

Help and advice



Sid Bourne on avoiding disputes

Remember to get the paper work signed

THIS is a story about a contractor who didn't bother getting the customer's signature on the paper work. It cost him a lot of money along with his reputation.

The problem arose in a large newly built detached home.

An interior designer had specified the whole interior from stains to wood units. He chose jatoba as the flooring material, specifically because of its durability. However, the contractor could not get jatoba as his supplier was out of stock.

The customer could not wait

'There were yet more problems after the customer moved in with a pet dog, a Great Dane. As you will have guessed, the floor was soon scratched and indented all over'

because she wanted to move into the new home. The contractor offered, as an alternative, an American cherry floor stained to the customer's requirement. He claimed the American cherry was as durable as the jatoba (Oops!).

The subfloor in the house was a

concrete base; the contractor stated that he had taken readings and found it to be perfectly dry. He screwed an 18mm plywood subfloor to the concrete base and then installed the wood flooring over the 90sq m area, a job which took three days.

When he began staining the floor, he noticed a patchy appearance which he pointed out to customer, who apparently decided this was okay.

So he applied four coats of polyurethane over the next four days. On completion the customer decided she was not happy. The contractor decided to re-screen, but it ended up worse.

There were yet more problems after the customer moved in with a pet dog, a Great Dane (true).

As you will have guessed, the

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Terry Wolfe on dealing with wood

Black day as waxed stain fails to dry

EARLIER this year, I was called to a large house where several floors had been laid in reclaimed oak boards. It transpired that the boards were cut from old French railway sleepers.

The boards had been treated with a brush process, that left the surface looking old and worn. They were secret nailed to joists by a very competent flooring contractor, who understood the product perfectly and carried out a superb installation. Under floor heating was incorporated between the joists by a heating engineer.

On completion, the customer suggested he would like the floors a little darker, and the flooring contractor applied a stain, after which he waxed the floors with two heavy coats of liquid wax and burnished them thoroughly.

I was called in, because the wax had combined with the stain to form a black paste that just would not fully dry, however much it was burnished. On one occasion, some curtains, wrapped in polythene, were laid on the floor, and the stain migrated through the polythene into the curtains. Carboard placed over the floors for protection had turned black. The whole house was a nightmare!

The question was, what to do about it. An obvious possibility was to sand the whole surface off and start again from bare wood.

However, these boards had been prepared with a beautiful surface, a patina that would then be removed and could never be reproduced on site. Sanding was a last resort.

I realised that the root of the problem was, that the stain had never penetrated the oak boards. This old timber was treated with preservative and so old and dense that nothing would penetrate it, consequently the stain was laying on its surface and never properly curing.

By using a rotary machine, we were able to

remove the wax and stain and apply a primer sealant that prevented anything from the board bleeding through to the surface. It was then possible to apply liquid wax to the primer, but thinly and sparingly, thoroughly burnishing the surface on completion.

There was a lot of flooring to treat, and it required considerable patience and perseverance, but the flooring contractor and his operatives were outstanding and carried out the work extremely well.

One final concern was, whether the wax would soften when the under floor heating comes on stream. It appears to be fine!

On another occasion, I went to inspect a floor in a living room and open plan kitchen, laid in new oak boards, secret nailed to joists. An oil finish had been applied to the finished surface. The lounge looked wonderful, but the kitchen had several stained areas, particularly in front of the cooker and sink.

The last site I want to mention, is a wonderful Central London apartment where wengé boards were laid, stained black, and finished with an acrylic lacquer. The problem here was a lack of adhesion of the lacquer to the floor; it was peeling off from board edges.

Applying finishes to wood flooring appears to be simple. Slap on some stain, next day apply wax, oil or lacquer, at your discretion, and all will be well. But will it? Are the finishes (a) compatible, one with another, and (b) simply right for the purpose?

When I discuss vinyl flooring installations, I always stress the importance of using products from one manufacturer, eg surface prep, primer, smoothing screed, adhesive. If you use one manufacturer's system, you can be sure the products are compatible and will work together.

And should there be a problem, you only have to contact one manufacturer for advice.

The same is true of wood finishing. Use a stain and a lacquer from one company. They will be able to assure you that the two are compatible. If the manufacturer does not manufacture a stain, at least get him to advise which stain to use. Read the instructions on the product. If unsure, do a small trial area first.

There is a tremendous range of products available today, and there are big differences. In 2002 I specified a hardwax oil finish for a village hall. When the flooring contractor was on site, he phoned and said he did not have the oil that I had specified, but had another oil; could he use that. At the time, I thought one oil was much the same as any other, and agreed. It was a disaster!

It was the wrong type of oil for a village hall, and they had immense difficulty in maintaining it. Make sure, therefore, that the finish recommended is really right for the purpose. The oil finish, used in the lounge and kitchen, referred to above, was fine in the living room but a disaster in the kitchen.

Finally, make sure the customer has maintenance instructions from day 1. It is no good giving them the instructions when they complain six months later that the floor looks awful.

