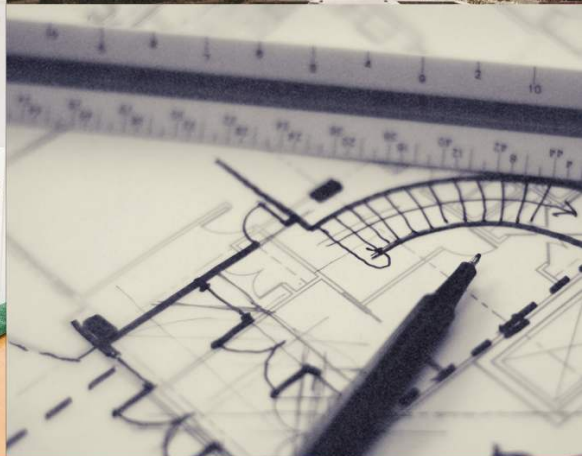
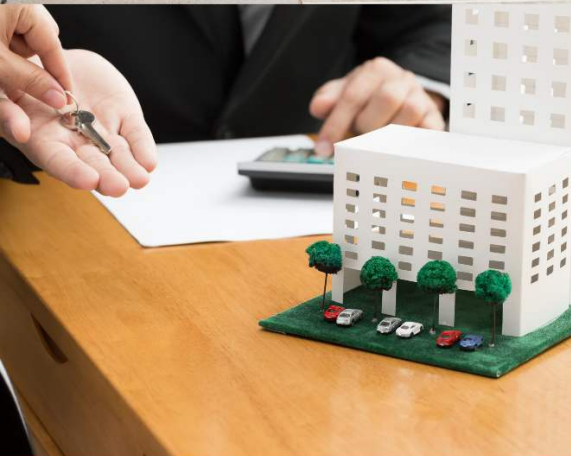


# CONDO REMODELING: FROM DESIGN TO EXECUTION

FROM NATIONAL BUILDING EXPERT &  
CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

A GUIDE FOR SMART CONDO RENOVATIONS



LANCE LUKE, CCC, CCI, CCPM

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"The Word According to Luke" Series

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# Introduction

This book is part of the **Ask the Building Expert** series and focuses on the topic of condo remodeling.

This topic is particularly relevant for condo owners, whether you live in Hawaii, the United States, or anywhere else in the world. Since condos are everywhere, the information in this book might be useful to you.

During a recent trip to Europe, my wife and I were surprised to realize just how common condos are in other parts of the world. We visited places like London, Portugal, and Spain, and sure enough, there were condos everywhere. I'm not sure about Morocco, but it made me think—no matter where you are, condo living follows certain rules and principles. And believe it or not, Hawaii has an incredible number of condos.

A friend of mine, a condo attorney, mentioned that if all condo owners in Hawaii came together, their combined population would make them the second-largest "island" in the state. That's a fascinating statistic! In this book, I'll be sharing valuable insights and tips on remodeling your condo to make the most of your space.

This book is brought to you by **Construction Management Inspection**, which is a Hawaii-based construction management and building inspection service. We do this to actually help building owners, property managers, realtors, developers, and real estate attorneys—anybody who has anything to do with a condo or a building.



If you're a condo owner, a Realtor, a rental agent that deals with condos, or a property management company, you could benefit from some of the information. You may be on one side, or you may be on the other side, as a condo board member or a property management company managing a condo association.

## CHAPTER I

# Condo Remodeling Simplified: From Design to Execution



If you own or manage an old condo, you may find things you dislike or that are outdated. For example, some design elements or flooring may be outdated, such as old carpet, while the latest trends in flooring are laminate, vinyl tile, or LVT. You may want to upgrade to a more modern look.

Do you just go in and change it, or are there design guidelines that you have to follow? I will tell you about some condo design guidelines and what you need to be aware of.

## CHAPTER II

# Condo Design Guidelines



Some of the things that you need to be aware of for one, are that can't just go in and just do whatever you want; although you own the condo unit, you don't own the whole building. Believe it or not, in many cases, you don't necessarily own the walls, the floor, or the ceiling because that's considered part of the building in a common area.

These are the kinds of things to look at or to be aware of. Even if your condo building does not require these things, it's specific guidelines. It's good to know what they are to be aware of.

