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One Person's Junk is Another's Sanity



BY
KEITH LONG

I sat staring at the architect's drawings for a couple of minutes before I realized the problem. There was the spiral staircase, the bay window, the kitchen island, the French doors. That would be almost everything . . .

"No junk drawer," I said, rolling up the blueprints.

"I'm not sure I follow you," the architect said with a touch of Northeastern roll.

"It's a farmhouse, isn't it? Then it's got to have a junk drawer." The blank look on the man's face further convinced me he was from the eastern seaboard school of architecture. "Look, a farmhouse can't run without a junk drawer. That's where you put all the junk. Do you realize how much junk is generated on a farm?" His blank look intensified. "What else are you going to do with all the stuff you don't need?"

"Throw it away?" the architect meekly asked.

"Oh, yeah, right. No wonder you guys have a garbage problem."

Long Island could learn something from farm architecture. The junk drawer has always had a

favorable impact on the Midwestern environment. Such a drawer is at least as utile as a four-wheel-drive, more entertaining than cable TV, and more time-saving than a PC-compatible computer. No wonder, then, that the junk drawer has evolved into standard equipment for old, and new, farmhouses.

In my family, the junk drawer has for generations resided right next to the back door. That's logical, since all junk on a farm comes through the back door. I know a city family who has a junk drawer in the full bathroom.

"Why'd you put it here?" I asked.

"No particular reason," my friend answered.

"Poor planning," I scolded. "What happens if you have to get some junk and the bathroom is occupied? The junk drawer should always be by the back door."

"Our apartment doesn't have a back door."

Can western civilization have regressed so far?

My parents have a junk drawer whose primary purpose is to contain size "D" corroded batteries which no one can bring themselves to throw away. Ditto the

crabbed-out tubes of Super Glue. And there is Scotch tape, masking tape, army tape, duct tape, tape tape, and a tape of Slim Whitman. None of which work, in my opinion. There are allen wrenches, crescent wrenches, monkey wrenches (small variety), flathead screwdrivers, phillips screwdrivers, short screwdrivers and long screwdrivers. There are two or three screws of assorted types.

All of the hand tools known to (farm) men—save the bucksaw—reside in my parents' junk drawer. And yet—I think it was Kant who set the principle back in the 18th century—there is always a vast scarcity of the particular tool I'm looking for.

"I can't find a small phillips," I exclaim while rummaging through the drawer.

"Look under the batteries," my father instructs. "I have."

Junk drawers are suspiciously similar to the glove compartments of automobiles. In fact, I suspect that if reincarnation is a reality, then highly-moral glove compartments will come back as junk drawers.

While I've made a hobby of examining junk drawers, the mama of all junk drawers belonged to none other than my Papa and Granny Pollard. They developed their drawer from the old school of farm junk. Sometimes, on weekend visits during my childhood, things would dull up around the 10 Texas acres and I amused myself by considering the trigonometric violations committed by the junk drawer, which, of course, was located by the back door. It was also located in the kitchen, proof that my grandparents lived in an honest-to-gosh farm house. All farm houses have back doors opening into the kitchen, another point lost on my architect.

The junk drawer broke all physical laws. Einstein would have been stumped, I'm sure, to find that all the junk, taken out of the drawer, had a gross mass of some three times the volume of the drawer. Go figure.

And it wasn't ordinary junk, either. There were barber clippers, from papa's shearing days. There was a straight razor, which I was instructed never to touch and only did so on those random occasions when no one else was in the kitchen. There was a chalk marker consisting of a string which I could stretch across the kitchen floor and twang with my finger, leaving a straight, blue mark. From papa's carpentering days.

There was a variety of paint brushes, from papa's painting days.

There were Peter Pan lids, and curious-colored rocks, and a fishing plug my granny invented, and Pepto-Bismol tablets, and bobby pins, and cotter pins, and sixteen-penny nails, and a compass that didn't work, and size "D" batteries (corroded), and clothes pins that did work, and black cat firecrackers that might work, and always at least a dozen BB's that could be cleaned and shot, and a squirrel call that didn't work, at least in the original sense, and 14 playing cards, a double-deuce domino, and stuff I still haven't identified.

There was stuff I would bring in off the farm—maybe arrowheads, maybe triangular rocks. Maybe diamonds, maybe quartz. The stuff was worth a good half-hour of perusement every day for a kid like me. At least.

As I grew older, I realized junk drawers weren't just for kids. Adults use them too, but in a different way. A junk drawer keeps an adult's sanity in order. If I ever lose something, I know where to look. The junk drawer. And no matter how intense my search, the junk drawer acts as the organizing element.

If I lose my pocket calculator, for instance, I check the junk drawer. If it is not there, and it never is, then I look in my briefcase, on top of the television, and under my recliner. If I still haven't found it, I check the junk drawer again. "If I have this much junk in one drawer," I reason, "then surely the calculator is around here somewhere." I rummage through the drawer, collecting my thoughts, and then I go look under the seat in my car, in the magazine rack, and beneath my computer. I may have to look in the junk drawer a dozen times before I find my calculator.

The location of my city friend's junk drawer plays havoc with his searches. Sometimes, if he can't get to the junk drawer, he has to organize his search around his car's glove compartment, which is okay unless it's raining.

After I explained all of this to my architect, he rubbed his chin in a knowing way, and bent over his drawings to make corrections. "Gee," he said, "I can't find my eraser."

"I'll find it," I said, smiling and ambling toward the back door. ■