

FLOORING



A Radical Approach to Protecting Finished Floors Applying finish to the floor at the start of a job is unconventional, but it saves time when you need it most

BY MICHAEL PURSER

For a wood flooring-refinishing contractor, one of the biggest drawbacks is coming in dead last in the sequence of building trades on a work site. We come behind everyone else when there is little time, patience, or money to go around. At the core of the problem are turf wars, since the areas we need to work on are the same areas others need to tread on to do their job. In an effort to create harmony on the jobsite and reduce friction, contractors and homeowners will delay work on the floors until the very end of a project. That concept may be good in theory, but in reality, it often deprives us, the wood flooring contractors, the time needed to do our work and creates even greater chaos for everyone when we are finally allowed on-site.

About 15 years ago, a contractor friend of mine and I asked some “what if” questions about the sequencing of various trades and how this impacted the continuity of the work, especially the last 10%—that infamous finish stage. We decided to move floor refinishing work in the schedule so that instead of its being the last task on-site, it would happen just after the drywall went up and was mudded. We experimented with this variation on kitchen remodels because those gave us the most accurate overview of how this might impact a project. Instead of working around cabinets, appliances, islands, toe-kick space, and many corners, nooks, and crannies, my helper and I walked into a rectangular room with four corners and sanded and refinished the entire room.

Photos by Michael Purser

PROTECTING FINISHED FLOORS



The author often wraps finished floors with a dense paper product such as Ram Board (1). One trick is to flip the paper over so the curl faces down. Courses then butt easily and can be taped (2). For stairs, the author prefers cushioned foam products, such as Albert Floorotex (3), which sticks without leaving residue or damaging fine finishes.

Aside from the work going more quickly, this also resulted in a stained and protected surface under everything. My typical finish process always called for two seal coats over the stain followed by two topcoat applications, or four applications total. We then put down floor protection, leaving spaces for the placement of cabinets and appliances, and let the other trades do their thing.

I held off on the final application until everything else was installed and all the finish work completed. At that point, I walked into the room, removed the floor protection (which we saved for the next job), prepped the floor, and made the final application. To say this was a success would be an understatement. The difference it made coordinating the other trades and installations left us gob-smacked, and we've never looked back.

I have carried this approach into the bulk of my business, which centers on historic restoration and preservation of old wood floors. Some of these projects have been massive in nature and work was often done in phases over years. Like on other remodeling jobs, the scheduling of trades was often an issue. Once again, conventional wisdom put all wood floor work at the end of the schedule, so implementing my new approach was not an easy sell until I was able to show the principals photos and the positive impact and flexibility that rearranging the wood floor work can have on scheduling the other artisans and craftspeople involved in the project. Finish work

with new construction, remodeling, or restoration all produced the same challenges: lack of time and options when you needed them most. By repositioning wood-floor restoration much earlier in the process, the painstaking restoration of other surfaces and objects could proceed over a fully protected and restored wood floor. We proved that some things written in stone can be erased.

NEXT-GENERATION FLOOR PROTECTION

For those of you who've scratched a bald spot on your head trying to figure out how we accomplished this, the answer is easy—there's been a quantum leap made in options for protecting floors. A new generation of products for protecting floors started coming on the market around 15 years ago. Since then, the offerings have expanded. Not only do these products address our needs, but most of them are also produced from recycled materials, which only sweetens the pot. They vary in composition, but all have the same goal: to protect what they cover from most materials, liquids, and activities taking place on the surface.

Heavy-duty, dense paper products. These were some of the earliest protective materials to come on the market. The two most well-known products that I'm aware of are Ram Board and FlexBoard by Protective Products.

Ram Board is sold through retail outlets, and FlexBoard is available



To allow other trades access to work on baseboards, the author may cut the cushioned film products into strips (4) and use them to cover a gap in the dense paper products covering the field of a room. A fabric runner, such as Dura Runner (5), works well for walk-on and walk-off mats at entrances to minimize the tracking in of debris and moisture.

online through the Protective Products website. Both are in the same thickness category, 45 mils, and come in rolls. For contractors, they offer different widths—38 inches for Ram Board and 32 inches for FlexBoard—that both come 100 feet in length. Ram Board offers a “home version” that’s 36 inches wide by 50 feet long and around 38 mils thick, but I’ve always used the beefier option. These are my go-to products, as they lay down easily and are quick to install.

