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Smooth Floor or Carpet?

Some of the key points to consider in selecting a floor covering are the initial cost, upkeep and the care you expect or wish to give. But there also are more elusive factors to consider in choosing for your own needs.

by Elizabeth Beveridge

THE KIND of care you expect or wish to give your floors is one key point to consider in buying floor coverings—particularly in deciding between carpeting and smooth-surface floor covering such as tile. Other important points to check before buying are initial cost, cost of upkeep and all of the factors that contribute to family comfort and enjoyment of the home.

Experience in your own home undoubtedly has helped you draw some conclusions on the satisfaction with both kinds of floor coverings in your family circumstances. Figures on purchase price and cost of installation can be obtained from dealers. Other information, however, is more elusive.

We Asked Families . . .

The new married-student housing units at Iowa State offered a convenient opportunity to study some of these more elusive factors. All apartments in Hawthorn Court are alike in size, arrangement and construction. All were built at the same time and of the same materials, including floors finished with asphalt tile. The apartments are close together and subject to the same weather, dust and mud. The occupants were all young married couples.

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A number of them were interested in the subject of floor coverings and willing to cooperate in a study. Of these, 24 families were chosen who had at least one child under school age but at least a year old—an age at which children are home all day and spend lots of time on the floor.

Carpeting used for the study was a good all-wool twist weave, a type that's used in many homes and not expected to require special care. The color was gold—neither so light nor so dark as to create special problems. The carpet was fitted wall-to-wall in the living room and hall of each of the 24 apartments but wasn't fastened down.

For more than a year, families had the carpet down on top of the asphalt tile for about half of the time, and the asphalt tile uncovered the rest of the time. Under a carefully controlled rotation plan, half of the families were living with carpet, half with asphalt tile, at any one time. Each homemaker was given a vacuum cleaner to use; half were of the upright type, half canisters, but all were of the same make.

Each homemaker was supplied with general instructions on the care of the two types of floors. These included the use of self-polishing wax for smooth floors, regular vacuuming for carpets. Then each homemaker was asked to care for the floors by her own methods, much as she would if they were her own floor coverings.

Each also kept a record of the time spent in floor care and of the kinds and amounts of supplies used.

Several times during the year, questions were asked of the homemakers about their attitudes toward the two types of coverings—particularly to see if there was any change in attitudes as the result of alternate use of carpet and smooth floor covering under like conditions. Interviewers were also able to observe the methods and motions homemakers used in caring for the floors.

Cleaning Time . . .

When records were totaled, they showed that, on the average, homemakers used 20 minutes less per week to care for carpeted floors than they did to care for the uncarpeted floors. This was an average over the whole period of the study and not an actual week-by-week difference. Cleaning and waxing of the smooth floors, for example, accounted for much of the increased time, though this wasn't done with any regularity. Researchers observed also that furniture was more likely to be moved on smooth floors so that the area cleaned tended to be larger.

The homemakers were keenly aware of the time spent in cleaning and waxing smooth floors. This may be partly because once scrubbing is started, there's no stopping until the job is done; time must be allowed for wax to dry while



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traffic is kept off. In these rather small apartments, work had to be done when small children were asleep and other family members away to allow the wax to dry without being walked on. Thus, thorough cleaning of the smooth floors showed up clearly on the records.

In contrast, it was impossible to find much evidence in the records of thorough cleaning of the carpets. A once-over with the vacuum cleaner when it was thought to be needed was the usual procedure. Also, children can be moved from one part of the floor to another to keep out of the way, and they needn't be banished until the job is done. Too, vacuuming can be interrupted at any time without causing extra work.

Differences among homemakers on time spent for cleaning were great. For smooth floors, average time per week varied from 27 to 189 minutes; for carpeted floors, from 26 to 100 minutes. There was a definite tendency for those who spent the most time on one type of floor also to spend more time on the other. All but three spent more total time on smooth floors than carpets.

Cleaning Methods . . .

If you find some kinds of motions more unpleasant or tiring than others, you may be interested in the ways the Hawthorn Court homemakers cared for their floors. The average distance traveled during one regular cleaning of the carpeted floors was about 160 feet,

while about 209 feet were traveled for smooth floors. The homemaker pushed or pulled something or carried heavy objects (over 5 pounds) through part of this distance. Cleaning the carpets called for more of this kind of work than did cleaning asphalt tile. Carrying the canister vacuum cleaner and its parts accounted for some of this difference.

Distances traveled while carrying light objects, however, were much greater for cleaning smooth floors. It took more bending to lay down or pick up objects when cleaning carpets (again, associated especially with the canister vacuum and its tools). But working in a stooped position was more frequent for smooth floors. There was more shoving of furniture on smooth floors. When cleaning carpet, moving furniture called for more lifting than shoving, so it wasn't moved. Homemakers sometimes said that dust doesn't show much on carpet anyway, so they didn't feel it necessary to clean carpet under furniture.

There were almost as many patterns for cleaning as there were homemakers, even though the area was the same for all. There were those who worked their way back and forth across a room. Others went around the edges first and then worked in the middle. Still others followed no recognizable pattern. As you might guess, homemakers who followed no pattern usually spent more time in cleaning than those who did it in either of the other two ways.

Cost of Upkeep . . .

