

work zone ahead

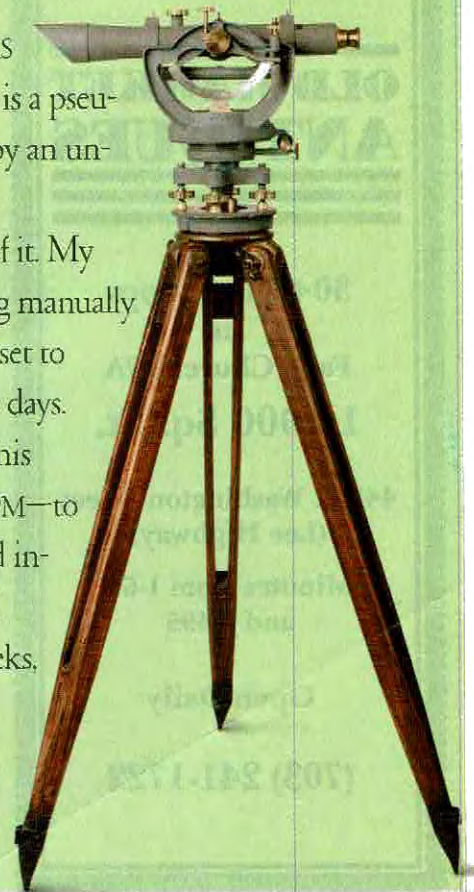
*At Best, Renovation Means Dust, Noise, and Disorder
At Worst, It Can Be Hell. Here's How to Get the House
of Your Dreams Without Its Becoming a Nightmare.*

By DEBORAH KNUCKEY

"I'M OFF TO FLORIDA FOR THREE WEEKS tomorrow," Bob cheerily announced. Bob is a pseudonym for a contractor I usually refer to by an unprintable name.

Florida? This was the first I had heard of it. My shower was disemboweled, my toilet being manually flushed with a bucket of water, and I was set to move into my bathroomless home in two days. After much yelling on my part, Bob and his brother worked "late" into the day—3:30 PM—to get the cistern hooked up, the showerhead installed, and a drop sheet nailed to the wall where there was still no tile. For three weeks, I made do and fumed.

Need a cure for a boring dinner party? Mention remodeling. Conversation will



flow, guests trumping each other's stories.

At best, renovation is expensive and disruptive. At worst, it renders you helpless to a process you can't control, to people who speak a lingo you don't quite understand, to issues minor and egregious that can make your life hell.

The good-help-is-hard-to-find problem is escalating: The refinancing frenzy has meant a remodeling boom. Clients are going hat in hand to tradespeople who may consider their work request—in six months or so.

There are great contractors out there, and there are horrendous ones. Some of us learn the difference the hard way.

LISTEN TO MICHAEL CELENTANO AND his partner, Peggy Scherman. The Capitol Hill twosome's tale started well enough, with a \$325,000 shell and an architect who seemed to know what he was doing. Sure, he was designing on the side while holding down a government contract, but he captured Celentano's vision on paper.

The architect convinced Celentano to include him on the list of bidding contractors. He touted a crew that recently finished a tony condo complex, and only one reference said anything negative, which the architect dismissed as being due to the clients running out of money. Contracts were signed, permits obtained, and an early-September finish date set.

"Once he started and I didn't have the crew I contracted for, I should have shut him down," Celentano says. "But he said, 'Don't worry, this crew will do it even better.'"

Celentano fell into a common trap: trusting a seemingly trustworthy person. It feels awkward to ask a contractor—particularly one with whom you have established a relationship—for proof of licenses and insurance. Celentano could have found out months earlier that the architect lied about being licensed to build in DC.

The first week of September rolled around, and the work was far from done. Celentano and his partner were forced to move from their condo, which they had leased out, into a friend's house and then a corporate apartment, their possessions in storage. Finally, ten weeks after the 15-week job was supposed to be complete, they moved in.

Moving day was rainy—outside and in—and the leaking roof was only one problem. The furnace had not been in-

stalled, some wiring not done, the garage not started. The work was so far from complete that Celentano could not refinance to cover the materials that he had funded on credit cards, and two banks shut his cards down.

