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NEWSLETTER

How to get a high-quality construction job completed swiftly, without hassles, and within budget

by Brendan Hughes

JUST RECENTLY, DURING THE COURSE OF RENOVATION, A BROWNSTONE BUILDING IN LOWER MANHATTAN COLLAPSED, KILLING ITS OWNER.

Investigation revealed that the collapse was caused by an incompetent contractor, faulty workmanship, and negligent planning. The contractor simply tunneled out the underpinnings of the foundation, and the whole thing collapsed like the tower of Babel.

Could this happen to you? Well, with luck maybe it won't. But, with care, you should be able to remove most of the hassle that can otherwise haunt virtually any construction project. The key to a safe and successful project begins with the following eight steps:

1. *Know what you want and begin with a plan.* Retain, or have your contractor recommend, an architect or designer to draft a plan. Attempting to work from notes and drawings on the back of an envelope can cost you a small fortune. Sometimes a large fortune. Don't risk it. Once the job gets going, changes to the plan become costly, so make time to go over all the details of the plan with your architect before it is filed.
2. *Have three separate contractors bid on your project.* Prices can vary considerably. Compare apples with apples: make sure each contractor

is quoting to do exactly the same job within the same timeframe. Time is money, after all, so it is usually more important to have a job completed on time than to accept what might only appear to be the lowest price.

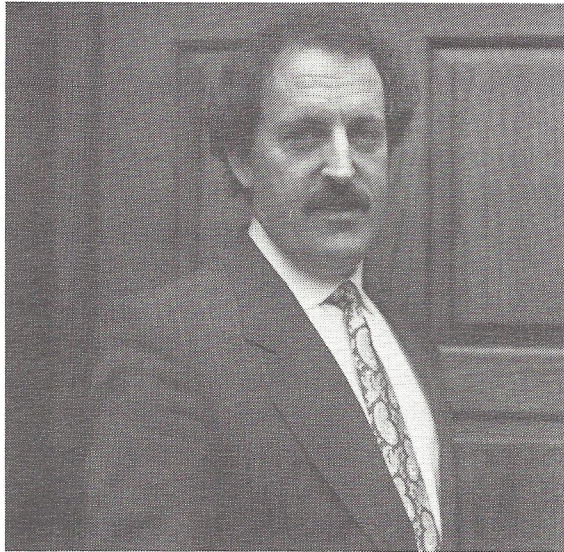
3. *Establish a payment schedule.* The payment schedule is a crucial component of the contract. It is also vital to on-time completion of the job. Usually, a completion date is only as good as the payment schedule. Payment schedules vary. You won't want to pay too much "up front." Equally, however, it is unwise to be a slow payer. If you fall behind, your contractor may simply be unable to afford to finish on time, even though he might like to. Always hold ten percent of the contract until substantial completion, then five percent until final sign-off.
4. *Check your contractor's liability insurance and workmen's compensation.* A good contractor would usually carry at least one million dollars worth of liability insurance. If, God forbid, an accident occurs on your job, you don't want to be the only insurant. It could send you bankrupt.
5. *Strike a good relationship with your general contractor.* If the chemistry isn't right at the outset, then it might be wise to assign the job to another bidder. Problems inevitably arise in construction,

but a good relationship can go a long way towards solving them. At worst, you and your contractor should be no less than friendly adversaries.

6. *Meet the person who would be in charge of your project.* The construction company is only as good as this individual. If he (or she) fails to inspire confidence, then you may want to have the general contractor assign someone else to your job.
7. *At the onset, ensure that your premises are protected from the effects of construction.* Cover your lobby floor, and hang coverings to protect your elevators and public hallways. Arguments concerning damage to these areas are virtually impossible to arbitrate once the job has begun. Best to take adequate precautions.

8. *Arrange weekly meetings with your architect and general contractor.* Regular meetings help keep everyone on track. Keep notes of such meetings. Mention *any* problem as soon as you see it. Never accept dubious workmanship. You are the person who will have to live with the outcome.

Brendan Hughes is the founder of the Hughes & Hughes Construction Corporation. He has been in construction at all levels, from shop floor to boardroom, for twenty-five years. He has supervised all sizes and styles of construction projects, whether private, residential, or commercial, including brownstone renovations, entire building rehabilitations, retail stores and boutiques, restaurants, and corporate offices.



Brendan Hughes, contracting executive, is also a multi-disciplined artisan

How to choose an outstanding general contractor

The five key qualities you must spot

“CONSTRUCTION AND RENOVATION IS ALWAYS A RISKY BUSINESS, FOR THE STAKES—MONEY, TIME, TOIL, OR TEARS—ARE ALWAYS HIGH, NO MATTER WHAT THE SIZE OF THE JOB.”

