

# From Old to New: Refinishing Timber Floors for a High-End Look in Melbourne Homes

Refinishing tired timber floors can **transform a space from drab to designer**. In Melbourne – where gorgeous Victorian cottages and modern penthouses alike boast timber underfoot – a floor makeover is one of the most rewarding upgrades. This guide will walk you through how to take old floors and make them *look high-end and new*, in a friendly, down-to-earth way. We'll cover different refinishing projects (from reviving heritage boards to pulling up carpet), weigh up DIY vs professional, recommend trusted products, and share plenty of tips for a stunning result. Let's dive in!

## Types of Timber Floor Refinishing Projects

Melbourne homes feature a mix of flooring – solid hardwood in period homes, engineered oak in new builds, even hidden gems under old carpet. Here are common refinishing scenarios and what to know about each:

### Sanding and Re-staining Solid Hardwood Floors



*A professional uses a buffer to evenly apply a new wood stain during a hardwood floor refinishing project <sup>1</sup>.*  
**Solid hardwood floors** (like Australian oak, jarrah, blackbutt, etc.) are the most forgiving to refinish. They're

one thick piece of wood, so you can sand them multiple times over decades to reveal fresh timber and change the colour with stain. The process involves:

- **Sanding off the old finish:** Usually done with heavy-duty drum and edge sanders. Professionals typically make 4–5 passes with increasingly fine grits to achieve a smooth surface <sup>2</sup>. This removes scratches, old varnish, and sun-faded spots, leaving bare wood.
- **Staining (optional):** If you want a different color tone, now's the time to apply a stain. You could go from an orange-toned pine to a chic walnut brown, or even do a whitewash. Staining adds a day or two because the stain must dry fully (oil-based stains can take ~18 hours <sup>3</sup>). It also requires extra sanding finesse for an even result. You can skip stain for a natural look – many modern floors in Melbourne are just sealed clear for a light, Scandinavian vibe.
- **Sealing with finish:** After sanding (and staining if used), the floor gets **sealed with clear protective coats**. Common choices are **polyurethane coatings** – either water-based or solvent/oil-based. Typically, 2–3 coats are applied for durability <sup>4</sup>. Each coat needs time to dry (water-based polys dry in a few hours, while oil-based can take 8–24 hours per coat <sup>5</sup>). Between coats, a light “screen” sanding buffs out imperfections. The final finish can be matte, satin, or gloss – more on choosing sheen later.

Solid wood is *very resilient* – you can refinish a solid hardwood floor **multiple times** (up to 6–10 sandings for a standard 19mm tongue-and-groove floor over its life <sup>6</sup>). Just ensure there's enough wood left above the tongue. A good rule: at least ~3 mm (1/8") of wood above the tongue is needed for a full sand <sup>7</sup>. In really old homes with thinner boards (e.g. 1920s houses with only 6–10 mm thick boards), you might only get 2–3 refinishes total before the nails or tongue could be exposed <sup>8</sup>. A flooring professional can help check thickness – they might pull up a floor vent or edge trim to inspect a cross-section of the board <sup>9</sup> <sup>10</sup>. If the wood is too thin to sand again, don't worry; you might still rejuvenate it with a **buff and recoat** (more on that in tips below).

## Restoring Heritage Timber Floors

Older Melbourne homes – think Edwardian terraces or mid-century apartments – often have **heritage timber floors** that have aged gracefully (or not so gracefully!). Restoring these is about **preserving character while renewing beauty**. It's a bit more involved than a standard refinish because you're dealing with decades of history. Common tasks include repairing loose boards, replacing damaged sections with matching timber, and being careful to **retain the patina and charm** that give the floor its soul.

**Professional expertise is especially crucial for heritage floors.** These floors might be brittle, uneven, or coated in mysterious old finishes (even wax or shellac) that respond unpredictably to sanding. A specialist will know how to handle these quirks. In fact, experts warn that using the wrong sanding technique or finish on a heritage floor can *ruin its character permanently* <sup>11</sup>. For example, aggressive sanding can erase the lovely aged grain or history marks, and some modern coatings might not adhere well to certain old woods. Heritage restoration pros take a gentle approach: thorough assessment, **selective board repairs**, and custom finishing. They often “blend” new repairs with the old floor so it all ties together.

When done right, restoring a heritage floor is deeply rewarding. You're **bringing history back to life**. That could mean sanding back 100-year-old Baltic pine boards hidden under paint, or rejuvenating a 1960s parquet pattern. The result is a floor that *gleams like new but still whispers of the past*. Plus, it's great for

property value – buyers in Melbourne love original period features that have been well cared for. And on an eco-note, restoration is sustainable: it saves those magnificent old timbers from the landfill <sup>12</sup> .

## Converting Carpeted Areas Back to Exposed Timber

One of the most exciting projects is when you **pull up old carpet and discover timber underneath**. Many Melbourne homes that were carpeted in the 70s or 80s actually have hardwood or pine floorboards hidden below. Revealing and refinishing these boards can completely change your interior – goodbye musty carpet, hello beautiful wood!

If you plan to rip out carpet to expose timber, here are some tips:

