

Vanishing Floors

*By Michael Purser
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How many times can a wood floor be sanded? There seems to be universal agreement that the magic number is three and that could spell problems for any house built before the 1950s. After the original sanding when the house was built, many homes got their second sanding during the '70s and '80s when wall to wall carpet fell out of favor with homeowners. This means that any more sanding from that point on can be the final one with few options to consider. For the last 35 years, most of my work has been on old floors and I think I can provide you some insight.

What do you look for?



These two pictures help explain some warning signs. Most floors are tongue and groove and fit together like a puzzle and are secured to the subfloor with hidden nails. After repeated sanding, you will begin to see the nail heads as in the photo above. The shiny objects above the pencil are nail heads. Continued loss of wood will eventually lead to splitting as in the photo below. Needless to say, this is what I call a high risk floor.



What are your alternatives?

An excellent option to avoid sanding wood floors refinished within the last 25-30 years is recoating. Recoating is basically a cosmetic procedure that involves a thorough cleaning and prep before applying finish to the surface. As long as the floor has never been waxed with paste or acrylic waxes, it should be a candidate. Many contractors

offer a "screen and recoat" as an option but this has a higher risk than using safe and environmentally responsible cleaners to prep the floor prior to applying new finish. I recommend this approach along with two applications of waterborne polyurethane for the best results.

If sanding is the only option on an old floor, homeowners better check out their flooring contractor carefully. You want to make sure the contractor has extensive experience working on older, at risk floors. Turning a crew loose in an old house that is accustomed to sanding new wood floors can be an expensive and heartbreaking lesson. Experienced flooring contractors avoid excessively coarse sanding, which removes more wood than old finish, and often have secondary sanders for the fine sanding. They understand the risk of removing too much wood and know how to avoid this costly mistake. This approach will usually require more time, patience and is more costly. But compared to replacing a ruined floor, it is a bargain.

As any real estate agent will tell you, a wood floor is a very valuable asset to an old home. You want to enjoy it and benefit from its enhancing the beauty and value of your home. Treat it like the investment that it is and you avoid a lot of problems.

(Michael Purser is owner of the Rosebud Co. and has been a wood flooring contractor in the older neighborhoods of Atlanta since 1973. For more information about Rosebud Co., visit www.rosebudfloors.com.)

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