

Headline: Refurbishment of Common Areas – *Know what you want, be realistic with expectations, and be surprised with what can be accomplished*

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What, Why and When?

Your home (and yes the Common areas of your Strata Condominium) is a reflection of who you are, and where you chose to live.

Up keep and maintenance of a building is an ongoing process. Age, wear and tear, and style also play a part in the equation in the aesthetics and durability of interior finishes and materials.

Some common elements in a building are repaired or replaced out of critical need; such as, replacing a failed boiler or repairing a roof leak. Common area aesthetics are often thought of as decoration and therefore can take a back seat to more demanding needs. So why and when should a Strata and the home owners give serious consideration to periodic refurbishment of the common areas? Consider these points:

- The property is a real estate asset and in the world of real estate having "curb appeal" is recognized as being one of the key factors to a healthy return on an investment.
- The common area is exactly that, common, meaning used by many over and over again, meaning it gets worn out, in some cases to a point beyond peeling paint or wallcovering, to cracked and uneven floor surfaces, which then become tripping (safety) hazards.
- Modernization of the elevator decor
- Out of date – or often cast into a style or era of a past time or period (existing appearance is stale / out of date)
- Durability – some materials and finishes are less durable than others. More durable (and sustainable) products and finishes are now available.
- Demographics / location - surrounding buildings and neighbourhoods change over time. Demographics of ownership in a building also change. Changes should be recognized and needs met for present day owners and the community.
- Change in times and needs – keeping up with the "Jones", or the "Bill Gates" in some worlds.

If one or more of these points sets off a warning bell or alarm, it is likely time to do something about the common areas.

Understanding when it is important and why you want to change, will lead you into the best path of refurbishment.

Refurbishment Process

To start the process of refurbishment a strata should clearly know what they want to change and why they are changing it (this sets initial expectations).

A design committee is wise, if not essential. A design committee is typically comprised of volunteers, selected, and/or voted in by the owners. The design committee should be granted some latitude and authority to make decisions. This level of latitude and authority should be clearly defined.

In some cases, refurbishment can easily be done based on the direction of the design committee; such as, switching out minor fixtures to more cost effective and updated fixtures. In other cases, where more extensive or comprehensive refurbishment is desired, looking beyond the home ownership for independent 3rd party expertise (e.g., from an interior design consultant) can be a positive experience.

Working with a professional design consultant allows the design committee to direct versus do-it-all-themselves, be somewhat arms-length, and allow those with past and current design experience to advise on suitable and timeless designs. Using a professional design consultant can be cost effective and even pay for itself in the short-term or down the road, by:

- preventing costly mistakes on design direction,
- preventing possible inappropriate selection of non-performing finishes and materials,
- providing co-ordination of design committee, design team and contractor(s), and
- help to ensure accountability of trades and their workmanship.

Understanding what the vision / look of what you want, is the initial challenge. Developing a concept (look) of the design is crucial to the outcome. Once the design concept is established, there are many cost effective ways of implementing the concept through choices in:

- material and finishes,
- furnishings, and
- phasing the project over several months (or years).

Design should not be a cookie cutter image, as this is generally deemed as trend in style instead of timeless design. Each property should be considered on its own to provide a sense of place, which requires that the building location, demographics of the building occupants and the surrounding community, and building value, all to be considered.

When a design proposal is put forth (by the design committee in conjunction with the interior design consultant), it should present:

1. the design concept ("The Look"),
2. materials, finishes, fixtures and furnishings proposed to achieve The Look, and
3. a budget.

This should be presented to the owners for their comprehension, buy-in, and ultimately to pass a vote to move forward with the project.

Once the design and budget is approved, the work is tendered to qualified contractors and a contract is awarded to the best suited contractor. In some cases, the work is first tendered to contractors, and the contractor pricing is presented to the owners for voting versus budget pricing (Note: There are pros and cons to each approach).

Once the project is awarded to a contractor, project management is required co-ordinate and managed to the work to ensure that the right products are being supplied and installed as specified. This can be done by the design committee, or by an experienced interior consultant that is aware of what to look for, and to follow up and report back as an unbiased and experienced third party.

Funding:

Monies to refurbish common areas of a strata typically come from the Strata's Contingency Reserve Fund (CRF) or by special levy. This is all the more reason to have the owners on board throughout the process, from selecting the design committee -- to knowing what the design concept and finished appearance will take (often presented by the interior design consultant at an Information Meeting or Special General Meeting) – to gaining approval to expend the required monies from the CRF or raise the monies through a special levy.

Refurbishment of the **common areas of your strata** should not take a back seat. There are many reasons to refurbish and maintain the image and appeal of the building. It is important to know what you want, be realistic with expectations, and **be impressed with what can be accomplished** through smart planning and implementation.