

Episode Title: Wendy Lau: The House That Instagram Built

Episode Description:

You're planning on tackling a major renovation or even a weekend DIY project, but where to start? Whether you're buying your first home or living in your forever home, personal touches are what truly make it yours. In this episode of The Better Buy, content creator and avid DIYer Wendy Lau shares how she set her renovation budget, where she decided to splurge and where to save, and how she threw her plans out the window and went back to the drawing board when faced with unexpected costs.

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Music begins

Mélanie Berliet (Voice Over):

Welcome to The Better Buy, a new podcast from Better Homes & Gardens. I'm your host, Mélanie Berliet. Each week, we'll talk to experts about the highs and lows of home ownership, and share stories, advice, and practical tips you can actually put to work in your own space.

In this episode, I'm speaking with Wendy Lau, DIY buff turned content creator who loves warm boho vibes and budget-friendly projects. With over 1 million followers, Wendy describes her style as cottage-core meets grand millennial chic.

Music fades out while Wendy's voice fades in.

Mélanie Berliet:

Thank you so much for being here, Wendy. We're really happy to have you. I'd love to start by understanding what drove you to buy your latest home.

Wendy Lau:

That is a complicated question. I live in Toronto, Canada, so it was not an easy decision to make as many listeners probably will know if they live in a place like Toronto; house prices have been going up. But we saw an opportunity. This is our third home and the second home was a stepping stone for us. And I say stepping stone

in a more emotional way, uh, because our first home we bought, my late mother-in-law was living with us at the end of her life. And when she passed away, The grieving process took us to wanting fresh starts. The second home really was a project that we were doing inside ourselves and also on the home, so it was never meant to be a forever home. So, that was what house two was. And now we are on house three and we were ready. We were emotionally ready, financially ready. We saw an opportunity and that's why we bought this house.

Mélanie Berliet:

And would you say that this third home is your forever home? And if so, what exactly makes a forever home?

Wendy Lau:

I wouldn't say "forever home" because we just don't know. It was what we needed at this time. And now that our community has grown in terms of how we use the home with my family – my extended family has been growing,-- we found that we were hosting 14 to 20 people every week. We could not accommodate that. We converted one of the bedrooms into a sitting room because we were running out of space. That's when we knew: it's time.

Mélanie Berliet:

Wow. That makes sense. How many homes did you see before committing to your latest purchase?

Wendy Lau:

I wanna say probably three dozen. And we did put several offers on several homes. We were very aggressive. We knew we were ready to move and we just got outbid every single time.

Mélanie Berliet:

Wow. Can you speak to me a bit about the heartbreak you faced in losing out on some of those bids that you placed?

Wendy Lau:

Oh, absolutely. I think it was a roller coaster, we were not novices, so we knew what we were getting into. But it was such a competitive market. Everybody was getting in there before, I feel like it was listed almost. And we were really struggling because we did outbid other people and then the sellers would back out. So, we weren't just competing with other buyers, we were also trying to negotiate with sellers and I think everyone saw the market climb and people kept changing their prices even after we signed. That was, I think, the more difficult part of it. It wasn't everyone else around us, it was really when we were dealing with the seller.

Mélanie Berliet:

And did you know from the outset that you wanted a fully renovated home or a fixer-upper, or was that a decision you made during the process?

Wendy Lau:

We always had the mentality of a fixer-upper even in the first two homes because we couldn't afford to be in the neighborhoods we really wanted to be in. So fixer-uppers were always more affordable in the neighborhoods that we were trying to move into. So the three things we always look for is lighting, location, and layout. And of course, buying the cheapest home on the nicest block that we could afford has always been our mantra. And so it was a no-brainer that it had to be a fixer upper.

Mélanie Berliet:

Are there any deal breakers for you and your husband in the house hunting process? And if so, what are those?