- **Go slow and safe when removing carpet.** Years of dust, dirt, and even toxins can be trapped in old carpet and underlay. Wear a dust mask (N95 or better) and goggles, and pull the carpet up gently section by section <sup>13</sup> <sup>14</sup> . This avoids kicking up too much dust and prevents splintering the wood by yanking too hard on stuck sections. Also remove all the *staples, nails, and tacking strips* carefully – leftovers can wreck your sanders later or injure feet. Pliers or a pry bar and some patience work best.
- **Assess the floor's condition.** Often the timber under carpet is dull and dirty (don't be discouraged!). There might be paint overspray on the edges, pet stains, or tack-strip nail holes. Sweep up debris (sweeping is gentler than vacuuming at first <sup>15</sup> ) and give the wood a gentle clean **only if the old finish is intact**. If the boards are bare or finish is worn off, avoid wet mopping – raw wood can absorb water and be damaged <sup>16</sup> . Simply proceed to sanding in that case.
- **Refinishing process:** Once the carpet's gone, the floor can be treated much like any hardwood refinish. You'll sand away surface grime, old lacquer, or paint spots. Do expect the first sanding pass to clog up with old carpet adhesive or grime – you may need to scrape or use a solvent on any stubborn tarry glue bits before sanding. After sanding, holes from carpet nails can be filled with matching wood filler. If boards are **gapped** (common with older floors that were carpeted), you have options: leave the gaps for a rustic look, or fill them (more on gap-filling in the Tips section below). Then finish with your choice of sealer. The transformation is usually dramatic – *from a threadbare carpet to what looks like a brand new timber floor*. Many folks share “before and after” photos of these projects with amazement.
- **Realistic expectations:** Keep in mind not every hidden floor is a perfect specimen. Sometimes you'll find previous owners have patched in bits of plywood, or the timber might be a cheaper species meant to be carpeted originally. Most often in Melbourne, though, you'll find decent hardwood (like oak or Victorian ash) or pine that was standard for the era. Even if it's not a top-tier wood, you can still make it look fabulous with the right stain and finish. A professional can advise on color treatments to mimic more expensive woods if needed (for example, staining pine in a warm oak tone). In any case, revealing an original floor gives your home a unique story and usually *increases its charm and value*.

## Refreshing Engineered Timber Floors (When Possible)

Engineered timber flooring is extremely popular in Melbourne's newer apartments and renos – often in a gorgeous European oak style. These floors have a real wood veneer on top of a plywood base. The big question when they get worn is: **“Can I sand and refinish my engineered boards like solid timber?”** The answer: **maybe – it depends on the veneer thickness.**

Engineered boards come in various wear-layer thicknesses, typically from about 0.6 mm on very cheap products up to 4–6 mm on high-quality ones <sup>17</sup> <sup>18</sup> . A good rule of thumb: if the top layer is **~2 mm or thicker**, you can likely do at least one light refinishing sand <sup>18</sup> . If it's 3–4 mm or more, even better – that floor could handle a couple of full sandings over its life <sup>19</sup> . But if the veneer is super thin (say 1 mm or less), sanding isn't advisable – you'd risk grinding right through to the plywood core, which would ruin the floor <sup>20</sup> <sup>21</sup> . In fact, many pros **refuse to sand veneers under ~2 mm** because the margin for error is so small <sup>22</sup> .

How do you know your veneer thickness? If you have leftover planks or documentation from installation, check that. Otherwise, remove a floor vent cover or edge trim and look at a board's cross-section: you'll see the top hardwood layer distinct from the backing layers <sup>23</sup> <sup>24</sup> . Measure it if possible. For example, a 15 mm engineered plank might have a 4 mm oak top – good for multiple refinishings – whereas a 12 mm plank might have only 1.5 mm of oak – only a **screen and recoat** is feasible there (screening = light sanding without fully stripping the wood).

If your engineered floor **does have enough veneer**, the refinishing steps are similar to solid wood: sand (carefully!), then finish. One caveat: many engineered floors are sold pre-finished with extremely tough factory coatings (often an aluminum oxide finish) which are harder to sand off than traditional polyurethane <sup>25</sup> . It's doable, but expect the contractor to use more abrasive belts and take a bit more time. Once sanded, you can change the stain color if desired, then seal it with new coats. Owners of mid-range engineered flooring are often thrilled to learn they *can* sand it – it can extend the floor's life by many years and even allow style updates (e.g. sanding an old yellow-toned oak finish and re-staining in a trendy neutral grey-brown).

If the veneer is **too thin to sand**, you still have a couple options short of full replacement. One is a **buff and recoat** (also known as a "screen and recoat"). This means **no heavy sanding**; instead, the floor is lightly roughened with a sanding screen or buffer, and a new coat of finish is applied on top. This won't remove deep scratches or dents, but it will **restore gloss and protection**, often making the floor look refreshed if it was just dulled or lightly worn <sup>26</sup> <sup>27</sup> . This is half the cost of a full refinish and doesn't reduce the veneer thickness much, so it's a good maintenance approach <sup>28</sup> <sup>27</sup> .

**Important tip:** Identify for sure that your flooring *is real engineered timber*, not laminate or vinyl. Laminate floors only **look** like wood – they cannot be sanded at all (it's just a photo layer) <sup>9</sup> . Same with vinyl or hybrid planks. If you're unsure, again peek at an exposed edge or consult the supplier. Many a homeowner has rented a sander thinking they had wood, only to discover the top is paper/plastic – a costly mistake to avoid!

## DIY vs Hiring Professionals: What's the Best Approach?

Refinishing a timber floor is **a big job**. Should you tackle it yourself or leave it to the pros? The answer depends on your budget, experience, and the project's complexity. Let's compare DIY and professional floor refinishing on key points:

## DIY Floor Refinishing

Many Melbourne homeowners are avid DIYers – refinishing a floor by yourself can be *hugely satisfying*. You get to save money on labor and literally watch the wood come back to life under your own hands. However, it's not a task to underestimate. Here are the main **benefits and challenges of DIY**:

- **Cost savings:** DIY is generally cheaper upfront. You'll mainly pay for **equipment hire and materials**. For example, hiring a floor sander from Bunnings or Kennards might cost on the order of \$100 a day <sup>29</sup>, plus sandpaper and finish (\$100–\$200 in supplies depending on area). If a pro charges, say, \$40 per square meter <sup>30</sup> <sup>31</sup>, do-it-yourself can seem very appealing financially. Keep in mind, though, if mistakes happen, DIY can become more expensive in the long run (floor repairs or calling in a pro to fix issues).
- **Personal reward:** There's a real **sense of accomplishment** in doing it yourself <sup>32</sup> <sup>33</sup>. Every time you walk on that floor, you'll think "I did this!". If you enjoy hands-on projects and have some handy skills, this can be a motivating factor.
- **Control and timing:** DIY means you set the schedule and work at your own pace. You won't be waiting to book a tradesperson. You can also control the minor details – for instance, doing extra sanding passes in a trouble spot or obsessing over the perfect finish coat – whereas a contractor might be more time-pressed.

