

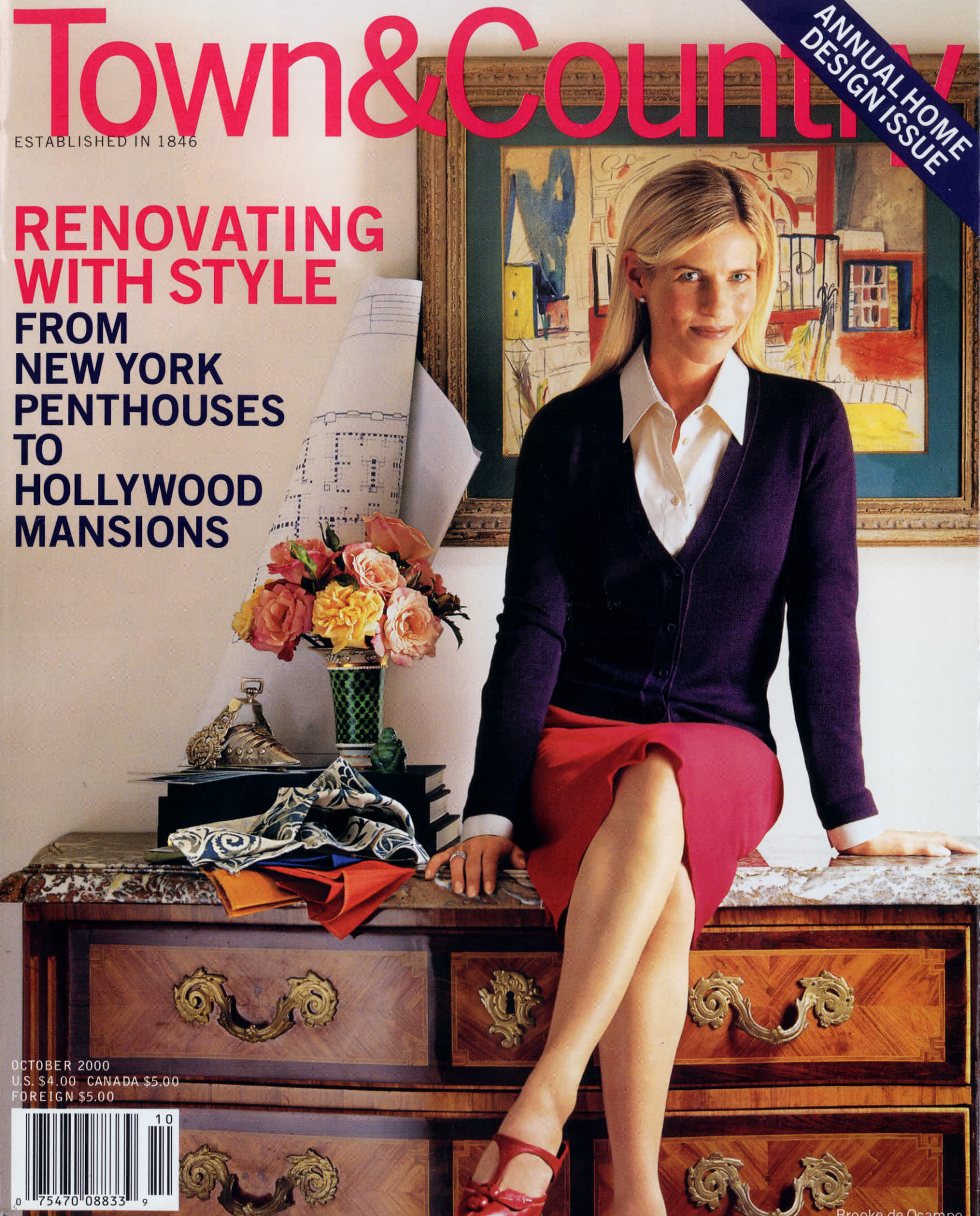
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RENOVATING WITH STYLE

FROM
NEW YORK
PENTHOUSES
TO
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Brooke de Ocampo

White-Glove Contractors

BY ALEXA YABLONSKI

IF YOUR HOME RENOVATION INVOLVES SENSITIVE alterations to a historic landmark, cutting-edge designs dreamed up by a Pritzker Prize-winning architect or old-world craftsmanship long considered a lost art (need to reproduce the *stuc pierre* plastering technique popular in 19th-century French châteaux?), a “good” contractor just might not be good enough for you. Fortunately, there is a breed of builder whose bread and butter is the esoteric, multimillion-dollar custom project: the white-glove contractor, whose business hallmarks—quality, speed and a lavish array of services—are all the more striking in this bull market, when his less-distinguished counterparts are able (and willing) to neglect their clients’ needs.

