



ask the *contractor*

By Vince Bartels

Practical Renovations for Rental Properties

Rental owners frequently ask me for advice on which types of renovations to rental properties make sense. Unless a property has maintenance issues that need prompt attention, I recommend that owners stick to projects that increase the appeal and value of rental properties. In other words, choose renovations that help you maintain or boost rents and give you a good return on your investment of money.

The best way to recoup your investment is to keep your costs low and the projects simple. That means doing cosmetic, not structural renovations. I usually suggest owners focus on kitchens, baths or the heating, venting, and air conditioning systems or HVAC.

Kitchens and Baths

For kitchens and baths, you might consider replacing cabinets and countertops. There are many options for both of these.

Cabinets

Cabinets are available in different levels of quality in terms of materials and assembly techniques. As you might expect, the more durable the cabinets, the greater the cost.

Cabinet exteriors can have a face frame or be frameless. Look at the different style and finishes to decide which will work best for your property. My preference, if your budget allows, is cabinet boxes made of plywood and hardwood face frames and doors.

A less expensive option is to use cabinet boxes made of composites or a blend of materials, but be certain that the product is of high density and designed for use in cabinets. I prefer to use composites that have a hard washable surface applied by the product manufacturer, not added later.

Countertops

Countertops are another item that has three basic options: laminates, hard composites and either tile or stone. These three options also can be used in tubs and shower surrounds. I will describe them in the order of their cost, from least to most expensive.

Laminated products include Formica® and Wilsonart® brands for countertops and Pionite® for shower surrounds. These relatively inexpensive products have many assembly options, but I recommend fully formed tops that have the drip edge and backsplash already built in. In my opinion, this configuration wears better. That's because it doesn't have a seam at the back edge that tends to be difficult to keep clean and may allow water to seep inside the counter surface causing it to swell. In addition, it doesn't have a joint at the front edge, which is easily damaged and more susceptible to wear and tear.

The slightly more expensive hard composite products include cultured marble and Corian®. These non-porous and seamless products are good in wet conditions, and some have surfaces that resist staining as well as burn marks caused by hot pans. These products are custom-made based upon the measurements you supply. The countertops can include a built-in sink, but that option can substantially add to the project cost and may require the replacement of the tops if the sink is damaged in the future.

The last option is the use of either tile or stone, such as granite. Both offer many options and can be used in combination with each other. The most important thing to remember when using granite slab tops is to properly support the tops with a plywood underlayment on the top of the cabinets. Without this support, the heavy granite top may crack.