Now the **downsides** or challenges:

- **Physical hard work:** Sanding floors is **arduous**. The sanders are heavy, loud, and dusty. You'll be on your feet (and knees for edges) for hours. It's a serious workout – not everyone is up for that level of exertion, especially in awkward positions and handling vibrating machinery. Expect sore muscles!
- **Skill and risk of error:** Without experience, it's easy to make **mistakes that affect the outcome**. Common DIY errors include sanding grooves or chatter marks into the floor (if you pause the drum sander too long in one spot), not sanding evenly (leaving swirl marks or stain blotches), or applying finish incorrectly (resulting in bubbles, lap marks, or uneven sheen) <sup>34</sup> <sup>35</sup>. Such mistakes can be hard to fix – sometimes requiring starting over. Professionals have years of practice to avoid these pitfalls and to troubleshoot wood-specific issues (like uneven board heights or previous finish reactions).
- **Time commitment:** A DIY refinish can take significantly longer than a pro job. As a beginner, you might spend an entire day on one room that a pro team could sand in a few hours. There's a **learning curve** with the equipment. Overall, DIY floor sanding **is incredibly time-intensive** for non-experts <sup>36</sup> <sup>37</sup>. If you have large areas, it might consume many evenings or weekends, during which the space is unusable.
- **Equipment access:** While you can rent good sanders, they may not be as **high-grade or well-tuned** as those a contractor uses <sup>38</sup> <sup>39</sup>. Pro machines (Lagler, Galaxy, etc.) can be more efficient, and pros also have edgers, corner sanders, dust extractors, and buffers ready to go. A DIYer might make do with fewer tools (for example, sanding edges by hand or with a small handheld sander is much slower). Also, handling dust is an issue – you'll need to seal off rooms and possibly rent a separate shop vacuum, whereas many professionals use industrial dust-collection systems to minimize mess <sup>40</sup> <sup>41</sup>.

Given these points, **DIY is best for**: small areas or one room; floors in relatively good shape (no major repairs needed); and people who have some renovation experience and *plenty of patience*. It also helps if you're okay with an "imperfect but good" result – expecting perfection your first time might be unrealistic.

## Professional Floor Refinishing

Hiring flooring professionals (floor sanders/polishers) is the **turnkey solution**. In Melbourne, there are many skilled tradespeople who do only floors day in, day out – and it shows in the quality. Here are the **pros of going pro**:

- **Expertise and quality:** A seasoned floor sander will deliver a **high-end, even finish** that can be hard for a DIYer to match <sup>42</sup> <sup>43</sup>. They know how to resolve issues like uneven boards, deep scratches, or old stains. They won't "sand right through" in spots or leave edger marks. You're paying for their eye for detail and technique to ensure a beautiful, smooth result. Especially for valuable or tricky floors (herringbone parquet, heritage boards, etc.), professional skill is worth its weight in gold.
- **Speed and efficiency:** What might take you two weeks of nights and weekends might take a professional crew **3–5 days of work** (or even faster for small jobs). They come with a team and commercial-grade tools that cut through old finish quickly and uniformly <sup>38</sup> <sup>44</sup>. For example, **an 80m<sup>2</sup> floor could be sanded and coated in 2–3 days by pros**, whereas DIY could stretch well over a week. That means less time your home is in chaos. You can often leave on a short holiday and come back to "new" floors.
- **Proper equipment and safety:** Pros use top-notch machines (e.g. German-made sanders like Festool or Lagler, Australian-made Polivac buffers) with effective dust extraction <sup>45</sup> <sup>46</sup>. **Dust control** is a big advantage – many can achieve near dust-free sanding, sparing you a huge cleanup and reducing health hazards. They also handle fumes safely and know how to dispose of combustible materials (like oil-soaked rags) properly. All in all, it's a cleaner and safer process when experts manage it.
- **Guaranteed results and peace of mind:** When you hire a reputable floor finisher, you typically get a guarantee on their work. If the finish peels or something goes wrong due to their error, they will often fix it. This assurance can be worth the cost alone – *you know the job will be done right*. Plus, you skip the personal stress. No worrying "am I using this sander right?" or "oh no, did I wreck the floor?!" – you can relax and let them handle it.

And the **cons of hiring professionals**:

- **Higher cost:** Quality comes at a price. Professional floor refinishing in Melbourne generally ranges from about **\$30 to \$45 per square meter** for sanding and water-based finishing, a bit more for special techniques <sup>47</sup>. According to national guides, that means a typical 3-bedroom home might cost on the order of **\$2,500** for a full sand and polish <sup>48</sup>. If you choose high-end finishes or have complications (repairs, staining, very uneven floors), the price goes up. For many homeowners, the investment is well worth it for the outcome – but it is still a significant amount of money compared to DIY.
- **Scheduling and timing:** You'll need to work on the contractor's schedule. Good floor sanders are often booked weeks in advance, especially in peak renovation season (spring/summer). You might have to wait for an opening. Also, while they work much faster than DIY, you typically **can't occupy the space** during the process. You might need to stay elsewhere for a few days due to noise and fumes, depending on the finish used. (Many modern finishes are low-toxic, but it's often easier to clear the area.)
- **Less personal control:** Handing off the project means trusting someone else's methods. While you can choose the finish sheen or stain color, you won't be there for every decision. Some homeowners are very particular and feel anxious not being in control. A way to mitigate this is to **communicate clearly** with your contractor – discuss the number of coats, any issues you're concerned about, and

even ask for a small sample section of stain on your floor before they do the whole thing (most pros will do this as part of color selection).

