

Trophy Hunters With Their Eye on Interiors



Justin Mott for The New York Times

Fernando Sanchez scours a shop in Chiang Mai, Thailand, for a Venezuelan client's terra-cotta wall. [More Photos »](#)

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BRAGGING rights for homeowners are fleeting, hard to hold as a fistful of fog. You think your home is special because your backsplash is covered in tile imported from Mexico? There are those who think nothing of dispatching their architects and builders to the ends of the earth to personally scope out far more exotic goods — to the Middle East for the perfect limestone, even as bombs are going off, or to Indonesia for centuries-old reclaimed teak.

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Searching the Globe for Authentic Materials

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For the ultra-high-end contractor, it's just part of a day's work.

Consider John Finton, a Los Angeles contractor who is known (at least to his press agent) as “a modern day Indiana Jones.”

Mr. Finton, whose jobs run \$5 million to \$100 million, travels the world to find rare and beautiful building materials for his clients. He has gone to China for cobblestones from a road that was being demolished, to pave a client's driveway; to the jungles of Nicaragua — by jeep, if you please — because another client wanted an authentic and rustic clay tile with

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Tony Cenicola/The New York Times
Bob Fireman of From the Source in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, with handmade pieces and a slab of waiting wood.
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Reclaimed shutters recline in a Chiang Mai warehouse. [More Photos »](#)

colors that would have variations, but not *too many* variations; to Jerusalem, to make sure the so-called biblical stone his client had ordered was coming from a school that really was hundreds of years old.

True, Mr. Finton has not been thrown into a pit filled with venomous snakes, but that is not to say he has not been threatened by bad guys. The greatest danger he faces tends to be misrepresentation — the French limestone company, say, that turned out to be cutting its stone in China.

There are other challenges as well. For a client in Russia building a rather large country estate (55,000 square feet, with 880 windows), Mr. Finton arranged to have thick slate for the roof brought in from Vermont. Some weeks later, he received a call in the middle of the night from what he believed to be a checkpoint in Russia, informing him that the slate was

radioactive.

“They held it for a week and fined us, like, \$20,000 for ‘storage,’ ” Mr. Finton said. “The slate wasn’t radioactive. Everybody wants a payoff.”

Political unrest also creates problems. Going to Jordan for limestone, as he has done a few times, he has been frisked and had to stay in a hotel that had just been bombed.

Does it ever occur to Mr. Finton that he might actually be putting himself in harm’s way for some crummy limestone?

Keenen Ivory Wayans, Mr. Finton said, once told him, “One day we’re going to see you on one of those CNN things, blindfolded and saying, ‘I’m just here for the limestone.’ ”

“I think I just have an adventurous spirit.”

Mr. Finton added: “The days of contractors going to a big superstore to buy material at the level that we’re doing just doesn’t happen anymore. I’m sourcing materials from literally around the world.”

Sonokeling, inga, tamarind, bloodwood — evocative names, all. And



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who wouldn't be intrigued by the prospect of owning tile dating back to the 17th century, which Jiun Ho, a San Francisco designer, found on vacation a few years ago in an abandoned house in Turkey and bought for a client's kitchen?

You might think an architect or designer would be able to obtain such things without leaving the office. But contractors, architects and designers who travel abroad to find these treasures would disagree. The only way you can make certain the product is as advertised is by going to the source, they say.

Ronnette Riley, a New York City architect, agrees. A designer often needs to go to the source to ensure that the color is consistent, that there is sufficient quantity and that the material is structurally sound, she said. And a trip on which the clients accompany the architect — like the owners of a 12-room flat in London did, traveling to an Italian quarry with Ms. Riley to pick out stone — can be helpful for other reasons as well.

“My clients and I had a lovely weekend trip in Italy, where we bonded,” Ms. Riley said. “The client felt personally involved with the material. If I buy an outfit at a boutique where I have had wonderful service, the experience in itself makes me like the outfit more than going to a discount place and fighting for it, even if it might have saved a few dollars.”

If You Have to Ask How Many Frequent Flier Miles It Takes to Send a Designer to Thailand, You Can't Afford Him

Do not waste your time or his by asking Fernando Sanchez, a Miami designer who owns Pineapple Designs, for a floor plan. Mr. Sanchez doesn't do them. He doesn't do budgets, either.

