

The Escape Artists

written by Sam Virzi | December 27, 2018



Image Credit: Suburban sprawl in Milton, Ontario from Wikipedia

It would take twenty seven days to watch every episode of *House Hunters*. A 32" LCD television left on 24 hours a day for a month contributes 106 pounds of CO₂ to the atmosphere. It's hard to take this gas out of the atmosphere after it's released. Carbon capture is expensive, doesn't scale up efficiently, and the scale at which we'd have to do it to make a dent in the problems facing the biosphere is nowhere near the scale of what so far has been attempted.

House Hunters is something like an apex polluter. I can't think of an emitter of greenhouse gases like it. The houses people buy on *House Hunters* pump greenhouse gases into the atmosphere for their power and heat. The production of the show itself—equipment the show passes through from the world of mass and volume, transportation of this equipment to the locations where the show is shot, computers that run the software that edits this footage into what we see on the screen—demands a price in carbon the atmosphere must pay. The streaming service where viewers can watch *House Hunters*—Hulu—buys cloud computing services from Amazon Web Service, which relies on data processing hubs to handle surges in network activity, like when the East Coast gets home from work every weekday. These data processing hubs consume as much electricity as a small town. And where do these viewers watch *House Hunters*?

In their homes, heated with fossil fuels, powered with fossil fuels, unless you live in Burlington.

This is true of literally any show you can watch on any streaming service. What makes *House Hunters* different is its position relative to the end of the world. We were supposed to have learned something in 2008. Something happened in the housing market, and the economy vanished like a scroll rolling itself up.

I won't attempt to account for why people are pushing for deregulation ten short years after the catastrophe, because the answer is obvious: racism. *House Hunters* predates and survived the crisis of 2008 for similarly obvious

reasons: its fantasy is conservative. It would be unbelievably dull to watch people do nothing else but decide which house to buy. That's possibly the least interesting thing you could watch on television, other than another person watching *House Hunters*.

Orders of magnitude more interesting is the interpersonal: watching a couple negotiate scarcity. She wants a bay window, he wants a finished basement, they have a budget. To be entertained by a show that introduces a realtor as the solution to the problems of such people, you have to have given up on a few important things, and committed to not examining these things for the 22 minutes *House Hunters* is on.

I'm not saying that's stupid or doesn't make sense. I don't even think it's an irrational desire to watch *House Hunters* in a country where enough vacant housing exists to put a roof over the head of every homeless person. Hell, I did it. I watched. I have seen. I'm least of all interested in saying the obvious. If you want an essay about how *House Hunters* is counter-revolutionary, I'm sorry to disappoint you but I'm sure there's a show you'd rather stream anyways.

If Americans were as outraged as they pretended to be when Fanny May and Freddie Mac got \$187 billion in bailouts, I don't understand how this show was ever possible. Because I don't want to believe the worst about us, but the fact remains: in 1772 episodes of *House Hunters*, three houses are shown and one is bought.

Enough people want to see that that advertisers will still pay rent to HGTV, Hulu or wherever the audience goes to superimpose its fantasy of a happy inner life onto the greige.

But with houses, it's supposed to be different. People live in them. Some of those people must remember when the American housing market destroyed capitalism. We who survived were supposed to have learned. What people are going to find out too late is what happened instead.

*

Watch for the blue check mark and watch out for each other, Jonathan Silver Scott advises his Facebook followers. Somebody pretending to be him tried to get Lisa Hartman to send them money as an advance for an appearance on *Property Brothers*, a real estate reality television show Scott co-hosts with his identical twin brother Drew.

Scott's Facebook post is dated November 20th. Hartman's story was reported on December 11th. Scott doesn't cite a specific victim in his post. The image accompanying the text is of a phony letter with the word 'SCAM' in loud red caps superimposed over the addressee's name. Hartman could have been one of these addressees. She may not have been, but she was a fan of Scott's show, devoted enough to feel disappointed and betrayed when she figured out she was

talking to a scammer.

Disappointment, you know, it makes sense in this context. Any other show like that, it would make sense to feel let down when the prospect of appearing within its fourth wall goes away. Betrayal is what I want to examine here.

What betrayed Lisa Hartman? Why did it betray her?

*

House Hunters sustains its audience's interest by giving just enough human drama for the realtor to resolve with the sale of a house. The realtor provides for their necessities, tranquilizes their anxieties and amuses their boredom. The formula is as reliable as a Latin mass or a rerun of *Network*.

