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Condo Living

Older condo lobbies need some serious updating

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TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL RENOVATION

Undertaking a lobby renovation requires a lot of planning. Here are some tips from those who have co-ordinated them.

- Choose the right designer and then don't micro-manage.
- Interview several to get the right "fit".

Not everyone agrees as to whether you need to take a road trip to look at a designer's previous work versus looking at a portfolio. You might feel some interiors are not to your taste but remember, those condo boards have presumably made choices their owners wanted. On the other hand, photos may not give the full picture.

- If the building is of sufficient size, have a decorating committee. Members can narrow choices before taking them to the board for final decisions. The goal is to achieve consensus, not reflect your personal taste. You are working on behalf of all owners.

- If you have a financial wiz on the board or the committee, great. Property managers are familiar with budgets, too, and can be a resource. Pay attention to costs as the project moves along.

- Jobs often grow in scope, just like home renovations. Hidden surprises, such as water damage, may crop up and must be addressed.

- Ask designers about long-term maintenance issues, such as with lighting. What's the cost of upkeep, bulbs, etc.? How about furniture? Carpets? Will they stand the test of time or are they trendy?

- Make sure your reserve fund accurately reflects what you need to do. Factor in the costs of any professionals you need, not just the actual cost of supplies.

- Designers have errors and omissions liability insurance, they understand the building code, are aware of disability access issues and know which permits they need.

- Think green. Can you find another use for existing furniture?
- Buying prints on canvas can save you about 70 per cent over original artwork. They look like paintings and give a gallery look. Original artwork, however, can be an investment. Consider where it's going to hang.

Remember the '80s, when Duran Duran and Spandau Ballet topped the charts and condo lobbies were awash in plums and teals, bleached woods and marble floors and lots of brass?

If you live in a building from that era whose lobby hasn't yet been renovated, you might find it hard to forget.

Like clothing, condo lobbies should be updated to reflect the times, solve design dilemmas and maintain property values.

New buildings set the standard, says interior designer Linda Makins, who has focused on renovating condo lobbies, corridors and elevators for about 10 years. And, while they may look great now, their time will come, too.

"In 15 years, all those little time bombs will go off" as the latest design trends spring up, she says.

She says boards are now more knowledgeable than when she started and realize that reserve fund studies, which address major repairs and replacements, have to factor in more than the nuts and bolts. Directors need to hire professionals who know the territory.

"A professional has errors and omissions liability insurance, they're trained, they understand building code, they'll go for permits," she explains.

If you are updating anything structural, "the minute you touch it and start renovating, you have to bring it up to current code."

Makins, in partnership with Danuta Ladna, undertook the lobby renovation at 2267 Lake Shore Blvd., one of three condo complexes making up Marina Del Ray.

The two-storey lobby was true to its period: it had marble floors, bleached oak walls, pot lights in the wrong places and brass detailing everywhere. Two residential wings off the lobby had distinctive teal suite entry doors.

The condo board wanted a more contemporary look: light and airy to reflect its location on Lake Ontario.

Makins chose to keep the oak but to restain it a rich mahogany. Although the bleached wood was like a sponge, absorbing the stain, she persevered.

The flooring, in bad shape, was ripped up and replaced with porcelain tiles, more suited to our climate. Pietra piacentina marble was used in the seating area.

Energy efficient lighting was installed, smoked mirrors replaced with regular mirrors and polished chrome replacing the entryway brass.

But perhaps the most important change was expanding the security station. It was completely opened up, giving the guards better sightlines. Old, heavy doors were replaced with automatic, frameless glass doors and a fob system.

Board president Walter Mudyk, a long-time owner, says “the automatic doors were the most appreciative part of the renovation.”

Enough money was left over to allow for a signature chandelier of Murano glass in the entryway.

Mudyk says that the budget for the lobby alone was around \$500,000, not including the security station work, which wasn’t part of Makins’ mandate, but it made sense to do at the same time. Adding wing corridors, elevators and lower level renovations, they spent at total of \$825,000.

