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Resilient Answer Man

by Christopher Capobianco
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A tall order: Tough as nails flooring that is easy on the environment

While new entrees are the life blood of any product category, manufacturers involved in resilient flooring are constantly being challenged to produce products that add a new dimension or address a specific need. This has led to the introduction of resilient flooring options in recent years that have had the effect of expanding the category. Among the most notable are products that are environmentally friendly yet tough and durable enough for even the most demanding commercial use.

A big issue is PVC (polyvinyl chloride) or "vinyl tile." For years, it has been a popular and highly reliable material for commercial and residential use. But it has also stirred debate. Over the last two decades scientists, engineers and, yes, even accountants have tried to figure out PVC's long term human, environmental and financial effects. A organization of building professionals committed to promoting healthier building materials, The Healthy Building Network, is working to accelerate the transition away from PVC building materials. It stated objective is to find "safer, healthier alternatives that offer equal or superior performance at comparable prices."

But does the mere absence of PVC mean the flooring material is more environmentally friendly? There are some who argue that high quality PVC flooring needs to be replaced less frequently and requires less care. As such, it may ultimately have less of an impact on the environment. That may be a valid point but there is no question that the controversy has led to a move toward PVC-free materials. But because it is the presence of chlorine that is usually the issue, the materials are often referred to as "chlorine free."

Among the first in this category is Stratica by Amtico International. It is described by the company's CEO David Motyl as "a chlorine free, plasticizer free floor covering which has now been proven in heavy commercial use for seven years." Because Amtico is also a leading producer of products that use PVC, I asked him how they differentiate between the two. "PVC provides our vinyl products with a very tough durable wear layer which will last



Cork/Rubber flooring is beginning to gain popularity in heavily trafficked commercial environments because of its soft feel under foot, slip resistant characteristics and use of "environmentally friendly" cork particles in the construction.

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many years and require a minimum of maintenance," he replied. "It is the basis for the low life cycle costs of vinyl flooring. The alternative product which provides a similar combination of benefits is Stratica, but it has a 30 percent higher cost." So even though the Amtico vinyl line continues to do well, Motyl tells me the company is seeing much greater interest in Stratica which is growing rapidly, "particularly in the areas where awareness of the environmental issues is greater and where the specifier is able to take a longer term view."

Vinyl or non-vinyl?

Other companies are getting into the market as well. "We have a chlorine-free product in development" confirmed Ivan Stoler of Allstate Rubber Co. For its part, Mannington last year introduced "Cameo," an olefin-based 18-inch modular tile. According to Mannington Commercial's director of Commercial Resilient Product David Thoresen, "It will be available in 20 great colors and maybe the most aesthetically pleasing design we have ever launched." Among the options is "Nature's Paths Luxury Vinyl Tile", a commercial grade solid vinyl product in 3", 4" and 6" planks as well as 16" tiles. Again, I asked: Why both? "The overwhelming majority of the market still values the cost, performance and styling of vinyl products," Thoresen said, "but there is small but growing group of designers and owners who are exploring their options. Cameo will fit their needs while offering a product that would still sell just on its good looks! We have demand in the market place for alternatives to vinyl and Cameo will fill that need."

Initially, these products will not be produced in the United States, Thoresen continued. "Both products are sourced from outside the country," he explained. "It's a great way to test the waters before making an investment in equipment." This continues a trend Mannington started many years ago when its first commercial sheet vinyl products were produced overseas before they began production at their Salem, N.J. plant.

Still, the fact that major players like Amtico and Mannington are putting their effort into both vinyl and non vinyl products is evidence that vinyl is not going away any time soon. In fact, as Thoresen points out, "Vinyl products are being specified into many buildings whose design teams are focusing on environmental performance. There are many reasons for this. First, recycled content is becoming more a part of vinyl products. Also, vinyl products have good indoor air quality attributes, as shown by testing against the rigorous CHPS 01350 testing requirements in California." Another point is that higher vinyl content products like solid vinyl require less care (including stripping and recoating)—and that means less of an impact on the environment.

Lots of talk about cork

Because cork is a renewable resource, it is another product that has gained popularity with those seeking "green" materials. Cork is seen as one of the most environmentally friendly flooring materials now in use because it comes from the bark of the cork oak tree. The bark is harvested without damaging the tree or even affecting the birds and other animals that live in the cork forests (which are usually in the Mediterranean region.) And best of all: the bark grows back.

From a design point of view, cork is also evolving. While some are still as plain as a bulletin board, there are also more interesting veneer looks as well as variations made with painting and staining.

Cork can also be used with other flooring materials such as vinyl or rubber. Roppe Safe-T Cork, for example, has cork particles in a rubber tile field and Wicanders has the reverse: Its "Motion" flooring intersperses colored rubber particles in a cork background. Meanwhile Expanko's XCR3 is 70 percent fine ground cork with 30 percent rubber. All are installed in tile form, but another product that incorporates cork and PVC granules to provide a high level of wet and dry slip resistance is Safetred Aqua, a sheet product from Tarkett- Marley.

These products have the advantage of resiliency, comfort under foot and sound reduction. There is also a safety factor: They tend to be more slip resistant because cork expands ever-so-slightly when wet, thus providing improved traction under foot. So in environments where safety is a chief concern, the environmental story and the unique looks now available in cork are actually secondary benefits.

There are several other newer resilient products that are also part of the design trend away from traditional resilient flooring. Products such as recycled rubber flooring and vinyl flooring with high recycled content, in addition to the products I have mentioned, are providing a great deal of interest in the resilient flooring category.

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