**Bottom line:** If you're aiming for a *high-end look* and can budget for it, **hiring professionals is usually the best route to stunning floors with no hassle**. The floors are an important feature of your home – a flawless finish elevates the entire space. On the other hand, if you're handy and love a challenge (and maybe the floor isn't your "forever floor" or you're okay with some character in the result), DIY can be a fulfilling project. Some folks even do the **prep and demo themselves** (like pulling up carpets or initial sanding) and then have pros do the finishing coats – a hybrid approach that can save a bit of money while still ensuring the final finish is top-notch.

## Tips for a Successful Floor Refinish

Whether you go DIY or with a contractor, some knowledge goes a long way. Here are **key tips and considerations** to get the best outcome and a floor that suits your style and lifestyle:

### 1. Make Sure the Floor *Can* Be Refinished

Before investing time or money, confirm your floor is a good candidate for refinishing:

- **Identify the flooring type:** Is it solid timber, engineered wood, laminate, or something else? As mentioned, *real wood* (solid or engineered) can be sanded (with veneer thickness caveats), but laminate or vinyl flooring cannot <sup>9</sup>. If you're not sure, remove a floor vent or a bit of skirting to inspect a cross-section <sup>23</sup>. Solid wood will look like one piece; engineered shows layers (plywood beneath a top hardwood layer) <sup>23</sup>. If it's neither, you may be looking at laminate – in which case refinishing means replacing with new timber or a laminate-friendly restoration (e.g. buffing and re-coating with special products, or just cleaning and using area rugs!).
- **Check thickness / past sanding history:** For solid wood, if the boards have been sanded too many times previously, they might be very thin now. Signs include nails very close to the surface or tongues starting to peek through between boards. One trick: insert a business card into a floorboard gap, mark the depth to the subfloor, and measure it <sup>49</sup>. If there's significantly less than ~3 mm of wood above the tongue, a full sand might risk damage <sup>7</sup>. With engineered wood, determine the veneer thickness as discussed earlier – typically  $\geq 2\text{--}3$  mm for safe sanding <sup>18</sup>. When in doubt, consult a flooring specialist; they can often tell at a glance and might suggest a gentle screen/recoat instead of heavy sanding if borderline.
- **Assess damage:** Some issues can be fixed by refinishing, others not. For example, **surface scratches and mild wear** will disappear with sanding – the floor will look new. **Gray or dull patches** where finish is worn off will also sand out, as long as the wood fibers beneath aren't permanently stained. However, **black stains from pet urine or deep water damage** often penetrate through the wood; even after sanding, a dark shadow or odor might remain <sup>50</sup>. These areas may require **board replacement** rather than just refinishing. Likewise, if boards are **warped or cupped** from moisture, sanding can level minor cupping once the wood is dry <sup>51</sup>, but severe warping may again call for replacement. It's crucial to fix the *cause* of damage (e.g. moisture sources) before refinishing, or the issue could recur. Refinish is the "beauty treatment," but any structural or moisture problems should be handled first.

In short, do a thorough evaluation (or have a professional do one). It's heartbreaking to sand a floor only to realize it needed sections replaced first. A little planning ensures you apply the right solution – maybe it's a refinish, or maybe, if the floor is too far gone, you opt for a new floor from the outset.

## 2. Choose the Right Finish Sheen (Matte, Satin, Gloss) for Your Lifestyle

One of the fun parts of refinishing is picking the **sheen level** of the new finish. The finish sheen dramatically affects the look *and maintenance* of your floor:

- **Matte (Low Sheen) Finish:** This has become *hugely popular in Melbourne* in recent years <sup>52</sup> <sup>53</sup> . A matte finish gives an understated, natural look – it doesn't reflect a lot of light. The wood's texture and grain take center stage without a mirror shine. **Pros:** Matte and satin finishes are *excellent at hiding small scratches, scuffs, and dust* <sup>54</sup> <sup>55</sup> . If you have pets, kids, or just a busy household, a low-sheen floor will be more forgiving. You won't see every paw print or tiny dent. Matte also lends a modern, relaxed **European style** that's very "in" – think airy Scandinavian or contemporary designs. **Cons:** Some matte finishes may be slightly less hard-wearing (this depends on the product – e.g. certain matte hardwax oils might not have the same scratch resistance as a high-gloss poly). They can also sometimes make colors appear a bit duller (less light reflection). And while they hide scratches, they can show *fine dust* more under certain light because the flat surface doesn't reflect it away <sup>56</sup> . Overall though, for most homes, matte or a low satin is a great choice – it's why the majority of Australian homeowners now opt for satin over gloss <sup>57</sup> .
- **Satin (Medium Sheen) Finish:** Satin is the middle ground – a soft shine that gives a little glow and elegance without the full mirror of gloss. It's actually the **most common choice** for Aussie homes today <sup>57</sup> . With satin, you get some light reflection which can brighten a room and accent the wood grain, but it's muted enough to still hide a fair amount of imperfections. Maintenance-wise, satin floors won't show footprints as obviously as gloss, and minor scratches blend in much better than on high-gloss (though not quite as much as matte). Satin can complement both traditional and modern decor – it's very versatile. If you're unsure, you **can't go wrong with a satin poly**.
- **Gloss (High Sheen) Finish:** Glossy floors have a classic, luxurious look – they literally shine. In a period home or a formal space, a gloss finish can add grandeur, reflecting light and making the floor look like glass. Gloss also **highlights the wood grain and color** strongly – some love this "piano finish" effect. However, be aware of the trade-offs: gloss shows every little flaw. Any scratch on a gloss floor catches the light and becomes quite visible <sup>55</sup> <sup>58</sup> . Dust, hair, and dirt are also more noticeable on a dark high-gloss floor. And maintaining that gloss requires diligent cleaning and periodic polishing to avoid dull spots. For these reasons, high-gloss has largely fallen out of favor for high-traffic homes – it's more common in low-traffic formal rooms or commercial settings. It *can* make a space feel brighter and more spacious due to the reflectivity <sup>59</sup> , but in a family home, you might find it impractical day-to-day. If you adore the gloss look, consider that you may need to enforce a no-shoes policy and more frequent cleaning to keep it pristine.