## **STRUCTURAL COMPONENTS**

- Walls
- Ceilings
- Floors

You don't go and knock down walls or drill holes in a wall, ceiling, or floor without getting approval because what happens if you drill a hole in the floor and hit rebar or post-tension cables? This could lead to structural or safety issues. So, be aware of these things.

Also, if the wall, ceiling, or flooring contains hazardous materials, that's something to be cautious about too. If your condo building was built before 1977–1978, there's a chance that the walls, ceilings, or even some flooring may have asbestos-containing material.

For example, a building built in the sixties may have nine-by-nine floor tiles with colored dots, which could be asbestos-containing floor tiles.

Additionally, the adhesive, known as mastic, used to stick tiles to the floor—often black in color— may also contain asbestos. Your popcorn ceiling may have asbestos, and your walls might have asbestos in the tape joints, in the mud, or in the plaster used to finish drywall.

I've even worked on projects where testing revealed asbestos in window caulking or the stucco of exterior walls. When working on a high-rise building, mitigating asbestos on an exterior wall becomes a significant issue. Be aware of these potential hazards.

## **FLOORING SOUND MITIGATION**

The second common thing to be aware of is the flooring. If you're going to change your flooring, as previously stated, you might not like the old, shabby carpet and want to upgrade to something more modern-looking.

Maybe you went to a home show or visited a friend who had nice-looking laminate flooring—perhaps bamboo or Koa wood look—and now you're interested in redoing the flooring in your home.

Be aware that there are sound mitigation guidelines, so you need to ask your condo board what the guidelines are. This information will help you prepare and ensure that when you redo your flooring, the underlayment insulation, floor covering, and the entire flooring system meet the sound guidelines of your condo building.

For a high-rise building made of reinforced concrete, it's relatively easy to meet these guidelines. You might have a four-inch or six-inch concrete slab with flooring underlayment and floor covering, both of which have sound ratings provided by manufacturers.

These ratings, such as **Impact Installation Class (IIC)** or **Sound Transmission Class (STC)**, are based on lab testing. For instance, if the manufacturer's specifications specify "65 IIC or STC" and your condo guidelines mandate a minimum of 60, then you are in compliance.

For the most part, high-rise reinforced concrete condos make it easier to maintain the sound rating.

However, be careful and ensure your contractor follows the guidelines. If they skip a step—for instance, if they say, “Oh, this laminate tile comes with a foam backing for sound insulation, so you don’t need a separate underlayment”—and attach the product directly to the floor without additional underlayment, it may not meet the sound guidelines. So, that's just a heads-up.

I can tell you this, based on experience and years and years of trying to do my research on sound rating for wood frame construction; all the townhouses in the area are constructed of wood—they're not made of reinforced concrete, but rather they are wood structures. So, you have wood framing, and you have plywood flooring. Even if you have a sound barrier or some kind of gypsum soundboard on top of the wood flooring, it's almost impossible to figure out what the sound rating is.

Initially, developers put in carpet and vinyl flooring, and lately, we've seen a lot of condo unit owners replacing their carpet with wood flooring, laminate flooring, ceramic tile, marble, and things like that, and it does not meet the sound rating.

How do you know it doesn't meet the sound rating? Because the unit owner below complains.

Now, we don't actually know what the sound rating is, because I haven't seen any floor products tested in a lab over a wood frame floor—it's always over reinforced concrete.

To make it worse, you might not have a drop ceiling, so there's no space, and the walls might not even have insulation. That could be a major problem.

And I've seen problems—I'm still working on some. There have even been lawsuits where the unit owner below ends up suing the unit owner that lives above.

In fact, I was involved in one case as an expert witness. The unit owner downstairs sued both the upstairs neighbor and the association board for approving the flooring installation... and it turned into a big mess.

## **ELECTRICAL/PLUMBING**

You don't want to start doing electrical modifications or plumbing without board approval, especially if you're planning on moving or relocating electrical outlets or moving your sink to another location. That means moving some plumbing piping.

There are three types of plumbing piping you need to be aware of. When you relocate, let's say your kitchen sink, you're involving your supply piping, your drain piping, and your vent piping. It's not like you're going to go and remodel your kitchen and bath and just use the same piping. If you are, okay, well, you still need to get approval.