I typically roll the paper out and then flip it over so the curled ends face down, enabling it to flatten more quickly. The side edges of the paper are precision cut, making it easy to abut the next piece. To avoid movement, I tape the long parallel edge seams for stability, running the tape continuously to keep fine particles from getting under the paper. A wide seam tape offers excellent protection from premature damage from foot traffic you find on work sites. Both Ram Board and FlexBoard provide protection from spills and contact with various types of liquids.

Lightweight, flexible, and cushioned polyester film. Products in this category offer some options that the dense paper products don’t. I’m familiar with two: Albert’s Floorotex and Protective Products’ Econo Runner, both available online. They come in rolls that vary in widths (40 inches for the Floorotex and 32 inches for the Econo Runner) and generous lengths. Both are flexible and have a thin polyester film on top attached to a thin cushioned material.

Most important for me is the light tacky material on the bottom that allows the products to grip a surface without removing the finish or leaving a sticky residue. They both have excellent resistance to moisture, while allowing what’s beneath them to continue curing. I’ve made good use of them on freshly refinished stair treads and landings where slipping would be a hazard with a paper product. I often cut this material into 3- to 5-inch strips. When I put down the dense paper products in the field of a room, I leave a gap at the perimeter to cover with the flexible film. The film can then be pulled back to allow other trades to work on baseboards, molding, and curved surfaces.

Soft fabric runners with non-slip backing. This material has multiple uses for me and all are good. The brand I am most familiar with is Dura Runner by Protective Products and I order it online. It has a felt-like surface on top of a waterproof backing that helps prevent slippage but doesn’t have adhesion.

I love to use this for walk-off mats at the main exterior entrance. I cut it into 6-foot lengths and place one outside and often another inside to minimize the amount of debris and moisture that is tracked in. In a fully furnished home, I like to use the same length outside areas where I’m working, so I don’t track anything from that area onto antique rugs, carpeting, or other hard surface materials. Since the strips are lightweight and easily portable, I place two to three next to each other to create a protected surface of about



The author restored the floors in Henry and Clara Ford's billiard room at the start of an extensive renovation to the Ford's home, Fair Lane. After the floor was wrapped with paper and fully taped hardboard, the room became the staging site for the other trades.

12 square feet for placing equipment and materials. I have had several of these walk-off mats for a long time, as you can easily clean them with a broom and take them to the next project.

Hardboard. This one is an oldie but goodie. I've been around so long I call it Masonite; the younger generations call it hardboard. It typically comes in 4x8 sheets, usually in 1/4- and 3/8-inch thicknesses. As with the dense paper, I abut sheets and continuously tape over the seams to help prevent anything getting underneath them. It's the ultimate in protection and well worth the price when a lot of rough work will be done on the job, or when something heavy shows up on the project site. More than once, I have put some under a grand piano and been able to push that sucker wherever I needed to without leaving any indentations on the floor. I don't use it often, but when I do, I'm grateful I did.

A FEW PRECAUTIONS

If you adopt my approach to doing the floor refinishing at the beginning of or during a project, instead of waiting to go in last, here are some things to keep in mind:

Curing. As with all products, make sure you read the technical specs. Finishes should be well into the curing process before being covered. It's best to check with the finish manufacturer about timing as it can vary from product to product.

Sunlight. If you have areas of intense sunlight and UV exposure, avoid putting down partial strips of flooring protection, as you may get some color variations due to fading. Cover the entire floor, or don't cover it at all, to avoid differential fading.

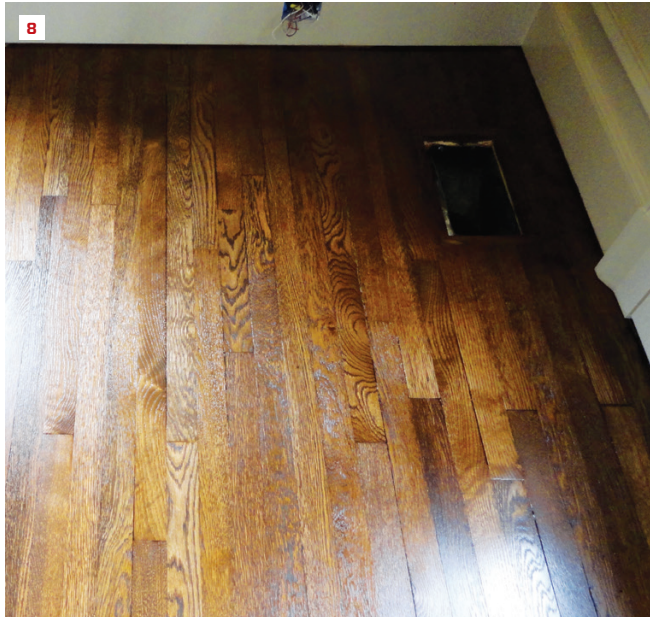
Tape. Never under any circumstances apply any masking tape of any color to the edges of these protective products to keep them in place. It makes no difference if the finishes beneath are old or new. I would extend this warning to other hard flooring materials such as marble, terrazzo, hard tiles, and terracotta, as they may have sealers, waxes, finishes, or acrylics on them that will pull off. In general, putting tape on any hard flooring material is a bad idea.

