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RENOVATION: FLOORING

The floor in your rental property gets used and abused, so pick the right surface to minimise your costs in the long run, says **Sharon Newey**

IT'S ONE OF the most abused surfaces in a house – the floor. It gets stomped on, spilt on, and mud and dirt tracked over it. Chair legs scraped over it and things dropped on it.

Any home needs a hard-wearing floor surface, let alone a rental property. You might get away with white carpet in your own house – as long as you have no children or pets and don't drink red wine – but for a rental, that's not an option. You need to think tough, and easy cleaned.

Having said that, as with any rental renovation, do consider your likely tenant and the level of wear and tear the floors will sustain. It is tempting to cover the floors in hardy vinyl or tiles but tenants may find hard floors throughout a property uninviting and echoey – unless you are renting out a beautiful character home with original timber floors. Most tenants will respond well to a mix of soft and hard flooring; warm and welcoming, but practical where necessary.

HARD FLOORING

If you have a rental property blessed with nice timber floors, there's nothing easier than sanding them back and giving them a coat of a urethane (try Resene's Qristal ClearFloor, which is waterborne so very easy to use).

Timber, and all of those clever timber look-alikes

Go to any big hardware or flooring outlet and you'll find a wide range of high-pressure laminate flooring as well as vinyl flooring (like a more rigid lino) made

to look like all sorts of timber – dark hardwoods, mid-toned 'natives' and even very trendy white-washed French oak. They either come in large 'tiles' of, say, three planks together, or in clip-together planks. This type of flooring is hard-wearing and cheap – as low as \$35 a square metre.

The vinyl version is particularly good for retrofitting as it is more forgiving of uneven substrates. Rigid laminates or engineered timbers may require more flooring prep to get them sitting right.

The next step up is pre-finished timber veneer planking, or what is called engineered timber, which uses actual timber but in a layer on top of another cheaper substrate. You can get these for as low as \$50 a square metre with a very thin layer of timber; more expensive versions will have a thicker layer.

The advantage of these types of 'timber' flooring is that they go down in one hit and don't need sanding and polyurethaning.

The downside is that, unlike solid timber flooring or veneer that has a thicker layer of timber on top, you can't sand them back and refinish them so once they are damaged in any way, they are difficult to repair.

Timber composites

Chipboard essentially, which has been used as a substrate and a flooring for years. Given a coat of urethane, and it looks fine and is hardwearing. You can always get trendy and paint it with Resene's Enamacryl (a tough waterborne enamel) tinted to any colour you like.

You could use ply but would need a tough marine-grade or it will dent too easily.

Tiles

Extremely hardwearing (as long as the tiler does a good job on the grout) and ideal for wet areas like kitchens, bathrooms and laundries. There is a big price variance but you can get good-looking floor tiles for as little as \$30 a square metre then it will cost more than the same again to get it laid, depending on waterproofing requirements. If the tiler has to paint a rubberised film on the floor of a bathroom, for example, that will cost you about \$75 a square metre including materials.

Tiles are cold underfoot, unless installed with underfloor heating, and any dropped plates are unlikely to survive.

Cork tiles

A good alternative to timber, in that they have a warm look and are relatively soft, with good sound absorption. They really need to be professionally laid and finished.

Vinyl

The range of modern vinyl flooring designs and styles is vast. Many are designed to replicate wood flooring (as mentioned above), ceramic tiles, natural stones and slate, even old-fashioned linoleum. With many it is incredibly hard, at first glance, to tell the difference from the real thing. Vinyl has a softer feel than other hard flooring materials, is easy to clean, is quiet underfoot, and can be very cost-effective (although, there are also some very high-

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quality pricey vinyls around). It can be laid in two-metre widths (hardware stores sell basic lino for \$45 a linear metre for a two-metre width) or for a DIY job you can buy vinyl tile packs. A thicker vinyl will hide imperfections in the substrate.

SOFT FLOORING

There is really only one type of soft flooring and that's carpet. With the huge variety of products on the market, just choosing the cheapest can be a trap for the novice investor - like most things, you get what you pay for, says Jared Schofield of Damn Cheap Carpets.

Polypropylene

The cheapest carpet type available, polypropylene is a very hard fibre so it will wear well. However, warns Schofield, "this product will flatten out and ugly out

quicker than most other products. It is also susceptible to melting - nothing is better proof of this than the unmistakable triangle shape of an iron tattooed into a bedroom carpet."

Another drawback of polypropylene is that the joins tend to fail earlier than they would in a wool or nylon carpet.

Solution-dyed nylon

For a rental, you can't really go past it for affordability and wear. Some look just like wool, yet they are tough and very resistant to staining and fading. Either type starts from \$100 a linear metre (3.66m wide), with price dependant on the quality. For this and wool carpet, allow another \$60 a linear metre for installation and underlay.

"The choice of many in today's market," says Schofield, "but be careful of outrageous warranty claims - some have extensive exclusions, so read the fine print."

Wool

A Kiwi classic and comes in many styles, colours and grades. Serviceable budget

versions start at \$120 a linear metre.

Woollen carpets are marketed as hardwearing, eco-friendly, stain resistant and moisture resistant. They're soft and, depending on the grade, can be very hardwearing and resilient. Whatever the type of fibre you choose, loop weaves are tougher than cut pile, and carpets with a texture or mottled colourway will keep their good looks for longer.

Check the grading of the carpet - it will pay to spend more on an extra heavy duty or even commercial grade for a rental property.

Schofield often deals with property investors and says that feedback over the years indicates spending more on solution-dyed nylon or wool (keep an eye out for manufacturer's second grade wool carpets) works out to be more economical in the long run.

"Remember it's not your home," he advises, "so if the trade-off is a better quality product that doesn't quite go with that Half Tea or Spanish White on the walls, in the end it will pay off in the long run." ■