## **NO DAMAGE TO COMMON AREA**

The other major issue is that you don't want to damage the common areas. So, let's say you want to install a split system air conditioner. Where are you going to put the outdoor unit condenser? You have a lanai, right? So, you're going to put your outdoor unit on the lanai. How are you going to secure it?

I've inspected installations where there were leaks. In one case, I went to inspect the unit above, and they had a condenser unit installed with little brackets drilled directly into the concrete slab. When it rained, water seeped into the drilled area and started dripping onto the ceiling of the unit below.

So that's a no-no. Now, about the lanai—it's technically part of the building and considered a common area. But legally, it's classified as a limited common area, which means only the unit owner whose condo it's attached to has the exclusive right to use it. He doesn't actually own the lanai, but no one else can use that space.

## CHAPTER III

# Hire an Architect



The other major point is to hire an architect. Sometimes you might not need one, but in many cases, you probably should. For example, if you're remodeling your kitchen or bathroom, or you need to relocate or knock down a wall—how would you know if that wall is load-bearing? That's not something you want to guess. In cases like that, it's best to hire an architect or an engineer.

Another reason is that you'll likely need to hire a design professional anyway if your project requires a building permit. While some improvements—like painting, installing flooring, or swapping out cabinets and countertops—typically don't need a permit, anything beyond that usually does. And once permits come into play, so does the need for an architect or engineer. It's just good practice.

Also, having a qualified architect can help you avoid costly mistakes. They're trained not just in aesthetics, but in function, structure, and code compliance. Sometimes what seems like a simple remodel can turn complicated fast—like discovering hidden plumbing, old wiring, or poor insulation.

A good architect can foresee those issues before you even start and design around them. Plus, if you ever decide to sell the property, buyers (and inspectors) often appreciate knowing the work was professionally done. It adds both credibility and long-term value to your home.

## CHAPTER IV

# Get a Building Permit



Another important thing is getting a building permit. If one is required for your project, then you need to get it—otherwise, you're technically in violation. Many condo owners assume that once they get approval from the condo association, they're in the clear. But that's only half of it. There are actually two approvals you need: one from your condo association for the work itself, and another from the City and County of Honolulu for the building permit.

Just because your association signed off doesn't mean the city did.

In many cases, condo unit owners never applied for a permit, and it only becomes an issue when someone complains or when they try to sell the unit. Let's say someone remodeled a bathroom without a permit, and now they're selling the unit.

The buyer or their agent will usually ask, "Did you get a permit for the work?" If the seller responds, "No, my contractor indicated I didn't require a permit," it can lead to complications, particularly if the renovation did necessitate a permit. Now they'll either need to apply for an after-the-fact permit, or the buyer has to accept that there's no official record of approval. It can get sticky real fast.

So, bottom line? Do things the right way from the start.

If you're in doubt, you can go online and ask the building department if you need a permit, or read their brochure, or contact a consultant.

A lot of times your contractor will say, "You don't need one." But they're providing erroneous information because they want to do the work. So, if you're a contractor and you have to wait a year to get a permit, that means you're not getting paid for the job. So, you just want to do it. That's the reason why a lot of contractors say, "Well, you don't need a permit. You're only going to remodel."

I am actually a construction consultant who reviews design applications for a bunch of condo properties, and it's pretty funny what the unit owners tell me that the contractor told them.

One is, "Well, you're only replacing, so you don't need a permit. In other words, you're just replacing your old bathtub with a new one, so you don't need a permit." Or, "We're only doing maintenance work, so you don't need a permit, or you don't need a permit because we're not doing any electrical or plumbing work."

And I'm like, "Okay, so can you tell me how the contractor is going to remodel your bathroom and kitchen without touching any plumbing fixtures? According to the plan you submitted, you're going to gut the whole kitchen, remove the kitchen sink and the disposal, and install a new dishwasher. How is he supposed to do all that without touching any plumbing?"

"Oh yeah. Well, he's going to have to; I guess you're right."

"Well, look at it this way. He's definitely going to have to touch the plumbing. He'll need to disconnect the drain line, disconnect the supply piping, remove everything that's connected, take out your kitchen sink and cabinets, and then install new ones. Then he reconnects it all. Is he going to change the P-traps? Is he going to change any of the plumbing?"

"Oh no, he's not going to change any of that."

“Okay, doesn't the work still involve touching plumbing? And what about the electrical outlets? You said that he's going to change the outlets to the new convenience outlets now, and then you don't have enough, so he's going to install two more outlets by your counter because that's not original. So how can you say that they're not doing any electrical work?”