One more consideration: **if your floor has a lot of character (knots, repaired areas, etc.)**, a lower sheen will mask those better, whereas a gloss will draw attention to every feature (good or bad!). Most modern interior designs in Melbourne lean towards **matte or satin** finishes for a high-end yet livable feel <sup>52</sup> <sup>53</sup> . They impart a sophisticated, contemporary ambiance without the glare. As one flooring expert summed up: *matte finishes are ideal for active households, offering a subdued elegance, while gloss gives a traditional shine but needs more upkeep* <sup>60</sup> . And of course, you can also choose something in between (many products come in "low sheen" or "semi-gloss" which are around 20–40% gloss levels – essentially a satin category).



### 3. Mind the Gaps: Dealing with Floorboard Gaps

Older timber floors especially may have gaps between boards due to years of shrinkage. Some gaps are normal and even desirable for authenticity, but very wide gaps can collect dirt or cause drafts (and may not align with that “high-end look” you’re after). So should you fill gaps?

- **Consider wood movement:** All wood expands and contracts with seasonal humidity changes <sup>61</sup>. In Melbourne, cold dry winters can make boards shrink, then they swell a bit in humid summer. If you rigidly fill a gap at the driest time, the boards might push out the filler when they expand – even causing buckling if there’s truly no room <sup>62</sup> <sup>63</sup>. So, first **assess how permanent the gaps are**. Are they present year-round and significantly wide (say, you can fit a coin in them)? <sup>64</sup> If yes, those could be candidates for filling. If gaps practically disappear in the humid season, you’re better off leaving them be or only filling slightly during the most expanded state <sup>63</sup>.
- **Filling methods:** For **fine gaps (hairline to ~2 mm)**, often the best approach is filling with a *paste made of sanding dust and clear resin or glue*, during the finishing process. Essentially, after the second sanding pass, pros collect fine dust, mix it with a filler resin, and trowel it across the floor to fill small gaps and nail holes. Once it dries and is sanded smooth, it can make the floor look more seamless. This works if gaps are not expected to reopen drastically. Many contractors do this by default as it also fills tiny knots, etc. <sup>65</sup>. Do note, very wide gaps cannot be effectively filled with just dust/glue – it might crack out later.
- For **larger gaps (say 3–6 mm or more)**, a sturdier solution is using *wood slivers or strips*. This is a bit of fine carpentry: you cut long, thin strips of wood (ideally of the same species and thickness as your floor), and glue them into the gaps <sup>66</sup> <sup>67</sup>. Once the glue sets, the protruding top of the strip is sanded flush and finished. Done well, these slivers blend in and stay put even with seasonal changes, because they essentially become like part of the floor. This is labor-intensive but yields a high-end repair. It’s often used in heritage restorations where you want to preserve the floor rather than replace boards.
- Another traditional method for *very wide old-board gaps* is **rope filler** – inserting natural fiber rope (jute or cotton) into the gaps, then staining it to match <sup>68</sup> <sup>69</sup>. This was used historically in wide-plank floors (and on ships’ decks – akin to caulking). It’s flexible and moves with the wood. However, it only suits a rustic aesthetic and is rarely chosen for a refined look in modern homes (plus in high-traffic areas it can fray over time <sup>70</sup> <sup>71</sup>).
- **When to leave gaps:** If gaps are small or part of the floor’s character (and don’t bother you functionally), you might choose not to fill them at all. Some owners and experts actually prefer not filling, because any filler can eventually loosen and look worse than a natural gap. As one woodworker quipped, “all fill solutions are bad – if you want perfection, replace the floor; otherwise just vacuum the cracks!” <sup>72</sup> <sup>73</sup>. This is an extreme view, but it reminds us that wood is dynamic. In a heritage home, a few fine gaps can be part of the charm and authenticity.

**Pro tip:** If you do fill gaps, time it right – **during a more humid period if possible (boards swollen)**, or at least leave a tiny bit of give. And definitely **don’t fill in the dead of winter** when gaps are at maximum – or as soon as Melbourne’s summer moisture hits, your floor could literally crack or the filler will squeeze out

<sup>74</sup> <sup>75</sup>.

## 4. Addressing Water Damage or Uneven Boards

These issues need special attention before or during refinishing:

- **Water damage:** Identify any boards with serious water damage (grey/black discoloration, cupping, or rot). Surface water stains that haven't blackened can often sand out. But **black stains (often pet urine or long-term moisture) usually go deep** <sup>50</sup>. If you sand and it's still black, that discoloration likely goes through the board – best to **replace those boards** entirely if a flawless look is desired. Also, mold or rot cannot be fixed by sanding – those boards must come out and new wood spliced in. If only a few spots, a good floor sander can replace and blend them such that you hardly notice (especially if staining the floor). Also, **fix the moisture source**: for example, if it was from a leaking appliance or pot plant, ensure that's resolved, or if it's due to a damp subfloor, consider improving ventilation. After sanding, **refinish with a water-resistant sealer** (most polys are water-resistant) to protect against future accidents, and always wipe spills promptly on wood floors.
- **Cupping or uneven boards:** "Cupping" is when boards have a convex surface (edges higher than center) typically due to moisture imbalance. Minor cupping (you notice slight ridges along board joints) can often be sanded flat *after the wood has dried and stabilized*. You must **wait until the moisture content is normal** – sanding cupped boards while they're still swollen can lead to crowns later. A professional will check moisture levels first. For significant cupping or long-term moisture issues (like a floor that cupped from a flood), sometimes the better approach is to replace or at least **re-nail and secure boards** before sanding. High spots or uneven boards (including old "hills and valleys" in a very old floor) can be sanded to an extent, but there's a limit – you don't want to sand too deep in one area and thin the boards excessively. In extreme cases, floor re-leveling or board replacement may be needed. Generally, one beauty of a proper sanding job is that it will **level out minor unevenness**, eliminating lippage between boards, etc., giving a smoother plane.
- **Loose boards or nail pops:** Before finishing, go around and **secure any loose boards** (drive screws or ring-shank nails where needed, then countersink and fill over). Hammer down any nails that have popped up (called "nail pops") and punch them below the surface, filling the hole. A good floor sander will do this prep, but DIYers need to remember it too – hitting a nail with a sander will destroy the sandpaper (and possibly send sparks into wood dust, which is a *fire hazard*). So, preparation is key for both safety and a flat final result.