“There isn’t a day that I don’t feel lucky to have discovered him,” enthuses Bill Simon, Jr., executive director of William E. Simon & Sons, an investment banking firm he cofounded with his brother and his late father, former Secretary of the Treasury William Simon. The object of such gratitude is a Los Angeles-based contractor named Peter McCoy. Simon and his wife, Cindy, hired McCoy Construction five years ago to renovate a rambling 1930s home built in Pacific Palisades by architect H. Roy Kelly. Over the course of eleven months, McCoy explains, “we dismantled everything and put it back together again” in order to preserve the integrity of the grand old house. McCoy’s crew salvaged and restored the original casework and paneling; added a bedroom and a handful of seismically engineered fireplaces; and turned the toolshed into a private chapel. “We’d heard a lot of renovation horror stories,” says Simon. “But from start to finish the project was a complete dream—a good one, not a nightmare.” Simon

even bought T-shirts for the crew that featured an elevation of the estate, plus its freshly minted nickname: Happy Hill.

The price tag for such client satisfaction? Run-of-the-mill contractors customarily charge 10 to 30 percent of the hard costs. White-glove contractors claim they don’t charge more, but—tight-lipped and discreet to a man—they are reluctant to get specific about their fees. McCoy, however, divulges that he has charged less than 15 percent for past projects. Lest you bargain-hunters get too excited: unless a Charles Gwathmey or David Easton is leading your design team, and unless you are willing to spend between \$300 and \$1,200 per square foot, you might encounter problems securing a slot in a white-glove contractor’s schedule.

The Chosen Few That’s because these pros are seasoned at the art of refusal and accept only a precious handful of projects per year. “We tend to *underbook* to leave ourselves available for our clients,” says George Peper, of Los Angeles’s Fort Hill Construction (the company that redid the \$47.5 million Jack Warner mansion for David Geffen). Such clients tend to be loyal customers—and ones with multiple homes and ever-evolving tastes, as well as the power of referral. Project budgets can soar past \$25 million, but requests from favorite clients for smaller jobs are often accommodated. “We’ll do their closets,” says Ben Krupinski—the contractor of choice for Hamptons homeowners—who predicts his clients might soon be *compelled* to think small with the advent of new area zoning laws aimed at thwarting the proliferation of megamansions.

What if you’re a first-time client with a less-than-impressive

budget? Submitting a particularly complex or innovative project might help you procure a spot on a white-glove contractor’s Rolodex: these builders thrive on creative challenges. “In this line of work, I find we can never be sophisticated or timely enough,” explains Scott Williams, of the Dettmers Company, a favorite among the residents of Chicago’s Gold Coast. “Our clients tend to know exactly what they want and can define the scope of a project almost better than we can.”

The clients’ architects tend to be just as demanding—and yet they can be among an elite contractor’s most ardent fans. Jeffery Smith, principal at Smith Architectural Group in Palm Beach, says he routinely recommends that his clients (who have included Liz and Damon Mezzacappa, Terry Allen Kramer and various Lauders) use Hugh Davis, of Davis General Contracting Corporation. “Hugh’s remarkably adept at interpreting drawings, anticipating potential problems and resolving them without compromising design intent.”

Team Leaders White-glove contractors can also faithfully translate an architect’s vision, because they are capable of assembling a team of the very best subcontractors—including HVAC technicians to install state-of-the-art temperature and humidity controls to protect art collections, woodworkers who can furnish boiserie, and ornamental plasterers who know the difference between 18th- and 19th-century putti. Some of these contractors have even forged connections with craftsmen abroad. For an L.A. project he worked on with the late distinguished French decorator Henri Samuel, McCoy flew in cabinetmakers from the designer’s homeland; for another, he imported English wrought-iron specialists to fabricate an elaborate entry gate.