“Oh, well, the contractor said they're doing minor electrical work.”

There's no such thing as minor or major electrical as far as getting a permit. The building permit requirements say any electrical work—you still need to get a permit and a licensed electrician as long as it meets the threshold. So that's the difference.

Now, in reality, there is minor and major electrical work, but for the purposes of a permit, it doesn't matter. There's no such thing as minor electrical work when you're applying for a permit. You have to list what you're doing—changing outlets, changing light switches, taking off a chandelier, and reinstalling it. Doesn't it involve hooking up wiring? If it does, then that's a job for the electrician, and the contractor may say, “Well, I know how to do it.”

“Okay, well, that's fine if you know how to do it, but do you have a license to do that? Do you have a separate electrical license? I know you're a general contractor, but under your general contractor's license, there's no allowance for you to do plumbing or electrical work. How do I know? Because it has been like that for years. You can do drywall work; you can do carpentry work.”

## CHAPTER V

# Finding a Good Contractor



Now, I wrote a book on “Working with a Contractor” where if you go to our website, [askbuildingexpert.now.site/publications](http://askbuildingexpert.now.site/publications) you can download it for free. It contains a wealth of specific information.

## CREDENTIALS AND LICENSING

When you're doing condo remodeling, you want to find a licensed contractor. You don't want to hire a handyman who's not licensed and maybe doesn't have the proper insurance.

Finding a trustworthy contractor, you want to ask for credentials and licensing and verify the license, verify the credentials, ask for references, and call the people up or email them, asking, "Hey, I'm looking at possibly hiring this contractor. He listed you down as a reference. What can you tell me about the guy? Did he have a good experience? Did he finish the job on time? Were there any change orders? Were there any construction during the project you had? Did he finish the work? Did he come back and fix things that weren't right?" Such issues should be addressed. Verify the license.

Now, some general contractors have specialty licenses too, so you want to make sure if your general contractor's going to do the flooring, make sure he has a separate flooring license. If not, he should subcontract the work to a licensed professional. It doesn't matter if he knows how to do the work or not.

## **EXPERIENCE, THE PORTFOLIO, CONTRACT TERMS AND AGREEMENTS**

Make sure you verify contracted terms and agreements. One of the key elements is: How much is the job going to cost? What exactly are you going to do? What materials are you going to be supplying? What is the warranty on the materials? What is your labor warranty? How long are you going to take to do the job? What is the whole schedule from beginning to end? And how am I going to pay you? Am I going to pay you every month? Am I going to pay you half now and half at the end? What is the deal here?

## **PERMIT AND CODE COMPLIANCE INSURANCE AND LIABILITY**

Make sure your contractor has both worker's comp and general liability insurance. A lot of one-man type operations only carry general liability—they don't have worker's comp. But you want them to have a worker's comp, because if they get hurt on the job, you could end up being their insurance carrier. So be firm about it. Don't just accept, "Oh yeah, I have insurance." Make sure they actually have both.

Make sure you get a copy of their Certificate of Insurance (COI). Read it carefully—check what the coverage includes and also look at the expiration dates. I've seen cases where they submit the insurance, but it expires before the job even starts. So, make sure to request a renewal if needed.

## PROJECT MANAGEMENT

If the job is big, it's a good idea to hire your own project manager. That can be really helpful.

Here's a question:

***“If I'm hiring a general contractor, how do I know if he's hiring licensed subs? Is it the homeowner's responsibility to make sure the GC is hiring licensed subs?”***

The answer comes down to what's in your contract. Make sure your general contractor provides a list of who will be doing the work. Is the general contractor doing everything, or are subs involved? You want clarity upfront—look closely at the scope of work.

If it involves electrical, plumbing, painting, or flooring, he needs to list it down. If he's not going to do the work himself, he needs to list down all his subcontractors. So, you're going to have general contractors X, Y, and Z. Then you're going to have electrical contractors A, B, and C, and plumbing contractors C, D, and E. They need to list the name and the license number. And you want to get certificates of insurance for all your subcontractors.