His fees begin at \$350 an hour, or \$5,000 a room. He travels frequently for his wealthy clientele and for Country Floors, a tile and stone company for which he scouts antique tile designs. His finds include a collection of 19th-century opium pipes that are being set into an acrylic wall for a client in South America, and stingray skins — his equivalent of the hunter's snarling lion head on the wall — which he plans to use on paneling in a bathroom.

Last month, Mr. Sanchez traveled for two weeks to Bangkok and Chiang Mai, Thailand, a trip he estimated would cost \$15,000 to \$18,000. As usual, he flew first class with miles provided by his clients.

“Let's say, for example, I am going to do your house,” Mr. Sanchez said. “You say, ‘Fernando, I want you to go to Thailand, I know you can get merchandise for less money. I have three hundred, four hundred thousand miles’ — the majority of my clients have these kinds of miles. I stay at the [Mandarin Oriental](#). I have been staying there many, many years. Asia is not that expensive. I don't drink, I have a massage every night — the clients don't pay for that, just for the chauffeur, the meals and the hotel.”

On this particular trip, he was buying items for a \$9 million home in Miami, which he is redoing to look like a 1920s Art Deco house. He

was also shopping for a wooden door frame on a concrete splint, to go in a meditation [garden](#), and scouring the ruins of overgrown buildings for antique tiles, for both the Miami project and an elaborate garden in South America that already has an 18th-century Chinese horse-watering tub.

“These tiles are full of moss, I don’t wash them,” Mr. Sanchez said. “The spores of the moss are in the terra cotta, so once you get them to the right place, the moss grows out again. In three months, you have the green wall. It looks very aged and antique.”

And Just as the Rhino Charged, I Saw This Amazing Accent Tile on the Outdoor Shower

Lee Mindel, of Shelton, Mindel & Associates in New York, doesn’t mind traveling for clients — he has been to Italy for stone and Germany to buy glass. But the wanderlust of his clients is something he has come to fear.

“They come back with what I call vacation ware,” he said. “A client is in, like, Bora Bora with a fire pit, and they have some adobe or hideous tile they pick up.”

He continued: “We have to re-educate them. It’s like the cuisine. If you are eating a pig buried in the ground in Thailand, it doesn’t mean you want to eat it for [Passover](#). The task is really to understand what it is about that environment they found attractive without falling prey to an inappropriate reproduction of some theme park.”

On the other hand, travel can sometimes can be a wake-up call.

Last October, Michael Pierce and his partner, DD Allen, of the New York City [architecture](#) firm Pierce Allen, traveled to Morocco with a client who wanted a Moroccan design for the \$1 million house she was planning in Point Lookout, on Long Island. After spending some time in Morocco, all agreed that was a bad idea.

“The interesting thing was, it was like, ‘Whoa, this is O.K. in Morocco, but in Long Island maybe we should use it for certain elements,’ ” Mr. Pierce said.

How much does he think this eight-day trip, which included first-class airfare, cost the client?

“About \$20,000,” Mr. Pierce said. “But it turned out to be smart, instructional on many levels. You could spend \$20,000 in a heartbeat doing those ridiculous crazy tile patterns those Moroccan bathrooms have.”

Isn’t Importing Exotic [Woods](#) Just Another Way of Desecrating Mother Earth?

Not necessarily — it depends on whether you take Mother Earth to dinner and listen to her needs, understand that “no” means no and call her the morning after.

Or, as Richard Donovan, vice president for forestry of the Rainforest Alliance, put it: “What I always say is, buy wood that has been

certified from the Forest Stewardship Council. It's an international nonprofit organization that has been focused on sustainable forestry and wood issues since 1993. You say, I want to see that certificate."

But Aren't You Carting Away Precious Artifacts? And How Much Is That Indonesian Roof Ornament?

Bob Fireman is the president of From the Source, a company that sells salvaged and plantation woods, as well as products made from Indonesian wood, like a coffee table made with inga wood perhaps obtained from a rice farmer clearing his field, which retails for \$695.

Mr. Fireman, who is 73, travels to Indonesia several times a year for everything from old logs and lumber to lintels, doors and shutters from old houses, which he brings back to his shops in Chelsea and Dumbo, Brooklyn, or sells out of his 35,000-square-foot warehouse in Greenpoint, Brooklyn.

