

Mall Remodeling: On the Road Again

Mall rehab can be profitable work, but the schedule's not for everyone



Mall managers want stores to remodel every five to six years. The contractor doing the job has to screen the job site and stay invisible.

by Ken Rippelmeyer

Seven months a year I spend 12 hours a day in a shopping mall. I am an itinerant mall remodeler, and I scrape the insides out of small chain stores, then rework the space to make it match the new store image. Coping with the road, with the intensity of the job, and adjusting to the empty weeks between jobs is one sort of challenge. Another is the tools, techniques, and construction management unique to mall remodeling.

The mall is set up as a hierarchy. Over everyone is the mall management. They own the entire mall or several malls. They lease space to identical tenants whose stores appear in identical malls across the country. National or regional chains franchise local owners, but the stores are built, owned, and merchandised from one home office. Very seldom to you have a local person lease space at a mall.

How Malls Work

Maintaining the mall's image is mall management's top priority. A mall always must look "new." This perpetual state of newness is accomplished by requiring the tenants (the companies leasing the slot spaces) to remodel in order to renew their leases.

The tenants like newness too and want all their stores to look the same. Thus, if a chain takes on a different look, all of its stores must be remodeled. Many chains

have 300, 400, or 500 stores nationwide. That's a big market for store remodeling!

All malls remodel every five to six years. If the tenant space hasn't changed its design drastically, they'll recarpet and do a minor facelift. If the tenant comes up with a new design, they remodel all their stores. In high-volume malls, stores remodel every three years.

The company develops its architectural design based on what the mall wants—pop-out fronts, flat fronts, neon (some malls don't allow it), or Lexan gates (sometimes these aren't allowed either). The mall and tenant have to agree on the design. The ten-

ant's architect designs it, but the mall's architect approves it. When the design is approved, the tenant puts it out to bid to a list of pre-approved contractors.

Because the chain stores remodel so often, they have an internal construction department that schedules, oversees, and contracts to a list of general contractors who specialize in mall-store construction. Mall remodeling picks up right after Christmas sales, when stores often close.

Mall work has its own pace and schedules. We used to work in off-hours around merchandise, but now our company moves merchandise out. We also used to work 24 hours a day when necessary. Now we work 7 to 7. We won't take jobs where the schedule requires 24-hour work. You make too many mistakes, and it's dangerous.

Slat-wall

The work set-up, the tools, and the job site are all different on a mall than in regular construction. We work a lot with a wall finish called "slat-wall," which holds merchandise shelves that slide into grooves. The front side is plastic laminate, and the backing is formaldehyde-based composition board (fumes are a concern).

The slat wall gets hung (screwed and glued) on 5/8-inch drywall, and installed on secondary perimeter walls within the leased spaces. The slat-wall is the most visible finish material, and installing it is tricky, since it has horizontal lines around the entire store (see Figure 1). Very often we find walls way out of plumb or level. In this case, we rent a laser level to establish lines.

It helps when we have a couple of

vertical mirrors to break up the run of slat wall. But some stores don't have any break. In that case, you have to be extremely careful and plan in advance how to get from one side of the store to the other. Besides the obvious visual problem, plumb and level are critical because corners have to be mitered (see Figure 2).

Like drywall, slat wall panels take up space in a confined area. The average mall store is only 800 to 1,200 square feet. While we're trying to get our work done, we might have an electrician hanging a dropped ceiling, or a tile installer finishing the store front. To make sure we don't trip over each other, we put everything on wheels and make all our tools as portable as possible (see Figure 3). For instance, we put our slat-wall work table on wheels, and we use a trolley to move the slat wall. To save space, we use knock-down sawhorses (Figure 4, next page) and a small table saw with table extensions. The electricians hang fixtures in a rigid frame prewired to receive the fixtures, but they use a rolling scaffold to make access easy.

Slat-wall requires different tools, as well. We use a small panel saw that leaves a narrow kerf when we cut the slat wall. It has high rpms so it doesn't chip the laminate, whether we cut from the front or the back. With a normal circular saw the finish face would chip easily. We clamp a factory edge of scrap to the rolling work table to guide the cut. We often carry a screwgun in our hammer holsters since hammers are only used occasionally to tap a tight piece into place. To lift the bottom pieces of slat wall into place, we use a drywall's foot lever (as shown in Figure 2).



Figure 1. Slat-wall sections must line up accurately and be mitered at corners. A high-rpm panel saw is used for cutting.



Figure 2. The author uses a drywall's foot lever (left) to position slat-wall panels in mitered corners. A screwgun (right) secures them in place. Shelves lock in the grooves.