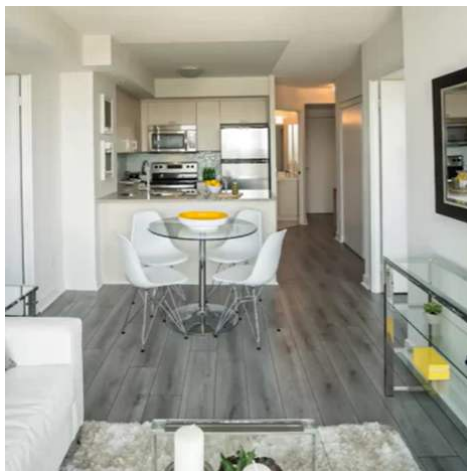
I was working on this expensive condo, which was about a million-dollar renovation, and they used 20 different subcontractors. I asked for certificates for each one of the contractors, and the general contractor said, "Oh, we don't normally ask that." And I said, "Well, you should, because what if one of your subs isn't properly insured and something happens on the job? There's a claim. Guess what, pal? They're going to go after your insurance." So, you want to be protected.

Not only is the protection for the general contractor, but it's also protection for the condo unit owner. Additionally, it provides protection for the condo association.

Condo associations require you to provide your contractor's insurance because they don't want to bear the burden of a claim alone.

Ask before the job starts. You want to verify all the subs because occasionally the general contractor doesn't even know that one of his subs is not licensed, or his license expired, or he doesn't have the proper insurance. Look at the scope of work and see what's involved.

Believe it or not, if you're doing renovation work, let's say, look at the picture. It is a remodeled condo, and they painted the ceiling and walls, they redid the flooring, and it has a brand-new kitchen. So, what does that tell you? What work was involved?



This was general construction. They installed new cabinets and countertops. They didn't go for high-end materials—it's more of a low-end kind of deal—because they wanted to spend more of the budget on the flooring.

So this involved painting, some drywall repair, electrical and plumbing work (since it was a kitchen remodel), and of course, flooring. Their general contractor was able to install the cabinets and countertops without using a subcontractor. But they did need to bring in subcontractors for the plumbing and electrical work. As for the flooring, they did that part themselves.

Is the general contractor allowed to do flooring? Well, that's debatable because there's a separate contractor license for flooring, so you may want to do more research on that. That's just to give you an idea.

## CHAPTER VI

# Bath/Kitchen Remodels

## Bath



For a bathroom, you want to have a good designer plan. If you're just changing everything and upgrading it without really changing the location of any fixtures or anything, then it's a lot easier. It involves plumbing, electrical, and fixture selection. You want to take out all your old fixtures and replace them with new fixtures, tile, and flooring.

It involves floor tile and tile on the walls, which would require a separate contractor's license to do ceramic tile, lighting, and ventilation. Storage solutions are really not a big deal because normally you would just replace your existing cabinets and replace them.

## **Kitchen**

### **LAYOUT AND WORKFLOW**

If you're redesigning things, some people prefer to include a kitchen island. But if you're in a condo, was it designed with an island initially? If not, and you have plumbing and electrical, how are you going to get your plumbing lines and electrical lines from your wall to the island? The layout and design are critical.

A general contractor can handle cabinetry, countertops, and appliance upgrades, but make sure they measure correctly to fit the appliances you're putting in.

I've seen cases where they installed beautiful cabinets and countertops, and when the time comes to put in the dishwasher, guess what? It doesn't fit because the space wasn't big enough. Now, what do you do?

## LIGHTING AND TASK LIGHTING



If you look at the picture, you see the wires hanging down from the ceiling. You can't tell me that the general contractor is going to do all the electrical work himself because he's not an electrician. It involves electrical work.

## BACKSPLASH AND WALL FINISHES

It is part of your cabinet countertop installation and helps tie the entire kitchen design together. The choice of materials—whether tile, glass, stone, or metal—can enhance both the visual appeal and functionality of your kitchen by protecting the walls from moisture, stains, and heat.



## FLOORING AND MATERIAL SELECTION

Since it's a kitchen and bath area, you don't want to put flooring that is not made for wet areas. In other words, if the flooring gets wet, what happens? It starts swelling; that's why it's not ideal to put wood flooring or particle-type flooring in a kitchen or bathroom.

Be sure that your material selection is compatible with the use of the area. Nowadays, they have luxury laminate tile and vinyl tile, which are basically water-resistant.