Wendy Lau:

Definitely location. We had to be in a radius of about 10-15 minutes from our family and friends, That was number one deal breaker. Number two was lighting, because you can't control the sun. You can spend as much money as you want opening up windows, but if you're facing north or something like that, but you're really desiring that Southern light, there's only so much you can do. So lighting was a big one. And three, the layout. You can take out everything in the interior, but there are just some structural things that cannot be moved or will cost a lot of money to move. And we learned that the hard way before.

Mélanie Berliet:

And you really are a DIY guru, which comes in handy I would think as you approach a fixer upper. Can you tell us some of your very favorite DIY hacks?

Wendy Lau:

One of my favorites were fireplace installs because you can always put an electrical fireplace or if you have an existing one, a lot of the times the homes that we were looking at were built in the '70s, '80s, sometimes the late '90s, and it has that fire engine brick – you know, it was very common. And so, one of my favorite DIYs was actually smearing on speckle or like mimicking mortar and just piping them into the brick lines just to give it that more German schmear look. And we did that in our second home. This home, we didn't need to do that because it was already painted. That was my first foray into a budget-friendly DIY because I think I ended up spending \$80 when we were quoted \$3,000 and my eyes went like, "Why? I could do this myself."

Mélanie Berliet:

(Laughs). I love that. And when you walk into a home, do you just see DIY potential at every corner in every room or does it take you time to figure out what you want to tackle?

Wendy Lau:

I think especially during the house hunting process, there has to be that initial excitement and that excitement comes from the spark of inspiration when you walk into a space and you can visualize just one thing that you're really drawn to that you can really see. So for this home, when we walked in, I was very excited because in the back of the house there was a pitch roof and I could envision a kitchen there. And I clung onto that, and from there, I really kind of worked around everything else. So do I walk into a house knowing what I'm gonna do exactly? No, absolutely not. But when I'm house hunting, there has to be that level of excitement to see potential in.

Mélanie Berliet:

That makes sense. And you spoke a bit about inspiration. Can you tell me more about where you derive inspiration other than empty spaces you're going to renovate? What are your go-to sources for inspiration?

Wendy Lau:

I think being a millennial, Instagram and Pinterest kind of rule our world in so many categories of design and fashion and beauty. And I can say that it was the same for me in terms of home decor. I turned to Instagram and Pinterest very, very early on in my house hunting journey back in 2014, 2015 when we were able to purchase. I looked up affordable, doable projects. And if you remember the craze of 2015 of chalkboard paint and chevron prints, farmhouse decor – that's what drew me into home decor in the first place, because I realized there were resources out there that could teach me how to emulate certain looks on a very affordable

level that I can do myself. So thrifting became very popular. So even now, fast forward seven, eight years later, I still find myself flipping through the virtual pages of Instagram and Pinterest. And obviously we have the coffee books and I love how accessible designers are to us. Like they're not just in magazines. You can go look at their blogs. They teach you how to do what they do. The internet is a wonderful place for inspiration.

Mélanie Berliet:

Have you derived any actual ideas from your Instagram or TikTok audience? Have they inspired you to pursue any specific projects in any of your homes?

Wendy Lau:

I would say they spark my inspiration in different directions. I always start with something. And it's a very collaborative feeling when you have a community who are like-minded, have similar interests. It's impossible not to be inspired. I have the privilege of speaking to a large audience of home decor lovers. So they'll say, "Hey, why don't you do this? Why don't you try that?" So, I started Instagram in 2018, really, with my second home. But I already was at the finish line of the renovation process. And I was using Instagram as a resource to look for alternatives in design that were more affordable. But in this home, I kind of swapped gears in the sense that I'm gonna do a house that Instagram built. I'm gonna turn to my Instagram community and ask for feedback. And it was real-life, instantaneous feedback, and I can throw up polls. We were talking about cabinet paint colors, should I do skylights in the kitchen or should I do beams or should I do both? And there was a debate going on... Everything was very collaborative. Obviously, I always was in the driver's seat, and I got to narrow things down, but it was so great to have someone to throw that to. And that's why I started Instagram in the first place, because nobody wanted to debate with me about the color, like the paint color of white, what shade of white will go in my second home? Nobody wanted to talk to me. So, I went on Instagram and I was like, "I wanna find a bunch of friends who wanna talk about home decor 24/7." And I did.

