

A Faster, More Durable Floor Finish

Portable UV equipment yields a fully cured finish in seconds, not days

BY JORGE BOROR

When I decided to offer my customers UV-cured floor finishes, I knew little about the process. What I did know was that the finish was more durable than oil- or water-based polyurethane—more like the clear coat you get with prefinished flooring—and I liked the idea of standing out from the competition. I figured that this would be the next big thing in the residential flooring market and that other contractors would be close on my heels, so I ordered the equipment (jelight.com) and signed up for training. That decision paid off, because I've been seeing more and more flooring companies take on this new technology.

Now, for what amounts to about a \$6-per-sq.-ft. upcharge, my customers have the option of a floor finish that is more durable than any non-UV-cured product. That's a big selling point for me, because many of my jobs are in Providence and Boston, where a lot of homes open right onto dirty, high-traffic, and heavily salted sidewalks. Keeping hardwood floors in decent shape under those conditions isn't easy, and I'll take all the help I can get.

Beyond durability, the UV cure also adds convenience.

The turnaround on a standard floor finish is three to four days, after which the finish is dry but not cured. That's an important, though often misunderstood, distinction. Until a finish has cured—which requires anywhere from a week to a month, depending on the product and conditions—it's very susceptible to scratches. You may be able to walk across the floor within a couple of hours, but the fumes can be intense, and it's out of the question to replace area rugs and furniture and to use the space normally. UV systems achieve the same cure in a matter of seconds.

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THE PROCESS IS SIMPLE

All aspects of a site-cured UV floor finish are the same as with a traditional sand-and-finish scenario, except for two major differences: The final clear coat must be a special water-based UV-activated product, and once that UV coating is dry to the touch (typically in one to two hours), it must be exposed to high-powered UV lighting equipment in order for it to cure.

THE RIGHT FINISH

As the technology gains a stronger foothold, more manufacturers are getting on board with their versions of UV coatings. I've tried every brand I can get my hands on, and they vary. In general, the big tradeoff seems to be ease of workability vs. hardness of the cured coating. In short, the most durable finishes require a coating that's a bit harder to level out during application. For this job, we used the General Finishes product, which is high on the durability scale and therefore more challenging to apply. The company recommends that it be applied with a T-bar, but we've had better luck with a floor-finish roller and a careful touch.

THE RIGHT TOOLS

UV coatings dry by evaporation but cure only when exposed to intense UV light. The standard tools for flooring work are a handheld unit (right) and a rolling unit (left). The handheld unit is used for detail work, reaching close-quarters areas, and creating a cured spot so that the larger rolling unit can be set onto the floor. Most of the job depends on the rolling unit, which has a front-mounted UV light, so the unit creates its own cured path. The process is just like mowing a lawn, but with a stricter pace. If the unit is pushed too fast, the finish will not cure properly; if pushed too slowly, it's prone to bubbling and burn marks.