Make sure you plan for storage and where your appliances are, and follow the safety and building codes in remodeling. Now, I can tell you for a fact that I've seen remodeled kitchens and baths that were done by a handyman, and they didn't follow the code.

In other words, the electrical was wrong, and the plumbing was wrong. How do we know that? Well, I was a construction manager for a total repiping project on many high-rise buildings where we had to cut open walls to replace their drain piping, and that's when we saw illegal electrical and plumbing work.

And guess what? The owner had to pay to have it redone. I asked them the question, "Who did you hire? Were they licensed?" Apparently, they weren't licensed to do electrical or plumbing work, and that's a big issue. The unit owner said, "Well, the bid was \$8,000 cheaper than other general contractors, so I went with it." I said, "Well, now this is what happened. You're paying for it."

## CHAPTER VII

# Flooring Remodels



Make sure that you know the following:

- Material selection**
- Insulation**
- Subfloor Preparation**
- Transition and Trim**

Are you going to have baseboards? What kind of baseboards are you having? Make sure of the underlayment. And the big issue is making sure you comply with the condo board's sound transmission requirements.

## CHAPTER VIII

# Air Conditioning



Let's say your condo unit or single family home doesn't have an air conditioning system, and you want to install one. You might consider either a window wall unit or a split system. How does the split system work? How does it get installed?

Well, it has two units: an indoor unit, which is called a *Fan Coil Unit*, and an outdoor unit, which is a *compressor*.

Now, why is it called an outdoor unit? It's because it has to be installed outside the building.

If you have a lanai, normally it's installed on your lanai slab or somewhere on the outside. Make sure you verify the system, the installation, location, sizing, and load calculation. If it's a split system, there's no ductwork. If it's central air, then you have ducts.

So, make sure you get condo board approval for installation because, in older buildings, they might not allow you to install a split system because the building initially wasn't designed to handle any additional load for electrical.

Now, I've seen situations where I get a call saying, "Oh, we just installed a split system AC, and when we run our disposal, the lights start dimming."

And I'm like, "Okay, well, that's not a good sign." Then I went to check it out and came to find out the main for all the units was only a 50-amp main, and they did not have any provision for installing an air conditioner.

So, what happened was they used one of the circuits and hooked up their split system to it, overloading the main.

Make sure that everything is calculated. And if you don't know, ask the contractor. If the contractor doesn't know, then you need to hire an electrical engineer to help you. You don't want your whole building to catch on fire and burn down because you failed to follow the guidelines. Anything electrical could cause not only a shock hazard but also a fire hazard.

## CHAPTER IX

# Electrical



Let's say you're going to replace your outlets or you're going to add in more outlets. You may need to upgrade your circuit breaker, install additional lighting, and install ground-fault circuit interrupters, which are safety-type outlets in your bathroom and kitchen. It has those test buttons—test and reset.

It's also critical in older buildings to check the circuit breaker panels, especially if they are a certain brand like **Federal Pacific Electric (FPE)** or **Zinsco**. These brands have been known to fail, and you may need to replace the entire circuit breaker box along with all the breakers.

CHAPTER X

# Plumbing



Fixture selection  
Piping Inspection  
Drainage and ventilation

You might want to consider replacing your water heater, but be aware of permit requirements and the need for an inspection.

It doesn't make sense to remodel your kitchen and bathroom while keeping the original water heater if your condo unit has its own. If you're already upgrading, it's a good idea to replace the water heater as well.

I would recommend replacing your water heater because it could leak or go out at any time, and now you have no hot water or, what's worse, you don't know it's leaking until the unit owner below you knocks on your door and says, "Hey, I got water dripping from my ceiling. What's going on?" And when you go to your water heater, you look, and it's a big leak because the pipe corroded.

## CHAPTER XI

# That Four Letter Word: MOLD



When you're remodeling and your contractor finds mold in the wall—whether in your bathroom or kitchen—you need to make sure the mold is tested. If it's not tested, it's best to cut it out, remove it, and replace the drywall.

Don't just take the contractor's word for it when they say, "It doesn't look that bad. It was only a small area, or we cleaned it with Clorox; we sprayed it. So you're good to go." If the mold is bad, you don't know what kind it is—it could be toxic. So, it's safer to have it tested or simply remove the affected wall.

There are cases where they actually cleaned the wall, sprayed it, and then when the drywall got wet, the mold grew again. So just be aware.

