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Boom Times for Job Site Thieves



Andy Manis for The New York Times

TO CATCH A THIEF Steven Watson, a private investigator in Wisconsin, installed a Global Positioning System device in a box of aluminum siding at a job site to track thieves.

By KATE MURPHY
Published: August 27, 2008

SUE WENTZ and her husband, Eugene, saved for five years, living in a modest home in a low-income neighborhood of Houston, before they broke ground in January on a 4,300-square-foot house on 12 acres in Magnolia, Tex., a woody suburb about 40 miles northwest of the city. They are overseeing the construction themselves to control costs. So it was with dismay that they arrived at the job site one morning in July to find that all the copper wiring and air-conditioning tubing had been ripped out of the rough frame of the house.

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Michael Stravato for The New York Times

Besides the financial hit — \$11,000 — the theft took a psychological toll. “I felt so violated, and now I don’t trust anyone,” said Ms. Wentz, who teaches English at a community college.

The couple, along with Ryan, their 7-month-old son, spent nine nights in a tent on the property to guard the place until workers could put Sheetrock over replacement wiring. Moreover, Mr. Wentz, an airline pilot, boarded up all of the entrances, limiting access to a single security door with two deadbolts and no handle. “Now we lock it up every night, and when the contractors arrive the next morning, they call us and we tell them where we hid the key,” he said.

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Screen Test: Javier Bardem

HOME SAFE HOME After a theft in July, the Wentzes – Eugene, Sue and baby Ryan – guarded their building site by sleeping in a tent.

According to professional homebuilders, law enforcement officials and insurers, the Wentzes' experience is not unique. Larceny at residential construction sites across the

country has increased significantly in the last two years because of soaring prices of building materials like copper, lumber and cement, they said. The National Association of Home Builders, a trade group, estimates that the annual cost of theft to the industry has reached \$5 billion. The problem has meant higher material and insurance costs for builders, who pass them along to buyers, sometimes to the tune of tens of thousands of dollars. In the end, that can add as much as 10 percent to the cost of a home, builders and developers said.

A cottage industry of guard services, surveillance devices and private investigators has emerged to prevent theft as well as catch thieves in the act. Larceny is an issue at commercial sites, of course, but residential projects are particular targets because they are often easier to access. The situation is worse in regions where homebuilding remains relatively strong, like in parts of Texas, North Carolina, New York and Louisiana, and remains a problem in states where home construction has slackened, like Florida, Nevada, Michigan and Arizona.

"Builders in Chapter 11 and lenders foreclosing on properties still under construction aren't as diligent about security," said Mark Ouimette, managing director at Beecher Carlson, an insurance company based in Atlanta that underwrites policies for homebuilders.

Indeed, police officials from Tucson to Miami report that thieves often peruse foreclosure filings to find idle and unsupervised projects. Insurers like Beecher Carlson said that theft has forced them to increase homebuilders' insurance rates by 10 percent to 15 percent in the last two years.

But even builders who erect fences and install surveillance cameras are losing materials as thieves become bolder, or perhaps more desperate, in a weakened economy. "They'll take anything that's not nailed down, and even stuff that is nailed down," said Jeff Stokley, a developer who builds houses in the Wilmington and Cape Fear areas in North Carolina for \$175,000 to \$225,000. "They'll rip copper wiring out from behind the Sheetrock."

Homebuilders and police officials said that stolen building materials commonly include wiring, piping, siding, lumber, shingles, bags of cement and bolts of insulation. People break into trailers and steal tools, generators and extension cords. Doors, windows, bathtubs, appliances and air-conditioning units are sometimes missing the day after they are installed.

"We have to pass the cost on to the consumer," which can add tens of thousands of dollars to the purchase price, said Frank Naso, of the Naso Organization, which builds homes in the \$400,000 range on Staten Island. The premium includes the cost of the private security guards he has had to hire to patrol his projects. "It's tough when you're trying to build affordable housing," Mr. Naso said.

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