## 5. Follow the Proper Sanding and Finishing Steps (and Be Patient!)

Refinishing is as much about *process* as it is about products. Here's a quick recap of the steps and timeline you can expect for a standard project, with some tips woven in:

- **Room Prep:** Remove *everything* from the room – furniture, rugs, even wall hangings (they'll get dusty). If you're doing multiple rooms or the whole house, you might have to move furniture in stages or out to a garage/pod temporarily. Professionals will often help with heavy items (some charge a fee for this). Take off any doors that swing into the room (they'll likely need trimming or rehanging later if new finish height changes). Cover vents and doorways with plastic to contain dust if not using a dustless system <sup>76</sup>. It's also wise to mask or remove floor-mounted electrical outlets or any fittings.
- **Sanding Phase:** The sanders start with a coarse grit (e.g. 36 or 40) to abrade old finish and level the floor, then medium (60-80), then fine (100-120) for a smooth result <sup>77</sup>. They'll use a big drum/belt sander for main areas and an edger for along walls. Corners and edges might be hand-scraped or done with a detail sander. This phase is the noisiest and dustiest. Tip for DIY: keep the sander

**moving at all times** when engaged with the floor – never let it sit still, or you'll sand a divot (practice on a sheet of plywood first if you can). Also sand in line with the wood grain as much as possible. After sanding, **vacuum and tack-cloth** the floor thoroughly to remove dust before any finish goes on <sup>78</sup>. Professionals often have dust extraction on machines, but they still clean between stages. Any stray grit can mar your finish.

- **Staining (if desired):** If you chose to change the color, the *stain is applied next*. This might be done by hand wiping or with a buffer in larger areas. After application, stains usually need to penetrate then excess is wiped off, and you must **let it dry completely** (time varies – could be overnight for oil-based). **Patience is key** here: rushing to coat over tacky stain can ruin the whole job. When testing stain, do it on a sanded section and *in the lighting of your room* – colors look different under your home's light than in a showroom. Also remember that the finish (polyurethane) on top can slightly alter the look (often adds a bit of amber warmth unless you use a water-clear finish). So, many contractors will show you a stained-and-finished sample if possible. Melbourne trends currently favor **lighter, natural stains** or even *no stain*, to highlight the wood's natural beauty (particularly with oak and lighter timbers) <sup>79</sup> <sup>80</sup>. But if your décor calls for rich dark floors or a custom grey, go for it – just know dark stains *especially* require a very even sanding job and careful application for uniformity.
- **Finishing (Sealing/Coating):** Now the clear protective coats are applied. Commonly this is polyurethane, either **solvent-based** (oil-modified) or **water-based**. Each has pros and cons: solvent-based polys have a strong smell and amber tint, but are beloved for their traditional warm look; water-based polys are low-VOC (low odour) and fast drying, and many modern ones are extremely durable and non-yellowing <sup>81</sup> <sup>82</sup>. In fact, top-tier water-based finishes (like Bona Traffic HD, Loba, etc.) often outperform old solvent types in wear resistance <sup>82</sup>. There are also **hardwax oils** (like Osmo Polyx Oil, Rubio Monocoat) which are penetrating oil finishes that give a very natural matte look and are easy to spot-repair, but they are less protective against scratches and moisture compared to polyurethanes <sup>83</sup> <sup>84</sup>. For a *high-end floor that's going to see traffic*, many experts recommend a quality 2-component water-based polyurethane – it's what's used in high-end commercial sites and galleries because it's durable and non-toxic once cured. Products from brands like **Bona** (Sweden) or **Loba** (Germany) are popular – they offer finishes in ultra-matte, satin, etc., that let the wood look close to bare while providing strong protection. If you prefer an **oil finish** for the hand-rubbed look, brands like **Osmo** (Germany) make hardwax oils that are well-regarded for their appearance and eco-friendliness. Just be ready to do a bit more maintenance (occasional re-oiling of high-traffic spots) and note that oil-finished floors don't form a hard film on top – so they will gain "character" (wear marks) faster. On the other hand, a polyurethane forms a hard coat; it *sacrifices itself* so the wood underneath stays pristine. It can last many years without maintenance beyond cleaning.
  - **Number of coats:** Usually **3 coats of polyurethane** are applied (some contractors do 1 sealer + 2 topcoats; others do 3 full coats) <sup>85</sup>. Oil finishes are often 2 coats. The first coat might be a sealer or the same finish thinned – it will soak in and lock down any remaining dust. Each coat should be given adequate drying time as per product specs (and trust the pros on timing – factors like Melbourne's weather and even the house's ventilation can affect dry times). *Avoid walking on the floor between coats* unless absolutely necessary, and then only in clean socks or shoe covers, after the coat is dry to touch. Never walk on a tacky floor.
  - **Sand between coats:** With poly, there is usually a light "screen" or buff between coats to ensure the next coat adheres well and any micro-bubbles or grain raise are knocked down <sup>78</sup>. Don't worry when you see them doing this – it may look like they are dulling the nice shine, but it's normal. They will vacuum up the white powdery dust and then apply the next coat which will restore the clarity.