## CHAPTER XII

# Conclusion from the Expert

If you live in a condo, make sure that you follow the guidelines of the condo association. And if they don't have any guidelines, and believe it or not, some don't, or it's like a one-page guideline, well, here's your guideline for remodeling your kitchen and bathroom.

Just make sure you hire a licensed contractor and that they don't work late at night or over the weekend—that's the guideline. And I'm thinking, "Man, these guys are living in the dinosaur days. They really need to upgrade their requirements". It should be strict, but there's nothing about getting a building permit, hiring licensed contractors, or doing any kind of review. So, there are still condos out there that operate like that.

I encourage all condo associations to upgrade their design guidelines and make them stricter so that you don't have any gaps—because then you have a problem, right?

People are changing their windows, upgrading their bathrooms and kitchens, knocking down walls, and adding walls—and no one knows about it until the unit is sold or someone does an inspection. Then you find out about it, and what are you going to do?

Occasionally, the association sends a violation notice, and the unit owner says, "Hey, I bought my unit 10 years ago, and when I bought it, it was already like that. You guys didn't say anything, right?"

So, is it the board's responsibility to issue a violation notice if they didn't even know about it, or is it the unit owner's responsibility?

If you read the condo documents and look at the Hawaii condo law, HRS 514B, it is specific that you cannot do any renovation work modifications without getting board approval. That's number one. And then if you read your condo governing documents or declaration, there's a clause in there that basically says the same thing: you're going to need board approval.

Did all these owners get board approval? No. If they can't prove they got approval, then they didn't get approval.

I hear this all the time from buildings: “Oh yeah, we got approval.” And I say, “That's fine, but can you send me a copy of your approval letter?” Then they say, “We can't find it.” Well, if you can't find it, there's no evidence of approval. You'll need to fill out a new application. That's when some people get bent out of shape. But I just tell them, “I didn't make the rules—I'm just following what the board has set.” And that's basically it.

## CHAPTER XIII

# Questions and Answers

*"What are some common challenges condo owners face when trying to obtain renovation permits? How can we navigate these hurdles effectively?"*

If you live in Hawaii, the permit process is very lengthy. There've been cases of people waiting two years to get their building permit, and that's probably one of the reasons why people don't even want to get permits because it takes too long.

Contractors know this and that's why some of them tell their clients, "You don't need a permit." But is that correct? Probably not. The permit issue takes a long time. Make sure that you apply as soon as you can.

Many condo owners assume minor renovations don't need permits, but even small changes may require city and HOA approval. To avoid delays or fines, always check with both before starting any work.

*"What secrets do you have to get the permit?  
Are there any?"*

Well, it used to be you could pay extra money, bring Manapua or candy, or take the officials golfing or whatever. But now that's not allowed; it's considered a bribe.

It's very difficult right now. On my major projects, I actually recommend that clients hire a third-party reviewer and a permit router. In addition to hiring a contractor, we paid thousands of dollars to have someone follow the plans and route them.

Recently, the building department changed the process—everything is online now. While this makes it easier to check on the status, it has actually made the process harder. It's supposed to speed up permits, but that hasn't been the case.

And the mayor, in his State of the City address, said he's going to revamp the program. So, in theory, permits should take less time, but I have yet to see any improvement in processing times.

I work on big projects. Here's an example: for a \$3 million piping project, we applied for the permit and started work in September of last year. We finished the project at the end of April, and we still don't have our building permit. That's just one example.

Another example is a spalling project for an apartment building by Ala Moana Shopping Center. We applied for the permit, we started the project, and it was all finished. Then I called the building inspector, "Oh, I need you to meet me at the property so we can close out the permit."

He shows up and he says, "I looked around and I don't see any spalling." And I said, "We finished it already. I just need you to sign off, then we're done." And he goes, "You guys weren't supposed to start doing any work until you got the permit issued." I said, "Yeah, but we actually wrote that it was an emergency and we started the work." And he said, "Oh, okay. But was it really an emergency?" And I showed him some pictures and I said, "Yeah, look at this. We've got railings ready to fall off and major spalling work on our walkway." He goes, "Oh, okay, fine."

The permit issue is not an easy one and it takes a while, but if you don't get one, what happens is you're going to get stuck later. So there are ways.

