

Convict Chronicles: Tip #19

PIMP'N YOUR PAD

By Leo Cardez

Find happiness in cell improvement.

It has come to my attention that my cell sucks. Objectively, that might be too harsh an assessment, but it certainly feels true right now. Don't get me wrong: It has a window; working toilet and sink, albeit old and ugly; and enough space that I would describe as livable. But the many things the cell leaves to be desired -- cheap fixtures, unopenable window, uncontrollable vent, industrial off-white walls, and an ancient tile floor that never quite looks clean and has the amazing magical power of concealing anything that is dropped on its surface -- have become unavoidably obvious to me as I've sat inside of it for the better part of my 30s.

The longer I sit, the more the flaws taunt me. The shallow kitchen/bathroom sink, combined with the low slope of its faucet, makes it impossible to fill my hot pot straight from the tap. The back wall of my desk/kitchen/multi-purpose table, slathered in lead-laden paint, has borne the brunt of gurgling vats of sputtering stir fries, but I failed to notice the unscrubbable spots when I wasn't stuck counting the bricks during COVID quarantine lock-down protocols. The dusty ledges and shelves, unsightly window pane and frame, and stuffed, chipped paint jobs weren't so irritating when they weren't my whole world -- back when I was rarely in my cell too busy working and going to school to notice the decrepit state of my abode.

In May, when the novelty of lock-down cooking began to wear off -- one can make only so many versions of Nachos--my idle hands turned to the problems around me. Armed with only tape and inmate ingenuity, I started small. I raised and releveled a shelf that had been crooked for, by my estimation, since the Reagan administration.

Using tape, paper clips, and plastic sporks cuffed from chow trays I hung up photos, a wall calendar, and a headphone adaptor that had been stashed in my box since I can remember. I scrubbed every inch of my tiny cell with bleach and in the process realized that many of my plumbing components weren't supposed to be the color they'd been since I moved in. I organized my boxes and then re-organized them. I flipped and rotated my bed. I made a make-shift shoe rack using some string and an old laundry bag, even though my shoes weren't getting a lot of use these days.

The sense of satisfaction I got from these projects grew as the weeks went by, along with my belief that I could do pretty much anything given enough time (and enough tape). I couldn't control much in the pandemic, but I could control what happened in my own 50 square feet -- barring a surprise compliance check. As Summer began to creep towards Fall, my ambitions expanded: Get a new bed; make a curtain for my window; make a cover for my toilet. What couldn't I do with an open mind and willingness to endure an inmate disciplinary report?

I was stymied only by the popularity of my impulses. As I searched for tape, extension cords, and even a new shelf; warnings of low supplies abounded. Gathered around a dayroom table a friend of a friend complained that the prison black market appeared to be out of everything, one of the effects of sky-rocketing demand. Hundreds of bored locked-up inmates had simultaneously decided the same thing: If we're going to be stuck inside these human crypts, we might as well make them as nice as possible.

In a weird way it makes perfect sense. Home is supposed to be our safe place, and as a prisoner our home is our cell -- like it or not. Customizing our home to not only look nicer but be more practical is something positive we

we can do right now.

Of all the things that I have done to better my cell, soothe my anxieties, or occupy my time during this pandemic lock-down, nothing has worked quite as well as installing convict surround sound for my TV using two pairs of large Beats-esque headphones and, of course, lots and lots of tape. The project cost me \$75 and took half a day -- it would have been faster if I hadn't needed to learn some tricks for removing my TV's back cover with nail-clipper pliers and loosening a seized nut with a Bic pen. But those roadblocks made it all the more satisfying. Not only does my new sound system free me from being tethered to within 4 feet of my TV, but installing it was a reminder that there are still problems that can be solved by one person wielding the right tool -- or in my case, the wrong one, if you can figure out the magic combination of creativity and effort.

"Humans have to need to be competent, to feel like they have some control over their existence," says Sally Augustin, an environmental psychologist, especially when they're feeling emotionally tender and isolated. "Nesting is another way to describe the impulse that is likely driving many of the newly minted DIYers," she says. It is a desire to eliminate your home's nuisances and aggravations in order to maximize comfort. She explains that humans are constantly sweeping their environment and when there is too much clutter, shapes, and colors we get stressed. This could be a factor for the rise in popularity in Feng Shui and the Kon Mari Method. Studies show humans feel the best in organized, clean, open spaces with soft lines, colors, and textures.

There's nothing inherently wrong with trying to make your surroundings better suited towards your happiness. You're not hurting anyone...except possibly yourself in some random accident.

In fact, in creating a more soothing living environment you are not only finding a way to feel useful you are combatting the depressing aimlessness of being stuck in one of America's many gray bar hotels.

But, there may be an even simpler reason so many of us are investing our time in sprucing up our cells: What else is there to do? The (some-what shaky) conventional wisdom is that inmates can eventually adapt to the mundane life of being housed in a human warehouse. In our shadow world lived on the fringes of society almost all experiences have been precluded and an passport is useless. The truth is, we don't adapt to our environment; we adapt our environment to us. And in that small act of defiance we live beyond these bars.

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Falling Deeper into the Well

