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LANDLORD-APPROVED APARTMENT UPGRADES

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You'd think your landlord would back your home improvement project--but not always.

Decorate your rental with a collection of cat figurines or ancient crossbows, and your landlord can't say a thing. But install a washer/dryer or build a new wall, and you'll face the consequences: pay to right your wrong or, in some extreme cases, get evicted—even if your addition improves the place.

Indeed, most landlords include provisions in their leases that forbid tenants from making alterations without their express consent. “If you take on a project, the landlord then has to vet vendors, make sure they have the appropriate permits, and worry that your changes might make the apartment less attractive to future renters,” says Dylan Pichulik, CEO of XL Real Property Management, a property management company. So what can you do to upgrade your digs without incurring the building owner's wrath? We spoke to landlords, property managers and brokers to round up a list:

- 1. Install window treatments:** Venetian blinds or curtains can enhance the look of the unit, making it feel more homey. Just remember that “not everyone loves floral prints,” notes Alan Wang, who owns brownstones in Brooklyn and Manhattan, and is a member of the Small Property Owners of New York (SPONY), an organization of small landlords. But if a tenant puts in shades that block out the light and are a neutral enough color (think beige or white), many landlords would be happy to have them. “If we think it might be something that the next tenant will hate, we’ll tear it down,” says Arik Lifshitz, president of DSA Management, which owns 40 apartment buildings in New York. “If not, we’ll leave it up.”
- 2. Adding shelving/storage:** Lifshitz recalls an incident when a tenant in a small studio installed shelves that added tons of storage space to the tiny unit. “I was really impressed with what she’d done,” he says. “So we left it all up for the next tenant.” Pichulik has also been pleased with custom closets that renters have installed and has left them for incoming renters. Just make sure that everything is put in properly, says Trevor Matwey, a research analyst for LandlordsNY, a peer-to-peer network for New York landlords. “And if you’re using a contractor, make sure they have the proper insurance.”
- 3. Replacing kitchen or bathroom hardware:** If you can’t stand the fixtures, most landlords will be okay with you swapping them out for others so long as you hang on to the old ones for the next tenant. Also, be sure not to “drill any extra holes or do any other damage to the cabinets when you install them,” says Pichulik.
- 4. Replacing showerheads:** Have your eye on a rain showerhead? Feel free to install one, says Pichulik, but make sure you run it by your building manager first. “They use more water than the regular kind and your landlord is generally the one paying the water bill,” he says. So get his consent.
- 5. Installing shower doors:** Can’t stand to shower one more day with a hanging curtain that attracts mold and mildew? Many landlords would be amenable to replacing it with glass doors, says Daniel Hedaya, president of brokerage Platinum Properties. “A glass shower door definitely increases the value of the apartment, but many landlords won’t do it themselves because it’s too costly.”
- 6. Changing the flooring:** If you despise the standard parquet floors in your rental and want to get something a little more upscale, lots of landlords would be open to it. “If it was of a better quality than what they usually put in and neutral enough to appeal to most renters, I don’t see a landlord having a problem with it,” says Adam Ginder, general counsel for brokerage MNS, referring to instances when tenants have had real wood floors installed in shades of dark, blonde or cherry-colored wood.

And here are a few projects that some landlords will bless and others will veto:

1. Upgrading appliances: Say you want a stainless steel fridge or a six-burner stove. So long as installing the new appliance won’t require you to rip apart the kitchen to make room, Lifshitz says he’d allow it. But other landlords are less permissive because it raises a number of tough questions: Are you going to leave the new appliance for the next tenant? If not, what are you going to do with the existing one in the interim? Will you pay for storage until your lease is up? And reinstall it when you leave? Will it match the rest of the kitchen? There’s also the question of whether or not the property manager is obligated to make repairs on your new, high-tech

appliance. Make sure that you and your landlord come up with a concrete plan before you remove or install anything.

2. Upgrading the lighting: Many NYC apartments are severely lacking in overhead light fixtures, meaning they can be dark and cave-like. So if you want to add your own—be it track lighting or high hats—many landlords will be pleased to see you do it, says Lifshitz. Others won't though, warns Pichulik. "We don't always like you getting involved with the electricity," he says. "You could get hurt."

3. Repainting: For every landlord who cringes at the prospect of you painting over the pristine cream-colored walls with a vampy red or neon green, there's another who couldn't care less—either because you've promised that you'll paint it back when your lease is up or because the next tenant might actually enjoy living in a pink princess apartment, or because he knows he can easily withhold the cost of repainting from your security deposit. "I don't have a problem with tenants repainting," says Lifshitz. "Neutral colors are best if you're going to do it, but we've had our fair share of walls painted black."

BEFORE YOU START UPGRADING:

- Be up front with building management about any renovations you'd like to undertake and get their approval—in writing—before you do anything. "Even if you have a verbal agreement that the landlord signed off on something, you need to make sure to protect yourself," says Santiago Steele, an agent with brokerage Citi Habitats.
- It's possible that a landlord will be so thrilled with your planned upgrade that they'll give you a break on rent or split the cost of the job. But this isn't the most likely scenario, so don't expect to get any money back, says Steele. "Even if you're making a good improvement, most landlords won't like it" because they're worried about what could go wrong, he says.
- If you're planning to invest your time and money in the place, lock in a long-term lease with an option to renew it. "Otherwise, if the landlord chooses not to renew, you could be giving him thousands of dollars in improvements, and you could end up with nothing," MNS' Ginder says.