



Richard Renouf has recently seen three floors that were flat when measured against the British Standard but were clearly not flat when looked at from a normal standing position

When flat means NOT-SO-FLAT

WHEN can you call a floor 'flat'? It's been a recurring theme on many of the jobs I inspected recently.

I suspect most customers would think that if a floor looks flat, it is flat. At least, that's what they tell me when things have gone wrong: 'It must be the product because the floor looked perfectly flat before the flooring went down.'

That seems to be the assumption of many installers, too, at least the ones whose work I'm called in to inspect.

'The subfloor's perfectly flat.'

'How do you know?'

'I saw it before I started work.'

It's an assumption that sometimes also relies on other factors, such as that 'there were tiles down beforehand, so it must have been flat'. Or, 'it's a new extension so it has to be perfect.' If these assumptions were correct, I would not be as busy looking at problems.

There are various British Standards for flooring products and they refer to flatness as 'surface regularity'. BS 8203: 2017 Installation of resilient floorcoverings - Code of practice, for example, requires a surface regularity that can easily be measured: SR1 maximum permissible departure from the underside of a 2m straightedge resting in contact with the floor: 3mm.

So, a few moments checking the subfloor by laying a two-metre straight edge (a spirit level works well) on to the floor and seeing if an old pound coin will pass underneath it anywhere along its length is a simple and effective check. If you only have a six-foot (1.8m) straight edge it will still be better than no check at all.

The British Standards for wood and ceramic flooring use the same requirement and it's only the standard for textile floorcoverings (BS 5325) that seems to be the exception for the time being.

As the standards relate to the floorcoverings this isn't something most



Above: Builder's screed is rarely smooth enough for vinyl flooring

builders are aware of and therefore as installers we need to be ahead of the game if we're to minimise the amount of corrective work we need to do before we can lay a floorcovering.

That, I think, is why all the British Standards emphasise the need for a full exchange of information between the various contractors and the customer before work begins.

But it goes beyond satisfying the British Standard. We're laying floorcoverings that people will use and that need to look good as well as be practical. I've seen three floors in the past two weeks that were flat when measured against the British Standard but were clearly not flat when you looked at them from a normal standing position.

I stood just inside a front door in Sheffield and could count the number of distinct ridges between the door and the back wall of the kitchen, a bathroom in Sunderland with curving lines swirling around my feet and showing through the vinyl, and a lounge in Surrey where luxury vinyl tiles had irregular gaps between them because the floor was so uneven.

The reason? All three floors had been covered with a smoothing compound before laying the flooring and in each case the installer applying the compound had assumed that 'self-levelling' meant there was no need to smooth out trowel marks, lumps



Above: Even 'self-levelling' compound needs to be applied with care

and splashes as the product would magically do this for you.

I'm sure the surface of the compound they had applied did settle and flatten to some degree, but the compound cannot flow to the extent that it will move excess half a meter across the subfloor surface to create a perfectly flat and smooth layer, this is only achievable by using reasonable skill and care - and the right techniques - when laying it.

Last month we discussed 'what is a defect?' and we considered this definition:

A defect is anything, other than misuse or wear and tear, that adversely affects the appearance, suitability or performance of the flooring now or during its reasonable life.

There's no doubt trowel marks, lumps, splashes and other imperfections in a subfloor affect its appearance. It's also very likely they'll cause abnormal wear on the high spots relatively quickly and may also cause some of the flooring to lift or split, or with laminate or click together LVT, to cause the joints to break as they're not intended to cope with vertical loads, only to hold the boards/tiles together from side to side.

All British Standards include the words 'Compliance with a British Standard cannot confer immunity from legal obligations'. Using reasonable skill and care in the work we do is one of those legal obligations.

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