

YOUR ^{OLD} House

SPECIAL ISSUE!

100% READER-CREATED!

- Your Projects

Best before & afters
Budget kitchen redo

- Your Problems Solved

Take control of clutter
End contractor troubles

- Your Ideas & Tips

Money-saving strategies
Clever ways with paint & tile



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96

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Houzz.com every
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Couch

On
The
With

This Old House

Wherein our reader therapists listen to your remodel sob stories and offer strategies to avoid that next home-improvement trauma — no inner child involve

Illustrations by John Hersey



MIA contractor? Unrealistic homeowner? Shoddy workmanship? The doctors are in...



WHO HE IS: Rory McCreesh, New York, N.Y.
WHY WE CHOSE HIM: Founder of Duce Construction, Rory made our top 10 list of best contractors in 2005 after coming through on one near-impossible job after another. With 26 years in the home-building business, Rory's the guy you can trust.



WHO SHE IS: Reva Kusumaul, San Gabriel Valley, Calif.
WHY WE CHOSE HER: A contractor turned renovation coach, Reva makes a living listening to both sides. For the last decade, she has taught homeowners and contractors how to make the remodeling process better for both parties through better communication and compromise.



WHO THEY ARE: Ignacio Arribas and Nitsa Lallas, Mill Valley, Calif.
WHY WE CHOSE THEM: They coauthored *The Happy Remodelers*, a book about how not to lose your money, sanity, or marriage during the home-improvement process. Their advice comes from 20 years of working with contractors on their own renovation projects.

NITSA AND IGNACIO: As with any renovation project, there are always delays. You don't know exactly what they'll be, but you can predict that they'll happen: Cabinets won't arrive on time, the contractor will get sick, there'll be bad weather. So starting something seven weeks before your wedding really is a disaster waiting to happen. It's better to wait, and take it one life-changing event at a time.

No Tools, No Manners

Gary O., Reston, Va. | "Even the simplest thing will go wrong. I had bathroom mirrors didn't have a level (I provided mine); they didn't have a level (I provided mine); they didn't have drop cloths. The work began. A drill slipped and made a dent in the mirrors while they were installing. They started to install in the room. As they left, they ran out. The first red flag was no drop cloth. The third was no drop cloth. Shame on you, Gary. You knew exactly what was going on, but had the realistic attitude that you just can't win. If they're so prepared, you have to say, 'I'm uncomfortable with a not having the tools to do this job. I'm going to group and talk to your boss. Maybe you can come back another time.' You could have controlled this."

RORY: Oh, geez, yeah, I would have tossed them out of the house. Now this is a small project, so you're not going to get references, but the contractor should treat your me with respect. Next time a crew walks into your use for the first time, check their manners. Are they courteous enough to ask to take off their boots or shoes? member, you're bringing strangers into your home.

Preacherous Tub

Janey R., Carmichael, Calif. | "We are completing a model and discovered that the plumber installed the [off and hot/cold handle way up on the wall (46 1/2 inches from the tub floor), close to the showerhead. He placed the diverter valve just above the tub filler.

My young daughters will now have to stand up to adjust the temperature. The contractor says it's 'fine' and refuses to correct it even though these were not the specs we agreed to."

REVA'S DIAGNOSIS: If you had plans and the contractor didn't follow them, then should make it right. The standard warranty on a contractor's labor is a year.

But if the shower plumbing was specified, the best way to get the contractor to fix the work is to say, "Okay, what can we do to make this right? What do we need to talk about as far as money goes? Don't yell at him calmly, and he'll be more likely to work with you on a solution.

In this case, the on/off control should have been between 24 and 36 inches from the tub floor, so you'd just have to reach up to turn it. The diverter is



RORY'S DIAGNOSIS: Anytime we keep a wall, we put something on it saying SAVE, SAVE, SAVE. But you should have that information on paper, too. It appears as if no one was following a written scope of work. Truth is, when a crew is doing demo, they want everything to go into a garbage container because, ultimately, what's not trashed is in the way.

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RORY'S DIAGNOSIS: Homeowners need to realize that they pay for expertise and peace of mind. But they should also know what goes into the bid. I itemize mine so it clearly states the cost of a supervisor (if I can't be on-site), materials, the cost to install those materials, and my liability and workers' compensation insurance. I even factor in a fee for a guy who just does punch-list items, such as installing hardware, paint touch-up, and cleanup. That costs more, but it ensures that nothing's missed and that you're coming home to a clean house.

You Get What You Pay For

Joe A., Whittier, Calif. | "Why is it that you go to see a job, show your contractor's license and insurance, give references, and draw up an estimate, only to be asked to lower your price because some guy says he can do it for less? You decline, but after a few weeks they call you again. They want you either to check the work the other guy is doing because it doesn't look right, or to fix what he messed up."

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NITSA AND IGNACIO: The lowest bid doesn't usually turn out to be the cheapest. You have to ask yourself, "Why are they charging less for the same work? Are they using inferior materials, or do they have less experience?" The person bidding might just be a handyman, not a licensed contractor. If he's licensed, he's also insured and has workers' comp to cover him—and you—if something goes wrong. Every state has an agency you can check with to see if your guy is licensed.

Wall Be Gone

Bernie S., Manitowoc, Wis. | "I hired a contractor for an old-barn restoration. Part of the project involved a room with a unique plank-sided wall. First day of work, the contractor called offering to dispose of the wall. I said no—preserving it was part of the restoration. I thought no more of it until I dropped by the barn some time later. The wall was missing! Later discovered that the crew demolished the wall because it was in their way. Then the contractor tried to cover it up with his generous offer."

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RORY'S DIAGNOSIS: The church is somewhat at fault here. They should have spoken to an architect first and had a drawing done. Then they could have said, "Yeah, that looks nice on paper," before calling a contractor. An architect would also have told them they needed a permit. To get one, you, your pro, or an expediter must show drawings, a contractor's license number, and proof of insurance. As for advanced money, generally you pay a 10 percent retainer and up to 30 percent for materials that are needed right away.

Pastor Jose C., roof over a walkway for materials. The fit above the church enforcement stop never pulled a permit, when he pro-

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REVA: After that initial money, develop payment due dates that correspond with the work to be done. Say the contractor has to do rough-in for the plumbing and electrical, and that costs \$3,000. If the

electrical isn't done by the agreed upon date, she doesn't get paid for that portion of the job. With a payment plan, which is spelled out in the contract, you aren't writing checks for work that hasn't been completed. To keep track of material costs, ask your contractor for receipts once the stuff arrives on-site. ■

CRINGE-WORTHY! More remodeling horror stories, and advice on dealing with them, at thisoldhouse.com/homeowner-contractor

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