

Also, the California Closets Classic line, EasyClosets and Elfa are all based on a track system in which the whole apparatus hangs on a wall with no back. (California Closets also has a higher-priced "designer" line, which sits on the floor like a piece of furniture.) Although suspended closet storage is sturdy, it looks flimsy.

Truth is, all these companies provide good products, which will help you organize your life, but none satisfies closet lust. I still dream of a cedar-lined, walk-in humidior, and Ms. Janis wishes her closet came with maid service or at least a cabana boy. Maybe we should all live like monks, whose saintliness, Mr. Rudnick contends, lies in their ability to give up all closet space. Amen.

CAPTIONS: Photos: S O S -- Amy Janis tested four renovators for the overstuffed closet in her Greenwich Village apartment. (Photo by Barbara Alper for The New York Times)(pg. F1); SENSIBLE -- California Closets (www.calclosets.com; 800-336-9178) said it could build a closet for Amy Janis in four weeks; \$1,235 includes installation.; HIGH END -- Clos-ette (212-337-9771; www.clos-ette.com) offers a free consultation but after that it charges by the hour for design. Its typical custom closet is \$15,000 to \$20,000, installed.; SELF-HELP -- Easy Closets (www.easyclosets.com; 800-910-0129) would deliver a \$596 closet to Ms. Janis in two days. But she would have to install it herself.; FAST FIX -- The Container Store (www.containerstore.com; 888-266-8246) closet, uninstalled, would be \$442. (pg. F8)

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