

Home improvement and repair Q&A

By Alan J. Heavens

THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

Q: I live on the first floor of a garden condo. Some years ago, the unit above was left unheated in winter, causing the pipes to burst and causing much damage. Everything was repaired, but ever since I have had trouble with my ceilings. Whatever I use to repair them, after a time, cracking starts. I was told that dampness obviously remains, yet some of my rooms are perfect.

Is there any method that can be used to get rid of the dampness before I try something else? I have tried popcorn, and now have acrylic. I am considering using styrene panels, but there must be some way to get rid of the dampness.

A: That's if residual dampness is causing the problem, which I find hard to believe, especially after all these years. You didn't say, but I assume the ceilings are plaster. Whether plaster or drywall, dampness would manifest itself by creating rust stains on the ceiling. You didn't say if that was the case.

I assume that when the ceilings were repaired, they were opened up to give air a chance to circulate and the joists and spaces a chance to dry completely. If you're concerned that there is moisture in the space above the ceiling, that's easily tested with a moisture meter that you can purchase on the Internet inexpensively. These are like the ones used by professionals engaged in mold remediation, or who clean up water

damage after fires or flooding.

The cracks you get could be evidence of settling. I don't know how old your condo is, but often the lumber used in floor joists might not have been completely dry when used. The water damage delayed the drying for a while, and the cracks might have appeared when the joists did dry. I've seen the same thing happen in new construction if the wood is a little green. When it dries, drywall nails pop. If the building is old and the plaster is, too, know that old plaster tends to develop stress cracks over the years, especially as it pulls away from the lath.

You don't want to add weight to the ceiling if this is what is beginning to happen because the problem will be accelerated. Popcorn finishes are not as light as popcorn. I'd find out the real cause of the problem before proceeding.

Q: We just bought a 9-year-old house with heated tile floors in the kitchen, great room and master bath. Is it possible to replace the tile without disturbing the heating element? If the tile cannot be removed, could it be painted another color?

A: Removing the tile without disturbing the heating element is not a likely option. I assume that the radiant floor heating involves piping that is embedded in Gypcrete, a lightweight blend of concrete and gypsum that, in concert with a shift to flexible PEX piping, has made installation easy and operation problem-free.

That said, the tile is either embedded in the Gypcrete or in adhesive on the Gypcrete, and you couldn't remove it without making a mess or damaging the piping.

Can you paint the tile? Yes, it's possible to paint tile another color with acrylic paint — but not if you plan to walk on it.

Q: I have a toilet that is "whistling" while it refills the tank after each flush. It makes no difference as to time of day, day of week, or number of times used. After the handle is pushed and the bowl empties, the whistling sound starts as the refilling of the tank progresses.

A: Likely cause: the fill valve. It will cost \$6 to replace it.

Q: Does the molding between a wall and ceiling have to be diagonal? I found casing molding that I like, but it would need to be installed flush.

A: I'm not sure what you mean, but I assume that you're talking about crown molding, which is designed to be installed that way. I've installed molding over the years whatever way it looked good to me. The big problem, especially in older houses, is getting the molding to fit properly.

Q: Just finished installing new wood laminate flooring in my basement over concrete. I used plastic for a moisture barrier. The day after I finished the installation, my sump pump stopped working, and I had a half-inch of water on top of the new flooring. I immediately replaced the sump pump, vacuumed the excess water, and started running dehumidifiers.

There are no signs of buckling yet. I'm also wondering about potential mold damage. The basement floor had been painted and sealed about six years ago.

A: If you took care of the water issue quickly, there may be no further problems. It's only when we let things go that such problems arise. I'd keep an eye on it, but otherwise, just enjoy the space.

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