

Your headline

So you've found the near-perfect rental and would like to put your personal touches on it to make it your happy home. Before you dig in to that DIY project and paint those honey oak cabinets blue, you might want to make sure you first understand your landlord's perspective and boundaries. As an owner-landlord, here's what I wish tenants would consider before making permanent or even cosmetic alterations to my property.

Let's start with the premise that the vast majority of landlords want you to be comfortable and happy in your home. We want you to stay long-term and we want you to make it your own...to a degree. While this may be your home, it is the owner's investment. Your goal may be to create a comfortable living space that reflects your personal taste and unique and delightfully wispy design flair. For an owner, it's a business. Our goal is to protect our investment, make a profit, reduce vacancy and turnover time, and appeal to as many qualified perspective tenants in as short of time as possible.

Generally, rental properties are neutral by design, with no obvious design direction beyond "current." That said, we do try to have some degree of flexibility. The best approach is to involve the owner upfront. Talk to us and keep us informed. Come prepared with a few pictures, examples from magazines, samples, paint colors, etc. that will help us understand your vision and overall aesthetic you are seeking. We tend to avoid anything extreme or structurally permanent. While I might appreciate a nice burgundy accent wall, it might turn away the next perspective tenant. Our expectation is anything you alter has to be able to be put back to its original condition. Ask upfront what the landlord allows. Keep in mind that the lease is the ultimate arbitration guide so make sure any post-lease agreements and permissions you have are documented in writing.

DIY projects concern us for several reasons. Of primary concern is the quality of craftsmanship and making sure any work is done within code, with proper permits, and under safe conditions. We expect electrical and plumbing to be done by licensed professionals, not tenants. We also consider restoration time and expense. Make sure you are completely upfront about permanent changes. For example, if you change out hinges or hardware, you really shouldn't expect to take those with you.

Don't expect us to barter rental income for DIY projects. It's good business practice to keep the revenue and expense columns separate. Bartering has tax implications that are looked upon by auditors with suspicion and aren't, frankly, worth the trouble. That said, while we expect tenants to fund any improvements they make, we still might invest in something that significantly improves the desirability of a property or corrects something seriously out of date. Talk to us about it but be prepared if the answer is no. Get permission in writing before you begin work.

Any restorative work would need to be done within your notice-of-vacancy period, not after you vacate. Vacancies are very expensive. In a vacancy time is critical due to lost rental income. Most owners expect the property to be in the same condition as when you took occupancy, less normal wear and tear. Some restorative DIY projects can take days or even weeks to return to their original condition. Owners expect you to do it on your time and on your dime, not ours.

Your financial exposure and responsibility might be greater than you think. You must be able to put it back. Some tenants believe they can walk away from the responsibility of alterations they've made by simply abandoning their security deposit. That is not really accurate. Owners can pursue remedy for damages beyond the security deposit.

Hopefully, this has been informative and helpful as you work with your landlord to make your rental your home.

Anonymous

NOTE: This is one landlord's perspective, is not legal advice, and is written from the perspective of an owner-landlord, not a contracted property manager. Property managers have different priorities and motivation and operate on a much larger scale. Check your local real estate laws and regulations.