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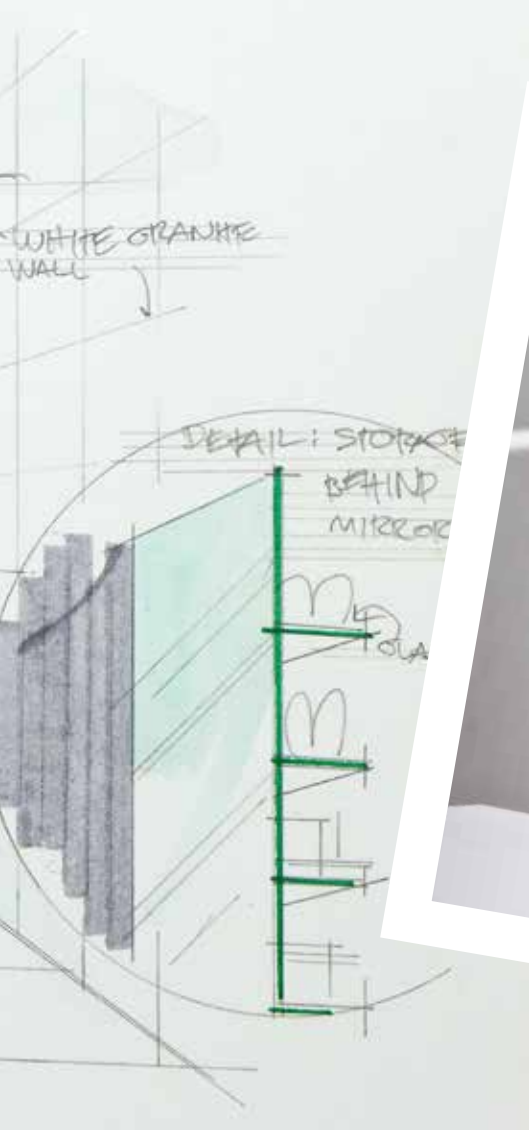
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How to successfully manage a large condo refurbishment project

BY BARBARA RAITZ

Maintaining common areas is fundamental to a good condo experience. More and more, residents realize the importance of common areas as a reflection of the aesthetics and design of their building. They are the first thing that guests or perspective buyers see when they arrive. If they are poorly maintained or outdated in appearance they tend to devalue the property which would naturally be reflected in the value of individual suites.



Corridor refurbishment, encompassing carpet, wall coverings, ceiling tiles, millwork, suite doors and lighting is a complicated and expensive project to undertake. To have a successful outcome requires planning, research, attention to detail, a good general contractor and a good designer.

How to get started?

Form a Design Task Force of committed residents to oversee the project from start to finish. The mandate should be to establish design and cost criteria, assist in selection of a design firm and general contractor and act as project liaison with the Board of Directors until completion of the project.

Next, send out a survey to get feedback from the residents. You'll find that the same concerns and issues will be an underlying theme in their responses. It is important throughout the project to keep everyone involved and informed.

Finally, the Task Force should visit at least a dozen condos to review their refurbishment projects. Make an appointment with the property manager. They are usually helpful

in discussing their projects, the choices that they made and the lessons they learned. Get feedback on the designer and general contractor that were used.

What about the budget?

Carefully review the reserve fund allocations for each component of the project to create a project budget. Be as detailed as possible. Don't forget to include a contingency fund to cover unexpected issues. Review the budget with the designer before obtaining final board approval. Once approved, stick to the project budget! If necessary eliminate some elements. Your designer can help to identify what elements are absolutely essential.

"Analyze what gives the most value. It all comes down to the numbers," said Anita Wiklém, creative director and founding partner with Wiklem Design Inc.

Now you know what you want done and how much money you have to invest. What's the next step?

It's time to select a designer. An experienced, professional designer will

ensure the integrity of the design. It is their job to be familiar with the newest trends and the best suppliers. A good designer is a good listener. They should know how to work within your budget to get the best results while retaining the aesthetic of your particular building. Most important, they should be experienced in large scale condo refurbishments.

How to select the right designer for your project?

The Task Force should network to establish an initial list of possible designers. Research each designer to determine the scope of their past work and their design philosophy. Visit the buildings they have done. Check their references. By a process of elimination create a short list of about six designers. Then meet each designer individually to conduct a tour of your building, carefully outlining the design criteria and budget for your project. Ask each designer to submit a preliminary presentation. Select three designers who meet all your criteria for a final selection interview.

Case Study

Anita Wiklém is an award winning designer with 20 years' experience, specializing in condo refurbishment. Her "Wow Factor" is a combination of her original designs coupled with her intuitive understanding of what her clients need and want. Wiklém Design Inc. was retained to design and act as project manager for a refurbishment project on a distinctive Rosedale co-op building with a ravine setting and fabled gardens that was built in 1957. The scope of work included new carpet, new wall coverings, new corridor lighting, and new millwork around the suite doors, new ceiling tiles, new baseboards and a complete redesign of the exercise rooms. Signage throughout the building was updated; frosting was used to great effect on the fire hose cabinet doors and the glass in the exit doors. Working with the existing suite doors and hardware new millwork and Art Deco inspired brass wall lights were added. "The outdated ceiling tiles were on all nine floors. Despite the challenge of the unique layout of the halls with many intersecting corridors I was able to create a uniform appearance where the grid disappears into the ceiling," Wiklém said. The company did such a good job on the refurbishment project that they have been retained to work on the elevator redesign project.

"I start with the elements that work and incorporate them into my design," said Wiklém.

How to work effectively with the designer?

Communication and attention to detail is the key. Discuss the components of the project, your budget and the design esthetic. Be direct and honest. View and discuss as many samples of carpet, wallpaper, paint colour, millwork design and lighting as possible before making your final selections. Have your designer prepare two design boards that would include samples of floor coverings, wall coverings, millwork, finishes, ceiling treatments, lighting, furnishings and colour schemes including budget figures to present to the residents. Hold an information session attended by the designer with the residents to request their opinion on the two design proposals. "What I like from my clients is open communication and honest talk about the numbers," said Wiklém.

What's next?

Once a design has been selected the design firm prepares a complete set of Tender Documents together with all working drawings and specifications, including construction start and completion dates. This package should go out to at least

five contractors who specialize in condo refurbishment. The tenders should be carefully reviewed with the design firm, the Task Force and the Board of Directors before a final selection is made.

What about the construction phase?

As a general rule, use the Design firm as the project manager. It's their design so they have a vested interest in the best outcome. It is absolutely critical at this stage that the Task Force works closely with the design firm and the general contractor. At least one member of the Task Force should be available while construction is ongoing to consult with them as issues arise. A weekly update in the form of a newsletter that could be distributed to the residents is also a good idea. When the refurbishment is completed on time and on budget, celebrate with a party!

"Common elements are an extension of one's home. We're mindful that we're working in someone's living space," explains Tony Romanin, President of L.A.R, a general contracting firm specializing in Condominium refurbishment. "We clear work areas before residents return home from their day and we don't start work at unreasonable hours." □