Makins says that budgets grow when “hidden surprises” pop up, such as having to modify ramps for disabled access to meet current building codes.

Sylvia McLelland knows all about surprises.

More than eight years ago, as president of The Wellington, she struck a design committee that did extensive research before embarking on renovations.

To wit: interviewing seven designers, going to their projects, photographing them and having a “financial wiz” in the building draw up spreadsheets and flow charts, aided by the property manager. That process took about a year.

They chose Randy Christensen Design because he “listened to what we wanted,” which was an Old World feel, McLelland says.

Built in the early ’80s, the building at 30 Wellington started out as an office tower but turned residential partway through construction of the complex it inhabits.

“We decided to make this place look like a Relais & Chateaux,” she adds.

Christensen says the board really knew their owners, going so far as to do colour boards to get the look they wanted.

Work started in 2003 and took about three months.

The lobby budget was more than \$300,000 but grew once they found water damage in the entryway had turned the underlying concrete to powder.

Christensen’s new design had the entryway slanting downward, so water wouldn’t collect.

Subterranean drainage was installed as well as a structured steel, aluminum and tempered glass canopy installed outside. Granite pavers with a non-slip texture were also laid down. That added an additional \$100,000 to costs.

For the lobby proper, Christensen chose an earth tone colour palette. Traditional custom wood panel details, crown mouldings, wainscoting, baseboards and tone-on-tone wallcoverings were added. Some of the existing coffered ceiling panels were reused and relocated, saving money. Granite flooring was installed throughout the lobby, vestibule and elevator cabs, which added \$75,000.

A new custom concierge desk was built, which included modern building security systems. New energy efficient lighting, including custom designed wall sconces, was installed.

Instead of installing ramps or an elevator for the physically challenged, a raised area was removed to comply with current building standards and universal design principles.

A Chinoiserie armoire replaced a metal storage cabinet, which had made the building feel like an office tower. Leather chairs were moved to the billiards room. He chose original artwork for the lobby but used canvas transfer prints in elegant frames elsewhere.

McLelland says that original artwork and marble flooring were determined to be “upgrades”, and not covered by the reserve fund. A modest special assessment (nearly \$229 per unit) meant an additional \$27,000 in the pot.

They also saved money by dealing directly with suppliers, saving markup on materials.

At the Pavilion, in the Yonge-Sheppard area, the decor was a dead giveaway of its mid-'80s birth order: A giant wall mural and the “casino ceiling” with its garish lighting, had to go.

The board struck a refurbishment committee, worked to achieve a consensus and found a designer. The entire process, including construction, took about two years, culminating this summer.

Stanley Kedzierski, of West 49 Parallel Design Inc., says the idea was to try not to fight the architecture. “The bones were there. We could see beyond what was.”

The oak tambour walls, made of half rounded wood, were removed and restained a chestnut brown. (The committee chose from among fifteen different stain samples.) Horizontal moulding was installed above.

Kedzierski installed metal halide lighting, which lasts about 10,000 hours and reduces labour costs for replacement.

An area carpet was custom coloured and milled in England. Further, he designed a 5-foot by 5-foot square table custom made with a brass piping that mimics the pattern on the concierge desk, which was enlarged.

Sliding doors were placed behind the concierge desk to separate the mailbox area and keep people from going behind the guards.

Two oversized antique brass finished chandeliers help fill up the volume of the two-storey space.

Kedzierski compares the finished look to a New York boutique hotel.

Yvonne Hann, an original owner and a director who was also on the refurbishment committee, says the corporation was “very pleased with the outcome.”

No item was too small for Kedzierski to deal with, she adds.

The budget started out at about \$375,000 but grew to about \$500,000 as the scope of work increased — just as in home renovation projects. But, it's necessary to spend money, she says. Updating your lobby helps your building compete with newer ones and increases your property values.

— Donna Laporte