

Wood's supporting role in retail development

TRADA flooring specialist Peter Kaczmar explains why its crucial to choose the right wood flooring in retail developments



How often do you go to the cinema and actually listen to the background music of the main feature? Answer: never, or at least not often. Yet imagine how dull the film would be without its background accompaniment. As so often in life, the success of the main attraction is often heavily dependent on a seemingly unprepossessing component that no one ever stops to consider – until something goes wrong.

So it is with the humble

wood floor, a much ignored component of retail trading, yet one which can significantly improve the shopping experience. Mellow flooring is designed to put customers at ease, by creating a pleasant and visually attractive environment in which to shop.

By installing a wood floor in a shop environment the retailer is telling the customer to expect the 'real thing' – no artificial substitutes or look-alikes. In other words, expect quality and a certain style. What therefore are the main considerations when installing

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a wood floor in a shopping environment?

Firstly, there is the issue of aesthetics. Retail psychologists are paid huge amounts to convey just the right ambience to seduce customers to make a purchase. Consider why it is that chemist's counters are always bathed in pure white light, whereas fruit and vegetables are always presented under softer yellow light. The first conveys the impression of purity and cleanliness, the second emulates the natural light of the sun, reinforcing the illusion that the vegetables are grown naturally. Similarly, a wood floor can offer a huge range of different moods, from the dark brooding colours of afrormosia or merbau and the rich, golden opulence of iroko, to the light, clean colours of beech, maple or sycamore. Natural wood gives endless design possibilities.

Next there is functionality. A floor in a busy shopping environment must be capable of withstanding significantly large amounts of footfall. Different species are suited to different trafficking regimes. Wood offers a range of different species suited to different environments, depending on the amount of potential wear they face. Oak and maple are popular choices, as they are good at withstanding medium to heavy trafficking. The range on offer is far more extensive if we consider less well-known timbers such as hornbeam or Japanese maple.

And wood meets environmental expectations. It is natural, durable and can be specified with chain of custody



Supporting role... Wood flooring at Bluewater, the UK's largest shopping mall

Floor cracking in service (left) shows what can go wrong if the material is wrongly specified or installed

certification, the means of tracking a piece of timber from the forest to end use, to prove that it comes from a sustainable source. This increasingly is a stipulation of tendering. Some species may not be available with certification and some which are may not be suitable for shopping centre flooring, so specifiers are advised to check beforehand.

The manner in which the floor is laid can serve to provide the illusion of space, or alternatively can make an open space seem more welcoming. Laying woodstrip flooring along the long axis of a space makes the space seem less expansive, whereas laying across the short axis gives the illusion of more room.

Laying wood floors over larger areas is not without its pitfalls; attention needs to be drawn to installation detailing. In the case of large shopping centres, the provision of adequate expansion gaps at least for every 12 metre run of floor, as measured across the width of the woodstrips or boards, is essential. However, the actual frequency can be moderated, depending on whether the species is a large, medium or small movement timber. This will prevent the phenomenon of 'rafting' where the movement of individual woodstrip causes a single large gap mid-floor.

The installation of a wood floor is as much a science as a skill. If correctly selected and laid, a wood floor can provide many years of trouble-free service in almost any environment subjected to footfall. It therefore becomes a far more attractive financial

proposition over the longer term than other floor coverings. This is in no small part due to the ease with which large areas of wood flooring lend themselves to regular maintenance.

Regular maintenance usually takes the form of daily sweeping and weekly cleaning, often involving the application of a surface dressing as a means of restoring the lustre of the original floor finish. In the event of severe wear, the floor surface can be restored to its 'as new' condition through a programme of sanding and refinishing.

Even the selection of surface treatments can offer a variety of options in areas subjected to trafficking 'hot-spots'. In such cases, application of a penetrative or fortified oil treatment rather than a surface lacquer offers the advantage that wear damage can be seamlessly spot-repaired without the need

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BonaKemi floor in a bar at Bluewater

to re-coat the entire shop floor. However, if total re-treatment is necessary, there is a wide range of quick-drying, high-performance lacquer systems which enable a three-coat remedial application to be carried out within a day, keeping disruption to a minimum. The lifespan of wood floors subjected to heavy trafficking can therefore be extended significantly compared with that achieved by many other types of floor covering.

The option of using wood floors in shopping centres is therefore extremely attractive all round. It offers a solution to many types of trafficking environments without limiting design. The irony is that if specified well and in sympathy with its immediate environment the floor will always contribute to its surroundings unobtrusively and, like the background music to a film, must always be content with playing the supporting role.