While ordinary general contractors are left to contend with overbooked subcontractors who show up according to their own schedules, white-glove contractors have cultivated strong—often exclusive—relationships with their subcontractors. “We often need to mobilize plumbers, electricians and woodworkers on comparatively short notice,” says David Cohen, president of the I. Grace Company, Inc., a twelve-year-old blue-chip construction-management company in Manhattan. In return for availability and fine craftsmanship, “we provide a stable and predictable source of long-term business,” Cohen explains—obliquely referring to his clients’ deep pockets, which are capable of withstanding just about any stock-market fluctuation.

On-site project managers—assigned to larger projects—carefully monitor the quality of the subcontractors’ work. “We managed a crew of seventy-five to a hundred craftsmen on site, every day,” boasts Cohen about a recent gut renovation of a Park Avenue apartment. The result? An interior rich with hand-laid wood floors, one-of-a-kind decorative iron railings for two new staircases, and finishes that required six different woodworking companies. And it was

A WHO’S WHO

- Davis General Contracting, Palm Beach, FL, (561) 820-1400.
- The Dettmers Company, Chicago, IL, (773) 774-0444.
- Fort Hill Construction, Los Angeles, CA, (323) 656-7425; Boston, MA, (617) 442-6895; New York, NY, (212) 431-7784.
- The I. Grace Company, New York, NY, (212) 987-1900.
- Ben Krupinski Builder, East Hampton, NY, (631) 324-3656.
- McCoy Construction, Los Angeles, CA, (310) 278-3503.
- Xhema Remodeling, Greenwich, CT, (203) 531-6070; New York, NY, (212) 752-0270.

completed on time, without busting the seven-figure budget.

Although conventional wisdom suggests that quality can’t be rushed, speed is precisely the goal of white-glove construction. Some firms, such as Xhema Remodeling in Greenwich, Connecticut, employ in-house carpenters and cabinetmakers who help streamline building and ensure top-level work. But an aggressive approach is the real key to meeting deadlines. “The majority of our projects are fast-track,” says Cohen, a veteran of more than thirty-five large “summer-schedule” projects in Manhattan’s top prewar buildings, where construction is permitted only from May to September (when most residents are likely to be summering elsewhere). Cohen and other like-minded contractors prefer to get involved as early as possible; collaborating with architects and clients during an extensive design phase helps avoid change-orders and costly delays down the road.

Full Service, Redefined If elite firms are at their clients’ sides before ground is broken, they’re there even after the dust has been swept away, when ordinary contractors typically become tough to reach. They boast service departments that specialize in post-project tweaks—adjusting closet rods, patching plaster—and will respond to emergencies like burst pipes. Fort Hill in Los Angeles also monitors its clients’ second (often unoccupied) homes, advising them of peeling paint and loose shingles. Davis General Contracting helps clients close up their houses at the end of Palm Beach’s winter season. I. Grace has even dispatched employees to move furniture for a client’s party.

“We’ll hang pictures for Mrs. Marshall Field,” quips Dettmers’s Scott Williams. “We’ll even walk the dog.” This unstinting can-do attitude may persuade even the most contented homeowners to rethink their surroundings.

Gut renovation, anyone?

CONTRACTORS SPEAK

Seasoned builders nationwide offer a few pointers for a successful renovation project. Ignore them at your peril.

- Building is site-specific. You and your architect must research local restrictions and ordinances before you begin the design process, much less start construction.

- Interview the contractors yourself—don’t leave it to your architect or designer. And make sure the builders you’re

considering are well matched to the job. Have they completed projects similar to yours, whether renovations, restorations or new construction?

- With the help of your architect or designer, estimate how much time your project might realistically take, and allow enough time at the front end for the design process.

- Specify, specify, specify in advance. The more detailed the drawings and specifications

for appliances, tile, stone, cabinetry and millwork, the more money and time you’ll save.

- Be on top of your project, but don’t micromanage the contractor. It will backfire.

- Changes may be inevitable, but some, like substituting hand-made tile for standard, are more expensive than others. Put changes in writing, and make sure the contractor puts all the extras on a separate bill. That way, you can keep track of how

closely he’s sticking to the original budget. The one change to avoid, if at all possible? Changing contractors in the middle of the job. No builder can vouch for his predecessor’s work, so if something goes seriously awry, you basically have to rip it out and start all over again.

- If at all possible, don’t move in before work is completed—you’ll slow everything down (see “Living Through Construction,” page 236).