

Below At the Pulitzer Hotel, Amsterdam, Havwoods timbers are used extensively



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TOBY MAXWELL

FLOORING FOCUS

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FOR ANY PROJECT the floor is possibly the biggest – and often the most overlooked – blank canvas for creative ideas, and yet getting this part of the scheme right can be one of the most effective ways to push the design boundaries and reinforce a vision for the building.

The challenge though is how to utilise the

extraordinary range of floor-covering options available to positively impact on the experience of a building's interior and connect with visitors, either consciously or sub-consciously. Bringing a floor to life undoubtedly takes skill, technical know-how, and experience, and in this FX Focus on flooring, we present a selection of inspirational

projects and professional insight into how to get the tone of a design right from the floor up.

Among a diverse set of case studies is a children's hospital with an innovative approach to the use of colour, a restaurant that uses visually striking materials to create an other-worldly environment for fine dining, and

a school that embraces the lessons of nature to provide pupils with a space to work hard but also to relax and energise.

We also ask a number of specifiers and flooring fanatics from across the industry for their views on flooring priorities, favourites and the inside perspective on some of their recent successes.

1 **INTERVIEW** **Maria Cheung**

Director and head of interiors at Squire and Partners Maria Cheung explains how a mix of old and new proved to be a winning combination for a large office project in south London...

WITHIN such a complex and varied project as the Department Store, Brixton, how important is the flooring, and what factors are taken into account when specifying the flooring in different areas?

Flooring was a significant part of the material palette at The Department Store, making up a third of the surface area. We were fortunate to inherit large areas of original teak and mahogany parquet and boards in the reception and two floors of workspace, revealed during the strip out, which we simply sanded back and oiled. We then had a responsibility to specify new materials that would complement the beauty of the original.

After restoring and repurposing as much original floor as possible, we looked at the use and limitations of each area to inform our floor specification. Within workspaces we introduced new French oak boards and parquet to match the format of the original, and within event and social spaces we specified a pale-grey screed as a cost-effective and robust surface able to weather various uses.

Staff WCs are located in an annex that had a weight limitation on the existing structure, so instead of specifying load-heavy floor tiles, we commissioned a bespoke series of patterned ply inserts, set within a thin screed trimmed with brass. In the guest WC off the main reception, where weight was not a concern, we were able to introduce handmade, patterned ceramic tiles.

What are the particular design challenges in combining restored materials with new? What are the benefits and the limitations?

It was important to create a flow of spaces and introduce new materials that complemented the original fabric of the



Right Original Burmese teak boards sit in the reception of Squire and Partners new offices in The Department Store, Brixton





building. We chose to replicate the format of timber flooring – two sizes of parquet and strip boards – rather than attempt to match timber or colour. We were comfortable presenting new and old elements side by side, as this was something we embraced across the design of The Department Store as a whole – fusing old with new, the history of the building’s past grandeur as well as more recent decay and neglect.

Where floor materials change between areas, bespoke printed ply thresholds provide an ornamental transition. These were designed to mimic a series of original marble mosaic thresholds found in the building that would be too costly to replicate. Patterns were created by print designer Eley Kishimoto, which we commissioned at the early stage of the project to create a series of motifs inspired by original elements in the building.

The benefit of restoring original timber is the inherent richness and texture that develops over time, such as the mahogany stair that expresses the passage of time with smooth dips in every tread. A limitation was that there was a finite amount of original timber flooring in the building. When we created new voids through the floor slabs, we salvaged parquet and boards, but these remnants weren’t always enough to cover newly formed areas, so we had to be flexible.

More generally, which flooring materials do you particularly like working with?

Terrazzo is a material we love working with because of its flexibility of colour tone, variety of marble chippings and the different ways it can be used – poured, laid as tiles, cast in blocks. As a material, it works equally well in domestic and workplace environments, and can also be used for counter tops and even furniture.

How do you keep up-to-date with the latest flooring products on the market? Is there scope for using some of the very latest material technology in projects or do

clients tend to insist that you stick with established ‘tried and tested’ solutions?

Our interiors department regularly visits trade shows such as Design Junction, 100% Design and Decorex to keep up-to-date with new products, and also hosts weekly presentations in our office by invited suppliers to present new products and research projects. We are always interested to hear about new technological innovations, but tend to specify more established products for our clients as we need to ensure they can provide a long design life. For projects with a short shelf life – such as a window installation or temporary structure – we can be more experimental. Our in-house model shop is currently exploring new techniques in cold-casting metals, testing how they react with various resin composites.

If budget was no object, what kinds of flooring materials would you love to use on projects?

While it sounds like a cliché, budget isn’t the driving factor when we specify flooring – what’s most important is that the material is designed for its context and purpose. At The Department Store, it would have been wrong to rip out existing 111-year-old timber, while terrazzo fitted perfectly in our recent refurbishment of a 1910 London workplace building at 79 New Cavendish Street. Sometimes a cost-effective product, such as a screed, can create a beautiful and practical surface.

Overall, we look for materials that age well and are easy to maintain, as often beauty increases with wear. When a budget allows, we feel adding rugs to a hard-floor surface add depth and personality to spaces. At The Department Store, we commissioned a series of bespoke patterned rugs drawing on colours within the existing building, which animate and define areas within the floors.

Thinking of products at the upper end of the budget scale, I’ve seen examples of stitched leather being used for flooring, and I’d be very excited to see how that looks and feels. squireandpartners.com; thedepartmentstore.com

Left New French oak boards are used in a workspace in The Department Store

Top A bespoke rug sits on new French oak boards

Above Printed ply sits alongside original mahogany parquet blocks