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Ultimate Master Of Fanciful Finishing Touches: If you can dream it, Leland Stone can find it, sell it, get it installed

Deborah Baldwin, New York Times

For someone who has dedicated his life to personal service, Leland Stone looks like quite the successful self-made man. He may be the only trained butler in Texas who tools around town in a vintage Mercedes, driven by his own chauffeur.

But then, butlering was only a diversion for Stone, who is channeling his will-do spirit these days into a profession so new it does not yet have a name. Think of it as equal parts decorator, handyman, fixer and finder, and throw in mediator and fast friend.

"A savior, that's what he is," said Linda Seeligson, who hired Stone three years ago to tune the trickle of her backyard fountain and has kept him on the payroll ever since.

"He makes life easier for these people," said Don McDonald, an architect in San Antonio who has called on Stone to help smooth out the kinks in his \$2 million villas.

Pay attention, recent college grads. Stone may be on the ground floor of a cottage industry with vast potential. "He fills a void," McDonald said, alluding to the increasingly perplexing punch lists confronting architects and decorators.

Ten years ago, a handyman could do the job. But as today's hyperequipped homes spawn ever-fresher fantasies of domestic perfection -- along with endless electronics and nests of wires -- even contractors scream for help.

No job is too small or too strange. At the Seeligson house, Stone inveigled a carpenter to sink a range vent in a butcher-block countertop. Then he rounded up

elegant upholstery nails to replace the tacks in a family-photo gallery.

He offered a lesson on hidden cabinet hinges to another architect, Billy Lambert, starting with templates and ending with "you'll need a router and a special bushing to cut the hole."

Lambert said he did not have time to carry out product hunts and would not even know where to begin. "The client has an idea of what he wants, and you have to go find out how it's done," he said. "So you go to Leland and say: 'This is my problem. How do you solve it?'"

It begins with the paralysis known as too much choice. When visitors waded into the International Builders' Show in Orlando, Fla., last week, they were confronted by products and services filling the equivalent of 40 football fields. Sorting through it all is "not that easy, even with the Internet," Lambert said.

Armed with an electronic address book and accounts with hundreds of suppliers, Stone tinkers and browses, yielding what every home-obsessed consumer craves: the custom solution.

Kinks he has smoothed out for one homeowner, Claire Golden, include getting the water to cascade properly from one pond to another, thence a pool; tracking down tiny latches for custom sock drawers; and making sure the locks on her new French doors will actually keep out thieves.

Fussy homeowners and decorators seek out Stone because they are carrying around magazine clippings and want to replicate what they see, without waiting. One interior designer, Lobie Stone (no relation), put in

an order recently for her favorite plain old iron-and-walnut ceiling fan. They have disappeared from stores, she said, "but guess who can get them."

Some assignments are easier than others. "This morning, I sold a pool table for a hunting lodge," Stone said one day in November, alluding to a call from a panicked host with 11 hunters on the way. Within an hour he dispatched a table. He sent a man to assemble it under separate cover.

Stone's low, even voice, coupled with the crisp authoritative step of polished wingtips, seems to put frazzled clients and warring subcontractors at ease. He once talked an electrician down from the ledge after he had been presented with a giant antique Italian chandelier and a request to hang it from a tiny American electric box.

Mediation skills aside, clients say, Stone is valued as a "sourcer" (which comes out "sorcerer" on some Texan tongues). He has rounded up gaskets to stop French doors from letting in rain and a powder-room pedestal sink so small it was not for sale in any Texas showroom, he said. Hidden wiring, clothes racks that sink into the wall when not in use, swing arms, switch plates, window treatments and what have you -- these are the raw materials of his art.

Golden, mired in the restoration and renovation of a 1920s house, wanted to hang a ceiling fan and copper and brass light fixtures -- outdoors. (Done.) In fact, she wanted the fixtures to hang in a tree, necessitating elastic mounting devices that would expand as the tree grew. (Done.) Inside, she required Venetian mirrors at made-in-India prices, a cast-iron claw-foot tub at the proper length and price, and insets to add elbow room to an antique walnut table. (Done, done, done.)

Along with peace-talking the plumber and electrician, Stone says he is willing to hang around after they leave to make sure everyone is happy with the positioning of the faucets and flat-screen TVs. Some clients have him follow up by screening potential household workers, including home chefs.

As an undergraduate at the School of Hotel Administration at Cornell University, Stone said, he felt his calling was "the superdetailed." He attended an independent butler school later mainly out of curiosity, he said.

"Leland was organized when he was 8," said his mother, Elizabeth, recalling a bad patch when he was a

teenage rebel and she caught him trying to rearrange her spices.

Stone, 36, honed his people skills in the 1990s by managing property for clients who were house-rich, time-poor and unexpectedly needy. One couple had him hire away a spa chef to prepare their favorite cuisine: raw vegetarian.

Noticing the way some owners of multiple homes sorrow when they arrive late at night and find no one there to "make them a meal or turn down their beds," Stone devised color-coded magnetic staff-scheduling boards to ensure that an employee was always on hand.

He devised a system for staying on top of the lightbulbs in households that "buy them by the hundreds," he said.

"When you work for a family, they really never go shopping," he explained. "I was just buying everything they needed, often difficult things, slightly customized" -- including Italian ironing boards with sleeve attachments that suck hot air through clothing and linens; hammered metal sinks from France; German appliances; and, inevitably, the parts to repair them.

About eight years ago, Stone came back to San Antonio, his hometown, where he poured his experience and know-where into his current career.

Making his rounds one afternoon in a custom-tailored Edwardian vest, with a bow tie and a pocket square that picked up the blue of his eyes, Stone acknowledged he was "kind of obsessive" about organizing his sourcing data. Thus he was able to order glass from Germany to replace the original Plexiglas in a Venetian-style iron lantern. To give the fixture, which hangs over a villa entrance, a look-at-me look, he replaced the bulb with one from England shaped like an eggplant.

On the Internet, no one knows you are running your company, the Stone Standard, a few feet from your bedroom. There, in a tidy office lined with catalogs devoted to plumbing and lighting fixtures, electrical parts, hinge templates and the like, Stone labors alongside his No. 1 factotum, Shih-Hua Fuh, who buzzes between the computer and the fax machine.

Stone runs the house, a stucco-sided one-story built in the 1920s, as if it were an internship program for hotelkeepers. Uniformed employees dust so aggressively that it is a wonder the place is still standing.

He and his partner, Curtis Johnson, like to entertain, so Stone orders wholesale -- buckets of scallops from Maine, cases of balsamic vinegar and entire beef tenderloins -- selling the overflow to his clients as a kind of perk.

He charges just 10 percent above his cost, plus \$75 an hour, all spelled out in easy-to-read invoices. "There's a high level of transparency that makes clients very happy," said Lambert, who came by one day in November to inquire about 6-foot surface bolts to finish an art collector's loft.

Stone (www.stonestandard.com) came to the attention of this reporter after his name bobbed up on the Web as a source for silk-covered lamp cords. It later developed that he had ordered in bulk and stashed the surplus in his attic, alongside a brace of oversize French copper stockpots and the spillover from a client's request for Diptyque candles at a below-retail price.

In a city where charm and good manners are as common as muggy days in August, it is hard to find anyone who questions Stone's taste, abilities or good intentions.

One couple, Margaret and Neill Boldrick, acted as if he bailed them out six years ago when they were working as lawyers and did not have time to take care of their house. "I liked my life," Margaret Boldrick said with a sigh, "but there was too much of it."

And who -- especially at this reckoning time of year -- hasn't felt the same way?