

Fixing pesky plumbing leaks (and other hidden house problems)

FIXING PESKY PLUMBING LEAKS (AND OTHER HIDDEN HOUSE PROBLEMS)



Renovation Scene

This \$200 tool is inexpensive enough to be accessible, yet effective enough for anyone with a serious, hidden leak to diagnose. Lights on the end of the flexible probe illuminate dark, hidden spaces, allowing the camera to transmit an image onto the hand-held screen.

Photo credit: Steve Maxwell

When plumbing leaks and rattling pipes develop out in the open – in an unfinished basement or underneath a sink, for instance – fixing the problem is a straight-forward repair job. But when trouble happens behind finished wall surfaces, that's when you're faced with one of two choices. You either pay a ton of extra money to have someone else poke around and repair the problem, or rise to the challenge yourself, get grimmy and save some serious cash doing the work on your own. It's surprising how well a determined amateur can do armed with the right information and the right tools.

One thing that makes diagnosing hidden household problems like these easier is the appearance of reasonably priced, hand-held remote camera units designed for peeking into small and inaccessible places. One I've used personally is the SeeSnake Micro.

At \$209, this rig isn't cheap enough to buy on a whim, but if you've got a serious, hidden problem to solve, it starts to look like a bargain compared with what you'd have to pay someone to use their own remote camera. Tools like these are also appearing more and more often in rental outlets, too, so check before you buy.

Drill a hole, insert the illuminated probe into the wall cavity, and take a look. It's like having a third eye on the end of the flexible wand. The screen shows everything.

When you've found the source of your troubles, slow down. Tearing into a gyprock-covered wall cavity any old way is easy. What's trickier is a surgical approach that makes repairs as easy as possible to complete later. And this requires some fore-thought.

FIXING PESKY PLUMBING LEAKS (AND OTHER HIDDEN HOUSE PROBLEMS)

Start by finding wall studs using an electronic finder and some 2-inch finishing nails. Determine stud location as best you can with the stud finder, then verify your findings by tapping the finishing nails into the wall to determine actual stud edges.

With your studs marked, use a utility knife and a straight edge to slice the drywall vertically, following a line right in the middle of the two studs that flank the trouble spot. You'll need a good, stout blade, slicing with multiple passes and moderate pressure.

With vertical cuts complete, make horizontal cuts above and below the trouble spot. You may need to increase the height of this opening later, depending on what you find inside. For now just pull out the drywall rectangle carefully. You'll need it later for repairs.

Fix the leak or secure the pipe that rattles loudly every time the water is shut off, then switch into wall patching mode. Since you sliced the drywall right over a stud, wall repair begins by re-securing the old piece of drywall to the studs with screws. Install strips of 1x3 wood behind each horizontal cut, to strengthen the unsupported seams there.

Ordinary drywall compound is good for concealing joints, but before you start, use your utility knife to trim away frayed paper on each side of the joint. Also, create a shallow vee-groove to accept the drywall compound in the joint itself. Apply some mud as neatly as you can with a 4"-wide drywall knife and a 12" plastering trowel, let it dry, sand the blobs off, apply more

mud and continue the process until the area is smooth. It'll probably take three or four mudding/sanding cycles before the repair is ready for painting. Every coat of compound should feather out a few inches more than the previous one, to create a bump free transition between old wall and repair.

The only thing nicer than the neat, clean repair you've completed is the satisfaction of taking care of your own household challenges and saving money while you do.

■ *Steve Maxwell is technical editor of Canadian Home Workshop magazine. Send questions to steve@stevemaxwell.ca. Letter volume may prevent individual response.*

BOSLEY
REAL ESTATE
BOSLEY REAL ESTATE LTD., BROKERAGE



Bosley Real Estate Ltd., Brokerage
ALL OVER TORONTO
www.bosleyrealestate.com