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GRAY MATTER

Eco-Floor

By Dennis Rodkin

Virtually anyone who launches a home renovation or construction project inevitably notices the ways these projects guzzle natural resources. Old trees are taken down for our floors and millwork; oil is gulped to transport materials from all over the world to the site; trucks transport away abundant natural topsoil to make room for the foundation.

While it would be nice if we could change every part of the process and build the most eco-friendly structures ever built, reality insists that isn't yet a reasonable goal to shoot for. Instead, we take little steps, changing what we can and incrementally improving the process.

So why not get in on the ground floor? As substitutes for oak, maple and other woods commonly used for floors, bamboo and cork provide a touch of earth-friendliness—and a big dose of eye-friendliness. In fact, they're catching on these days much more because of their exotic looks than because of their environmental pluses, and that might make them the best advances of all. If they can make our homes look dazzling and just incidentally help the planet, they're far more likely to get the chance to do so than if the roles were reversed. There are long shelves in the has-been aisle overloaded with eco-positive products that didn't

catch on because they just didn't look good.

"Most people see a bamboo floor, think it's really cool and want it. I tell them it's also a green product and that's good, but it's almost never the reason they go for it in the first place," says Igor Murokh, the owner of **Mr. Floor in Skokie**. "I've had probably one or two calls from people who say, 'I'm building green and I need bamboo or cork,' but a lot of calls from people who want that great look they saw at a hip restaurant or somewhere like that."

Bamboo has a lovely, light, Asian-infused feeling that derives mostly from the plant's knuckles that are plainly visible in the planks. "They have a lot of depth," says Evanston architect Nathan Kipnis, a fan of both bamboo and cork floors. "You get it natural and it's pale like pine, with those knuckles shimmering in the light almost like a 3-D baseball card." The other finish available allows it to be caramelized, or actually boiled, and it turns out to be a beautiful golden color, a very impressive look.

Because it's sold as planks like oak and other conventional woods, bamboo flooring sometimes passes for a standard floor until visitors take a closer look. Cork can't get away with that; the swirls and clouds and amoeba shapes in its surface make it look like some kind of impossible cross between a hardwood



A light bamboo floor complements the sleek cabinetry and finishes in this contemporary kitchen.

and marble. It has a wonderfully textural attitude. "A cork floor can look wild or muted, depending on the texture you choose," Nathan says, but whichever you go with, "it's not going to look like every other floor in the neighborhood."

Cork and bamboo are harvested without taking down old trees and contributing to deforestation of the planet. Cork is a lightweight, elastic layer from the bark of certain trees; strip it off and the tree grows a new one. Bamboo is a lightning-quick grower—classified as a grass, not a tree—that can be harvested in five years, as opposed to 20 to 100 years for hardwoods,

and rapidly replaces itself. Growers of oak, maple and other hardwoods are taking innovative steps toward reducing the impact of their industries on the world's forests, and those efforts are important, but cork and bamboo contribute to the solution too.

They're not saints, though. Both bamboo and cork have environmental negatives. The largest is that they're both cultivated overseas, while oak and others are grown on this continent. A product that has to be brought in from very far away is said to have a higher degree of "embodied energy," meaning it demands more oil to be

transported from its origin to its final destination.

Also, Igor explains, because bamboo grows canelike stalks, not thick tree trunks, usually floor planking is made of several thin slices laminated together. "So it's kind of a toss-up," he says. "This is an eco-friendly, green product, but assembling it with glues brings up the toxicity question."

And cork flooring, while nowhere near as crumbly as you think from those old wall panels used in the 1970s and 1980s, is softer than many other floors and particularly if used in a high-traffic area, might turn out to have a shorter life span than other materials. Which would mean discarding it—adding to the landfills' burden—sooner.

Still, even if bamboo and cork aren't perfect eco-positive solutions, they're a step forward. That ought to make them very appealing to interior designers, says Kathleen Dolio, of KDT designs. "Designers want to show a sensitivity to the environment," she says. "It's important because sometimes we create spaces that are a little bit more fantasy and removed from reality, and I think we have a responsibility to participate in environmental concerns." With their hot good looks, bamboo and cork flooring can do the fantasy thing at the same time that they do good.

Neither type of flooring has caught on like wildfire yet, though both have been

available from veteran manufacturers and wholesalers for five years or more. Dolio says she has suggested bamboo to at least ten Chicago-area clients and been turned down every time. Her clients in Los Angeles, though, seem more receptive. Dolio attributes that to both a more fashion-forward sensitivity and the presence of more mid-century and contemporary homes there, the kinds of houses where these floors fit. "You're not going to use bamboo floors in a colonial or a Tudor," she says.

Price isn't an enormous barrier. Igor says both bamboo and cork run somewhere between 10 and 20 percent higher than oak—significant, but not more than homeowners with big budgets are willing to reach in order to get the stylish look they prefer. Nathan used bamboo in an environmentally friendly house he built last year in Skokie. He found that although bamboo cost more than oak, it didn't need any stain, just four coats of urethane to seal it where oak would need at least two stain coats under the urethane. Factoring that in, he determined that the total cost of bamboo and oak were "the same price, to the dollar."