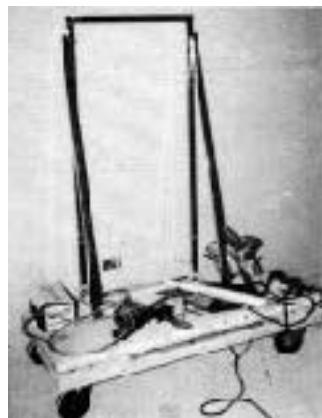


Figure 3. Everything's on wheels. At left, the rolling trolley can carry slat-wall panels and tools. At right, the gang box holds tools and equipment.

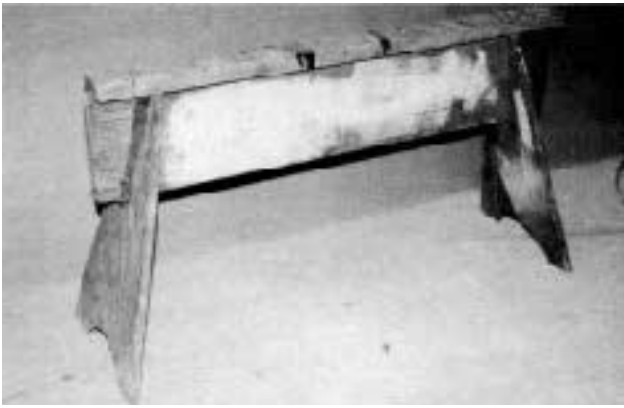


Figure 4. The knock-down saw horses can be disassembled to save space when not in use.

Remodels and Take-Overs

On a remodel, we first have to remove the existing interior. We're there two to three days, and the store looks like a white box. We rip it back to metal studs and drywall. Everything else goes in a 30-yard dumpster.

Because of the limited work space, the dumpster takes on special importance: We use it to store material we may need later. Dumping costs \$300 a pull, so we try to cram all the debris from the job in one load. To do so, we've made an art of packing a dumpster. One caution: Make sure nearby restaurants don't throw in food.

When a chain store assumes another store's lease, they "take over" the space. Take-over space works like a remodel, but we never know what we're going to find. On one job we found a steel vault; the space had once contained a bank branch office. It cost \$15,000 to remove the vault. Luckily, our contract with the head office made it clear they had to cover the extra expense. Lately, however, we've been making fixed bids rather than working on time and materials. The contract calls for us to "field check" jobs before we bid, but as a matter of expediency we often base our bid on a phone call to the mall manager. We realize we could get burned if something unusual turns up.

On remodeling and take-over jobs, you need to cooperate with the mall management. Your best strategy is to stay out of sight and out of the way of

the mall patrons. Some of the requests of mall management may seem ridiculous, but if you want the work you'll need to respect them.

New Malls

We sometimes fit out the interiors of stores in new malls. The job conditions are much different than on a remodel. As on many urban commercial jobs, trailers of major subs dot the site and contractors squabble about who gets to use the subs.

On new work, deadline pressure is intense. It seems the jobs always run late, so you're in the middle of a war zone. Other contractors are trying to take your subs. And you have to watch tools closely because they walk away. One of the big problems is that the base building usually isn't done. You'll be working along in your "slot store," and suddenly an electrician pulls the main transformer for the whole mall; the power goes out, and fifty frantic slot-store crews are stranded in the dark.

New construction means starting the space from scratch. The first days in a new store we pour concrete and get the plumbing roughed in. We put up *demising* walls—these are walls separating leased spaces. We have subs fire-tape the walls all the way up.

The store that we have contracted with sends us slat wall and tile at the job site. They buy wholesale any materials that are the same from store to

store. All supplies get sent to the subs—electrical fixtures, carpet, the store gate, and neon. When we're ready, the store sends us cabinets and the cash counter.

Four Partners

Our company consists of four partners. We split up into two crews, and we divide the work. We typically do 15 jobs a year. Each job takes about a month, so each team of two is on the road seven months a year, and spends the rest of their work time in the office. As the general contractor we bid jobs, handle cash flow, maintain insurance coverage, and manage the office. We do all our hiring out of the local unions, so we don't need to provide worker's comp, W-2s, or other employee benefits.

We do all the finish carpentry, including the slat-wall, ourselves. Because we're at the job site, we also do the on-site supervision of the other trades. This gives us the ability to control the quality of the job, to resolve scheduling problems, and to coordinate with the mall. One of the partners typically bids the next job while we're doing the existing job. He can use the job phone for contacting subs or waiting for them to return calls.

The biggest problem, not surprisingly, is lining up subs. We get lists of subs from the unions, but we often have scheduling problems. We sub out all hvac, electrical, plumbing, concrete, fire protection, glazing, tile work, carpet, and installation of the overhead gate.

Many chains rely on large general contractors, who use site supervisors to hire local carpenters and manage individual jobs. Back in the home office, the project coordinator keeps a master list of subs. This allows a company to handle many concurrent jobs.

We prefer to not take on more jobs than we can personally handle. With larger companies, the store doesn't know who the supervisor on the job will be. With us, the store gets a known quantity. This works well for us, but we're an exception in a field dominated by larger general contractors. ■

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