



Photo courtesy of Christopher Peacock Cabinetry

Greening Your Kitchen

Green building, the media darling of the design world in the past year, has finally reached the point where the line between good design and green design has disappeared. Green design, the practice of using resource efficient and healthy materials, *is* good design. Nowhere is this more important than in our homes, where we spend over 80 percent of our time.

It is a common misconception that interior designers do not know or care about green design—or that a green interior designer is incapable of doing good design. In reality, you cannot have one without the other. In the future, every project will be a green project; the word “green” will be superfluous.

Recent events have demonstrated that this future is becoming a reality. The American Society of Interior Designers, in a joint venture with the US Green Building Council, released their **REGREEN** guidelines at the Interiors '08 Conference in New Orleans this past March. The guidelines, available for free from their website (regreenprogram.org), are an indispensable guide for greening your projects room by room.

The rising costs of energy, combined with increasing concerns about health risks associated with indoor air quality, are driving the demand for green interior solutions. Every product introduced into the home has the potential to contribute to a toxic soup of

chemicals with potentially harmful effects. That new carpet smell indicates known carcinogens being released into the air, and the lingering paint odors are volatile organic compounds (VOCs) seeping into your nose and lungs. By being smarter about your choices, you can eliminate these dangers and protect your clients.

Perhaps the most frequently remodeled room of the home is the kitchen. With an average lifespan of only ten years, the kitchen consumes more energy and water, and requires more building materials than any other room of your home. As the social and eating center of any home, the kitchen is the most important room to make green. And although the kitchen is the most expensive room in a home to construct, the payback in increased home value is enormous.

Regardless of size or design, all kitchens require consideration of the same issues in regard to sustainability. Consider the following in designing any kitchen:

CABINETS

For projects with limited budgets, cabinets are typically constructed from particleboard or MDF held together with formaldehyde as an adhesive. A better choice would be a formaldehyde-free alternative, such as **Pure Bond** (columbiaforestproducts.com).

The remaining wood and fronts of the cabinets should be a more responsible choice, such as reclaimed wood from **Neil Kelly** (neilkellycabinets.com), bamboo (bamboocabinets.com) or sustainably harvested certified wood (breatheasycabinetry.com).

If you're using wood veneer, switch to veneers from **Dooge** (doogeveneers.com), certified from the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) to be sustainably harvested. For custom cabinets, try local favorites **Woodshanti** (woodshanti.com) or **Zwanette Design** (zwanettedesign.com), who only work with sustainable woods and finishes.

For a fun finishing touch, LA-based **SpectraDecor** (spectradecor.com) sells beautiful knobs made from recycled glass.

COUNTERTOPS

No other material defines a kitchen as much as the countertop. While many clients fall asleep during discussions of toilets or sinks, their eyes light up once the choice of countertops is raised. Today, a nearly infinite number of green counter options are available.

Although traditional terrazzo uses marble chips cast into cement, recycled glass terrazzo replaces marble with a much greener material; the result is a luminous surface so beautiful you won't notice the glass is made from old soda bottles. You can choose the colors of both the glass and the cement binder, giving you an endless number of possibilities. Several manufacturers are now available, although Berkeley-based **Vetrazzo** (vetrazzo.com) and **IceStone** (icestone.biz) are the industry leaders.

APPLIANCES

Running nonstop, the refrigerator consumes more energy than any other appliance in the home. Although today's refrigerators consume 75 percent less than their 1970s counterparts, they still consume eight percent of your total household energy.

As a general rule of thumb, upgrade any refrigerator purchased before 1981 and your clients will save at least \$100 a year on their energy bill. Refrigerators with upper freezers use 10-15 percent less energy than side-by-side models. Look for the EnergyStar sticker and find the most energy-efficient model available. Rather than specifying the largest model available, select something that meets your clients' needs. Finally, try to locate the refrigerator away from the oven. Placing an appliance that generates cold next to one that generates heat is a waste of energy.

TILE

As the name implies, a counter backsplash should be easy to clean. Gorgeous choices in tile with recycled content include metal tiles from **Eleek** (eleek.com), **Oceanside's** glass tiles (glasstile.com), and **Terra Green's** ceramics (terragreenceramics.com).

LIGHTING

Rather than illuminating an entire room, task lighting can reduce energy use in the kitchen by 30 percent. Recessed LED lights by **Permlight** (permlight.com) draw a third less electricity than compact fluorescent bulbs. LED bulbs even play well with dimmers and are color corrected for excellent light quality.

FLOOR

The kitchen floor demands something resilient and easy to clean. In place of vinyl, sometimes referred to as the “poison plastic,” substitute healthier and more durable linoleum, made of linseed oil and sawdust over natural jute backing. The colors are dyed through the material so it won’t show wear patterns. Linoleum hardens with age, offering a 50-year floor. Forbo (forbo-flooring.com) is the leading manufacturer of linoleum.

