



SMALL BUT PERFECTLY FORMED

Apartments can be renovated on a tight budget, to great effect, writes **Sharon Newey**.

APARTMENTS HAVE BEEN a part of the New Zealand residential landscape for a while now, and are deservedly popular with property investors. The first retrofits and purpose-built apartment blocks appeared on our city landscapes around 20 years ago, so some of that stock is fairly old now.

The interiors of those apartments may simply be dated but are more likely the victims of a steady turnover of tenants and lots of wear and tear. In fact, any apartment, no matter how old, may start out all sparkly and new but can quickly become scruffy. It's also a symptom of people living in a more confined space where walls are easily dinged and carpets worn.

Renovating an apartment is relatively easy and is often merely cosmetic. Often there is little to be done structurally as most purpose-built apartments were well laid out when first conceived and built. Many body corporates will also have quite strict rules about what can be done structurally or externally, even if the building was a retrofitted office or warehouse space in the first place.

If you are changing the structural elements of the apartment, keep the

bedrooms small so that the living areas can be larger.

As always, adjust your renovation style and budget to your likely tenants. If the apartment is larger, in a good area and warrants a little extra expense in the likelihood of attracting better rent and more careful tenants, then go for it.

More often than not, it will be a case of providing an attractive interior and using fairly bullet-proof materials in the kitchens and bathrooms so that they don't mark too quickly. Don't go too cheap or down-market. Firstly, you may be competing for tenants with other landlords in the same building. What you provide, in the form of clean, bright interiors and perhaps a furniture package, may be all that sets you above the competition. Better to do that than drop your rental price.

Using good-quality paint and materials will ensure the apartment looks smarter for as long as possible. This will save having to refresh the interiors more regularly, which means it will be out of action, not earning and costing more in terms of materials and tradespeople at more regular intervals. Do it right and well once and have it last longer.

The overall standard of the apartment building may also determine how much money and time you spend on a renovation – there's little point doing an expensive fitout in a building that has a scruffy foyer and lift area. If these areas are proving to be a turn-off for prospective tenants, lobby the body corp about the maintenance of common areas.

If installing a new kitchen is part of your renovation plan, think hard about how the kitchen is going to be used. Do you need a full traditional kitchen? Who is your likely tenant and will they eat out a lot, simply heat up pre-prepared meals and be there only for breakfast? Do they actually need an oven, or just a microwave and bench-top oven? This will save you a bit of cash. Use a front-loading washing machine and stack it in a cupboard with the dryer.

TIPS FOR DECORATING SMALL SPACES

Keep the colour palette light and bright by using a warm off-white, for example, Resene Thorndon Cream (a more modern cream than good old Spanish White or Pearl Lusta), on both the walls and ceilings. Use simple window treatments, like



**THE
RESENE
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PART TEN

NICELY NEUTRAL

The colours you use on the apartment's walls and ceilings will make a big difference in making a rental apartment look bright, welcoming and spacious. Warm neutral tones are the best way to achieve this. Resene colour consultant Angela Fell says the most popular Resene paint range is The Range Whites & Neutrals, and the top-selling colour from within that range is Resene Half Tea. Other lighter neutrals she suggests to try are Resene Wan White, Resene Alabaster and Resene Sea Fog. These allow tenants to add their own colour with accessories and furnishings, and have less fear of clashing with an existing strong colour scheme.

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roller blinds that disappear behind pelmets or become a sleek roll when retracted. Consider using block-out fabric if there is light pollution from outside, i.e. a street light or light from a neighbouring building. If you use curtains, use sheer or light fabric so that they don't look too heavy. Hang the curtain rod up next to the ceiling to make the room appear taller. Use fabrics colours that blend with the walls – Resene have a range of curtains that are designed to work with their paints. See www.resene.co.nz/curtains.

Don't block the light. Covering every window with blinds or curtains can make a small room feel close-in and small, and privacy isn't always an issue when the apartment is high up, and not facing another building. Light always makes a space seem larger.

Keep kitchens streamlined and simple by using plain cupboards that are either handle-less or have slim handles, the same benchtop material throughout and an integrated refrigerator. Most appliance manufacturers have slimline or smaller models of cooking appliances as well as dishwashers and fridges.

Keep the flooring simple, using at most just two types of covering – a hard and a soft. You don't need a foyer defined with hard flooring (tiles or timber). Just use carpet right from the front door. With most apartments you're not walking straight out of the weather so the carpet is not going to look dirty and worn so easily.

Recess bathroom storage into a cupboard behind the wall mirror. Use a pedestal basin or a vanity that doesn't sit on the floor to make the room appear larger. Use large floor tiles laid diagonally for a greater illusion of space.

If the rooms don't already have recessed lighting, consider installing it to de-clutter the ceiling. Track lighting aimed at the walls will visually push them back and make the area feel bigger.



AND IF YOU ARE FURNISHING THE APARTMENT

Many apartment tenants expect a level of supplied furnishings, which can range from just the appliances and whitewear to all of the furniture. There are rental packages available or you can buy your own.

Square dining tables take up less space than round ones. Or if the apartment is very small and you are replacing the kitchen, include a place at the bench for sitting on bar stools, or extend the bench if you can to include a table area.

Fold-away beds are also good for very small spaces. Have a look at www.hiddenbed.co.nz.

Use arm-less sofas or those with a slim or timber arm. Don't use bulky pieces of furniture or too many pieces. Furniture that is blocky and low to the ground makes a room appear more crowded whereas sofas and chairs with legs that sit higher off the floor allow your eye to look 'under' these pieces and add to the sense of space.

Strategically place mirrors to maximise the light in your property and to make rooms appear larger. ■

RENOVATE FOR RESALE

Apartments can be a developer/speculator's dream. With relatively little expense, an outdated and scruffy apartment can be completely renovated fairly quickly and on-sold for a tidy profit.

It's a trend noticed by Pauline Bridgman, sales manager of apartment specialist company City Sales.

"We are seeing more and more apartment in need for a facelift. Some people are picking them up, spending as little as \$5000 on them and selling them on. Even if they spend \$50,000, that would be at the extreme end of the renovation cost."

Because most apartments aren't very large and the changes are cosmetic, it doesn't take a lot of money to make them look good, she says.

As with any sector of the property market, buyers have to do their homework before buying.

"The buyers we are dealing with are pretty choosy and know what they are looking for. The older, more characterful buildings are popular," says Bridgman. Add on a nice furniture package and home staging for the marketing period and these apartments are selling well. If the renovation has been done well, these apartments are mostly selling to owner-occupiers, says Bridgman.

City Sales always sees two distinct markets in the apartment sector. The first is investors looking for a good return who are not all that fussed what an apartment looks like. And secondly, owner-occupiers looking for a lifestyle change – or in the case of young couples, a more affordable option than the traditional suburban dream, who seek a totally different type of apartment.