The period of use of the two kinds of floor covering was too short to obtain useful information on the long-term cost of upkeep. There's a continuous use of cleaning and waxing products in the care of asphalt tile floors, but the cost of equipment is relatively small. Major costs of carpet upkeep are the purchase of a vacuum cleaner and occasional commercial cleaning. Then, for long periods, the costs are likely to be minor—disposable bags for the vacuum, rug cleaning compounds, spotting fluids, etc.

What They Thought . . .

What the homemakers in the study thought about carpets can be summed up very quickly: They liked and wanted carpet. At the beginning, 23 of the 24 homemakers said they'd prefer to have carpeting in a new home if cost weren't a factor. But only 14 believed they'd be able to purchase carpeting in the near future. After this experience with both kinds of floor covering, however, most of the homemakers seemed willing to delay the purchase of other items to acquire carpet soon.

There was little doubt that homemakers would rather clean carpet than wash and wax smooth floors. Some said that they'd rather have carpet even though it was quicker to dust-mop a smooth floor than to get out a vacuum cleaner for the carpet, though fur-

niture was more easily moved on the smooth floor and though spills on smooth floors were easier to wipe up.

Factors other than care weighed heavily in the preference for carpet. Homemakers thought carpet gave a feeling of warmth to the home. Since these homemakers were mothers of young children, carpet assumed a real importance in making the floor comfortable for children's play. The mothers also had less concern for children being hurt because carpet cushioned the frequent tumbles, and they felt there was less chance of slipping and falling with carpeting.

Any restrictions on family activity imposed by furnishings have an effect on family life. After living with carpet and smooth floors alternately for a year, homemakers' views boiled down to this: Restrictions imposed with smooth floors were largely to protect children or to prevent noise. With carpets, the restrictions were for protection of the carpet and to avoid the trouble and effort of cleaning up spills. The restraints with smooth floors were more directly associated with small children. With carpets, restraints were more directly associated with older children who engage in such activities as coloring, painting and pasting. There was more concern about spotting carpet. "Carpet," homemakers said, "stains more easily, is more difficult to clean when things are spilled and is a more expensive item to ruin." Here, they were thinking of the tile type of smooth floor covering which permits replacement of individual tiles.

Entertainment of adults seemed to be little affected by floor covering—though a few homemakers said they'd be more careful to see that small rugs were placed at doors and that ash trays were provided if they had carpet. More safety precautions were taken with smooth floors in entertaining children—avoiding the handling of breakable objects, restrictions on running, etc. One mother said she could entertain more children when she had carpet because they could sit on the floor.

A rather intangible factor in

the preference for floor coverings appears to be "what other people think." These homemakers believed that having carpet shouldn't influence opinions as to the economic, social or prestige level of other folks but that "it just does."

Noise Control . . .

Families in the study believed, and correctly, that carpet on the floor muffles noise. They felt that noise of children's play was reduced and that carpet reduced sounds that were likely to interfere with enjoyment of radio or television. Since the husbands were students and needed quiet for studying, it's likely that these homemakers were unusually aware of distracting noise.

Sound level measurements confirmed these opinions by showing that carpet definitely reduced the level of background noise, floor impact noise (such as dropped toys or footsteps) or noise produced above the floor. Carpet, in fact, was the only factor found to have any measurable effect on the noise level.

What It Means . . .

Young families with a small child or two living in a compact house or apartment could expect their experiences with the two types of floor coverings to be similar to those of the Hawthorn Court families. Most families however, as they consider such long-range plans as the buying of floor coverings could anticipate some different conditions. The study couldn't produce the answers to the following questions, but your own consideration of them will help you make decisions as to the type of floor covering best suited to your needs and wishes.

● Would a larger floor area in a larger house require the same relative time and energy for upkeep, or would less concentrated living reduce the care needed? Would more specialized areas of activity call for one kind of floor covering in one area, another someplace else? Would more room enable the family to be out from

underfoot so that cleaning could be done with fewer interruptions?

● Would older children in the family make a difference since their activities and needs are different from those of toddlers?

● What about family hobbies? (Hawthorn Court residents were too busy getting an education to have many hobbies.)

● What's the "life expectancy" of floor coverings? When wear becomes apparent, will you want to replace the entire floor or try to get more wear out of what you have? What about repair of accidental damage? What are the long-range upkeep costs? Any good carpet needs occasional professional cleaning; smooth floors, a complete wax removal. What about the cost of equipment and supplies for upkeep?

● How interested are you in finding the best and easiest products and methods for caring for your house and its furnishings? There was, for example, a great difference in the apparent effort used in floor care in the study. Spending lots of time and energy didn't necessarily insure the best looking floors. In fact, some of the best looking floors were waxed infrequently.

● What about your own standards? Must carpets or smooth floors be spotless? Does dust bother you? Do you find yourself saying "no" to activities that might spot the carpet or track up a newly polished floor?

● Of these factors and others that you might add, which are most important to you? The experiences of others can give you a basis for judgment, but the right decision for you must be based solidly on your own needs, goals and values.

When you've made your decision and the floor covering is installed, a plan for regular systematic care will lengthen the life of your floor. It will also enable your family to enjoy your home without undue restrictions and make the job of upkeep easier.