His biggest challenge is making sure all the wood is legal. "You can't just go out and cut down a tree," he said. "If they find you riding on the road with a tree without papers, you're in trouble."

Isn't he concerned that, in buying up old doors and walls from 100-year-old homes, he's taking a country's irreplaceable heritage?

"That's a hard one," he said.

"Tastes change, and people want what they see as new and better," he added, referring to people who sell him the artifacts. "Why should I dictate where and how people live, just because to me it seems charming or quaint? I'm not the one living there. I know what's beautiful to me and I want to make good use of it."

Just Be Glad He Did Not Admire the Front Wall of the Vatican

Stephen Fanuka, a 42-year-old contractor in Manhasset, N.Y., had a client who saw a house in Naples, he said, and decided he wanted his own to look just like it. "He says it was the best facade he had ever seen," Mr. Fanuka said, "and he wanted me to go to Napoli and find the guy who did it."

So Mr. Fanuka "went house to house" in Naples, he said, asking "Who did the facade?" Eventually, he found out that the man who built the house was dead, so "midnight, I go out to the house, I find the smallest little part I can that looked loose, I chipped a piece off and ran."

He continued: "We were able, at the end of the day, to figure out how to do it, but it just didn't work with the way the house was being constructed. It was a big house in Southampton, a \$6 million house, and the facade was going to look cheap on the house — the house was so massive. So we went with the brick."

How much was the trip to Naples?

"About \$5,000 a day, because I didn't want to go," Mr. Fanuka said. "The things you do for the rich. I was given a proposal once that I go

to Afghanistan to the mountains — literally, me and the architect — and choose the marble. There was one issue with this: they were still fighting the Russians. I was like, ‘I’m out.’ ”

**With the Patina of Spaghetti Sauce Splatter,
It Will Be Exquisite**

Mary Gibbons, a designer at Curley Contracting in Greenwich, Conn., who also makes hand-glazed tiles, was once sent by a client in Manhattan to India for three days to obtain a glaze.

“She wanted a specific, real coppery effect in her backsplash,” Ms. Gibbons said. “I tried different glazes, and she did some research and found out about a factory in India. I flew to Mumbai and from there I took a domestic flight, which was interesting, to Hyderabad. It was a commuter flight, although I had the best Indian food I have ever had in my entire life.”

Why couldn’t she just call India and say, “Send me some of your glaze”?

“There was a time element, and if it was wrong we wouldn’t have been able to get the project done on time,” Ms. Gibbons said. “I was literally there for two nights, the way home was 21 hours.”

How much did the tiles end up costing?

“It worked out to be \$112 a square foot to have them made and hand-glazed,” she said. “I also installed them. It was about 30 square feet, so it really wasn’t that expensive — about \$3,400 for my finished product.”

“But the travel ended up being \$6,000 or \$7,000,” she said. “So it came to about \$10,000 or \$11,000.”

Finding Exotic Materials Closer to Home

IF your renovation budget does not permit you to send your contractor or architect to the Far East for exotic woods or stone, don’t despair — there are places closer to home that they go themselves.

For homegrown exotic woods, Stephen Fanuka, a New York City contractor, recommends Timeless Timber, which sells North American wood that sank to the bottom of rivers during the logging booms over a century ago; or timelesstimber.com.

Suzanne Lovell, a Chicago architect and designer, recommends Rhodes Architectural Stone in Seattle, or rhodes.org, and Cavendish Grey in New York and Los Angeles, , or cavendishgrey.com, for antique and handcrafted architectural stonework, including reclaimed French cobblestones.

Architects and designers often go to From the Source, which carries Indonesian logs and timber, as well as reclaimed artifacts from dismantled homes, including doors, walls and floors. There are stores in Chelsea and Dumbo, Brooklyn, but the best selection is at the company’s 35,000-square-foot warehouse at 69 West Street in

Greenpoint, Brooklyn, where Penny Emmet, who works in wholesale sales and marketing, might be persuaded to show snapshots of logs being hauled out of the jungle on the shoulders of local bearers, like the trophy animals of less environmentally evolved times; or [fromthesourceny.com](#).

For information on exotic woods and the environment, consult the Web site of the Forest Stewardship Council, [fscus.org](#).

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