Hardwood Flooring – the Buyer's Dilemma: Prefinished? Or Site-Finished?

Is There a Third Choice?

by Jim Oliver

Hardwood floors.

The Gold standard of fine flooring for homes, offices, and commercial spaces everywhere. Even retail stores have installed wood flooring to reflect their upscale-ness.

Traditionally, the people who create and install these wood floors have been regarded as wood flooring rock stars. These artisans develop customized colors and finishes, apply special surface textures, and cut in handmade borders and other fancy features. But something happened along the way. The flooring rock stars got ambushed!

Someone, somewhere, figured that wood flooring could be cut, colored, and finished by machines instead of flooring rock stars. Not on a jobsite, but rather far from any jobsite. Initially, the flooring machines were located in factories near the forests of the United States. Later, the machines left the United States, bound for the cheap labor economies of third world countries, and ultimately settled in China and other Asian countries.

This machine-produced wood flooring could be manufactured in prodigious quantities, and warehoused until a customer came along to buy it. Made by machines, with limited quality and features, the product could be, and had to be, cheap. Shipping containers full of cheap "prefinished" hardwood flooring flooded the marketplace.

Low-priced, "prefinished" hardwood flooring holds certain *advantages*, as compared to the custom site-finished floor. First, the "prefinished" floor is cheap. Second, it comes in a box, fully-finished and ready to install and use. Third, the machine-applied finish has components that make it highly durable, sometimes with wear warranties lasting decades (unless the owner sells the house, leaves the windows open, or takes other warranty-busting actions). And fourth, the homeowner can theoretically install the prefinished flooring himself.

However, the "prefinished" floor holds certain *disadvantages* as well. First, the scope of features generally is limited. The practical cost of shipping and storing inventories waiting for sale limits the variety of wood species and colors. Second, the machine-applied and cured finish yields a shiny, plastic-looking surface, eliminating much of the authenticity of a wood floor. Third, the floor dimensions are constrained, limited by the sizes of the processing machines. Fourth, "prefinished" commodity flooring is sold by *almost everybody,* making the buying process chaotic and daunting for the typical consumer.

The customized, site-finished floor carries the mirror-image advantages and disadvantages. Among disadvantages, the site-finished floor is more labor-intensive, and thus more costly. The fabrication process, besides being lengthy, is also messy. Fumes, debris, and jobsite congestion are an inevitable fact of the custom site-finished floor.

On the other hand, among advantages, the site-finished floor cannot be matched for beauty, versatility, and authenticity. Widths and lengths are limited only by the underlying lumber. Colors are mixed for the job itself, and are thus infinitely variable. Hand-applied onsite finishes are clear, are air-cured over time, and reliably reveal the wood beauty beneath.

The buying public divided itself into the two camps:

- Those who wanted and were willing to pay for the traditional custom-made and individualized flooring created on the jobsite by rockstar flooring artisans; and
- Those who were attracted by the low price, and were willing to accept a good-enough, mass-produced commodity product.

Each type of buyer is served by its respective suppliers, and the flooring market has been divided along these lines for many years.

So, the prospective flooring buyer is faced with the seemingly unbendable choice:

- Authentic hardwood floors made on site, but with the troublesome side effects of a complicated fabrication and installation process; or
- Easy delivery and installation of "prefinished" flooring, but with severely compromised size, beauty, and authenticity.

Quite a problem!

Or is it?

What if the beauty and authenticity of custom-made flooring could be combined with the easy delivery and installation of "prefinished" commodity flooring? How many flooring buyers would be joyful and relieved over this possible third option – the "best of both worlds?"

There is a small niche in the flooring manufacturing business that aims to provide this very solution. Put simply, it is "factory-finished" flooring, *but with a twist*! In this niche, hardwood flooring is produced in a controlled factory environment, but using the traditional methods and techniques of the on-site rockstar artisan.

In this solution, raw flooring is produced for the factory with virtually unlimited dimensional characteristics, similar to the raw flooring used onsite. Finishes are applied in the factory *by hand*, and set to air-cure, similar to site-finished flooring. The total process is necessarily lengthy, as with site-finishing. And the finished product is authentic and beautiful, with a clear and deep finish, just like onsite finishing.

The factories in this niche are scattered across the country, and tend to be smaller operations. After all, the factory-finished product is made the same way as the custom, onsite product – slowly and painstakingly, and without the economies of scale and brutal efficiencies possible with large mass-production enterprises. These factory-finishing plants can be identified in advertisements and promotions with words like "custom," and "made-to-order," and "factory-finished."

So, what's the real difference between "factory-finishing" and onsite finishing? Product-wise, very little! Cost-wise, very little! (Factory-finishing is still labor-intensive, like onsite finishing is labor-intensive.) Product lead time from conception to delivery, very little! (Quality still takes time.)

But installation-wise, at the jobsite, the difference is *huge*! The time-consuming and messy parts of fabrication take place ahead of time, in the factory, not on the jobsite! No jobsite debris, no jobsite fumes, no jobsite toxicity, no extended homeowner move-out, no lengthy jobsite shutdown waiting for finishes to be applied and air-cured. And no two guys named Darrell in the owner's home for weeks on end!

Best of all, the attributes of easy delivery and installation, found with the compromised commodity flooring, are fully-realized with factory-finishing. Factory-finished floors are custom-made, normally in any requested quantity, and delivered ready to install.

Eureka!

The best of both worlds! The ease of "prefinished," with the beauty of custom…

But wait. Is there a downside to all this joy? What's the catch?

This not being a perfect world, there is a downside…although a relatively small one. Factory-finished floors delivered to a jobsite ready to be installed are already fully-finished. Therefore, installation mistakes, or jobsite anomalies such as an unlevel subfloor, cannot be rectified by resanding the floor (and thus ruining the factory finish).

Part of the solution to this potential problem is the application at the factory of surface texturing. Texturing, such as handscraping, is not only a "vintage" feature, but also successfully disguises both floor leveling defects coming from the subfloor, and wood movement in-service due to moisture changes. Another successful offset technique is the use of beveled edges to accommodate subfloor problems without resanding.

But, sometimes the design calls for a polished smooth tabletop look. Such a look is beyond the reach of any factory-finished or "prefinished" floor.

On the other hand, the factory-finished floor offers some features not easily available at the jobsite. For example, the process of handscraping hardwood flooring on the jobsite is very, very tough on a rockstar artisan's knees and back. (And handscraping is a skilled task not to be entrusted to an inexperienced tradesman.)

And forget about jobsite wirebrushing. Or sandblasting. Or torching with a flamethrower. These processes are all elements of flooring design, and all are handled much better, and sometimes *only*, in a factory.

Further, what about traditional and modern-design parquet panels? All handmade in a factory setting.

Staircase parts that match the custom flooring? Onsite fabrication is okay. But "factory-finishing" to match flooring is easier and more reliable.

So, not a total victory to the custom factory-finishing crowd, but a near-knockout nonetheless. When the design theme allows even the tiniest bevel edge, or includes parquet panels, wirebrushed and other surfaces, then the compelling advantages of "factory-finished" custom floors are clear.

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