No one size fits all. I do not rely on any one product for all my protective needs. I use products from all the categories I listed above based on the needs and demands of an area.

WEIGHING THE ECONOMICS

The first time I wrote an article on the pluses of protecting wood floors, I made a mistake. The article was for *Wood Floor Business*, whose readers are primarily wood flooring contractors, manufacturers, and distributors. In the article, I used photos taken from some projects where I had completed my work and then wrapped it to protect it from the building trades that would be following me. The mistake I made was in the examples I used: One of the projects was a \$2.3 million project and the other was my restoration work in Dearborn, Mich., on Henry Ford's home, Fair Lane.

Pushback from the contractors was swift. Whereas I saw the protective products as a means for enhancing the workflow for everyone, they saw it as a perk only for high-profile jobs that would increase what they charged for their clientele, thereby making them less competitive. It was a good point, and I spent a fair amount of time answering their comments in the online version of the article.



After the author sanded, stained, and finished the floor in this master bedroom (8), the room was used as a spray booth for cabinet doors during the course of the renovation (9). Fully taped hardboard over paper protected the flooring.

I was careful to point out that protecting my work was a collaborative effort, and I didn't bear the price alone. I also made it clear that much of my work was in houses in older, inner-city neighborhoods, and the projects were much more modest in scale and price tag. These are the old neighborhoods where there are 100- to 150-year-old houses. My business partner and I work on what I refer to as high-risk floors that cannot be sanded any more, so we are often the only building trade on-site and we make excellent use of protective products. Rarely would any of these projects have a budget of over \$20,000, so I don't consider the cost of the project to be the determining factor in using protective products.

When my contractor friend and I decided to go down the road of rearranging the work of the finish trades, we had a specific goal in mind: to help make the final 10% of the work more fluid and less chaotic. Certainly, there was the additional cost of the protective products, but we learned the real value in creating time when he would need it the most. If you can minimize the potential conflicts wood floor work brings to the end of a project—when punch list items are looming, certificates of occupancy need to be issued, or delays in kitchen cabinets and their hardware are the cause of sleepless nights and ulcers—then there's another metric for measuring the extra costs. We had not anticipated how big a dividend this change would pay out until we tried it. We took a "what if" question and put it into practice, and we've never looked back. When others express skepticism, all I do is point to the pictures and provide them with proof.

One byproduct of this approach is the goodwill it generates.

Aside from the fact you are virtually eliminating the turf wars at the end of a job, homeowners also see the efforts being made to protect their property. Having to explain to homeowners how damage was done to a brand-new surface isn't the way you want to spend your time at any stage of the project, but especially not at the end. You are creating the positive narrative that the homeowner will use in describing your work style to other potential clients, and as the credit-card company says about their service, that's priceless.

FLEXIBILITY IN PLANNING AND EXECUTION

I want readers, especially general contractors, project managers, and job supervisors, to walk away from this article knowing that not everything is written in stone. What I want them to understand is that innovations in materials and products in our world might achieve goals that aren't readily apparent. Temporary protection products give flexibility in planning and executing a project. They open doors you never thought existed and provide options that can exceed everybody's expectations. There is a modest cost for the protection, but the payback in increased options simply makes it a wise investment. On every project where we've flipped the sequence, everyone involved has said they would never go back to the older, outdated method of putting our trade last.

Michael Purser is a second-generation floor finisher based in Atlanta, Ga. He owns The Rosebud Company (rosebudfloors.com), which specializes in the restoration of historic wood floors. You can follow his company projects on Facebook at The Rosebud Company.