



## Nailing it: A new book tells all about building and remodeling

By **PATRICK VERAL**  
The Stamford Advocate

When it comes to complexity, building a house ranks somewhere between open heart surgery and taking the bar exam. Sheri Koones wants to make the process a little easier, even if a custom-built dream house isn't possible, but a new look for your kitchen is.

"From Sand Castles to Dream Houses," (Hanley-Wood, LLC \$24.99), published in July, is designed to cover every possible nail, stone and paint swatch that might come across the transom during the voyage that is remodeling and building.

For Koones, a columnist for Home Resource and Design Magazine, it's the culmination of experience building her own home in Old Greenwich, Conn., and following that, years of research on the myriad possibilities and pitfalls of the business.

"I was so inspired by the whole building process, but none of the books told me what I needed to know," she said. "When you finish your own house, you only have a small sliver of the knowledge you need to know, so I spent two years researching to fill in the rest of the blanks."

At 300 pages, the book aims to be comprehensive, including location selection, setting a budget and the hiring, negotiating and working with architects, general contractors interior designers and landscapers.

A lengthy notebook section occupies the back, along with a glossary of terms (know what a "rabbet" or a "muntin" is?) and, because she got so many ideas from them, a survey of all the 100-plus magazines devoted to home design.

"This was the craziest thing I did, because there were so many magazines out there; I was just buying every magazine with a house on it, and it was overwhelming," she said.

If there's one thing Koones wants to get across in the book, it's the importance of getting references for workers and trying to foresee all the systems you might want in your home before the floors are laid and the walls are sealed.

"A lot of people want to put audio visual, central vacuum, water quality, lighting and security systems in their house," she says. "Even if you don't want them, you want to have the house ready for them. What I try to do is give people all the information on these systems so they can ask the right questions."

It would have been helpful,

for instance, if she'd known ahead of time that she'd have a plethora of lights in her own house, so a single dedicated system could better serve them.

"I think I made very few mistakes, but I try to remind people not to make the same ones," she said. "When our place was finished, there was no place to put the trash, and no place to keep fire wood. For the electrical plan, we didn't plan for landscape lighting either. It's the little things."

Of course, even after the merits of polished brass versus stone sinks have been hashed out, you still need to find someone to install it for you.

Along with not planning ahead, Koones says the biggest mistake one can make is hiring the wrong people. That's why references can't be emphasized enough.

Koones, for instance, says she was close to hiring a carpenter who was very pleasant and easy to get along with.

"When I called his references, I got an education on all the things that can go wrong," she says. "These people are going to be in your life for quite a while; you want them to be easy to work with and capable. People who are competent are very happy to have their references checked anyway."

Specific information about

designs, terminology and system specifications (are the cabinets you want frameless or face frame?) are also included so as to put the reader on equal footing with professionals.

"Being an educated consumer is very important, and people will have more respect for you if you've done your homework. If you have great respect for the people you work with, the better the chance you'll end up with what you want," said Koones.

Many of the book's suggestions stem from common sense (don't allow any work to be done without a signed agreement; be prepared to pay more than you initially expect), but they are worth reiterating, because with so many details to cover, it's easy to forget a few.

For some reason, for instance, Koones says when plans are drawn up for a house, outdoor spigots are often left out, even though they're needed for watering.

Again, she cited her own house, which has a flat roof, as an example. When it started to leak, she called the builder.

"He came over and reminded me that, as any dummy knows, when you have a flat roof, you have to clean it off once a year," she says. "I said, 'Well, this dummy didn't know that.'"

## Lazy designs

How appropriate that a company named La-Z-Boy would give us a lazy way to redecorate. A new design center on the company's Web site at [www.lazboy.com](http://www.lazboy.com) includes a computerized room planner that lets you rearrange the furniture without lifting anything heavier than a computer mouse. You can customize the room dimensions, features and furniture sizes to match your own, then move things around till you find an arrangement that suits you. (Hint: Be sure to read the help section first.) The center also lets you take a quiz to determine your decorating style, read design tips and articles and order a home-furnishings kit that includes a decorating guide and product brochure. And not one of those activities requires exertion.

## Resolve to be smart about home improvement projects

By **DAVID BRADLEY**  
The Associated Press

Bill Petitta knows what can happen when homeowners get in over their heads on home improvement projects they can't handle.

He just wishes the New Year's resolutions of die-hard do-it-yourselfers would include some introspection about what they can — and can't — do around the house.

"The problems go beyond cosmetic blemishes," said Petitta, of the Home Service Store. "Homeowners sometimes overlook safety concerns, structural integrity, or how mistakes add to project costs."

Petitta, whose firm oversees projects at the behest of homeowners, draws a fine line between projects homeowners can tackle vs. jobs best left to real pros.

He cites high-skill projects such as electrical, heating and air-conditioning projects as requiring professional ability. Mistakes on these tasks can put consumers at risk of injury or damage the home.

The piecemeal approach many homeowners take by doling out work to con-

tractors while performing some chores themselves can backfire both in terms of results and financially.

Quality of work is issue No. 1. "Poor work is very visible and can destroy the appearance of a room quickly," said Petitta.

Such work ultimately affects resale value.

"When the time comes to sell the home, and if it appears you did the work on major projects, buyers may penalize you on asking price," said Petitta. "The hard part is that the homeowner thinks their work is good enough when they really need to ask themselves 'Do I have the skills for this project?' A lot of people won't admit to their true skill level."

It can cost big bucks for a contractor to rescue the project by redoing homeowner mistakes. According to Petitta, a contractor might not offer as competitive a bid knowing the homeowner has already bungled portions of the job. Repairing structural damage is particularly costly.

The result: the homeowners might pay more money than if they had simply allowed the professional to do the project in the first place.

Even homeowners who complete their work satisfactorily might be in for a few surprises if they consider the projects ultimate cost.

"If you've spent long days or weeks on a portion of a job that would take the professional two or three days to complete, there is a cost to that," said Petitta, "especially if it pushes back the schedule or causes the professional to come back several times."

If homeowners insist on their own labor for the bulk of the project, Petitta suggests they limit their role to routine tasks such as painting or other easily done jobs. But the homeowner role should be discussed with and agreed to with the contractor.

Petitta understands the homeowners' drive to do work themselves.

"It's only natural for us to look for a good-quality product for as low a price as we can get, but homeowners need to look at the big picture," he said. "Do you ultimately save money in the long run by using a professional? The answer is that 99 percent of the time you will get better results, and save money, too."

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## Control your light

A new system puts control of your home's lights within reach, both physically and financially. Heath/Zenith's budget-priced remote lighting controls lets you operate lights from anywhere in your house. You just plug or screw in an adapter, then use the remote control to give commands for on, off and dim. The device can control both indoor and outdoor lights, and it can even be used to control the house lights from your car when you're arriving home. No electrical wiring is involved, so the system is simple for anyone to install. A single remote control has two channels, so it can operate two sets of lights. Any number of lights can be controlled with each channel. Prices range from \$13.99 for an individual component to \$27.99 for a kit. Heath/Zenith remote lighting controls are available at Target.



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