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Makeovers Make a Move to Main Street



Matt Peyton/Getty Images

One small civic uplift: Ray Romano, at right, a general contractor who is part of the design team of "Town Haul," helps put up a new store sign in Jefferson, N.Y., called Jeff by residents.

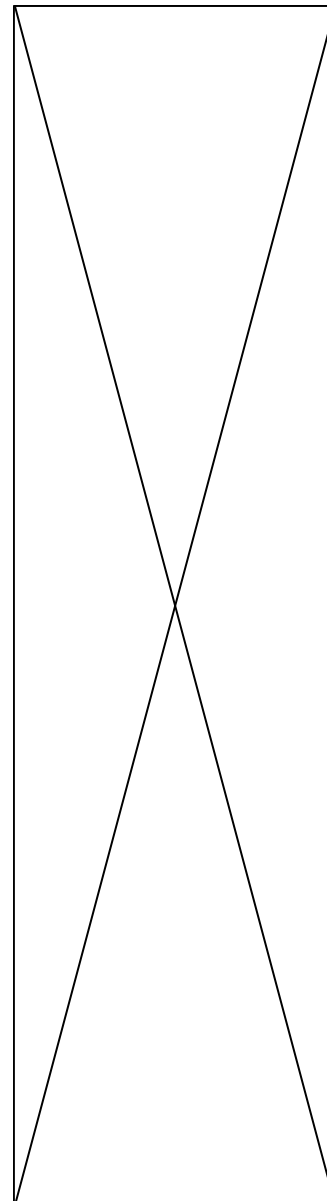
By KARRIE JACOBS

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Correction Appended

LAST fall, the cast and crew of a new reality TV show from TLC that promises to "bring change to communities and their lives" swept into Jeffersonville, N.Y., a Sullivan County hamlet, population 420. Change, in this case, meant stripping vinyl siding and banishing aesthetically questionable signage. "Town Haul," as the show is called, did make some tangible improvements. It left behind a half-dozen businesses spruced up with tasteful new wooden siding, for example, and a single handicapped-accessible apartment. And they left a few things undone - a second-floor center for teenagers, for instance, intended as an example of "the social mission of design," can't open for business until the town installs a \$9,300 elevator. And the improvements might be hard for the casual visitor to appreciate because Jeffersonville, with its cohesive Main Street, handsome whitewashed church and hydro-powered public radio station, was awfully nice to begin with.

But if the show's small team of designers and builders make only a few small steps for civic uplift, the show itself represents one giant leap for reality television (designer division): out of the privacy of the suburban master bedroom and into the public realm. "I'm doing the entire town," Genevieve Gorder, co-creator of "Town Haul," boasts in the show. Ms. Gorder, 30, is a former graphic designer for MTV who was an interior decorator



for TLC's popular show "Trading Spaces."

Ms. Gorder and her crew did not, in fact, do the entire town. They did, however, remake Kelly's Kones. The renovation was the subject of an entire one-hour episode, the first of six. The ice-cream stand, just off Route 52, the state highway that doubles as Jeffersonville's Main Street, used to look pretty much like any soft-serve outlet. The sign that spelled the name out in bright yellow saw-toothed letters had a distinctly amateur look about it. Party lights in the shape of ice-cream cones dangled from the awning, and a plethora of hand-drawn signs obscured the windows.

Now, however, this diminutive building - hardly more than a shed - has been made anew inside and out. It's been repainted a shade of creamy lemon-lime, and given a skillfully crafted sign with circus lettering, planters out front shaped vaguely like cones and, atop the building, a steel-framed deck so substantial that Kelly's could practically double as a heliport.

The series was devised by Ms. Gorder as a public-spirited alternative to the sea of decorating shows that Bob Vila, Martha Stewart and "Trading Spaces" spawned. The idea grew out of her disenchantment with what she calls "ambush design." She's referring to the formula where the homeowner is locked out of the house while his or her den is renovated and then brought back to see what the clever decorators have wrought, and to dissolve into tears of gratitude.

Note that the ratings for "Trading Spaces" crested in 2003. With competition from myriad cable makeover shows like Bravo's "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy," and network variations like ABC's "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition," there was plenty of incentive to add new twists to an increasingly familiar formula. A show seeking out America's ugliest bathrooms is, for instance, another addition to TLC's 2005 lineup.

Nonetheless, Ms. Gorder views "Town Haul" as a sign of new maturity for her chosen genre. "Let's graduate from the bachelors and how stupid you make yourself look or what you dare yourself to do to be on TV," she said in an interview. "As it can be a negative thing, TV can be an amazing thing too, and so powerful, and design is so powerful."

In the show's opening shots, Ms. Gorder; William Moss, a landscape architect; Jimmy Little, a carpenter; and Ray Romano, a general contractor (not the sitcom star), arrive in town and stride down Main Street. Anchored by Ms. Gorder, a telegenic blonde, the crew bears an uncanny resemblance to the Mod Squad. After a series of "Town Haul meetings," open to the public, they embark on a half-dozen projects suggested by the locals.

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The first question that TV viewers might reasonably ask is why Jeffersonville? It looks like so many other towns: snug, bucolic and dotted with the kind of upscale stores that signal the presence of weekenders from New York. In truth, the show's producers scouted some 60 towns within an easy drive from the city, looking for one that was not "too far gone," Ms. Gorder said.