Months later, after more missed deadlines and \$40,000 in added costs, other contractors have repaired and finished work that had been left undone. Because the architect was unlicensed, Celentano has to rely on the DC government's fraud provisions for recourse, and legal action is pending.

"Our house was going to be perfect, have everything we wanted. Now it's hard to even live here; we have gone through so much," Celentano says.

Nail Down the Details

WHERE'S NOTHING LIKE A FLUORESCENT STOP WORK notice, a \$2,000 fine, and a nasty call from an inspector to trip up renovations, DC resident Mark O'Donnell found. Despite a contractor's reassurance that no permit was needed to replace a retaining wall, the city thought differently. Not only did the contractor mislead O'Donnell about the need for a permit, he lied about being licensed to work in the District and having liability insurance.

The paperwork of remodeling may seem dull compared to the thrill of finding that perfect faucet, and many remodeling problems start with skipping a step. It is important to check references, to see—not just ask about—licenses and insurance, to have a written contract, and to pull permits.

The contract specifies the scope of work, timelines, and a payment schedule. Attorney Irene Lindner, of Lindner and Associates in DC, says every local jurisdiction has specific requirements for both the form and the amount of the deposit, and a savvy homeowner will confirm that a contractor does not seek more than allowed.

Self-employed DC contractor Rick Sullivan says you should generally expect to pay a third up-front, a third upon substantial completion, and the final third when you are satisfied with the work. The final payment is your greatest leverage if something goes wrong. Your contract can build in an incentive payment for early completion.

It is ideal to get a closed contract—one with a fixed price. But if there is demolition involved, your contractor will need to be able to add in extra work that could be uncovered mid-process. Lindner warns that change orders often lack the detail required—price, for one, and whether the builder will paint and finish the additional

work—and many problems arise from not getting the scope and price of extra work in writing.

Also negotiate a “waiver of mechanics liens” to prevent the contractor from placing a lien on your home—triggering a mortgage default—in the case of a dispute, Lindner says. A contract may instead stipulate that disputes are to be resolved through mediation.

Lindner suggests reading—not just looking at—the insurance documents. “Check that the certificate of insurance is in the exact same name as the contractor’s name on your written agreement.” Call references and ask how they came to know the contractor, weeding out positive references based on personal relationships.

Years after that fiasco with his retaining wall, Mark O’Donnell says, “in this market, it’s tough finding contractors. Just because you are feeling lucky that a contractor showed up, don’t forget basics: references, insurance, and permits.” Now in a new home, he’s redoing his bathroom. O’Donnell chose a contractor who showed up with copies of his license and insurance. “How smart is that guy?” he says.

Getting What You Pay For

THE IMPENDING PITTER-PATTER OF little feet spurred Bethesda residents Laurie and Jordan Goldstein to remodel their 1938 cottage, adding bedrooms and a porch and turning a screened porch into a dining room.

Despite being a commercial architect, Jordan had little experience in residential remodeling. After getting three bids, he chose to go with the cheapest, a Virginia firm trying to get a foothold in Maryland.

“It was only when we were asking detailed questions that we could get a sense of their level of experience, the finishes they were used to using, types of construction techniques,” Goldstein says. Their conclusion: The low bidder couldn’t deliver the contemporary look the Goldsteins were seeking, nor did they understand the regulations in Montgomery County.

They pulled the plug before any money was spent. They returned to a contractor they had turned down, and crossed their fingers that the job could get done before Laurie’s due date in May. The work was wrapped up seven days before the baby was born.



Michael Celentano and Peggy Scherman's renovation was \$40,000 over budget.

It's a Team Effort

ELIZABETH RIVES AND HER PARTNER, Alison Willocks, could have saved some hassles and money had they asked the right questions early on when they renovated their Arlington bungalow.

They selected a well-recommended design/build firm, but problems arose between the designer and the builder—despite hiring them as a team through one firm. Not only did the designer have no idea of pricing—offering an estimate on widening a narrow staircase that was off by \$8,680—but he failed to communicate critical details to the builder. The worst error: windows installed too high to offer a view from the kitchen. Rives and Willocks were forced to split with the builder the cost of seven new windows.

“Check out the relationship between

the designer and the builder,” Rives advises. “They have to communicate well.”

Besides asking references how the designer and builder work together, you might meet with both once you’ve nailed down details with the designer.