For a more upscale look, natural cork offers a warmer alternative. Harvested from the bark of a tree, cork is all natural and rapidly renewable, growing back in just five to seven years. Surprisingly durable, cork tiles come in a wide variety of gorgeous patterns and give off a wonderful hickory-like fragrance. The natural water resistance and softness of cork make it ideal for the kitchen. **Natural Cork** (naturalcork.com) and **Expanko** (expanko.com) offer a wide variety of patterns. The beautiful cork mosaic sheets from **Habitus** (habitusnyc.com) are made from recycled wine corks.

For some, a wood floor adds an unbeatable warmth and natural color to a kitchen. Simple to clean and maintain, hardwood floors are a favorite choice. But instead of cutting down entire forests to obtain new wood, several greener alternatives are available.

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Reclaimed wood is salvaged from some unusual sources, including barns, bridges and train trestles. These aged woods contain a certain character from the remnant flaws of the old bolts and hardware. Since they were typically sourced from old growth forests, reclaimed wood is your only remaining opportunity to utilize the quality of old wood. The Bay Area offers the best sources of reclaimed wood: locally based companies such as **EcoTimber** (ecotimber.com), **Terra Mai** (terramai.com) and **Restoration Timber** (restorationtimber.com) all offer a wide array of reclaimed options. Due to the seasonal nature of reclaimed wood, it may be difficult to predict when some species will become available, so check back with purveyors often. With the rising cost of new wood, comparable reclaimed wood is often a less expensive option.

A popular alternative to wood is bamboo, a fast-growing grass grown in China and Central America. Unlike wood, bamboo is trimmed and able to grow back quickly, making it more sustainable. Tongue and groove planks are installed the same way as traditional wood flooring. The tight grain of bamboo creates a floor as strong as oak and the distinctive knuckles of the bamboo produce a unique grain pattern. Rather than sourcing it from Asia, San Francisco based **Smith & Fong** (plyboo.com) supplies FSC-certified bamboo flooring in a wide array of styles. Specifying prefinished planks of bamboo eliminates the need for toxic finishes.

Sustainably harvested wood (where no trees were clear-cut) is available from nearly every major wood manufacturer. Look for wood certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) as a guarantee of how the wood was obtained. Anything certified by the FSC came from a managed forest. Expect to pay 20 percent more for sustainably harvested wood, but it’s worth the extra money knowing you’ve done the right thing. If you choose floors that have been prefinished at the factory, those chemicals won’t have to be brought into your home. If you do stain or seal the floors, choose low-VOC or zero-VOC, water-based products.

As a final green alternative to wood, the exotic plywood panels from San Diego-based **Kirei** (kirei.com) are not wood at all. Formed from leftover stalks (called sorghum) from rice farming, Kirei has a very unusual, almost ethereal appearance that can be used for everything from furniture to cabinetry. Best of all, the natural starch in the sorghum holds the panels together, so no glues are used in their manufacture.

WALLS

For all painted surfaces, specify a zero-VOC (or at least a low-VOC) product such as the aromatherapy paints from **Yolo Colorhouse** (yolocolorhouse.com), or the healthy paints from **AFM Safecoat** (afmsafecoat.com) and Benjamin Moore’s Natura line (benjaminmoore.com).

As an alternative to using paint altogether, **American Clay** (americanclay.com) is a natural earthen plaster. The warmth and depth of the plaster adds a special texture to any wall surface.

From major decisions to the details, countless new and innovative green materials are available. As the heart of the home, the kitchen offers the greatest potential for design innovations. By taking advantage of the abundant local green resources available, designers can make healthier and more sustainable homes for their clients.

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SIX SIGNS THAT A COMPANY IS GREENWASHING

1. Jargon: an environmental statement should be clear and concise. If a company uses a lot of confusing jargon or technical terms, it may not be as simple and green as it claims to be.
2. Fake friends: if a company cannot obtain a legitimate and respected certification, it may create its own. Beware of labels, seals, or awards that are fake or made-up.
3. Tiny amounts: just containing recycled content is not enough. Beware of products claiming to be green but containing only 4% recycled content, especially if the raw material is not green to begin with (e.g., recycled vinyl).
4. Running alone: a single green product in a line of dozens of non-green ones is greenwashing. If this line of products is their “green” line, what would you call their other products—the toxic line?
5. Overpromising: avoid companies painting a picture of perfection. Beware of companies showing images of flowers flowing out of a tailpipe, or rainbows terminating with a pot of their product. Simply painting a green happy face does not make a product green.
6. LEED Certified: the impossible claim. Buildings get certified, not products. There is no such thing as a LEED-certified product. Beware of products claiming to be certified and bearing the official seal of the US Green Building Council; it just means they are members, not certified.

SIX QUESTIONS TO ASK

1. Where did this material come from?
2. What are the by-products of its manufacturing process?
3. How is the material delivered and installed?
4. How is the material maintained and operated?
5. How healthy are the materials?
6. Can these materials be recycled after I am finished with them?