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Improper Construction

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It always seems like a leap of faith to invite a contractor into your home. They become members of the family -- free to wander through your life.

The Council of Better Business Bureaus reports that many of these contractual families become dysfunctional. Once again in 2006, home contractors were number one in consumer complaints. That puts them ahead of Nigerian Internet scams and 20 pounds-a-week miracle weight loss herbs with names that sound vaguely illegal.

Our particular descent into the seventh circle of renovation began with a dream of restoring an old home -- with a barn -- far from the horns, the crowds and the mysterious blue-green puddles left by the street cleaners of New York City.

I know. Friends don't let friends restore old houses.

But we pressed ahead with confidence because -- we had an excellent architect. Emile was experienced and French.

I want to be clear here that I have absolutely nothing against the French. We should have listened to them before we blew up Baghdad. But after a year with Emile, we've gone back to freedom fries.

Emile, for reasons that remain unclear, by-passed many well-known contractors in favor of Chuck, whom he described as young, hungry and with a sensibility perfect for our needs. We were to learn that young and hungry means inexperienced and willing to pretend to do whatever Emile said.

There were signs.

The first time we came out to the project, Chuck was there with his five kids and two dogs. His wife works and the dogs get lonely. He didn't know the answers to specific questions, but was very good at agreeing with everything we said. Can we put a water park in the basement? No problem.

When we complained about the growing ground cover of cigarette butts, food wrappers, bottles and tinfoil swirling across the property, he said (all together now, all of you who have done major construction) "It's the subcontractors, and I'll be sure to speak to them about it."

There were other issues: hard-core porn downloaded on the DVR (I don't think this is *Grey's Anatomy*); coffee cups on the furniture, and beds where it was obvious someone other than us had caught a quick nap. I try not to think too much about the other possibilities.

As for the job itself, events followed theme. There was paint and spackle that didn't cover nails. Emile said it was part of the "vernacular" of an older home. The first time we turned on our new hot tub, up through the metallic blue waters came an evil grey sludge. Then there was the bath tub that drained water through a light fixture. We were to find out later that the plumber Chuck brought in -- named Branstead -- was known in the local contracting community as Brain Dead.

We were slow to reach final confrontation -- I see a fine line between a hammer and a blunt instrument. But we inevitably told Chuck it was time to pursue other career interests. And just as inevitably, he demanded payment in full because none of this was his fault. As for Emile, he felt terrible about the whole thing and pledged to make it right -- at our expense.

As I sit in our home-in-progress, looking at the remaining nail heads heroically holding out for the vernacular, I am reading about how the downturn in the housing industry is causing great pain in the ranks of contractors.

In fact, the National Association of the Remodeling Industry has launched expanded seminars on good business practices and how to build good customer relations.

Go to class, fellas. And take notes.

Note: all names in this piece have been changed. Bad contractors can have good lawyers