GOTHAM

Isla Fisher

DISHES WITH KIRSTEN DUNST
ABOUT HER HOT NEW ROLE
IN *THE GREAT GATSBY*

GOVERNOR CUOMO
THE SCOOP ON HIS NEW CAMPAIGN—FOR THE ADIRONDACKS

PLUS AMAZING FACES OF NEW YORK, WALL STREET IN PLAY

and Finally...

constructive madness

NOT EVEN ICONIC APARTMENTS ARE SAFE FROM THE WRECKING BALL THESE DAYS, BUT IN THE POSHEST BUILDINGS, WHY DO YOU STILL HAVE ONLY 90 DAYS TO OVERHAUL THEM? BY BETSY PERRY

Among the battles New Yorkers wage—maneuvering kids into preschool at Episcopal or the 92Y Nursery School or scoring a Birken fast-tracked from de Gaulle—the scariest has to be getting board approval for your soup-to-nuts renovation in a Park or Fifth Avenue prewar trophy apartment. And then, getting it all done in three months' time.

Although summer construction rules have been around for generations, no one, not even the toughest M & A expert on Wall Street used to wangling deals back from the brink, has been able to guarantee a tension-free outcome with such stringent time constraints. Co-op boards, allergic to noise and dust and ruthless about allowing wiggle room, only sanction a Memorial Day start with a Labor Day time's up—a three-month span warranting mind-numbing pharmaceuticals for everyone involved. Freshly minted fortunes, paying multiple millions for "as-is" apartments, are reflexively gutting 30 room apartments, perhaps once owned by a Rockefeller or Astor, with ever-increasing frequency to create shiny designer-orchestrated stage sets suitable for their new status.

As famed interior designer Mario Buatta confided, "New money basically doesn't understand the way these beautiful old apartments work, and they're just torn down." But is it worth sweating through a summer to find yourself unable to move in if the work's not done by Labor Day? Or would it be wiser to look elsewhere and create your own architectural vision in a building that allows you to ditz around as long as you want?

Despite cracking the whip (picture the opening scene from *Les Mis*) "there's no guarantee the work can be done in one summer," says Mark Martinez, president of Interior Management, a specialty construction management company with a hugely successful track record for summer construction projects. Martinez's average project runs about $4 million with 100 worker bees per job laboring through—if they're lucky—an eight-hour work day; on one job the day was shortened by three hours so a neighbor could nap. And the worst hindrance to a project's timely completion is the diva designer with an ever-evolving vision, who is unable to make decisions; Martinez wants everyone in sync by February with clients and decorator "focused and present." Litigator Steven R. Wagner of Porzio, Bromberg & Newman, an expert at navigating nasty stuff in co-ops, resolved a $50,000-plus late fee—the co-op's $1,500 per diem penalty—when a fireplace stuck in customs finally arrived cracked, which caused the designer to crack as well. Interior designer Ellie Cullman, president of Cullman & Kravis, "fudged" an almost completed job as Labor Day approached and admits, "With a few construction items left we ran two industrial strength vacuum cleaners nonstop to mask the sound of drilling. The building's tenants assumed our clients were incredibly clean."

After enduring her own renovation, investment banker Elizabeth Franklin created The Franklin Report, an independent ratings agency for high-end home renovations—Angie's List for the rich. Her best friend's building permitted six weeks of overhaul until, "the board chair wanted to renovate and then the rules became more flexible."

On a sotto voce level, these rules are no doubt meant to proclaim the existing gentility of a building and to let you know what's ahead if you're among the "chosen" welcomed into the fold. Most co-op boards—once populated by a generation that combined gossipy meetings with a gimlet or two—have been replaced by a tougher breed, who suffer from a peculiar form of dementia that makes them forget the hoops they jumped through. Question is: if you're still seduced by the siren song, but not used to a tyrannical board calling the shots, is this really how you want to live? As Buatta shared, "These rules still make for a better building," and no one is bending them no matter how much money you throw around. **G**