

YOUR HOME » IS YOUR CASTLE

# Do you know who your subcontractors are?

The recent arrests of two Ecuadorean labourers have Torontonians thinking carefully about the workers they let into their houses

BY DEIRDRE KELLY

Renovating is scary enough for homeowners. You give the job to someone you barely know, entrusting them with the keys to your property. Delays, shoddy work and escalating costs are the petty, aggravating trials of the renovating process.

But what is becoming clear from the unproven allegations surrounding the recent arrests of two Ecuadorean labourers - Cristian Figueroa and Fabian Loayza-Penalosa (the latter had done considerable work at the Mississauga mansion where Filipino-born housekeeper Jocelyn Dulnuan, 27, was killed in October, apparently during a robbery attempt) - is that renovations can come with a host of other problems.

When you bring contractors onto your premises, you implicitly trust that you - and your possessions - will be safe. You make a number of assumptions: that everything will be left as you left it; that no one goes into areas of the house other than those on which they are working; that no one but the workers and subcontractors known to your contractor are anywhere near your place.

While the murder charges are an extreme example, it does point out that some of these assumptions may be false.

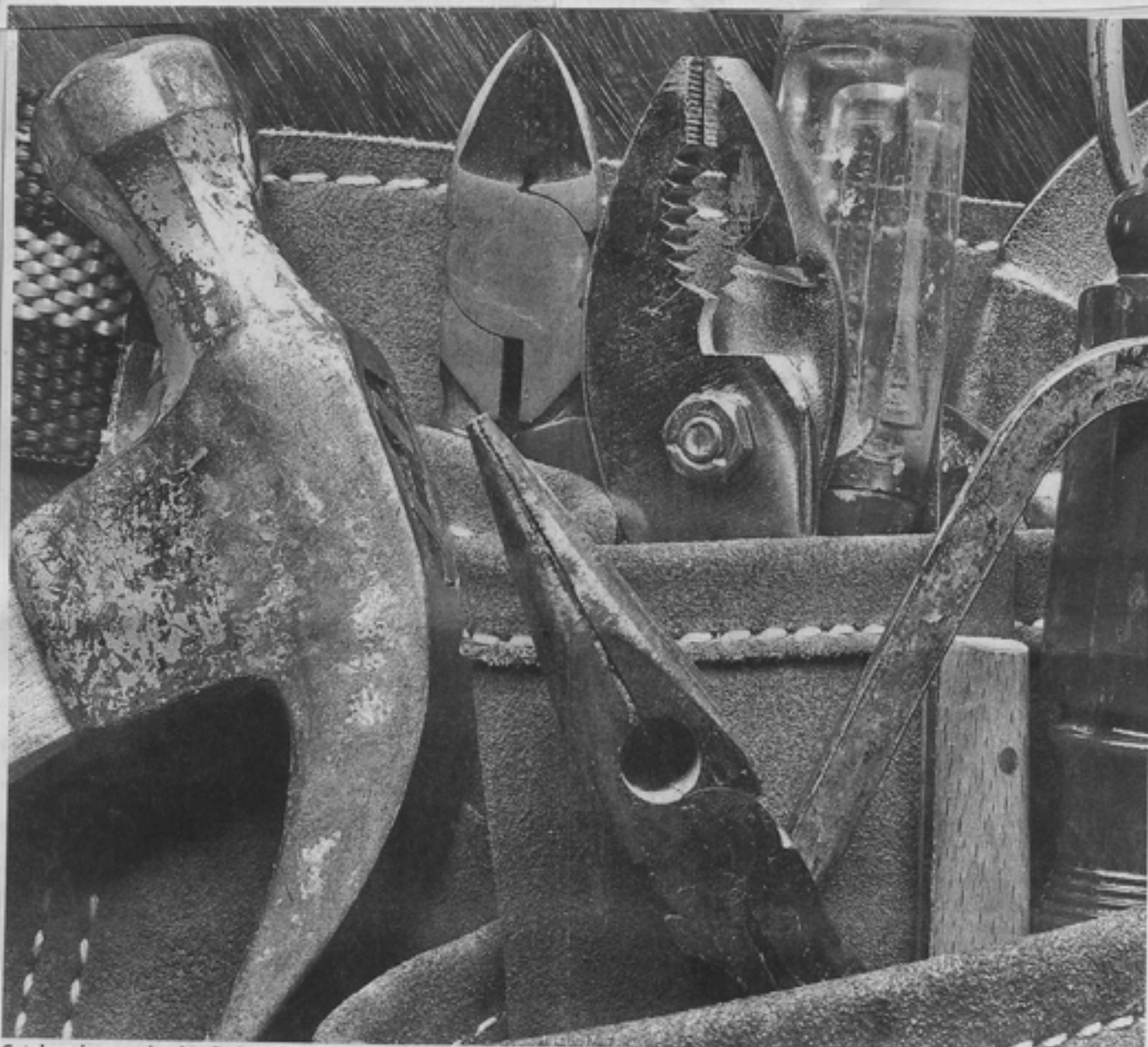
For instance, theft and drug-taking in clients' homes are some of the more egregious offences that contractor Joel Scopelleti has heard about or witnessed first-hand during a 20-year-plus career as head of Toronto-based Carick Home Improvements.

