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HOUSE HOME

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In August, the Rich Race To Renovate

By CHRISTOPHER MASON

AT 9:30 last Friday morning, there was an ear-piercing screech of electric saws and a palpable sense of panic as 30 men furiously attacked the floors, walls, ceilings and plumbing of Mary Tyler Moore's former apartment at 927 Fifth Avenue. Carpenters, electricians, marble installers and plasterers dripped with sweat as they rushed to finish renovations on the 18-room apartment for its new owner before the dreaded Labor Day deadline.

Tony Ingraio, the interior designer on the project, grimaced at the deafening noise; only Ms. Tyler Moore's erstwhile neighbors Pale Male and his nestmate Lola seemed oblivious to the din as they glided past the apartment's windows.

Like 20 or so other grand addresses in Manhattan, 927 Fifth requires that construction work be completed between Memorial Day and Labor Day, when many residents are in Europe or reclining by the pool in the Hamptons. Over the past five years, co-op boards at many of these buildings have begun enforcing the summer-only construction rules more strictly. Buildings that were once casual about such rules now take them "incredibly seriously," said Dolly Lenz, a managing director of the real estate company Prudential Douglas Elliman — with the result that some of the city's top decorators and contractors now view the last weeks of August as the most nerve-racking of the year. "They literally come and chase you out of the apartment," said Mario Buatta, the interior designer, referring to building employees. "It's tough on the owner and very tough on the contractor."

Adding to the anxiety, some buildings impose stiff fines for work that remains unfinished after Labor Day. Five years ago the fines were in the region of \$200 to \$300 per day, according to Randy Polombo, a contractor. These days the usual daily rate is \$1,000.

Ms. Lenz ascribes the shift, and the tensions that it has brought in some buildings, to "the wealth factor." With hedge fund managers and their clients becoming richer by the minute, she said, "people become more exacting" — both those who want to renovate and those



Photograph by Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

RUSH HOUR Mark Martinez, a contractor who specializes in meeting Labor Day renovation deadlines, applies the finishing touches in a Fifth Avenue co-op.

who don't want to deal with noise and fumes and dust.

"I've sold triple-mint-condition apartments that have been gut-renovated, and the purchasers want to rip everything out and start over," Ms. Lenz said. "And people who live next to that apartment think, I just lived through that and I don't want to do it again."

"You're talking about most powerful people in America, and the richest," she added of the would-be renovators, but "the buildings absolutely halt the construction and don't let the workers in."

If work is not completed by Labor Day, homeowners can find themselves forced to wait nine months to resume renovations, paying huge monthly maintenance fees for uninhabitable apartments. At one Park Avenue apartment, work dragged on for three summers after workers missed two September deadlines.

To avoid such dramas, Mr. Buatta relies on Mark Martinez, a contractor whose company, Interior Management, specializes in summer-only construction. Mr. Martinez, 32, defied the image of the scruffy contractor last week as he

darted between job sites in his blue blazer, crisp blue shirt and cream pants. He claims to have completed all the summer projects he has taken on in a single season, even a gut renovation of a 6,000-square-foot duplex at 730 Park Avenue last year. (He declines to name his clients, but receives rave reviews from some of them at franklinreport.com, a Zagat's of decorators and contractors.)

Still, he said, "we're sweating bullets every time." By the end of August his workers try to push the limits of every workday — which the rules typically limit to six hours — only to have "the building come and throw us out." On one occasion, he admitted, his team failed to meet the Labor Day deadline when a supplier ran out of marble. When it finally arrived, he ran several vacuum cleaners simultaneously to conceal the sound of his whirring saws from the neighbors.

Michael Foster, a decorator who grew up in the construction business, sees working on such a tight deadline as an art. "Big construction jobs have more than 200 vendors," he said, from demolition crews to cabinetmakers. "You have



Photographs by Hiroko Masuke for The New York Times



TIME'S UP With Labor Day looming, workers line up before 9 a.m. outside a building at 730 Park Avenue, top left, and tackle interiors at another on East 66th Street, top right. At 927 Fifth Avenue, above from left, Bryan Brown (architect) and Tony Ingrao (decorator) confer with Frederic Gillet (foreman) and Janusz Skibniewski (tile guy).

to get everyone in the right place at the right time. It's like an orchestra."

Mr. Polumbo, the proprietor of 3-D Laboratory in Manhattan, compares the work to "a military maneuver." To prepare for the summer assault, he rents storage space in Red Hook, Brooklyn, where he assembles entire rooms of the apartment — floors, walls and all — using pieces that are "ready to go together like a puzzle."

"You can't afford to make a mistake," Mr. Polumbo continued. "If they catch you walking around with a chisel, or if you drop a hammer after Labor Day, you may as well move to Mars."

The average contractor "doesn't quite understand what it takes to have 70 people working in one apartment during the last month," said Bunny Williams, the interior designer. "You need someone with experience and man-power, who can call in the troops and make miracles happen."

She added, "We usually slither in just under the wire."

Contractors who can accomplish such miracles in one season often charge accordingly. "Things done fast are usually expensive," said Robert Couturier, another interior designer. "You try to negotiate, but contractors aren't stupid," he added. "When you're close to finishing, sometimes the contractor says, 'Whoops! I made a mistake — I need another \$250,000,' and if the client wants to move in, he has to pay."

Most buildings on Park and Fifth Avenues do not have summer rules, Ms. Lenz said. "If I had to guesstimate I'd say only 15 percent," Ms. Lenz said. The list includes some of the fanciest addresses in Manhattan, including 740 Park Avenue, 820 Fifth Avenue, One Sutton Place South and 10 Gracie Square, she said. There are no buildings with summer-only construction rules on the Upper West Side, according to realtors.

But increasingly, co-ops around the city are instituting time limits on construction, regardless of the season. Most luxury co-op buildings have "a very



strict deadline of 90 or 180 days for construction," said Steve Abrams, the owner of Fountainhead Construction. "It's changing my business significantly, and separating the men from the boys in who can build major apartments in a very tight time frame."

Several buildings on Central Park West that enforce such limits also impose hefty fines for additional days. The San Remo at 145 Central Park West gives tenants six months to complete noisy work and charges fines in daily increments that add up to more than \$65,000 for the seventh month of construction. At the United Nations Plaza on East 47th Street, fines for exceeding the time limit on noisy construction can reach as much as \$10,000 a day.

While the summer-only rules have the obvious advantage, from their residents' perspective, of limiting construction to one season, they can also contribute to pile-ups of projects, which in turn lead to short tempers.

"In some buildings you have four projects and only one freight elevator," Mr. Couturier said. "It's a complete madhouse." Under such circumstances, the elevator can take 40 minutes to arrive.

At One Sutton Place South, there are seven apartments under construction this summer, causing consternation for contractors and residents alike.

"It's pretty noisy," said Betty Sherrill, the interior designer, who recently retired as president of the co-op board after 27 years.

"I'm glad I'm out here in Southampton," she added.