



Not just Cosmetic

Interior Refurbishment isn't a Frill

By **Samantha Angel**



*Samantha
Angel*

Escalating costs and reserve fund shortfalls persist in our beloved condominium sector, and these pressures can make it tempting to put off capital projects, especially those considered “extras”. Interior refurbishment can fall under that category, but an argument can be made for not putting it off. But how to tackle it? Let’s explore approaches for condominium corporations to address these issues, emphasizing strategies like value engineering, bid process streamlining, and pre-buying materials. But first, the Broken Window Theory.

The Broken Window Theory, as readers may already know, is a criminological concept that suggests that visible signs of disorder and neglect in an environment

can contribute to an increase in crime. The theory was first introduced by social scientists James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling in an article titled “Broken Windows” published in 1982.

The central idea behind it is that if a window is broken and left unrepaired, it signals to others that no one cares about the property. This visible sign of neglect may lead to an increase in vandalism and other forms of antisocial behavior. The theory extends to the notion that if these minor signs of disorder are addressed promptly and the environment is well-maintained, it can prevent more serious criminal activity.

While we aren’t going to directly attribute neglect of interior spaces to criminal activity, managers well know that if a spill is not cleaned up or vandalism not fixed immediately, it can be interpreted as “no one is

watching”. On a less dramatic level, peeling wallpaper or fraying carpet can have the same effect. Conscientious Boards know this, and want to refurbish when those improvements are due, yet in these times of economic uncertainty, planning an interior decorating job can give the impression that the Board is spending on frills. Modified approaches are needed to keep the value of the condo community high and protect everyone’s investment.

In the realm of refurbishments, value engineering serves as one strategic imperative, optimizing project costs while staying within a set budget. Starting with the budget and working backwards, contractors working with designers can make judgment calls and work innovatively together to save here, spend there, and know where it counts. Designers are trained

to solve problems, not just making things aesthetically pleasing, so why not utilize their brains by providing a budget and letting them know what you are intent on achieving for that budget? The fear of showing one's cards may inadvertently lead to a more complex and drawn-out process that ultimately ends in compromise anyway. So, more transparency can be a win-win.

Streamlining the bid process is another key component of value engineering. To ensure an accurate comparison of bids, condominium corporations must create a standardized evaluation criteria framework – an “apples to apples” approach. Providing clear project requirements and expectations enables contractors to submit bids that are comparable in scope, facilitating an informed decision-making process. But that doesn't mean you can't approach a refurbishment firm early on to help out. It's just best to have some idea of the scope of work, identifying element by element, and you will be well on your way. Simply do what the contractors do: Walk through the area to be refurbished, and identify every part - every type of trim, transition, light, surface, hardware, colour, and material. Be prepared to decide on each one. Have questions ready for the first meetings to save time.

Lastly, consider all the costs of structuring a project and see where it might be appropriate to structure deals in a way that provide contract security, such as progress payment draws that ensure payments are issued for work completed. Work with a contractor that understands the industry and can predict where hidden costs can show up and how to avoid them. Make sure you work with a contractor who is used to the hours and unique difficulties of carrying out the job during work hours, with diverse residents, and can work well with the building staff. This can help prevent delays and costly upcharges and surprises. Renovation is disruptive enough without finding out part way through that the job will take even longer.

The trustworthiness of board members plays a crucial role in gaining resident support for refurbishment projects.

Transparent communication, community engagement, and a collaborative decision-making process can bolster the reputation of the board, making it easier to plan a renovation. Residents are more likely to support refurbishments when they trust that decisions made are in the best interest of the community, fostering a sense of collective responsibility for property maintenance.

But the fear of overspending is a common concern among condominium residents. Corporations must adopt a rigorous prioritization process for refurbishment projects. Identifying high-priority elements and clearly communicating the rationale behind their selection helps build confidence among residents. Sharing the strategy around cost-saving measures demonstrates a commitment to fiscal responsibility.

Next, when it's time to move forward with a contract, pre-buying materials is a savvy strategy to control costs, in this 'Wild West' of pricing fluctuations. While many areas in the market have stabilized from scarcity pricing, (most famously wood products and paint) some costs for elements such as carpet and furniture have gone haywire due to labour shortages. If the Board can commit to purchasing materials soon after approving the proposal, materials can be purchased for the price in the estimate - often nowadays costs are held for 30 or 45 days and in some cases even less.

Not de-prioritizing refurbishment projects is not only essential for longer term cost management but also for ensuring resident satisfaction, in line with the Broken Window Theory's focus on maintaining a well-kept environment. Projects that enhance accessibility code compliance, such as installing ramps or updating elevators, directly contribute to the well-being of residents as well. And putting those projects off can also potentially send a message that those with disabilities matter less.

Communicating the focus on resident comfort and safety can alleviate concerns about overspending, reinforcing the positive impact of refurbishment projects on the community's overall aesthetic and perceived safety.

Clear, well-defined contracts with transparent fee structures also can help alleviate concerns about over-

spending. Residents are more likely to support refurbishment projects when they understand the financial safeguards in place, such as progress payments and warranties for interior decorating jobs.

Balancing fiscal responsibility with resident satisfaction is the cornerstone of successful refurbishments and really the art of Board leadership. Condominium corporations must carefully weigh the financial impact on residents against the long-term benefits of property enhancement. Making a case for preventive work can be polarizing. By adopting a transparent and collaborative approach, addressing concerns about overspending, and prioritizing projects that directly contribute to resident comfort and safety, condominium corporations can strike a balance that ensures financial prudence while enhancing the overall living experience for residents. Address any impact on fees in a matter of fact and compassionate manner.

Remember, carpet, paint, and design updates are not merely cosmetic decisions but investments in resident well-being and protection in their investments, actualizing the premise that visible signs of care contribute to overall order. Thoughtful selections can contribute to a comfortable and aesthetically pleasing living environment. Durable carpet options withstand high foot traffic, providing both comfort and longevity. Strategic paint choices refresh common areas, creating an updated and cohesive look. Consideration of design choices that optimize space and functionality enhances the overall resident experience. By framing these decisions as investments just as worthy as other capital projects, condominium corporations can garner support for refurbishments. ■

Samantha Angel is an OCAD graduate who advocates for holistic, community-centric approaches to projects. Her expertise spans design, communications, and the condominium industry, offering inclusive and budget-conscious interior improvements in her position as president of condo refurbishment firm Folio Interiors. foliointeriors.com