Oils, for example, require special instructions. Some are maintained with a cleaner/dressing; others with soap and water. It is imperative for the end user to have this information at the time of hand-over.

I do hope these few words will alert you to possible problems and avoid calamities on your sites. **CFJ**

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Help and advice



John Roberts on installing wood flooring

Sound and dry, OK? It must also be level

LAST month I wrote about the need for subfloors to be sound and dry. This month I deal with the third aspect, LEVEL.

This is normally interpreted as a subfloor with variations measured under a straight edge, of no greater than 3mm.

The length of the straight edge varies from 3000mm to 1000mm, depending on the British Standard being used or the manufacturing tolerance being applied. This does not mean use a spirit level to ensure the subfloor has no deviation from level.

Some floor coverings obviously benefit from being laid on a spirit level subfloor, for example floating floor coverings, but this does not mean you cannot lay floating floor coverings on subfloors which are not truly spirit level.

Consider the implications of laying these types of floor coverings on subfloors which are not spirit level, for instance floating wood products which can move in the direction of the slope, resulting in no expansion gap along at least one wall.

They may also show gaps away from the skirting board / scotia at the opposite end. The results

'Some floorcoverings benefit from being laid on a spirit level subfloor, for example floating floors, but this does not mean you cannot lay floating floors on subfloors which are not truly spirit level'

would be unsatisfactory and this is often costly to put right.

I can hear you say the customer will not pay to have the floor levelled or there is too much variation to level. If so, are you giving the customer the right advice? Consider selecting a product that can cope with subfloors that are not spirit level?

Moving on to subfloors that are not flat and smooth (most of the subfloors the installers come across). Just applying a 3mm thick skim, only serves to raise the level of the subfloor.

A skim should be applied at various thicknesses with a minimum of 3mm (or other thicknesses as specified by a manufacturer) to smooth the subfloor to within acceptable tolerances.

If this cannot be achieved due to floor levels in other rooms, discuss the situation with the

client, pointing out that if a floorcovering is installed on a subfloor that does not meet the British Standard or the manufacturer's standard (if they require a tighter tolerance) the guarantee may be void.

It is wise to discuss the situation with the manufacturer who can advise you on their policy for variations to the standards. Remember if you do not advise the manufacturer, how do expect them to help you if there is a problem.

Manufacturers are perceived to be looking for any excuse to get out of a problem! Talking or written documents can help to resolve situations that cannot be installed within normal tolerances.

So why not try to work with the manufacturer instead of waiting for a problem to manifest itself?

It is alright to apply a skim of at

least 3mm in thickness, but these products require the skill of the installer to apply them with minimum trowel ridges! (TAOFS run courses on subfloor preparation).

If ridges are left in a skim, grind down the surface to a smooth finish by using a hand stone for small areas or a sanding / grinding machine for larger areas. I accept that this operation takes time, but the cost of complaints is normally far greater!

There is much more to this subject than can be written in a single article, so remember to ask questions.

Don't take risks! The bottom line is that you are the professional.

You should possess sufficient knowledge to carry out installations to acceptable standards, always read the instructions and, if you need help, don't hesitate to ask! **CFJ**

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Sid Bourne on avoiding disputes

Always get the paper work signed or else!

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floor was soon scratched and indented all over.

Enter the independent inspector. After hearing the facts, he asked for the moisture readings and signed documents. Sheepishly, the contractor said there were none.

And where did the contractor get his information that the durability of American cherry was equivalent to jatoba?

He said he 'thought' they would be the same.

The customer assumed that the flooring contractor was experienced and 'knew his stuff' and therefore took his advice on the cherry floor.

She was asked, regardless of species, did she really expect that

the wood floor would not scratch or dent.

She said she understood that real wood floors scratch; she had a real oak wood floor in a previous property and it scratched, but not too badly. That was why durability was so important. Scratches on the American cherry were unacceptable.

The problems didn't end there; the customer was unhappy with the applied polyurethane finish; also there was dust on all the fixed wall units and the built-in fire surround. Quite rightly, she refused to accept any of this.

Finally, large gaps appeared between the floorboards.

The contractor was advised not to contest this, but to replace the floor or return the money as this would be the cheapest option.

However, believing that he only did what was asked of him, he went to court. Of course, he lost. It was a very expensive lesson.

Remember to make sure with any job to do everything professionally. Take moisture readings of subfloor; document this with the time and date and get it signed off by the customer.

Not least, check the customer's expectations. Do they have pets? Is the wood floor the right species?

Take readings of the wood when it is delivered; take readings before installation, let the flooring settle before sanding (around a week or so) clean up, before, and in between coats, let it cure before moving the furniture back or at least protect the floor.

If the contractor in question had

done all these things and had all the changes and agreements signed off, he would not have lost all the money.

As I have written about in **CFJ**, there are customers who try to take advantage of flooring contractors. That is why it is so important to have signed documentation about every fact relevant to the installation, and especially any changes made.

The message is to get a signature on the paperwork if you want a signature on the cheque with your full payment! **CFJ**

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