Something about the sound in his voice tells you that Brendan Hughes, the founder of Hughes & Hughes, knows his subject. This isn't surprising, for he learned his trade in a small down-to-earth Irish village, long before commencing his nearly twenty-year rise to the top in New York.

“The key to an outstanding contracting job lies in choosing an outstanding general contractor,” says Hughes. “And to do this, you should look for what I consider to be the five key qualities of a general contractor.”

1. An upbringing that instilled the work ethic

“First, you want a contractor who enjoys hard work,” says Brendan Hughes. He then points out that the best way to spot a hard worker is to subtly look for someone who was *raised* to work hard as a matter of course.

For example, Hughes himself was born the fifth child of hardworking farming parents in Ireland in 1948. He worked at the family farm as a matter of routine, even as a boy. Then, at fifteen, he began work as an apprentice carpenter and attended technical college in the evenings. Some of his more ambitious peers did much the same. What set Brendan Hughes apart, however, was that whereas his friends attended one class, he enrolled in five! Thus, incredibly, he finally completed apprenticeships in carpentry, brick and block laying, plumbing, ceramic tiling, plastering, and interior decorating.

At the age of twenty-three, Brendan Hughes decided to visit New York. He'd hardly arrived when word came that his father had been fatally wounded while an innocent onlooker to the kind of tragic violence that pervades Northern Ireland.

After much thought, Brendan Hughes decided to make his future in New York. “New York can be a violent town, too,” he says. “But somehow, I just felt I needed a new beginning. And, now that I was entirely on my own, it was sink or swim for me, of course, so I really had to work like hell.”

2. *The ability to lead under pressure*

"A general contractor must be able to lead and to cope with unrelenting pressure. The pressure is part of the job," says Hughes.

Brendan Hughes himself plunged into the New York construction scene, where his many talents won immediate recognition. "I somehow always got put in charge. Nobody seemed to care that I was young and spoke with an almost indecipherable brogue."

"I always liked to work at a fast pace," he remembers. "Here in New York, however, the pressure of meeting deadlines put me on a high. Still does. I focus best and work best under pressure."

"I particularly remember working on the original Studio 54. I ran the carpentering and plastering. The pressure was unbelievable. We worked round the clock to finish the dance floors, the balconies, and the DeeJay booths. I guess you might say I completed my education in pressure on that job. We finished on time, though, don't you worry about that!"

3. *The intelligence to juggle the three P's*

"A general contractor is four parts executive, and only one part tradesman," says Hughes. "His success swings on his ability to think, both for himself and for others."

At age 34, Brendan Hughes was made vice president of operations for a major contracting organization. "Here I discovered the crucial importance of the three P's: Priorities, Planning, and Paperwork."

"To do a great job, and to finish on time and within budget, you've got to plan carefully, set priorities, and pay attention to paperwork."

"You can lose vital time, simply by failing to initiate a purchase order. It is possible to reach the end of a job and not be able to complete on time because some clerk forgot to issue a written confirmation of the for-custom windows. A mistake like that could lose you months. It might even send you

bankrupt. Don't forget, it takes a long time to build a good reputation, but only one careless slip to destroy it."

4. *Commitment to—and from—a happy clientele*

Now forty, and married with a wife and four kids, Brendan Hughes is in his own business and eager as ever to please the customer. "I know my own goals, and how I hope to achieve them. 'Never get too big to think small.' That's my credo. Give top quality, keen prices, and meet deadlines."

Customers attest to Hughes' ability to make good on his aims. "He ran the major renovation of my four-story Manhattan brownstone, says prominent international consultant and author of *Secrets of a Corporate Headhunter*, John Wareham. "Fast completion was crucial because I both live and run my business in the same building. Brendan was always on top of everything. Nothing was ever too much trouble for him. And you never quite knew when he might suddenly take off his coat, roll up his sleeves, and pitch in with a hammer or saw—or whatever!"

Others say much the same. "Brendan is a real dynamo," says designer John Laferlita, whose Manhattan design firm specializes in restaurants and fancy interiors. "We've worked with Brendan a lot. He does a real artisan's job. I particularly respect his intelligence and honesty. If he says a thing, you know it's true. You never have to check his word."

5. *An inner commitment to excellence*

Brendan Hughes likes it when people say nice things about him. Finally, however, because he really *is* an artisan, he works to satisfy his own internal standards, rather than to court praise. Perhaps this is why he's now heads his own organization. He seems to agree: "My father owned and ran his own farm, and he loved his work. I suppose in the back of my head I always knew I'd strike out on my own one day, too." □