



FLOORING MAIN STREET IOWA TECHNOTES

Historic buildings have many interesting features; exterior details like decorative cornices, interesting brick and stone patterns, ornate leaded transom windows and a variety of storefront window framing materials and details. Interesting characteristics are not limited to the outside, interiors also boast some exciting architectural elements like pressed metal ceilings, carved woodwork, lights and fixtures.

One element that is both functional and is a strong character defining element in any building is the flooring material. From hardwood to stone and tile to carpet flooring, materials add more than character and charm to an interior space.

The choice of a flooring material will strongly influence the feeling and image of a business. Flooring materials can also help to define different sections or departments of the business and help guide customers through the store.

When deciding upon a flooring material, the first question should be what was used historically in the space? Is it still a viable option for today? An obvious candidate for contemporary use is the original wood floors that are fairly common in many historic commercial buildings. The exact character of the

wood can vary greatly. It might be a very narrow tongue and groove maple or oak. It might be a wider hard pine, maple or oak. It might even have decorative inlays of walnut or even more exotic woods. A typical hard wood floor is usually $\frac{3}{4}$ " thick with a tongue and groove

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design. The tongue and grooves divide the board into three approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ " thick elements.

One of the benefits of this $\frac{3}{4}$ " thick flooring is that it usually can be sanded and refinished if it has not been sanded too many times previously. Under the skills of an experienced craftsman, a refinished wood floor will actually look like new, maybe even better! Such a craftsman can also repair any minor “dings” in the floor, fill any cracks and even replace any damaged or missing pieces. All loose boards can be set with a countersunk nail or very small headed screw to help eliminate any squeaks.

Total refinishing is not always needed, or even desired. The drawback to refinishing is that the interesting patina and character marks are virtually eliminated during the refinishing process. Often times it is a more interesting finished product if the floor is only sanded lightly to remove any rough spots, leaving all the “character marks”.

Of course, needed repairs should be made to the floor, but even these repairs become part of the character of the floor.

Another common flooring material that is seen in many of Iowa’s historic buildings is ceramic tile. With its resistance to wear and easy clean up, tile was often used at the entrance and in heavy traffic areas. Although by no means exclusive, a common store type where you will see ceramic tile is the old fashioned drug store/soda fountain. Tile was commonly used at the entrance and along the service counters in these establishments, often in a decorative design. With its great design flexibility many tile floors have interesting details. Store names, logos and other designs are common features in tile floors. However, as owners and occupancies change some of these features have been removed by insensitive alterations.





The tile of today is basically the same materials and is installed with the same techniques as that 100 years ago. However it's been made easier. Rather than setting each individual tile by hand, today tile comes in larger sheets with the individual tiles set onto a mesh fabric all perfectly spaced. Computer technology has also aided the customized logo or graphic design of tiles as well. Virtually anything is possible with contemporary tile installations.

Another heavy traffic material used in historic commercial building applications is terrazzo. Terrazzo floors are made by adding colored marble chips into a mortar base. Different sections of the terrazzo floor are defined with brass strips. The strips provide a control joint for expansion and contraction and also create an opportunity for design flexibility. By using different color aggregates and a variety of shapes, design possibilities are virtually endless. Terrazzo floors can be seen in the entrances to many theaters, five and dime stores, department stores and many schools and hospitals. Still widely used today, terrazzo is an extremely durable flooring material.

Any or all of these historic materials will function well for virtually any business if you have them

available. Mixing and matching with contemporary materials can also add the “final touch” for an up to date contemporary commercial use.

Perhaps the most common flooring used in commercial applications is carpet. It is relatively inexpensive, comes in virtually any colors and has good durability for the price. Carpet



is also appropriate for many applications, especially in office and other upscale retail operations. It creates a warm inviting atmosphere

and its soft texture helps to reduce the noise associated with many of the hard surface materials. Carpet is also easy to replace, creating a quick update to a tired interior color scheme. Perhaps the biggest drawback to carpet is its care and maintenance. Even with modern stain fighting advances it soils and stains much easier than wood, tile or terrazzo.

Other contemporary materials like vinyl and laminate flooring are often used as well. Both laminate and vinyl are easy to install so they lend themselves to a quick and easy remodel. Sheet vinyl comes in a wide variety of patterns and colors and is easy to clean. Care should be taken if selecting vinyl to be sure that an appropriate image is chosen

to complement the overall character of the business.

Laminate flooring is a popular alternative to hardwood flooring. Known by the trade name “Pergo” these types of flooring can have similar appearances to hardwood. An advantage of this flooring is that it is quite easy to create a unique pattern of inlays or borders by using different color flooring or special edging strips. This flooring is pre-finished so it is ready to use almost immediately after installation. The long term durability of this type of flooring is not yet certain since it is a relatively new innovation.

Whether new installations or contemporary materials, flooring options are widely varied and limitless. There are many more options than those briefly discussed here.

One point that should be carefully considered in all situations is if the original flooring can continue to add to the value of the business operation. In many situations, the answer will be yes. If so, this will not only add to the historic character of the building, it can also be a more cost effective solution.

For More Information:

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Additional Reading:

*Preserving Historic Ceramic Tiles
Preservation Brief #40*