And there are some homeowners, maybe only a few, who are willing to pay a higher price to lead the way, open friends' and neighbors' eyes to the merits of a product that offers at least a partial solution to an



PHOTO BY DAVID NEVALA COURTESY OF ECO-FRIENDLY FLOORING.

The Asian-infused attitude of a bamboo floor suits contemporary settings such as a workout room.

environmental dilemma. They have a long-range vision rather than a tight focus on the budget. They acknowledge that, as Dolio puts it, "We're responsible for what we buy, and we can't continue to encourage people in Brazil to cut down a tree that's been there for

200 years. They need to be able to leave those trees there for another hundred years." **—HG**

CHOICES

Inlays turn a floor into artwork

By Allison E. Beatty
Special to the Tribune

If you want to turn an ordinary wood floor into a work of art, there are many options.

Instead of board after board of the same wood species, try adding a darker or lighter type of wood as a six-inch border around the room. Or, add small inlays of unique woods in random locations.

By using borders, inlays and medallions, you can turn an ordinary floor into something that becomes a conversation piece.

These types of decorative features typically are added to draw attention to a room or section of a room. They often are added to a wood floor in a foyer, dining room or kitchen.

Someone with an art collection in the dining room might want a unique floor border that accents each wall of paintings, for example.

When deciding where to add such a feature, consider the overall floor plan, where you want to draw attention, and your furniture layout. Also take into account the amount of light that will reach the floor and how it will reflect on the material.

If you want to make a big impression at the entrance to your home, consider a medallion in the foyer. Foyers often are large, open spaces with two-story ceilings.

A large, ornate design in the center of the foyer will catch visitors' eyes as they walk in. The high ceiling height will accentuate the design.

Medallions are made from a variety of materials, such as wood or natural stone. Some medallions are made by hand to fit a specific design, but many are produced in mass quantities. This creates a large selection and typically lowers the price of the medallion.

When selecting a design, some homeowners like to add a dark wood medallion on a light wood floor to create a contrast. Others add medallions that are made of other materials, such as natural stone.

A green-marble medallion will stand out because the texture and color are different from the surrounding wood.

Many medallions are round, 30 to 60 inches in width and are



Inlays and decorative borders are included in the pattern of this wood flooring from Mr. Floor Inc. in Skokie. Using borders, inlays and medallions with wood and other materials can turn an ordinary floor into something that becomes a conversation piece.

priced from \$700 to \$2,200. When ordering a custom-made medallion the prices might be much higher, depending on the pattern and material used.

Before adding a design in the foyer, however, take note of where a rug would be placed in the entryway. This will help ensure that the medallion is not partially covered.

The dining room is another popular location for adding decorative wood floor designs. This room often has a formal tone that can be enhanced by adding a border that is 12 to 16 inches from the wall. Or, the border might outline the dining room table or be centered under a chandelier.

The placement of furniture is another important consideration.

"In the dining room, if you put a border that is 16 inches away from the wall, your buffet might cover the border," said Allen Shulman, owner of North Star Homes, a custom builder in Northbrook.

Decide how the border or inlay will coordinate with the room layout and any unique architecture elements.

"If you have a niche, do you want the border to go in the niche or in front of it?" Shulman

said.

In the kitchen, the floor design can be used to draw attention to the cabinets. It also can blend the overall design scheme together.

A maple border in a cherry floor, for example, will create a strong contrast and draw attention to the rich cherry color. If the kitchen has maple cabinets, the border will take the design one step further and tie together the cabinets and floor.

Among popular wood combinations are red oak with an ebony border or inlay. The ebony is an exotic, black wood that will make a bold statement, Shulman said.

If border, inlays and medallions do not create the design you want, consider having the floor installed on a diagonal instead of a horizontal or vertical pattern.

"It gives the room more character," said Sam Darwan, owner of Royal American Homes in Naperville, which is building homes priced from \$325,000 to \$400,000.

This style can be particularly effective when it starts in a foyer, as it grabs your attention from the front door. Designers recommend using the diagonal in all the rooms with wood in-

stead of mixing it with a horizontal or vertical orientation in different rooms.

The diagonal design will add 10 to 20 percent to the price, however, as this type of cutting and installation creates more waste.

There are, however, some guidelines needed to avoid creating a design disaster.

"The floor actually becomes a piece of furniture so it needs to relate to what's going on in the house," said Andy Poticha, a partner with Design Construction Concepts, a building and remodeling company in Northbrook. "It doesn't have to be exact—as long as it is close and blends together, it will work."

And, avoid trying to add too much design in one space.

"We tend to like cleaner lines and simpler designs," Shulman said. "A lot of times the borders will be two or three boards wide without a lot of busy patterns."

Allison E. Beatty is a Chicago-area freelance writer. If you have questions or information to share regarding new home buyers' product and design choices, write to Choices c/o Chicago Tribune, New Homes Section, 435 N. Michigan Ave., 4th Floor, Chicago, IL 60611. Or, email: neuhomes@tribune.com