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July 15, 1999

## Truly, Madly: Courting the Contractor

By JULIE V. IOVINE

WHEN the tank of Dale Burg's toilet cracked last February, she thought it would be as good a time as any to redo the two bathrooms in her Upper East Side apartment. Like so many other people contemplating modest renovations in these boom times, she was wrong. Four contractors turned her down. The \$17,000 job didn't impress them.

Barbara and Morton Kligerman were planning to spend about \$100,000 to enlarge and add some closets, install crown moldings in a sitting room and fix up a bathroom in their Philadelphia home. They found a contractor who could fit them in at the tail end of the summer season. Then -- a fatal mistake -- they asked if he could delay starting until October so they could take a trip. He said, "Sure." They never saw him again.

"We're not driving the bus these days," said Sara Klar, an interior designer in Manhattan. Finding a contractor who will even return phone calls has become so difficult that she has resorted to supplicating faxes, trying to make each job sound appealing. Even loyal contractors who have worked with her for 13 years are not coming through. "They are so unbelievably busy," she said. "No matter how much I say I need to have this or that done, it doesn't make a difference."

They don't do bids, they resent comparison shopping, they want an architect on the job, they expect generous deposits. One will accept jobs only within walking distance of his TriBeCa home; another won't work for lawyers. If today's experienced contractors grant new clients an audience (more likely, a private cell-phone number), it's at their whim.

Call them Lords of the Drywall.

Just don't try contacting them with a project under \$250,000.

"If one more person calls, I may just hang up the phone," said Steven Lamazor of Taocon Inc., a Manhattan general contractor who turns down calls with new work every day. Mr. Lamazor is running 10 jobs, ranging from a \$150,000 floor installation, for an artist with chemical sensitivities, to a \$6 million conversion of a small apartment building. His 50 employees are working double time, and he's paying bonuses to keep them from moving on to other projects without him. "Clients are begging me, and I'm begging my subs," said the contractor, who is up mornings at 5:30, placing orders, getting estimates.

Residential remodeling has risen nationally by approximately \$4 billion in the second quarter of 1999, up almost 8 percent over the same period in 1998, according to a report by the Joint Center for Housing at Harvard University, to be released on Tuesday. Homeowners spent more than \$93 billion in the last 12 months, an increase of more than 7 percent over the previous period, estimated Kermit Baker, the director of the Joint Center's Remodeling Futures Program. In addition, he said, money spent on kitchen renovations alone increased from \$9.1 billion in 1995 to \$10.1 billion in 1997.

Mr. Baker attributed the spike in remodeling activity to decreases in interest rates, strong home sales, and the recent stock-market gains that "have encouraged many homeowners to undertake remodeling projects that may have been deferred."

Meanwhile, the number of contractors at work appears to have risen only slightly, from about 800,000 in 1992 to an estimated 900,000 in 1997, Mr. Baker said. Add to that material shortages -- primarily of gypsum board, but also of insulation, especially in the Northeast -- and the result is a tremendous squeeze on a work force that is already a famously transient group of largely self-employed crafts people.

Conversations with more than a dozen contractors revealed a heightened sense of empowerment. Several spoke of establishing a threshold for new clients at a quarter of a million dollars (while remaining happy to accommodate repeat clients with smaller jobs) and of accepting only residential work with an architect or designer already attached to the project. To screen calls from old and new clients alike, one Manhattan contractor visits job sites with a cell phone manned by an assistant.

Chris Clark, a Manhattan contractor, slipped into the Nixonian third person as he described his rationale for rejecting homeowners without designers: "Chris Clark can't sit down at the kitchen table with Mrs. Jones, who wants white cabinets, a granite counter and Miele dishwasher. The room for dispute is too vast. Do you know how many white Formicas there are?"

It was no surprise to Olivia Goldsmith, the writer, to learn that most Manhattan contractors have a full dance card. She talked to five of them about moving a few walls in her loft and came up empty handed. "The professionals were very smooth," she said. "They acted as if, if they could book you in the next millennium, you were the lucky one."

Paul Deffenbaugh, the editor of Remodeling magazine, has heard it all before. "There just aren't enough people to do the work," he said. "Americans don't value skilled construction labor, so the younger people coming up don't see it as the career choice they used to." The traditionally cyclical nature of the business also takes a toll, making more experienced contractors wary of overextending themselves, then going out of business when the jobs dry up, as they inevitably will.

Right now, the contractors that people are apt to find for bread-and-butter work -- modest kitchen and bath makeovers, small cosmetic additions -- are more likely than ever to be inexperienced and potentially unscrupulous, said Brett Martin, a spokesman for the National Association of the Remodeling Industry in Alexandria, Va. Mr. Lamazor said: "It's on the smaller jobs that everyone gets started, and that's where new contractors are working out their kinks. I wouldn't want to be doing a \$50,000 job right now."

Mr. Martin's recommendation is to check the most recent references -- a site inspection is preferable -- and to make sure that contractors are licensed where required. (More than 30 states now have licensing or registration requirements for general contractors.) He also advised homeowners never to succumb to luring contractors with more than half of the money up front. "Times like these are a golden opportunity for scam artists," he said.

(In New York City, contractors are required to carry a license from the Consumer Affairs Department; 4,712 do. The department estimates that more than 1,000 do not. In case of trouble, homeowners who have been working with a licensed contractor can file a complaint and may be able to recover as much as 50 percent of losses up to \$20,000 from a consumer affairs trust fund.)

Sometimes, contractors are just two-timers. A fashion designer in Manhattan found out by reading the newspaper that hers was also working on a huge loft for someone else. "You feel like you have your hat in your hand all the time, when in fact, you are paying them," she said. She asked not to be named because her kitchen renovation, begun more than 18 months ago, is still missing some light fixtures and cabinet handles, and she didn't want to antagonize the contractor.

For those willing to adjust, the situation is not as grim as it appears, promised Warren Ashworth, a partner in the architectural firm of Bogdanow Partners Architects and a former contractor. One alternative, he said, is to ask the manufacturers of products being purchased if they have a design staff. Many kitchen, bath and tile showrooms do. The cost may be higher than a general contractor's estimate, but the focused attention of a team

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of workers dedicated to getting the job done on schedule can even things out.

But if you find the contractor of your dreams, Mr. Ashworth had a courtship tip: "Sell yourself," he advised, suggesting that homeowners use such inviting phrases as: "We're not going to change anything in midstream" or "My architect has drawings that make it perfectly clear" and the musical "We can wait."

Once a contractor is hooked, it doesn't hurt to wine and dine him at a nice restaurant for lunch or give a little Christmas bash for the crew. "Things like that help tremendously to show you really care," said Ian Banks, a contractor in Pomona, N.Y.

Ms. Goldsmith solved her problem by calling in a contractor from Vermont who had worked on her home in upstate New York. She put him and his crew up in a six-week rental apartment in Queens for slightly more than \$3,000, including expenses.

Meanwhile, Ms. Burg found that a sense of humor may well be the real key to surviving a contractor impasse. To redo her bathrooms, she finally turned to a Russian immigrant with a can-do attitude but little experience. The results were mixed, but she discovered that a few mistakes only gave the work more personality.

"We were learning together," she said, indulgently, recalling how she once overheard the contractor shouting to his workers, also recent arrivals from Russia: "Sergei! Americans like their tiles to line up, not like in Russia!"

Photos: DON'T CALL US -- Chris Clark, top right, works only through designers; Dale Burg, above, turned to a Russian immigrant to redo her bathroom; Chris Smiley, left, accepts only jobs he can walk to. (Photographs by Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times)(pg. F10) Drawing (Matthew Martin)(pg. F1)

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