"But I have also heard of guys doing their laundry when the client is not at home, or going into the fridge and helping themselves to the clients' food, and drinking the clients' liquor."

Such unsavoury activities are usually committed by unsavoury characters, workers who come cheap by the hour. But quantifying it is difficult.

"There are no stats for this kind of thing," says Wayne Paterson, a constable with Peel Regional Police. "Break and enters are common. But construction-related thefts are hard to pinpoint."

In the case of the Mississauga homicide, the suspects, one of whom had an extensive criminal record and was known to local police, had intimate knowledge of the house, as well as access.



Good workers are hard to find in a booming industry that generated an estimated \$5-billion worth of business last year. STOCKPHOTO

Dr. Jaya Chanchlani, the homeowner, was at the Trillium Health Centre on the day they allegedly robbed her house.

Why they ended up also allegedly killing the maid is still unknown.

But the point remains that they were insiders who might have gotten away with the crime had the house been vacant, as they assumed.

How do undesirables get into a house in the first place? For Mr. Scopelleti, it boils down to hiring practices: "The problem is, if you're looking for the cheapest price, it means you are getting cheap labour and that usually means guys who are not bonded, who are not trustworthy, who, for some reason, can't be hired elsewhere."

He tells one anecdote involving a low-cost Toronto contractor who routinely gets his

labour force by driving each morning to the corner of Queen and Church, known for its flophouses. Anybody who has lined up by 7 a.m. and is willing to work that day for cash will get access to some of the homes in the city he renovates.

For Stephen Dupuis, chief executive officer of the Building Industry and Land Development Association, such fly-by-night hiring practices underscore the need for consumers to exercise extreme caution before opening their homes to renovators.

"On the client end of things, the most important thing is fit," says Mr. Dupuis, who oversees the booming Toronto renovation industry that he estimates last year generated \$5-billion worth of business.

"This person is going to be in your home over an extended period of time. It means you

have to work with them, you have to have trust in them. The best price isn't necessarily what makes the best contractor. Consumers should instead be asking themselves, 'How well will this person solve my renovation problem?' and then take it from there."

Interviewing potential contractors is one way of trying to ensure quality and reliability.

But, for a greater sense of protection, homeowners ought to ask for and investigate on their own at least three third-party references to give them a sense of an individual contractor's track record.

That added measure of prudence is important because first impressions can be misleading sometimes.

Toronto contractor John Vaughan relates the story of an apparently diligent and conscientious labourer who ended up robbing a home during the

course of a job.

"He was working for a contractor in Forest Hill. I met him. He was so hard-working and so soft-spoken, you wouldn't have suspected anything.

"And then one day, he's caught stealing \$6,000 of heirloom jewellery and upending the kids' piggy banks to support his cocaine habit. No one knew until the cops took him away in handcuffs, direct from the house."

Mr. Vaughan, who renovates high-end Toronto homes priced at around the \$3-million mark, says contractors worth their salt have to exercise caution in choosing their work teams.

"To me, the most important thing is having trust in the people working for you, and that's because I have to sleep well at night. My business is all about referrals. Any whiff of criminal activity would severely damage my reputation."

Mr. Vaughan says he interviews prospective employees, including subcontractors, carefully before hiring them for one of his high-end renovations.

If he does hire a labourer from a temp agency, he makes sure to carefully supervise him, and is constantly on the lookout for any suspicious behaviour. "If someone starts acting strange, if they ask questions they shouldn't be asking - like, when does the client come home - if they are seen going into rooms they shouldn't, then we let them go.

"And we never hire people with substance-abuse problems. And we don't hire people with tattoos. Clients generally feel uneasy when they see them."

Consumers should also exercise diligence when hiring. An online resource such as [renomark.ca](http://renomark.ca) exists to help the public choose a reputable contractor. The site also includes a downloadable code of conduct. BILD's Mr. Dupuis thinks that consumers should insist contractors sign it before the start of a job.

"Obviously, we're concerned about the security of the home itself," he explains. "What we're asking contractors to do is maintain a safe and organized work site. But when we ask them that, we're talking trip hazards."

"We never even thought of murder. We never thought of anything like that ever happening on a job. But I guess a criminal mind will always look for an opportunity."

**When we ask them [for a safe work site], we're talking trip hazards. We never even thought of murder.**

Stephen Dupuis, CEO of the Building Industry and Land Development Association