"Jeff," as residents refer to the place, "rose to the top because of the people we found here," says Don Halcombe, TLC's director of communications. Over breakfast at Ted's, the underdesigned Turkish-American diner that is the center of daily life in Jeffersonville, he

reels off the locals who feature prominently on the show, and the list sounds a bit like "Pee-wee's Playhouse": "There's Kelly, and Mayor Ed and Cowboy Bob. It's the larger-than-life characters who live here."

"I wanted a show with soul," says Ms. Gorder, who insists that "Town Haul" is really about people working together. Indeed, as television it's most successful when it shows people working together - but working together badly. Unlike, say, "This Old House," where every surface is planed until perfectly smooth by the steady hand of some would-be Bob Vila, these renovations are gonzo. The old awning is ripped off the front of Kelly's Kones with a pickup truck. Ms. Gorder, dressed fetchingly in knee-high boots and slit skirt, demolishes a plate glass window by repeatedly heaving a sledge hammer at it.

And the saga of Kelly's Kones is one miscalculation after another. The holes dug for the steel posts that will support the deck are too small for the forms they're supposed to accommodate. Mr. Romano is off having a tête-à-tête with the camera when he learns that the impatient cement-truck driver "bailed." His response is partially bleeped out. Then Bill Sattler, Kelly's husband, points out that the steel posts, when they're finally planted in the ground, are on the property of the neighboring establishment, a store called Amazing Bargains that is reviled as a local eyesore.

"I thought he was cool with that," Mr. Romano says, referring to Steve Antoniou, one of Amazing Bargains' owners. Mr. Romano then marches next door with all the self-importance that television confers.

"I'm not trying to cause waves," insists Mr. Antoniou, a 23-year-old with a skinny mustache and an acute sense of real estate values. "But it's the legalities of the situation. It's two feet over."

"Why don't we give you a thousand dollars," Mr. Romano says, producing a wad of bills. When that doesn't work, he tries emotional blackmail on Mr. Antoniou's brother Jimmy. "So the poor kids can't eat their ice cream. Amazing Bargains didn't allow the deck to go."

Meanwhile, Ms. Sattler's teenage daughter, Bridget, who is anointed project manager for the renovation and given a gold hard hat and a whistle, has to show up at her real job, slicing cold cuts at a local deli. The "Town Haul" crew doesn't seem to grasp that she can't spend her whole day on camera. "People don't understand. There's nowhere else for me to get a job," Bridget complains.

Ms. Gorder responds to this onslaught of human interaction by making a speech to the camera: "I just want to do my work. I just want to design the town. I just want Ray to be able to get the buildings up. And I want everyone else to go away."

Of course, it all works out in the end. The episode climaxes with a big "Trading Spaces"-inspired "reveal." A blue curtain marked with a "Town Haul" logo (and the logos of sponsors like Swiffer) is hung Christo-style in front of Kelly's Kones. As it's pulled back, the Jefferson residents look on and Kelly Sattler weeps with joy. "Ambush design" lives.

The townspeople left in reality television's wake were, for the most part, still dazzled by the experience months after the show decamped for another small town. "It was the first time in my life when I was at the right place at the right time," Ms. Sattler said in an interview.

Ed Justus, the town's mayor, who usually spends his days working with his brother and father at their tire shop, says that seeing his town chosen for the show was "like winning the lottery." And you can practically see the stardust in his eyes as he tells his favorite story: "I always take walks at night. I went by the Village Hall and saw a light. Genevieve was all by herself painting. There was no filming, no camera. To me that showed dedication."

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Over at one of the newer stores on Main Street, the exceptionally tasteful Global Home, the owner, Vivian Hung, notes that having the show in town was good for business. Her criticism of Ms. Gorder's design decisions is meted out very carefully. "It's not historically correct," Ms. Hung said in an interview. "It looks a little like a set. I think it will look great on TV."

W. Gregory Brooks, proprietor of the Blue Victorian, an antiques store and gallery that rented a design studio to "Town Haul," said that he's had to defend the show to weekenders friends who believe that the town was "Disneyfied." "My reaction," said Mr. Brooks, is "What's wrong with that?' Disney got it right a lot."

Over at Amazing Bargains, Mr. Antoniou is possibly the only person in the history of reality TV who didn't scream with joy when his new façade was revealed. "They ran out of town pretty quickly. They just packed up and said 'toodles,' " he said in an interview. In his store, which is an excellent place to find an old Jane Fonda exercise LP, Mr. Antoniou stands in front of a display of samurai swords and explains that the deck he was given was not built to code, resulting in problems with the local building inspector. "Rules were bent," he said.

Ms. Gorder shrugs off criticism. "There's going to be people like that in every town." She repeatedly insists that what "Town Haul" did for Jeffersonville was "a gift."

To the suggestion that the show often seems like a documentary about a reality television production team that has bitten off more than it can chew, Ms. Gorder acknowledges, "Jeffersonville really schooled all of us on what to do and what not to do." In its second outing, which just finished taping in Laurens, S.C., the team got even more ambitious. It built parks, tried to mend age-old racial divisions and sponsored a Hootie and the Blowfish concert. "We're running like a finely oiled machine at this point," she says.

Correction: *January 23, 2005, Sunday:*

A picture caption last Sunday about the reality program "Town Haul" misidentified the town that was "made over" in the course of the series. It was Jeffersonville, N.Y., as stated in the article, not Jefferson.

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