Property Brothers adapts this formula in such a way that the idea of consuming all the episodes of a reality TV show enacting it becomes possible. Whereas Jesus Christ couldn't survive a 27 day onslaught of *House Hunters*, *Property Brothers'* 136 episodes clock in at a relatively meek four days of continuous viewing to complete a binge. The scale of real estate reality TV show shrinks down to understandable, human dimensions when it's the same realtor talking to different clients. *Property Brothers'* major innovation was to make this realtor, Drew Scott, a chromosomally exact twin of the contractor, Jonathan Silver Scott, whose job it is to more closely provide, tranquilize and amuse what the realty and realtor cannot—for a bargain.

With every episode, we see the same process repeated: the brothers meet a couple; we, the audience, meet them, too; we see the couple negotiate scarcity; we see their house chosen, built or rebuilt, and in the end we see them happy and housed as the camera pulls away. Over the course of four days of watching, the difference between *Property Brothers'* treatment of the *House Hunters* fantasy becomes very clear. You would not want to watch the Scott brothers do the same thing 136 times if you weren't interested in their relationship with each other most of all.

What I'd like to know at the beginning of a binge of the complete *Property Brothers* are questions I'm sure the Scotts couldn't answer: Is communion possible? Is camaraderie or solidarity possible? Is it possible to be a person?

I'll be honest, here. I am not the ocean for HGTV's polluted stream. I'm not going to try what I've entertained the thought of actually doing—bingeing either show—but if somebody out there wants to, let this warning in this essay speak to them. We must put away childish things. If you've seen the Scott brothers give an unsuspecting couple a tour of a house that costs more than what they could or would buy, and and then see this same set of identical twins try to win back their clients' trust by remodeling a less-expensive house, and keep watching this show, what information are you waiting for?

To be fair, the Scott brothers have backed off the bait and switch tactics of earlier seasons. Now they'll tell their clients when they're looking at a house above budget. Still, if the Scotts would do such things to clients in the past, and for so many episodes, it is irresistible to think they could do something like that to each other.

This is the cannibalistic logic of the streaming service, the real estate agency, the cloud computing provider, the television network, the natural order of things today. It is what motivates the tabloids to write stories about any possible rift between the Scott brothers, be it divorce or bankruptcy, and it is what motivates the people who buy ads in these tabloids, and what motivates the people sitting on the boards of the companies that get huge tax breaks to film these shows in the places worst hit by the recession.

There are 136 houses and 136 mortgages in America, and 136 episodes of *Property Brothers* which tell more than their story. How much more, I have no idea, and I wish I saw proof somebody is cataloging this vast and immane, interlocking, intewoven contemporary violation of ourselves. I see none. I have none. 136 mortgage payments are due next month, and there are still 8 episodes left this season.

*

Jonathan and Drew Scott are the stars of the HGTV real estate reality TV show called *Property Brothers*. They are the *Property Brothers*, and they are rich.

E! News estimates their net worth to between \$5 and \$10 million, or somewhere between 100 and 200 teacher salaries. Look a little closer at the numbers parading across the screen on any given episode of their show and the picture of their net worth greys out and gets quite grim.

Say a couple comes to them with a budget of \$1 million. Drew shows them a house that's worth \$1.5 million. When the couple balks, the brothers promise to give them everything they see that they like for a bargain.

Drew finds houses under, at and above budget, and the couple settles on the middle option at \$750,000. They buy.

Say Drew's commission on selling this house to this couple is the industry standard 6%. He will make \$45,000, approximately one first-year teacher's salary, on commission for selling this house.

Now the couple didn't get everything they wanted from the more expensive house in the one they bought, and with the quarter million dollars left in their second mortgage, loan, home equity or estate, they want Jonathan to make their open floor plan dreams come true. And Jonathan and his people can do all this and more for \$150,000, which, using the industry standard rule of 1.5, means the renovation will cost his clients \$225,000, which is far enough

below this imaginary couple's million dollar budget to elicit maybe an uncomfortable group hug before the four of them part ways after 43 minutes.

Now, the \$75,000 difference between the cost of renovation and the cost to the Scotts' clients isn't all profit. Flipping houses is expensive. It's not just parts and labor that costs money. You have to pay insurance, accounting, legal fees, licensing, taxes, you have to pay your utilities, you have to pay for advertising and marketing and so on. Let's say the cost of doing business eats up \$30,000.

That leaves Drew and Jonathan Scott \$45,000 of profit from the real estate and \$45,000 from the contracting.

