

# An Amateur Survives Without a Contractor

By John Tytell

Dec. 14, 1978



See the article in its original context from December 14, 1978, Section C, Page 1 [Buy Reprints](#)

New York Times subscribers\* enjoy full access to TimesMachine—view over 150 years of New York Times journalism, as it originally appeared.

[SUBSCRIBE](#)

\*Does not include Crossword-only or Cooking-only subscribers.

## About the Archive

This is a digitized version of an article from The Times's print archive, before the start of online publication in 1996. To preserve these articles as they originally appeared, The Times does not alter, edit or update them.

*Occasionally the digitization process introduces transcription errors or other problems; we are continuing to work to improve these archived versions.*

---

THE general advice on apartment renovation is that whenever you want major work done, hire a contractor and pray. Contractors are notorious for doubling or even tripling the cost of a project, and stories of inferior work, shoddy material and unmet deadlines are an accepted part of the mythology of apartment renovation.

Yet everyone seems to agree that the contractor is indispensable, that the layman cannot successfully organize a renovation without a nervous breakdown, or at least a peptic ulcer. Only a contractor, it is said, has the contacts and experience to purchase supplies that will actually be delivered on time, and the ability to schedule the rotation of demolition removal, electricians, carpenters, plumbers, tile setters, plasterers, painters and floor scrapers for a large-scale renovation.

Well, everyone can be wrong.. Last summer I contracted the renovation of my 1878 co-op floor-through in the West Village. Like any good contractor, my six-week deadline stretched into three months — a period of considerable tension, aggravation and uncertainty — but the work was completed according to my specifications, and I saved at least one year's salary.

Five years ago, the tenants in our two adjoining brownstones formed a cooperative and bought the buildings. That venture proved successful, and my wife, Mellon, and I dreamed of modernizing our floor. Our apartment had the advantage of quaint charm and an exceptionally low maintenance, but our facilities were quite inadequate.

Our bathroom was a claustrophobic horror, with its peeling paint and unspeakably stained fixtures so crammed together that you had to be careful not to fall over the toilet as you emerged from the tub. The ceilings sagged in several

rooms and the walls were disfigured by ominous cracks.

The bathroom was situated in the center of our apartment, and we wanted to double, its size. After many meetings with contractors, who came to estimate costs and from whom we gleaned advice, we decided to gut the floor and entirely redesign the space.

It is common practice for contractors to estimate a major renovation based on a price of \$20 to \$30 per square foot, depending on the quality of the materials and the customer's wallet. For our 1,050 square feet of space the totals ranged from \$20,000 to \$30,000 —true to the formula.

Regardless of what formula is used, estimates are quite useless unless specifically itemized. If a contractor quotes a figure of \$1,500 for plumbing and another wants \$2,500, then the difference can become a way of gauging what is involved. Ask for detailed answers about labor costs and materials. A contractor should be willing to list the specific steps he would take in the project.

Our first hurdle was the matter of faith and finances. The estimates seemed staggeringly high — we had saved \$10,000 and didn't like the idea of huge debts — and we didn't know how to control a contractor's choices over material and execution.

Early in the contractor-interviewing process, we realized that we needed detailed plans as a basis not only for negotiations, but also to clarify our own expectations. With Edward Carroll, our architect, we worked out a design that would use our new bathroom and walk-in closets as a space divider, with a generous living room flowing into a kitchen on one side, and a combination bedroom, den and study on the other.

The architect influenced the project in another important way: It was his suggestion that I serve as my own contractor for the renovation and cut the estimated costs in half. He agreed to make himself available for frequent

consultation, and while we were encouraged, we were still afraid. It would mean finding workers we could trust, coordinating the various trades, and whenever possible purchasing and hauling materials.

We finally got up the courage to begin demolition on July 13, 1977, the day of the Big Blackout. Our goal was to remove a particularly senseless partition in our living room. By evening, before the lights were restored in the Village, we had filled 20 cardboard boxes with plaster and laths.