Mélanie Berliet:

I love that you've really involved your audience in the journey and the process of building your home. I also really responded to a recent video you posted where you made sure to feature every messy place in your home for every pristine area of your home. And I think that's such an important message to drive home, no pun intended, because social media can present a facade of what it's like to live every day. So I wanted to ask you what your take is on that facade of perfection that surfaces on social media.

Wendy Lau:

I love sharing the behind the scenes and I love sharing the messy parts because it is even more inspirational when you know the work that it took to get to that point. And I like showing that because I was somebody who was a user to be inspired and fell into that comparison game. So I was very well aware of how I can be perceived and I really don't want people to ever come on my page and feel lacking or wanting. Um, in fact, I want them to leave feeling welcomed and that they had fun and inspired and I can do that too.

Music fades in.

Mélanie Berliet (Voice Over):

We'll be back with more from Wendy Lau after the break!

Music fades out.

[Mid-Roll Break]

Music fades in.

Mélanie Berliet (Voice Over):

Welcome back to The Better Buy, a podcast from Better Homes & Gardens.

Music fades out.

Mélanie Berliet:

You mentioned also that your husband maybe couldn't perceive the differences in five different shades of white, which I find hilarious and I totally understand. I'm wondering how the home renovation process has impacted your relationship.

Wendy Lau:

(laughs) I'm very, very fortunate. My husband trusts me. He is my accountant in the sense that he tells me the budget, but he's also very willing to splurge when I make a good case of it. We have gotten to a point where we're very good at compromising in terms of home renovations and decor. We understand that sometimes home projects means that we tackle the immediate and important parts of the house projects that we have on our list versus the wants and desires. For example, we wanted to tackle the principal bathroom and also the principal bedroom this year. However, we sprung a leak. So we had to work on the guest bathroom because that was pertinent. I told him what I wanted and he would look for whether it be trades that we're looking for that are in within that budget, or this is the aesthetic I wanna ultimately come up with and he trusts me with that portion. Then he will work alongside of me to be like, "Does this work?" He will bring up not design elements, but more so compromises. Here's like, "The tile shops that we visited before, they were more budget-friendly," or, "Let's negotiate here."

Mélanie Berliet:

I really like that approach of sort of dividing your priorities into "need to have" and "nice to have." In terms of your favorite room in your current house, whether renovated or not, can you tell me which it is and why?

Wendy Lau:

I'm gonna go with the kitchen. I feel like that was the room I was most excited in when I walked into the house and I knew this was going to be the biggest project. This was the reason why we bought the house because I knew I could add value – not just in monetary value, but to maximize the space to use it when we are still living here. But when we leave it, I know that I came in and I made it better than how we found it. So it's more practical. It's located centrally, it's more aesthetically pleasing. It's surrounded by windows, so I really like that.

Mélanie Berliet:

I think a lot of us feel the kitchen is sort of the heart of the home, which makes sense. What should homeowners keep in mind if they're as into entertaining as you are when they're searching for their forever home?

Wendy Lau:

I think material is very important. And if you love entertaining like I do, you know there are certain things that are really nice to have, but they're really tiring to upkeep. One of them is marble material. So it could be in the form of a floor or in a high traffic area like a kitchen. It's great in a bathroom, highly would recommend, especially in a principal bathroom, but maybe not so much if you're entertaining in the kitchen, having marble would be really tough. I knew that going in when I was designing or even house-hunting, because I didn't wanna wipe up after people. I don't wanna be sliding coasters everywhere when you're entertaining.

