



LOUIE FAVORITE / SHUT

What lurks in the attic? Nothing, after a contractor working without building permits gutted the Grant Park home of Les and Deborah Scott.

HOW NOT TO BECOME A VICTIM (IT TAKES MORE THAN GARLIC AND A CRUCIFIX)

There is no foolproof method to finding a reliable remodeling contractor — especially since Georgia does not require contractors to be licensed. Neighboring states such as Florida and Tennessee do regulate their contractors.

"Unfortunately, that brings a lot of contractors that don't qualify for licensing in those states here," said Vernon Thomas, executive director of the Atlanta chapter of the National Association of the Remodeling Industry, which is lobbying with the state for a contractor licensing law.

To help homeowners through the difficult process of finding a reliable contractor, NARI publishes a brochure, "How to Select a Remodeling Professional," available by phoning 1-800-611-6274 or by visiting www remodeltoday.com and clicking on the link to the brochure.

Here is some advice from NARI and the National Association of Home Builders:

- ▶ Select a contractor with an established business in your area. Ask friends for referrals or check with the Atlanta chapter of NARI for names of member contractors in your area.
- ▶ Check with the Better Business Bureau and

the Governor's Office of Consumer Affairs to see if the contractor has complaints against him.

▶ Ask about professional organizations of which he is a member. If he is a member of NARI and you have a complaint, you can ask the local chapter to arbitrate your dispute. NARI helps protect the public with its screening process for potential members. Only contractors that pass its background check are eligible for membership.

▶ Ask to see a copy of the contractor's insurance policy, then call the insurance company to see if the policy is current.

▶ Think through your project carefully before contacting a contractor for a bid. Most problems arise from lack of communication or changes after an estimate has been given or work started.

▶ Interview more than one contractor, get bids in writing and ask for references. Ask to see recent projects and as long ago as three to five years to see how the work has held up.

▶ Make sure all structural work is permitted and complies with codes. The NAHB recommends that the contractor secure building permits, the person who purchases them is the contractor of record and therefore liable for the work.

▶ Make sure the contractor you hire provides a contract with his name, address and phone number. It should include start and completion dates, total price, payment schedule and penalties for delays and/or cancellation. It also should include a warranty for materials and workmanship for a minimum of one year.

▶ Negotiate a payment schedule based on benchmarks in the project, such as completion of the roofing and framing. Many firms require some money to begin — one-fourth to one-third of the cost in advance, one-third midway and the balance upon completion. Never pay cash.

HELP FROM TV SHOW

Did you attempt to do it yourself and did it to yourself instead? A new series on DIY Network is coming to the rescue. Producers are taking applications for "DIY to the Rescue," which will be filming in Atlanta Jan. 19-26. To be eligible, homeowners must have tried to do the project on their own and

be able to spend two days working with the experts during filming.

Projects could include reorganizing and renovating closets or garages; repairing walls, light fixtures and floors; updating a playroom; porch or deck repair; replacing windows and doors; and retrofitting a home for the disabled. No kitchens or baths.

Apply online at diyret.com/diyshow. The deadline is Sunday.

—Tina Salcedo

TALES TO BEWILDER FROM

OTHER

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When it comes to horror stories, countless tales to tell. Trudy McGinnis, a certified bath designer, said her worst nightmare won't tell the designer what he can afford.

"They're either embarrassed to say yes or think they can get more for their money, tell us," she said.

McGinnis described a client who said she would spend more than \$20,000 on her kitchen. She designed the space with that budget in mind, but the client ordered cabinets that cost \$20,000 and added such custom (and expensive) extras as special lighting, a cathedral ceiling and skylights.

"I redesigned as we went, with each change she made," McGinnis said. "By the end, I figured I made about \$5 an hour."

Nora DePalma, who owns Building Products, a marketing and public relations firm that focuses on the building industry, said contractors often get a bad rap. "You only hear about the bad ones, but there are a lot of honest, good contractors out there who do really good jobs at a fair price," she said.

Some of the problems readers shared may result from a contractor's lack of business acumen. Danny Feig, Small Carpenters at Large, a 23-year-old in Inman Park, said most renovation costs come up from the banks and may be skimping on the background to run a small business.

"When they don't have money to start to start a new one to pay for finishing the job, how they get in trouble," he said.

Even when a contractor's references are previous work is fine, Feig-Sandoval said the one on which the contractor falls apart.

Working with some clients can be difficult. Quinn, a partner in SawHorse, which has homes in Atlanta for more than 20 years, said the worst nightmare is the client who consults friends after decisions are made, then keeps changing their mind.

Quinn has figured out ways to minimize both sides. He spends a lot of time with clients before contracts are signed. They discuss the project on materials upfront so that the client can move along efficiently.

"Some people want to move ahead of the deadline in mind; others can take a year. Quinn said, "We can work with both, but agree on what we are going to do before we start. It's a little longer, but it's worth it."



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— Trash Sources

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Some of the problems readers shared may result from a contractor's lack of business acumen. Danny Feig-Sandoval, owner of Small Carpenters at Large, a 23-year-old company based in Inman Park, said most renovation contractors have come up from the ranks and may be skilled carpenters but don't have the background to run a small business.

"When they don't have money to finish a job, they have to start a new one to pay for finishing the first one. That's how they get in trouble," he said.

Even when a contractor's references check out and his previous work is fine, Feig-Sandoval said, your job may be the one on which the contractor falls apart.

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"Some people want to move ahead quickly and have a deadline in mind, others can take a year to decide on tile," Quinn said. "We can work with both, but it helps if we all agree on what we are going to do before we start. It takes a little longer, but it's worth it."



Make sure communication is clear on a project, advises Jerome Quinn of SawHorse.