- **Curing and Wait Time:** A floor may be dry enough to walk on *barefoot or in socks* after a day or two (for water-based, sometimes even hours), but **full cure of the finish takes longer**. Urethane finishes typically reach full hardness after about 7–14 days for water-based, and 2–4 weeks for solvent/oil-based <sup>86</sup> <sup>87</sup> . During that curing time, treat the floor gently: avoid dragging furniture, avoid placing rugs (they can block airflow and slow curing or even stick to the finish), and wipe up spills promptly (a not-fully-cured finish can stain). Many contractors advise: *24 hours before light foot traffic, 48 hours before moving furniture back, and 1-2 weeks before putting rugs or heavy items in place*. It may vary by product – always heed your finisher’s guidelines. It’s tough to wait when you’re excited to use the space, but it’s worth it to ensure the finish sets up perfectly. **Pro tip:** If you must move furniture back sooner, pick it up – don’t slide it – and ideally place felt pads under legs. And no high heels on a freshly finished floor for a couple weeks (stilettos can dent even fully cured wood, but when the finish is soft they can also leave little round imprints or scratches).

To give a sense of timing: **most average rooms (20–40 m<sup>2</sup>) take about 3 days to refinish**, plus additional days of cure time <sup>88</sup> <sup>89</sup> . A whole house might be 4–7 days of work spread over a week or two (if sections are done in phases) <sup>90</sup> . So plan accordingly – you might, for example, refinish floors before moving into a new home, or live in one level of the house while the other level is done. Contractors can sometimes do one floor at a time if you have multiple stories, to let you shift living areas. Good communication and planning reduce inconvenience.

## 6. Products and Brands to Consider (Neutral Recommendations)

Getting a **high-end look** is not just about technique, but also using quality products. Without endorsing anything specific, here are some well-regarded brands you’ll hear about in the timber flooring world:

- **Bona:** A Swedish brand known worldwide for top-tier water-based finishes and floor maintenance products. Bona’s finishes (like Bona Traffic HD, Bona Mega etc.) are used in many professional jobs for their durability and low VOC. They also make sanding machines and dust containment systems. If a contractor says they use Bona, you can generally expect a *premium, environmentally friendly finish* on your floor. (Fun fact: Bona was used on the floors of Parliament House and major galleries in Australia <sup>91</sup> ).
- **Osmo:** Osmo is a German brand famous for its **Polyx Oil**, a hardwax oil finish. It’s beloved for bringing out a wood’s natural beauty with a matte, nourishing oil that’s easy to patch-repair. Osmo is a common choice for those who want a natural look and feel underfoot (you can touch the wood grain, not a plastic layer). It’s also low-VOC and based on natural oils and waxes. The trade-off is, as discussed, it’s not as bulletproof as poly – it might **require more periodic care** and isn’t as resistant to chemicals or standing water <sup>83</sup> . Some folks absolutely love the look though – it can make the wood *glow* in a very authentic way. It’s particularly popular on lighter European oak floors for that relaxed matte style.
- **Festool:** Festool is a high-end German tool manufacturer. In floor refinishing, Festool’s **dust-extracting sanders** (like the Festool ROTEX) and HEPA vacuums are prized for keeping the worksite clean. A professional boasting Festool gear likely emphasizes dust-free work and precision. For example, Festool orbital sanders are often used for fine finish sanding or edging, and they connect to vacuums that capture the fine dust <sup>92</sup> <sup>93</sup> . This is better for your home (and the operator’s lungs!). While a homeowner probably wouldn’t buy Festool tools just for one job (they’re pricey), it’s good to know if your contractor uses them – it means a tidier, quality-conscious operation.
- **Polivac:** An Australian brand that has been making commercial floor sanding and polishing machines for decades. Polivac’s *Sandivac* floor sanders and high-speed polishers are a staple in the

industry, known for being robust and effective <sup>94</sup> <sup>95</sup> . Many Aussie floor sanders will have a trusty Polivac in their arsenal. In practice, you might see a Polivac rotary sander being used to buff between coats or even do a slow final sand – they often have vacuum attachments too. It's solid, reliable equipment. So if you hear your contractor mention Polivac, rest assured they're using locally-renowned machinery built for our conditions.

- **Others:** There are many other great brands: **Läglér** (German sanders like the famous Hummel belt sander), **Loba** (another German finish brand, similar tier to Bona), **Feast Watson/Intergrain** (Australian finishes often found in hardware stores), **Whittle Waxes** (natural oil finishes), **Festool** (tools, as above), **3M/Norton/Hermes** (quality sanding abrasives). And of course, **Forma Flooring** (the sponsor of this content) who *supplies* top-quality timber and engineered floors – while they don't do the on-site refinishing, they can certainly guide you to the right products and finishes for maintaining those floors.

When selecting products, just ensure compatibility – e.g. if you have an oil-modified finish and later want to recoat with water-based, there are processes to allow that (often a thorough cleaning and a bonding primer coat). Your contractor will know what works with what. If DIYing, stick to one system – for instance, use the same brand's sealer and topcoat to ensure proper adhesion and warranty.

## 7. Real-World Example: A Melbourne Floor Transformation

To wrap up the tips, let's imagine a real scenario: **Say you have a 1920s California bungalow in Melbourne's inner north.** It had been covered in dull beige carpet for 30 years. You pull up the carpet to reveal wide Baltic pine floorboards – they're grey, paint-stained at the edges, full of staple holes, and have some gaps, but they're intact. You decide to refinish them for a fresh, high-end look.

1. You remove all the carpet and staples (a few hours of work and a healthy amount of dust – but you wore your mask and got it done). The timber looks dry and lifeless, but solid.
2. Your floor sander comes in, punches down the old nails, fills the tiny staple holes with wood putty, and sands the floor smooth. The pale raw pine now shows its grain and knots – already a huge improvement! Some larger gaps between boards are filled with strips of similar pine for a uniform appearance <sup>66</sup> <sup>67</sup> .
3. Initially, you thought about a dark stain, but after seeing the raw light color, you realize a **light finish will make the rooms look bigger and suit your modern furnishings**. Following the trend of European oak-style floors, you opt *not to stain* at all. Instead, the contractor applies a **Bona Drift** (a slight whitening sealer) to counteract any yellowing, and then coats the floor in **Bona Traffic HD Extra Matte** water-based polyurethane for an ultra-matte, durable finish. The result is a **gorgeous muted pale timber floor** – it looks like a chic European oak even though it's humble pine, because the finish is high quality and non-yellowing.
4. The matte sheen hides the character marks that remain. The floor has tons of character but now feels clean, smooth, and *up-to-date*. From a worn-out carpet to what looks like a brand new custom floor, all in the span of a week.
5. You allow a few days before moving your furniture back (you had it all stored in the garage). When you do, you add felt pads to everything. The house is transformed – the once dark, stuffy rooms are now bright and airy, the timber adding warmth without overpowering. And you did it all while preserving the original floor – a win for sustainability and history.

