

# A Tale of Two (Self-Proclaimed) Contractors

by Harris Hyman, P. E.

John and Marsha (their names have been changed to protect the innocent) are a pleasant, hard-working couple who run an attractive, spottless motel in a resort area with a wonderful view.

They have a class operation and have been rewarded with good business and the opportunity for expansion. So this year they decided to build another unit.

Since they were quite knowledgeable about motel operations, they figured that all they needed to do was to sketch something out and take it to a drafter. Then one of their relatives who was a carpenter could build it at the end of his construction season.

The drafter gave them some plausible drawings, and they went in to the local authorities for a building permit. The local code official took one look at the drawings, asked, "What is this?" and promptly rejected the request for a permit.

There was no plan for getting water to the building or removing sewage. No approval from the state fire marshal's office for a transient

bad, John assumed.

But the next plan changed the height of one of the walls because Marsha wanted to relocate and enlarge the laundry. So the actual wall was poured a couple of feet too low and . . . well, we've all used the metaphor "cast in concrete."

The framing went well. It was installed by a two-man crew with a lot of experience working together, and the pace was kept down to a level where John could handle things. He found a good deal on sliding glass doors and bought a load of them without feeling it was important to mention to the architect or the crew. (He must have thought that all sliders have standard rough openings. They do, relatively speaking—but these framed openings were just a little too small.)

Another day lost. John felt bad about this and decided to help out. He'd done some building in his time, so he laid out the second-floor framing in an effort to speed things up.

Using the architect's plans and compensating carefully for the re-framed door openings, everything fit—more or less. John was a lit-

tle upset to find that the upper-floor sliders were about three inches out of line from the sliders on the lower floor, but he could live with it.

The carpenters, meanwhile, had just about had enough and didn't know whether to become angry or simply toss it off "by the hour."

The framing was nearly finished when the architect received a frenzied call to be on site "immediately if not sooner" to help the excavation contractor with the grading. John had told the contractor that it was an easy job that could be handled with no trouble. It was the end of the building season, and the contractor had been overloaded with work, so he took John at his word and sent only a loader, a hoe and a crawler to the site.

The foreman had no idea where to begin, however. John, who had little experience keeping the paperwork in order, offered him partial-plan sheets and six different progress prints. So the machine team sat around for a couple of hours while the architect ran off a recent set of prints and made his way back to the job site with an assistant to stake out some grades.

They certainly earned it. •

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public accommodation in a resort area. No fire escape and no provision for parking. And now, no permit.

The owners were sore at the bureaucracy, since they were about to dose down motel operations for the season and begin building. In fact, they had made arrangements with all of the subs to get started the next week.

Their next stop was at the office of a local architect. Marsha inadvertently selected a competent one who asked the right questions, opening up a lot of options that could improve the attractiveness and operation of the unit: "Where does the laundry go? Since the grade slopes away, what do you want to do with the room at the low end? Do all the rooms have two beds? How do people enter the rooms—where should stairways be placed?"

After a bit a haggling, the architect promised to start on the project with all possible hustle, and John and Marsha agreed to an outrageous fee "for a couple of drawings."

The architect surveyed the site and roughly staked out the building for general orientation. A few days later, the foundation contractor started scraping away the staked area for his footing. "Just make it 24' x 80'," said John. "You know how to do a foundation." The footing was placed.

Then the architect finished the plans, which called for a 23' x 86' building with no footing at the lower end. (Had the building been shorter, it would have lost two rooms, so there was no choice but to extend the footing.)

The foundation sub was genuinely surprised to find that plans were being drawn up. Even though John had declared that he would "take care of everything," the sub decided to cooperate with the architect and prudently avoided the job for a couple of days until the plans were formalized.

Then he went in to finish the job, which now involved ripping out some of the footing to accommodate a water line for the required sprinkler system. (He originally had included ¾" copper line for domestic water, as John had requested.)

One minor problem: The architect had given John a print labeled "Progress Print—Not for Construction"—and John had pressured the foundation contractor into pouring concrete according to the print. It was only 8½" off, reflecting an unsolved problem with the framing of the motel rooms, so it wasn't that

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The architect had intended for the grade to come part way up a concrete wall, but the wall had been placed with an outdated set of plans and was too low. So the carpenters ripped out about 20 feet of framed wall and replaced them with pressure-treated studs and sheathing while the meter on the excavating equipment kept running.

Being a careful shopper, John found another good deal—this time on ceiling tile. The carpenter found that he could staple it to strapping for a lot less money than it cost to buy a channel-rest system, so they departed from the plans to take advantage of the windfall.

At about the same time, John called the architect about another matter, and he came out to the site. A moderately well-adjusted type who generally accepts builder changes, the architect had to stifle his rage when he saw the reworking of the ceiling. This was no insignificant change: It threw out both the fire rating and the soundproofing.

With a long sigh, he listened to John's outspoken ideas on the practicality and fairness of the state fire marshal and on the physics of sound transmission. Then he tried to work out a reasonably acceptable solution (i.e., one that wouldn't cost too much money). The plans