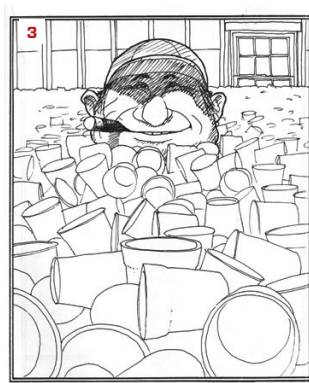
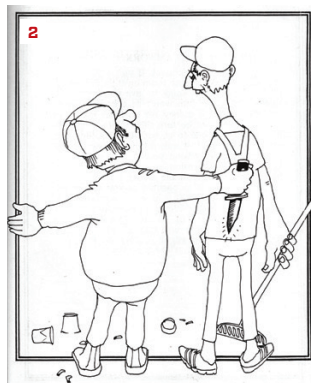


BY DON BOIVIN



A caricature of a “successful” contractor graces the cover of Malcolm Wells’ book (1). One of Wells’ 50 Rules cajoles the would-be contractor to hire friends but renege on payments (2). A smiling contractor is awash in a sea of coffee cups (3).

The ‘Not So Successful’ Contractor

I was recently given a book entitled *The Successful Contractor (How to Make It Big in the Building Game)*. Its author, Malcolm Wells, widely recognized as the father of modern earth-sheltered design, was an architect, author, illustrator, speaker, and activist who lived right up the road from me until his death in 2009. I’d read one of his books, *The Earth-Sheltered House*, and had even seen him a few times at a local coffee shop, but I never had the guts to introduce myself.

The Successful Contractor is Wells’ delightfully irreverent response to his own “painful experiences” with the inevitable bad-apple contractors one is bound to run into as an architect, builder, or homeowner. The original cartoons accompanying each of the author’s “basic rules” are priceless. Contractors who can laugh at themselves and at the stereotypes of our industry will thoroughly enjoy this easy and entertaining read. Here are a few excerpts from the 50 rules Wells spells out for those seeking success as a contractor—lest they end up as “just another nice guy nobody remembers.”

- Success: “It’s not how you build that counts... Success is having people think you’re important.”
- “Take any job that comes along no matter how big it is. Tell them you’ve done other jobs just like it.”
- “Underestimate... Otherwise, you won’t get the job.”
- “Don’t worry about taking on more work than you can actually handle; the customers will [always] wait.”
- “Use your friends as subcontractors no matter how undependable or unskilled they are.”
- “Your money comes before their friendship... Stay well behind in your payments to them till [sic] the work is complete. Then tell them their prices were too high. Offer them half.”
- “Get rid of the architect.”
- “Never answer the phone or return any calls.”
- “Never, under any circumstances, say you’re sorry. Apology is a sign of weakness.”
- “Don’t let a building owner get started on his list of complaints... YOU must do all the talking.”
- “A happy job can be told by the number of coffee [cups] on the ground.”
- “Everything that goes wrong on the job is someone else’s fault.”
- “Completion: It’s any time that you say it is.”
- “In the building trades, all materials and workmanship are guaranteed for a period of one year. It is imperative that you cut off all contact with the owner during those 12 critical months.”

For the story behind how I came by this book, go to jlconline.com. *The Successful Contractor* is available at malcolmwells.com.

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Cartoons by Malcolm Wells