You wanna be a gracious host, you want people to feel comfortable and at home. And for them to do that, you need to feel comfortable with living as if this was their home. So material, so you're looking at counters, surface areas, and you're looking at flooring. If you have wood floors, you want a higher grade density floor because you don't want it to nick. So that's something I keep in mind, those are like big things material to me.

Mélanie Berliet:

And would you say an open floor plan is also important if you're an entertainer? I know there's, you know, a whole subset of people who are anti open floor plan suddenly.

Wendy Lau:

It depends on what kind of host you are. Do you want everyone to be together all the time? I find that as humans, we really gravitate towards each other. So, a big space, yes. I think as long as you have a table, an island to gather around, I think that's okay.

Mélanie Berliet:

Would you still characterize your aesthetic as "modern granny chic?"

Wendy Lau:

I learned a new term called "cottage-core" that kinda have that granny chic mentality. And we also see a resurgence of grand millennial style, which is lovely, and I find myself being drawn to it. But I think I still have a bit of farmhouse in me because of the affordability and because of the thrifting resurgence that we also see. So I think that those are my roots.

Mélanie Berliet:

What part of the process is thrifting for you? Is it very strategic your thrifting process or is it just something you do once in a while and then incorporate pieces as you go?

Wendy Lau:

I wanna say I thrift every day-

Mélanie Berliet:

Oh, wow!

Wendy Lau:

...only because of the internet. Facebook Marketplace is a wonderful place and the fear of missing out is real when you're a thrifter. And I live by a Restore, so once a week in-person thrifting, and every day when I'm doing it online. I definitely would say that I make room for a vintage piece in any space that I can. I think it makes the space more lived in, it feels there's more character. And I love that juxtaposition of a newer piece or an MCM piece because you see that MCM resurgence in brands that are making furniture. I feel like it's the last era of good furniture that's still very easy to replicate. And we see another trend coming back, the wabi-sabi look. And I'm very excited about that and I look forward to bringing more raw pieces of raw pine, raw oak into my home. And I want to bring back that history and character and charm.

Mélanie Berliet:

I love that determination to incorporate thrifting. And thrifting is, as you mentioned, so much a digital thing. It's no longer hitting up estate sales on the weekends. As you said, mixing new and old and high and low, both really important juxtapositions that you seem committed to which is great. Can you tell me the first thing you notice when you enter other people's homes?

Wendy Lau:

Smell? A scent? We have five senses and the number one said to bring memory and a good impression is smell. If I walk into a home and it smells welcoming because somebody's cooking a meal, I notice that right away. Or if there's a fragrance that they use or, um, flowers that they have on the dining table, it's all helps contributes to that feeling of their home, it distinguished my home from their home and the atmosphere that they're creating. Sometimes it's a lighted candle, a diffuser.

Mélanie Berliet:

And speaking of smell, I would love to learn more about your approach to incorporating greenery, specifically plants – I believe you have over a hundred. Can you talk to me about incorporating plants into the home and why that's important to you?

Wendy Lau:

It's kind of like the- the early 2000 makeup beauty artists who always puts white highlight in the core of their eyes and they go like, "It makes it pop." That's greenery in a home. It makes it pop, it brings life into it. I can never seem to walk into a room if I'm designing it and not leave it without a plant in it. It does not feel complete to me.

Mélanie Berliet:

Can you tell me, is there anything you would do differently if you were searching for The Kwendy Home 4.0? You're currently residing in The Kwendy Home 3.0, your third home. I'm wondering if you have any advice you've learned through multiple home ownership journeys at this stage for listeners.

Wendy Lau:

Always going to stick with lighting, location, layout. But if I had learned anything, it is probably: look for architectural details that you cannot add, that you cannot replicate, potentially, in a new home. So if it's woodwork or millwork or stained glass, you can't replicate that. Sometimes maybe it's the charm of the neighborhood. You can control your home, but you can't control your neighborhood. So, maybe the next time we buy a home in 4.0, I wanna live in a very charming street. I would love that.

