

## **“Recovering Movable Walls” Avoiding the “Land Mines” when remodeling your meeting facility**

Often convention facilities treat movable walls (air walls) like the surrounding perimeter walls when they consider applying new wall covering. This is a critical mistake that only manifests itself when the set-up staff finds out that their movable walls no longer operate correctly. Not all movable wall systems are designed to be resurfaced easily. Some panels have “trimless” edges or different substrates. Some panels have been covered using improper materials or adhesive. All of these factors will affect the finished product. When considering the prospect of resurfacing your movable walls, consider the following advice because there is nothing typical or usual about the process.

### **“Trimless” panel edges:**

Several operable wall manufacturers offer systems designed to appear more like fixed walls when in use. The joints between the panels butt against each other with minimal sight lines. This type of system is by far the most labor intensive to recover because the wall covering wraps around the panel edge and is held down by a narrow vertical edge trim, which is smaller than the overall thickness of the panel. These vertical edges need to be removed and stored while the panels are recovered. Once the new wall covering is applied, the panel edges will be re-installed in the exact same location (on each panel) where they were initially removed. If the edges aren't re-installed correctly mechanical problems will occur.

All panels can be covered with Vinyl, Fabric, Acoustically Ribbed Carpet or a myriad of Plastic Laminates or Hardwood Veneer. Problems occur when changing from one type of wall covering to another. Vinyl and fabric have a narrow profile, which can be replaced with similar wall covering of the same thickness. If acoustically ribbed wall carpet is desired to replace vinyl or fabric, the following mechanical problems can be expected:

- The actual width of the panels will increase (by ¼” per panel) because the wall covering wraps around the panel edge. On a wall system with 20 panels, the overall length of the system will increase by 5”. Since all movable wall systems are custom made to fit into your specific opening – the system now is too large for the room.
- Panel systems that are hinged together will now not fold flat. Contractors assume that the wall system is at fault. Qualified movable wall contractors know how to rectify this problem
- The panel edges don't fit anymore - the edges get damaged when the attempt is made to remove and/or re-install them.

Panels with trimmed edges are much easier to recover and experience few if any mechanical problems. Custom mill work can be too thick (especially custom chair rails etc.); some attention should be directed regarding the increase in stacking depth if the panels are stored in a closet. In any case, all types of panels have hardware that needs to be removed and re-installed after the panels are recovered.

### **Panels with varying substrates:**

Panels are typically manufactured with gypsum board, particle board, or steel faces. In many cases, removing the existing wall covering is required before applying anything new.

Gypsum board faces can be damaged if the existing wall covering isn't removed properly. Most of the time the panel faces will still need some degree of final skimming and preparation. The amount of preparation is contingent on removing the existing wall covering without undue face damage and the type of new wall covering that will be applied for the finished product. Most experts would agree that gypsum board faces aren't recommended for movable walls in a commercial meeting facility. Gypsum board faces with steel laminated on the outside exposed surface, however, are fine.

Steel faces have a tendency to rust depending on the type of adhesive that was used during a previous recover or even from the factory. Panels will also rust depending on the proximity to moisture where the panels are installed – i.e. areas with high humidity or coastal areas with corrosive particulates in the air. Rust inhibitor is required to keep any existing rust from “bleeding” through the new wall covering.

Particle board faces can become damaged during the stripping process. Additional panel face preparation will be required.

### **Wall covering and adhesive selection:**

Not all wall covering choices will work on movable walls. Since movable wall panels aren't stationary, they tend to become damaged (especially at the panel edge) when moved. Vinyl or fabric wall covering needs to be of the proper weight with sufficient backing to be applied to the panel face. Some acoustically ribbed wall covering can be too thick and cannot be wrapped around the panel edges on “trimless” panels.

The use of wall covering with repeat patterns is not recommended for movable walls for several reasons. Not all panel widths are the same (even if they are part of the same run); therefore it is difficult if not impossible for the installer to maintain the pattern. Some wall systems stack in remote areas where the panels can be moved out of their original sequence – disrupting the pattern.

Movable walls can be recovered several times during their lifespan. Sometimes the old wall covering cannot be removed without causing severe panel face damage because improper adhesive was selected. Rust damage can also be attributed to improper adhesive selection.

Recovering movable walls requires a different approach than recovering the perimeter walls in the rest of the facility. Many remodel contractors, wall covering suppliers and designers aren't aware of the "land mines" that await them during a convention facility renovation. Most if not all of the hidden challenges can be exposed by contacting a qualified movable wall service and repair company in the early stages of renovation planning. Qualified movable wall specialists can advise the design staff on the proper selection of wall covering and detail the total scope of work for the contractor. Qualified movable wall companies should be prepared to supply you with an extensive list of references of past remodel / renovation projects. Always consider the project management history and track record of these companies. Reliable service companies will perform within the short window that might be required to complete the work during a renovation "shut-down". Companies with less than 10 qualified references shouldn't be considered. Since there are at least eight active movable wall manufacturers who offer several types of systems, only a recognized operable wall expert can provide accurate and reliable advice regarding movable wall renovation.

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