

When she founded Dirty Girl Construction, Barton set out to change how people feel about their contractors. "I'm not just building houses," she says. "I'm creating a comfortable space for people to be honest about what their needs are at home."



*JOAN  
BARTON*

**DIRTY GIRL CONSTRUCTION**  
@dirtygirlconstruction

It takes a fearless attitude to be a female general contractor in a male-dominated field, let alone become such a successful one. Joan Barton is a trained musician and composer ("I do miss my orchestra," she says), so construction is her second career—one she approaches with a unique blend of emotional instinct and practicality. For her, the process of design and construction is as much a feat of heart and soul as it is bricks and mortar: "I'm going to be in your space all day, every day—with 20 guys, no less," she says. "It's dusty, it's crazy, and you have no idea what I'm doing. But the hope is that we're going to have a friendly relationship, not just so you'll refer me, but so five years from now, I'll come back on a Sunday to fix a leaky faucet for free." She founded Dirty Girl Construction in 2008 because, she jokes, "I have a perfect understanding of minutiae," a quality imperative for all good contractors. "I'm an artist, but I'm also a mathematician." It's apparent Barton can do just about anything. But lucky for those in need of a contractor, she chose to be the Dirty Girl.



When she launched her business, Barton bought a tool cabinet—and all of the tools in it—at a local yard sale. She still holds on to what's left of her first pair of boots, which she literally wore off. Her goal is to help her clients see past the inevitable construction dust.



## SUPPORT SYSTEM

"I have my own acronym for the three main factors you must consider before starting a project: BRA," Barton says. "It's tongue-in-cheek but it gets your attention! Like a bra, this is what really holds it all together: Budget, Relationship, and Aesthetic. The order is important, because if you don't have the first two, the third will never exist. We all read or see things in magazines and online and say, 'I want that!' But even if you have a sense of what you like, you have to start with the money.

"So B is for Budget. There's what you want to spend—usually as little as possible. Then there's what it really costs and what you are actually capable of spending. The real cost is typically somewhere in the middle. I don't allow my clients to get into a financial position where they can't pay their mortgage

because they're keeping up with the Joneses—I want them to feel good about their homes, not face buyer's remorse! Then there's the R, the Relationship between client and contractor. As a stranger, I take your house and your money, and I ask you to trust me. Then I become part of your family for the next six months to six years—if you don't like me, it's not going to work. Construction projects are intense and consuming. So developing an honest, open, adult dialogue with someone you like—or at least respect—is key. And then, finally, we get to the A, for Aesthetic. What will it look like?

"Money, people, things. The stuff comes last. A good working budget and a knowledgeable contractor who works with you instead of against you is what yields the beauty we're all after." ■