Not all episodes feature a couple parting ways with a million dollars in capital, but it's fair to say that for every million dollars of real estate the *Property Brothers* transmute into fantasy, two teachers could teach for a year off the profits alone.

They make HGTV enough money from advertising and syndication for the network to pay them between \$75,000 and \$100,000 per episode.

It's more than just Jonathan and Drew who get paid. The location director, producers, sound technicians, editors, and CGI contractors all get paid, as well as as many as seven different construction companies the brothers hire to do the work of fixing up each house.

The Scotts make enough money doing this that they can invest their own resources in franchising out their name and formula to seven different shows on HGTV. They are rich.

It's not possible for me to watch the numbers and commas and dollar signs pass over the face of the screen as I watch any real estate reality TV show without wanting to know where all this money comes from, where it's going and how it will get there. Maybe you're like me. Maybe not. If you're reading this in this of all fucking decades, the twenty teens, then you remember what it was like to watch capitalism fail and the state bear the cost.

The state is made of the people. Some of these people are realtors. Why you would ever become a realtor is something I probably won't ever understand. Why the Property Brothers became realtors is a straightforward question with a straightforward answer. Within the fourth wall of their show, the reality of real estate and the reality of reality TV are made one and indistinguishable.

*

Jonathan Scott didn't want to be a realtor at first. His dream was to be a magician.

Before the *People Magazine* covers, the syndication, the franchising, before the bankruptcy, before even the flipping, Jonathan Scott was a boy in a crowd in front of David Copperfield, sitting right in front of where a fan had risen up from the audience, somebody who'd just come to watch but now was part of the trick, part of the show, part of the magic.

"I'm a magician too!" Jonathan yelled. "I want to do what you do!"

According to Scott's memoir, Copperfield replied, "It takes a lot of work."

And it did, and it wasn't enough. The Pacific Coast Association of Magicians awarded Jonathan third place when he competed for Best Stage Performer at the age of 16. Scott took this to be a sign from the magician's Mount Olympus. He made business cards. He legally changed his middle name from Ian to Silver, because "nobody was using Silver" and "holy smokes, it sound[ed] amazing."

He got offered a part subbing in his hands for a lead actors' during a cutaway shot of a quarter rolling up and down his knuckles. Jonathan accepted without knowing how to do this, spent thirty hours practicing, perfected the sleight of hand and never got a call back about the part. The job just vanished.

But Jonathan knew how to roll quarters up and down his knuckles, and new something about showbusiness he hadn't when David Copperfield told him how much work it'd take. He knew he didn't want to do somebody else's magic tricks. He wanted to do his own.

This meant he had to make everything himself. He had to design every illusion and build every set. He had to make the plans himself the same as he'd perform the tricks himself. It was a fantasy of self-reliance dressed up in bomber jackets and tight black pants, and it was doomed.

Toward the end of his teens, Jonathan got a call from a friend of a friend, an escape artist who was also chasing dreams and performing magic tricks. The escape artist asked Jonathan for props and sets he wasn't using, said he needed them for a big show, and promised a cut of the profits once it all went off the way it was bound to. They agreed on a payment plan for the props. Jonathan, ever the perfectionist, flew with his sets and props to make the exchange in person, and the escape artist met him at the airport with his wife and children.

Jonathan went back to his barn. Time passed. The escape artist missed his first payment, then the next one, and the next one. Jonathan eventually wised up and lawyered up. By then his sets were gone and with them went the money the escape artist had made in their sale. The escape artist didn't have any property the courts could put a lien on. Everything he had was in his children's names.

Chasing his dreams and trying to look out for another person cost Jonathan \$80,000. All of this, in the context of his memoir, is supposed to account for why he declared bankruptcy in 1998 at the age of twenty. It's understandable why he would want to explain in cathartic detail something

even the president of the united states gets defensive about if you ask him about it. Beyond his projection of ridicule, this is the story of how he left behind his childish fantasies and entered the adult world of real estate. Now he and his brother co-host a show that entertains the summit of conservative fantasies: homeownership.

Jonathan Silver Scott couldn't get back anything the escape artist took from him. People pretending to be him took something away from Lisa Hartman that can't be given back. But for \$10,000 an episode and the labor of an outside contractor running Neezo Renders software, Scott can wave his hand in front of a green screen, and the HGTV Property Brothers collection will tastefully fill in any void his brother sells with blue checkmark magic.

The Scott brothers were 20 in 1998. They were 30 in 2008. In 2018, they will be forty, and the arctic will never freeze again.