Rives and Willocks learned that a team is only as strong as its weakest link. With crews hard to find, their builder had to rely on subpar subcontractors he had never used before. Worst was the drywaller who fit their project between other jobs, working until 8 every night of the Thanksgiving weekend. Not only did he help himself to their beer and make long-distance calls, but his workmanship was shoddy.

Lesson Four: Move Out

NOT INTO BREATHING DUST? FOR a major remodel, moving out may be the best way to pre-

serve your family's sanity.

Living off-site shouldn't mean being away from the site. Visiting once a day is critical for answering small questions, spotting mistakes as they arise, and ensuring work moves forward. Michael Carter, who recently had a quarter-million-dollar renovation done on his Spring Valley home in seven weeks, scheduled a meeting every morning with the project manager.

"As the owner, walk the fine line between being on-site to answer questions and handle changes, while trying not to get in the way of the workmen," he says.

For smaller jobs, living on-site can be a better strategy. I'm not the first person to discover that on the days I work at home, productivity spikes.

Don't Sweat the Small Stuff

EVEN IF ALL THE BIG THINGS RUN smoothly, small problems are bound to arise.

Mark O'Donnell, who is now into his fifth renovation, this time on his home in DC's AU Park, wasn't surprised by a few empty beer bottles he found one day on the job site. What did surprise him was that the drywaller had passed out in the bedroom.

"The guy disappeared the next day with work undone. It was the last I ever saw him. I still have some of his tools," he says. O'Donnell finished the job himself.

In Georgetown, Sabrina Cassagnol learned to accept that residents ignore the EMERGENCY NO PARKING signs, that the District doesn't tow offenders, and that paying contractors' parking fines is another cost of remodeling.

A lot of the stress of remodeling depends on your attitude.

Two different couples interviewed for this article had their ideal piece of granite picked out for their kitchen, only to have it disappear despite a signed contract. For one couple, it was a major stressor. For another, interior designer Skip Sroka and his partner John Kammeier, the granite they ended up with is beautiful, though in a different way.

"Don't get your heart set on something," Sroka advises, "because it will drive you crazy."

Finding Fault

CONTRACTOR-BASHING MAY BE A fun sport, but sometimes the client is the difficult one. Last-minute changes, failure to pick the tile in time, and unrealistic expectations—some problems stem from clients not holding up their end of the bargain.

Michael Carter found that making finish selections early for his Spring Valley home, and being clear about what the contractor was responsible for versus what he was responsible for helped smooth the process. Sabrina Cassagnol agrees: "The best scenario is having appliances and cabinets delivered and ready for installation as soon as the builder is ready to install. There are always delays with those types of things, so order well in advance."

Helping the client set realistic expectations is part of a contractor's role, says DC contractor Rick Sullivan of R.J. Sullivan.

"It is important to remember you are selling people dreams: They dream of this, and pay you to provide it. You have to inform the client if it is costly or not possible." Sullivan has learned to generate a change order every time a client starts thinking of meddling mid-process. Seeing the dollars and delays the changes will entail sometimes makes the initial plans attractive again.

Then there are problems beyond anyone's control, Sullivan says, like a \$50,000 Georgetown job that went over time and over budget due to termites discovered inside the walls. Clients need to accept that remodeling involves some unknowns.

Plenty of do-it-yourselfers have learned the limits of their skills the hard way. One neighbor of mine removed a staircase and wall that they were sure wasn't load-bearing, creating a structural disaster that cost them thousands; another removed the best part of their bedroom ceiling, beams and all, only to discover the cool loft look wouldn't come off in a Federal home.

And me, well, with my Habitat for Humanity training and power tools, I fancy myself a skilled do-it-yourselfer. Yet changing a simple three-way switch led to months of on-off switch confusion in my hallway. Sometimes it's worth spending the money.

When Bob and his brother finished my bathroom, was it worth it? Even if you have a good relationship with your remodeler, DC interior designer Steven Richards likens the process to having a baby: "It's always going to take longer than you think. And it's going to get worse before it gets better. But in a year you'll look back on it and you won't remember it as being as horrible as it really was."

