

Property porn didn't invent the pastime of using houses to make money - but it gave it legitimacy

Does anyone still remember Baywatch? The 90s show about LA Lifeguards had tissue-thin plots, utterly unbelievable characters and the most schmaltzy soundtrack ever recorded. When things got really desperate, David Hasselhoff would sing. It was also the most popular TV show in the world, with over 1.1 billion viewers a week.

We weren't tuning in for the story lines. The show's success had a lot more to do with the slow motion sequences of Pamela Anderson or Yasmine Bleeth running along the beach in their swimsuits. It was porn – soft, puerile, slightly more acceptable porn but porn all the same.

People don't watch shows like Baywatch anymore. We like to think we have grown out of them. Instead of lust, we get our kicks from greed and envy.

Since the start of the new millennium, property shows have become our new Baywatch. Glamorous silicone-enhanced Californian models have been replaced by balding estate agents and mumsy interior designers telling us how to make loads of money out of our homes without really having to do anything.

A recent BBC Trust report has finally acknowledged just how mind-numbingly poor these programmes can be, calling them "formulaic and derivative" and demanding they be improved or scrapped within a year.

These shows have been around for a decade or more, so you might have thought the BBC Trust would have realised how bad they were earlier. Programmes based around following a couple around as they shop for a house were never going to win many BAFTAs. Neither, were shows such as Property Ladder, where couples are encouraged by presenter Sarah Beene to decorate their walls with neutral colours to make

them more sellable and viewers are given the opportunity to, literally, watch the magnolia paint dry.

Never once did the likes of Beene point out that the bulk of the increase in property values she liked to boast about came from a rise in land values rather than the application of a tin of Dulux.

Meanwhile Phil and Kirsty over on Channel 4 were pulling in more and more viewers in series after series of a show called Location, Location, Location that never mentioned that the increase in value of these locations might have had something to do with the community as a whole.

The impact of what was eventually dubbed "property porn" was a society that no longer treated their houses as homes but as commodities to be speculated, a means of getting wealthy without working; a society more obsessed about house prices than it was about sex.

Adam Sampson, chief executive of the housing charity Shelter, sees property pornography as just as destructive as the sexual kind: "Pornography can make feelings and behaviours that are otherwise unacceptable seem normal. Property porn didn't invent the pastime of using houses to make money - but it gave it legitimacy."

Baywatch persuaded us it was perfectly OK to watch women converted into silicone-enhanced Barbie dolls bounce along the beach in slow motion. Property porn had a similar effect. Deep down we all knew that there must be something wrong with making money for nothing out of rising land prices but property shows made us feel that it was perfectly normal harmless fun. Perhaps, on reflection, Baywatch wasn't so bad after all.