If your contractor knows how to work with the city and get a permit faster, then you might consider using that contractor, even if he's a little bit more expensive. A handyman cannot get a permit for you because there's a contractor statement, and the contractor has to list down his name, company name, and license number, and the building department has a link on their computer to the state records, and they can check.

If your handyman puts his name down, they check, and they go, "Hey, the guy doesn't have a license. We can't give you a permit." The permit is only issued to the unit owner with the general contractor's verified license. That's where they catch you. And that's why the handyman companies are telling unit owners, "You don't need to get a permit." They want the job but they don't want to be liable.

***"My photovoltaic (PV) application got put on hold because the condo property manager said that there may be an issue with batteries used for storage. Do you know what the situation is with the batteries?"***

Yeah, lithium batteries have a tendency to catch fire, and that's why condo boards are often hesitant to approve them.

There's a newer type of battery now that isn't as prone to starting fires—that's the current trend. So just be aware of that. Maybe you're contracted to use that type of battery instead, and if so, show them the test results. Hopefully, that helps you get it approved.

***"I live in a townhouse and want to install a central air conditioning system. My application was rejected. Can you help me get it approved?"***

If your condo doesn't allow central air, then no one can help you get it approved. If it does, then ask, "Well, what can you do to get it approved? Did you hire an architect? Did you hire a contractor and submit plans?" Maybe they didn't give you approval because you're not getting a permit for it.

You are welcome to contact me directly at (808) 754-3425 or [lanceluke1@gmail.com](mailto:lanceluke1@gmail.com). I may be able to offer you some advice, although in some cases, it just might not be possible. For example, I know certain condos—like a townhouse project I work with—don't permit central air installations. So, if you're considering installing one, be aware that it likely won't be approved.

**END**

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Lance Luke has been in the construction and real estate industry for over 44 years. He is a former general contractor and worked as a construction and project manager for real estate development companies. Currently he owns an independent construction consulting company, Construction Management Inspection, LLC. He has experience in design, engineering, construction inspections, construction management, reserve studies, real estate development, property management, and condo association management.

His specialty is in inspection and construction management for condo association buildings and commercial properties. Various types of projects worked on include concrete spalling repair, painting, roofing, waterproofing, asphalt resurfacing, plumbing repiping, electrical retrofit, and structural wood repair. He provides construction oversight and progress inspections for residential and commercial projects.

He has 44 years of experience managing capital improvement projects for condominium associations.

Lance Luke serves as an expert witness on construction and real estate litigation cases. He was formerly an Advisory Board Member for the State of Hawaii Regulated Industries Complaints Office as an expert consultant (for over 15 years). His expertise was in helping to resolve complaints filed with the Contractors' License Board. He was also selected in 2017 by the Honolulu Assistant Fire Chief to serve on the RFSAC (Residential Fire Safety Advisory Committee) Building Code Subcommittee to prepare the Fire Life Safety Evaluation criteria.

He has written numerous articles on construction and inspection, which have been published in both local and national media. He conducts up to 30 presentations a year to the construction, real estate, and property management industry, including educational webinars and construction seminars.

Three-time Best-Selling Author on subjects of construction management and building safety. Numerous articles were published in national construction, design, and building management publications.

Featured guest on national media shows such as Times Square Today and Hollywood Live, which were broadcast on national media outlets such as ABC, CNBC, CNN, NBC, Fox Affiliates, A&E, and Bravo.

Mr. Luke is a qualified insurance inspector and an approved Federal HUD Construction Inspector. HUD projects included "from the ground up" assisted living

facilities such as Plaza at Moanalua (2012), Plaza at Pearl City (2014) and Ilima at Leihano (2016) He is also listed as one of America's Premier Experts and Marquis Who's Who in America 70th Anniversary Edition. And is an instructor for National Seminar Providers such as Lorman Education Services, Compliance Prime, and Half Moon Education Seminars.

Lance Luke is a former member of the Structural Engineers Association of Hawaii and the American Bar Association, serving on the Real Property/Probate Law Division and the Forum for the Construction Industry.

The National Building Expert Lance Luke shares his tips on Building Safety for Buildings large and small. He shares his 44 years of experience in the construction industry.

His webinars on building and construction topics draws audiences not only from the United States but from all over the world.

Sign up for a future webinar or two, or watch a few on demand at [askbuildingexpert.now.site](http://askbuildingexpert.now.site)