Mélanie Berliet:

Is there anything you wish you'd known before undergoing a home renovation?

Wendy Lau:

I wish I knew how much it could cost. I wish I knew how much cushion I need in terms of budget. Back in the day when I was first started renovating and we would plan down to the last dime because you think everything will go well. But you only accounted for maybe one or two mishaps – there's always more than one or two mishaps. It sucks to say this, but things pop up.

Mélanie Berliet:

Yeah.

Wendy Lau:

Leaks pop up, you find mold, you find pest problem. These are all things that I personally encountered

Mélanie Berliet:

And for our listeners who may not be as DIY savvy as you are, what is the easiest DIY project that has the

biggest bang for the buck? What should people do themselves?

Wendy Lau:

Painting is not as hard as you think. Paint is probably the most impact that you can get that's the most cost effective and it's the easiest to pick up. But something else that you can consider is backsplashes, wallpapering... anything wall treatment-wise, it's surprisingly easy to do. So, if you're looking for millwork, bead boarding, wainscoting – that is not as hard as you think, and it's not crazy power tools that you need.

Mélanie Berliet:

If you could give one piece of advice to new homeowners, what would it be?

Wendy Lau:

Outfit your home with things you love to serve people you love. That has been my motto and mantra. And I feel like as long as you come back to that, you can never go wrong. Because if you bring in things you love to serve people you love, how can you go wrong? I know that it might not be to the world's taste. We are learning acceptance as a society and maybe we'll get there with design, too. As long as you are happy in it, that's okay. And I think you have to do that when you present your home to the internet and people go like, "I don't like them." That's okay. If that's not for you, don't do it in your home, but I love it and the people I host feel comfortable with it. I think that's good. That's an A+ design to me.

Mélanie Berliet:

That is beautifully said. The following are sort of, "would you rather?"-style quick response questions... Spacious lawn or large basement?

Wendy Lau:

Large basement.

Mélanie Berliet:

Super high ceilings or lots of natural light?

Wendy Lau:

Lots of natural light.

Mélanie Berliet:

Living near loved ones or living close to work?

Wendy Lau:

Living near loved ones.

Mélanie Berliet:

Neighbors or privacy?

Wendy Lau:

Neighbors.

Mélanie Berliet:

Playroom or game room?

Wendy Lau:

Game room.

Mélanie Berliet:

Fully renovated or fixer-upper?

Wendy Lau:

Fixer-upper.

Mélanie Berliet:

Pom-poms or tassels?

Wendy Lau:

Tassels.

Mélanie Berliet:

Most underrated home tip?

Wendy Lau:

Hmmm... Clean windows make a big difference. And do you know what cleans windows really well, streak free-

Mélanie Berliet:

Tell me.

Wendy Lau:

...that's free? Newspaper.

Mélanie Berliet:

What?

Wendy Lau:

Yeah, I know. My grandma taught my mom and my mom taught me. It blew my mind when I was a kid. She told me, "Clean windows," and she gave me newspaper and she crumpled it up and she's like, "Just scrub."

Mélanie Berliet:

Wait, you don't even moisten the newspaper? You just-

Wendy Lau:

No.

Mélanie Berliet:

This is- this is-

Wendy Lau:

Yeah. You can put a little moisture, but like, you have to try it. I haven't taught anyone else yet.

Mélanie Berliet:

Wendy, you are going to change so many lives with that tip! What does home mean to you in a single feeling?

Wendy Lau:

I'm gonna say love.

Mélanie Berliet:

That's wonderful. Thank you so much for joining us, Wendy Lau. It has been an absolute pleasure speaking with you today.

Wendy Lau:

Thank you so much for having me. It's been a pleasure. I can't wait to hear what everyone thinks about the newspaper tip.

Music fades in.

Mélanie Berliet (Voice Over):

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Music fades out.