By the end of that first, long shower in my new bathroom, the steam had softened the ill will, and I had scrubbed away months of anger. That's the great thing about remodeling: Once the labor pains are over, you get to sleep soundly through the night.

before&after



This sunroom/master-bedroom addition on the back of Bob Woodward and Elsa Walsh's Georgetown home is the work of Muse Architects. Stephen Muse is



known for seamlessly blending old and new.

tips from the pros

Be Realistic, Set Limits, Then Stop Looking Over Our Shoulder

By SARA WILDBERGER

WHAT ADVICE DO CONTRACTORS, INTERIOR designers, and other remodelers give clients about to go through renovation? Here are tips on making it go smoothly.

■ Washington couples can be so busy that the initial design meeting is the first chance they've had to talk over what they want, remodelers say. "I didn't know you wanted that!" is something contractors often hear spouses say. It's important to get the whole family in on decisions and for partners to understand each other's expectations.

■ While many homeowners fret about the perfect cabinet hardware, it is more important to study how a room is laid out. "They want their children to be able to reach the microwave, or they don't want their elbow to hit the wall when they're at the vanity blow-drying their hair," says Thomas Gilday, of Gilday Design & Remodeling in Silver Spring. A good remodeler should ask questions that get at these things. These issues, if not addressed, last long after

the dust has settled.

■ Be realistic on price and value. "People usually want way more than their budget can afford," says Scott Burr, president of Tech Painting Company in Alexandria. "They want a new kitchen, they think \$30,000 is a lot of money. It is a lot. But they have a vision of what they want, and \$30,000 isn't enough. So when that contractor knocks on the door and says, 'I can do it for \$30,000,' they do it. But if one contractor says it will take \$75,000, and another says \$50,000, the one who says \$30,000, bells should go off."

■ Look for a contractor who will give you his home number, one remodeler advises, adding that he has rarely gotten a call at home. Having it allays the greatest client fear: The Vanishing Contractor.

■ Most contractors know of someone who uses the deposit from this job to pay the bills for another, then gets into a cash flow problem. Before choosing a contractor, ask for a list of major

suppliers; call several to find out whether a contractor is paying his bills. During a project, you can also ask to see invoices.

■ Set boundaries for a building crew. "Having a designated bathroom or porta-potty is essential," says DC designer Heather J. Gradison. "Assigning them a phone line, having a phone line installed, or demanding they use their own phone is important. Having people in and out of your house all day is stressful—not that there's anything wrong with the workers, it's that they have a job to do, and you have a life to live.

"One thing I did on one whole-house renovation—we had a dozen contractors and subcontractors for three months—I fed the workers lunch every day. I would say it added \$1,500 to the job. My kids and I would make sandwiches and cookies, and bring sodas. It established an esprit de corps, it saved the guys money, and it kept them on the job. It gave me a way to check in every day."

Gradison does warn, "If you give them coffee three days in a row, from that point on they're going to expect it."

■ Some contractors say they don't mind picky, micromanaging customers—in fact, they expect them. "Anyone making the kind of money it takes to do remodeling in this town is going to pay attention to detail," Gilday says.

Most contractors are empathetic with clients who have a hard time making up their minds. It has gotten harder to make home improvement decisions in the past ten years, they say, because the choices have increased.

Not everyone sees it this way. "They can't stand back and let people do their jobs," says one designer who blames clients for most conflicts. "They hire all these people, then they ask their neighbors, their hairdresser, their sister-in-law what they think. We're talking big money here, big decisions, so I don't blame them. But I wish they'd realize that it contributes to delays. They don't want to let go of control."

■ While contractors can seal off construction zones from the rest of the house with plastic, Arlington interior designer Michael Roberson says that builders can put in zipper doors—heavy plastic covering with a zipper access. "It's more expensive, but it's worth it: It's tighter than plastic you would push away to walk through," she says. "You can seal off an area more successfully."



Guide to Home Remodeling Searching for Great Pizza
How I Lost 75 Pounds Homes of the Financial Fat Cats

WASHINGTONIAN

May 2003 www.washingtonian.com \$2.95

**WE LIVE IN
ONE OF THE
MOST BEAUTIFUL
PLACES ON
EARTH. ARE WE
PROTECTING THE AIR
WE BREATHE, THE WATER WE
DRINK, THE LAND WE USE?
HERE ARE THE PLAYERS,
THE WINS AND LOSSES,
THE FUTURE**