Our first taste of the difficulties to come was the sour grit of plaster dust. It was everywhere, even between the pages of unopened books. We were shocked at what we had done, and we knew that there could be no turning back now.

We hired a demolition crew for the rest of the apartment and began our evacuation to the floor above that Mellon uses as her photographic studio. Everything had to be removed and stored until the work was completed.

The studio had no running water —no bathroom — but the neighbor on the floor below us was leaving for a twomonth vacation and she allowed us to use hers. Other neighbors were not as understanding, dirt and noise being the chief complaints.

Each day brought its particular crisis, such as when our electrician discovered— after they had been installed — that I had been given the wrong housings for six overhead spotlights.

We had taken care in selecting our workers, and signed contracts with those who were doing major work. Nevertheless, we learned that the true despair of the self-contractor is measured by those occasions when the plumber is due on Tuesday, morning and arrives on Thursday afternoon.

The search for the right workers had its amusing moments. One tile setter under consideration insisted that the curves in the grout line on a job he had done for another client had been the client's design. It was in the pursuit of the perfect

grout, in fact, that Mellon and I discovered the real nitty-gritty of self-contracting: the hours devoted to every detail. We actually spent two full days looking for what amounted to \$12 worth of champagne grouting to match our cream bathroom fixtures.

All of our choices were not esthetic. One disturbing realization was that most prospective workers preferred cash compensation to avoid taxes. I insisted on hiring only those who would accept my personal check so that I would have a receipt in the event of resale, and a token of guarantee. It was dismaying, however, to realize that half the country seemed to be working off the books while the Government blithely deducted almost a third of my pay.

The manner of payment raises the inevitable question of the bottom line. For architectural plans, an entirely new bathroom, for all new wiring and 12 overhead spotlights, for new Sheetrock walls throughout the apartment, for spot plastering on some ceilings and a new plastered ceiling in our living room, a walk-in closet, a new air-conditioner installed in the wall, for 150 feet of bookcases and a fireproof door, for scraping and bleaching our oak floors, for exposing a 25-foot brick wall and two fireplaces, and for a redesigned kitchen with a bar — the grand total came to \$13,898.35.

Some material, like the tile, I was able to get wholesale, but I had to spend a day driving to East Farmingdale, L.I., to pick it up. Lighting fixtures were available in the lighting district on the Bowery at reduced prices. And our architect got us discounts on items like wall hooks and doors.

Since my wife and I were the contractors, we could insist on matters like heavy-duty door hinges, or tiling up to the bathroom ceiling rather than to the standard four feet.

There were some cost overruns, and if you are planning to become your own contractor, allow at least 10 percent for this contingency. We spent an additional \$600 on electrical wiring because we wanted two separate air-conditioner lines,

and we kept adding outlets. Most of the cost overruns were due less to inflation than to changing expectations.

If a worker contracts to perform a given task, he is obligated to finish it at the stipulated price, even if the job takes more time and material than he expected. We were careful about contracts and they became a buttress for our insecurity; although they take time, contracts establish trust in a way no handshake can. The best model contract is provided for a modest fee by the American Institute of Architects at 20 West 40th Street.

Confidence, or the lack of it, and time are what prevent most people from assuming the cares of self-contracting. It is also very difficult to pursue a career while contracting, since being your own contractor requires all of your available energy.

If one calculated the hours we spent interviewing workers and inspecting their work, the hundreds of telephone calls, the trips to showrooms, one might wonder whether our effort was really worthwhile.

The psychic costs for the selfcontractor are clear—frustration, anxiety and the fear of failure—but the rewards may even be greater. For us, it was a period full of the exhilaration that comes with unexpected accomplishment and, of course, the sweet satisfaction of a job completed according to our taste and budget

*John Tytell, when not renovating, is a professor of modern literature at Queens College.*