Many similar stories happen across Melbourne. Whether it's a **warehouse apartment in Fitzroy getting its old hardwood floors polished in a matte finish to match an industrial-chic vibe** <sup>96</sup> , or a **Victorian**

terrace in Albert Park restoring its baltic pine and staining it a rich walnut to juxtapose modern décor, refinishing can cater to any design vision. The key is aligning your choices (finish type, color, sheen) with both your aesthetic goals and practical needs.

## Melbourne-Specific Considerations

A few final thoughts especially relevant to Melbourne and similar climates:

- **Weather and humidity:** Melbourne is known for its “four seasons in a day,” but generally we have **moderate humidity**. Timber floors here will expand in summer and contract in winter, but not as extremely as in tropical or very dry climates. Still, seasonal movement happens – thus the earlier advice on gap filling and acclimating new wood. Also, when scheduling your refinish, note that **cold, wet winter weather can lengthen drying times** for finishes, especially oil-based. If possible, plan the refinish in spring or autumn when conditions are mild – you can ventilate the space easily and finishes will dry at normal rates. If you do it in mid-winter, ensure the area can be kept warm and air can circulate to avoid curing delays.
- **Period home features:** Many Melbourne homes are heritage-listed or simply old and lovely. Keeping those original timber floors adds value and appeal. It’s often worth the extra effort to restore rather than cover up or replace. Also note, some *heritage regulations* (for listed properties) may require you to retain original materials, so refinishing is the way to go. If your home has decorative parquetry or borders, definitely consult a specialist – these can be refinished too, but require careful sanding (often done with smaller machines by hand to follow the pattern). The outcome, though, is stunning – nothing beats the glow of 100-year-old hardwood brought back to life.
- **Popular styles in Melbourne:** Currently, lighter-colored floors are in vogue. **European oak in matte finishes** is highly sought, as are Australian species like Blackbutt or Spotted Gum finished in a natural clear satin – showing off their native hues. Grey-tone washes and **“blonde” finishes** are also seen in many designer renovations (achieved with specialized stains or reactive treatments, then sealed). If you’re going for resale or just love a timeless look, you can’t go wrong with a neutral light-to-mid tone and either matte or satin sheen – it pairs with most interior palettes and enlarges the sense of space. On the flip side, very dark espresso-brown floors can look luxe and dramatic in the right context (e.g. a classic Victorian home with high ceilings and ample light), but remember they will show lint and dust more, and can make small rooms feel smaller.
- **Sustainability:** Melbourne folk increasingly care about eco-friendly choices. Refinishing your existing timber floor is inherently sustainable – it avoids new manufacturing and cuts waste <sup>12</sup>. To further “green” your project, opt for **low-VOC finishes** (water-based polys, natural oils) and ensure dust and old material is disposed of properly. You might even look into **recycled timber** if replacing boards – suppliers in Victoria provide recycled floorboards that can patch in seamlessly while reusing old wood. By rejuvenating what’s there, you celebrate the beauty of timber without consuming new resources – a win for the planet and your home’s character.

Lastly, one **Melbourne quirk**: our mix of architecture means you could have hardwood in the hall, pine in the bedrooms, and concrete in the extension! If you want a unified look, talk to a flooring expert about options – e.g. you could stain the pine to mimic the hue of hardwood in other rooms, or even install new matching boards in one area. Forma Flooring (who supplied this info) can advise on new timber that complements your refinished sections, should you need an extension or partial replacement.

## Conclusion: Revive Your Floors and Elevate Your Home

Refinishing timber floors is truly the process of turning “old into new” – and often, the “old” comes out even more beautiful than brand new floors, thanks to the rich grains and quality of yesteryear’s timber. Whether you’re **sanding back a heritage gem, bringing life to forgotten boards under carpet, or freshening up a modern floor**, the result can completely transform your Melbourne home’s look and feel. You’ll gain brightness, elegance, and that coveted high-end finish that still respects the character of your space.

We’ve seen that with the right approach – proper prep, choosing the ideal finish (matte vs gloss, etc.) for your needs, and maybe getting help from professionals when needed – refinishing is an incredibly rewarding project. Your timber floors can go from scratched and tired to *showroom gorgeous*. Not to mention, you add value to your property and joy to your daily living (there’s something special about walking on silky smooth wood that you just can’t beat).

**Nota bene:** While **Forma Flooring** proudly supplies top-quality timber and engineered flooring products (for when you *do* want new floors or need extra material), they do not perform on-site refinishing services. However, they are always happy to **offer expert advice** on caring for timber floors. If you have questions about whether your floor can be refinished, what products to use, or you want to explore samples of new timber to coordinate with your project, they’re a fantastic resource.

**Ready to give your floors a makeover?** Don’t hesitate to reach out to Forma Flooring for guidance. They can help you choose the perfect timber flooring or finish to achieve the look you’re dreaming of – and put you in touch with trusted flooring professionals in Melbourne if needed. **Contact Forma Flooring for expert timber flooring advice or to request samples** of beautiful hardwood and engineered options. With a little help, you’ll be well on your way to enjoying stunning timber floors that truly elevate your home.

*Forma Flooring – Quality Timber Floors, Expert Advice. Transform your space from the ground up!* 46 53

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