

The floor



In the construction phase of a new build project a number of different parties have a say in the outcome of the flooring and a great deal of decisions have to be made, including its shape, size, design and materials used. Jim Murray looks at the part each stakeholder plays in the initial planning stage of a floor.



• who chooses? ring

Architect Michael Troughton, with Andrews and Hazzard of Birmingham, is one of those men who like to tell a story.

I could tell he was busy when I called. He was a little breathless. He had just sat down to take a break, he explained, in the middle of moving his office, now sat alone in a room full of boxes. Could he give me a few minutes, helping out a journalist with a deadline?

I could hear him on the other end, thinking it over. "How many minutes," he asked, "is a few?"

I told him, five or ten, no longer. If I hold you longer you can cut me off, no questions asked.

He took half an hour. Like I said, he likes to tell a story.

It turned out to be a good story, too. Andrews and Hazzard had been taken on to refurbish and modernise a care home for the elderly and give it an all-new, updated appearance with new windows and new entries everywhere. It was a sizeable job and fortunately the man in charge had a budget to match.

Said Man-in-Charge was a person

accustomed to having his own way, particularly when he is paying for it, and that signalled trouble. The trouble Troughton found himself in took the form of a polished marble floor. Man-in-Charge, it seems, had always cherished the vision of a floor in white, polished marble in all the facility's public areas. It was a dream he had entertained for years and now that it was within his grasp he was not about to let go of it. He meant to have it and he was not going to compromise over it.

"It's going to be magnificent!" Man-in-Charge declared. "It's going to be elegant

“The argument raged for weeks, customer determined to have marble and architect just as determined that it was a disaster in the waiting.”

and durable and simply unforgettable. It's going to be a local landmark.”

Troughton told him, “It's going to be one more thing, too. It's going to be deadly.”

“One little spill,” Troughton said, “a cup of coffee, a jug of milk, anything at all, and it's going to be as slippery as glass. You're going to have patients who find it difficult, just standing on it. You're going to have fragile, unstable people skating across that lobby. The liabilities will be enormous.”

“Well,” said Man-in-Charge, “it's up to you to make it right. I know what I want and it's marble. If you can't provide me with what I want I will find someone who can.”

And so it began.

This is the question I am now posing to you: With all these beautiful, durable and functional flooring surfaces available today, making the right choice is not as easy as it might seem. Getting it wrong is rife with consequence and it can range from creating a public eyesore to the real risk of injury.

So who should be entrusted to make this decision? Several options present themselves, and there are strengths associated with each.

The architect

Architect Michael Burton of Corsham takes his responsibilities seriously, in fact, he guards and defends them. He maintains, choosing an appropriate flooring is the architect's responsibility. “Every building,” he says, “must balance three virtues of commodity, firmness and delight. Choosing the right materials to keep all these in balance – this is the architect's job. It's all about detail.”

Then again, according to Keith Stewardson of Croydon firm Stewardson Farrant, there are so many choices available today, with options changing all the time, that one man cannot possibly hope to keep up with all the changes. “The only real option we have,” he says, “is to

rely on flooring contractors and manufacturers for help.”

The flooring manufacturer

Several architects – they are not eager to be named here – are a little cynical about consulting with flooring manufacturers. Commercial organisations one and all, manufacturers will succumb from time to time to the temptation to recommend not the surface that might serve the customer best, but rather the one they want to sell. Everyone is running a business and it is simply inevitable.

Architect Massimo Fanin of Trevor Lahiff in London addresses the question of vendor relations this way: “We tend to use companies we have worked with before, but we also like to keep updated with new products and are constantly meeting with both existing and new suppliers as well as visiting shows and trade fairs.”

He adds, “An important aspect to consider when specifying a new flooring product is also the availability of the product. It is quite frequent for a job to be delayed because the marble for a bathroom floor is not on-site on time.”

The contractor or builder

Troughton delights in telling the story (didn't I say he likes stories?) of an architect he knew in the past who relied upon a builder to choose the optimal flooring on a large project. The builder, the reasoning went, was on the site every day, was intimately familiar with the project and close to the customer as well, and therefore would be most likely to choose the materials the customer would be happy with.

It turned out upon investigation that the builder was earnestly choosing all his materials based upon his estimation of what he thought the architect wanted. In short, it was his unspoken judgement, in the selection of flooring materials, that the architect knew best.

Whether the customer was satisfied with the results of this silent, circular process is a matter for speculation.

The customer

At first glance it might have looked like a no-brainer; the customer should decide. After all, he is the one writing the checks, and he is the one who is going to have to live with the finished product. So, it should be his decision, right?

Let's get back to that care home for the elderly and the man who wanted marble floors. Troughton's story illustrates just how wrong a well-meaning customer can be.

The argument raged for weeks, customer determined to have marble and architect just as determined that it was a disaster in the waiting. Troughton's company enlisted the support of various other, outside authorities up to and including the government, and the resulting chorus finally convinced the customer that the liabilities involved should override the cosmetic appeal of the tile. The care centre was refurbished, quite successfully but without the marble floor.

So, there is no easy answer

There are so many choices, from the silky elegance of marble and ceramic to the fixed and Puritan resolve of stone. There is the kindly and genteel dignity of wood and the soft silence of carpet. Then there are newer, composite surfaces that defy any simple description. You have to see them to believe them.

Fanin offers the following analysis of the process: “As architects we usually offer an initial proposal, whilst at the same time, keeping in mind our client's brief and budget. For the most part, our clients are very clear on what type of floor they want but obviously we are called to give our professional opinion and offer different options. We take our clients to visit flooring showrooms or completed jobs so that they can see exactly what the finished product would look like.”

CJ Hodgson of Cranleigh firm Hodgson Lunn and Co. sums it all up this way: “Aesthetics are the first consideration, and the customer makes those decisions. But sometimes the customer makes a decision we wouldn't, and then we have to get together and make an informed decision. Planning is everything.”

Collaboration, planning, and regular communication between all parties – these appear to be the vital ingredients involved in getting this key decision right the first time.

“An important aspect to consider when specifying a new flooring product is also the availability of the product.”