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Choose the Right Flooring

Offices, lobbies, break rooms and hallways all have different flooring needs.

by Dan McLeister



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Choosing the right flooring for commercial applications takes some study because there is no magic bullet, and no one size fits all, according to Bruce Goff of San Francisco-based Domus Design.

Carpet still is used most often for flooring, but there are many other flooring options including linoleum, marble, wood, rubber, vinyl and tile.

Flooring Choices

Combinations of materials often are selected in office buildings and are divided between what Goff calls "front of the house," such as lobbies, and "back of the house" applications, such as break rooms or conference rooms. Materials such as tile, marble and expensive carpeting are used in lobbies, while the back areas might have materials such as vinyl composition tile.

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Environmentally friendly or "green" building features are playing an increasing role in the selection of flooring materials, such as bamboo, cork and carpet made from recycled fibers. Client requests for green features have reached more of a critical mass, Goff says. "Now, every one of our clients wants to discuss a green topic," he says. "It is a major shift from as recently as two years ago when the discussion usually opened after clients found out that green features might cost more money."

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Types of Flooring

Concrete. A growing design trend is putting a concrete stain on the floor slab. That is being done frequently on the West Coast, according to Goff, who is a member of the [American Society of Interior Designers](#) (ASID). Because concrete does not absorb sound like carpet and some other flooring materials, the reduction of sound is accomplished by using higher partitions in offices and increasing acoustical ceiling tiles, Goff says.



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Vinyl. One trend in the solid surface areas is to use solid vinyl tile and plank, according to Christopher Capobianco, chairman of the [Floor Covering Installation Contractors Association](#) and the owner of Flooring Answers in Patchogue, N.Y. "It looks like the real thing but it is still plastic. It fools about 90 percent of people"

Carpet. The choice between different carpet types, still the most popular choice for commercial flooring, is often driven by the building tenant's or building owner's budget, according to Capobianco. A building occupant with a one- or two-year lease will tend to pinch every penny and select a moderate quality carpet for placement in most areas except executive offices or conference rooms where sometimes a more expensive carpet is selected. The carpet for the executive areas tends to be plusher than the carpet material in the corridors, where traffic tends to crush it down.

Another factor in carpet selection is the environmentally friendly aspects of the material. Capobianco says the use of carpet with one degree or another of recycled content is still not widespread, but it is increasing, as is the ability to recycle existing carpet that is removed.

Cork. Because the wood product is made from a renewable process and comes from the bark of special oak trees that take five to seven years to grow back, cork's green features are attractive and the material an environmentally friendly alternative to carpet. Capobianco says cork is one of his favorites. He likes

e green features look and cushioning aspect of the material, which is 50 percent air.

ood. Another unusual material is bamboo, which Capobianco says has gained some level of popularity because of its green features, such as being a renewable source. But he added that this material has a "mixed record" because it is harder cut during installation.

ther types of wood flooring are considered environmentally friendly, particularly when the material is recycled and cut into different pieces. Clients are interested in it, Goff says. In some cases, wood is taken from old buildings that have been torn down. In other cases, the wood is dredged from the bottom of lakes and rivers where the material sunk during logging operations many years ago. The water has helped preserve the wood, and it is re-sawn and reused.



oleum. Another possible environmental choice in the hard surface category is a material like linoleum, which often is a misused term. Capobianco says many people use that term for any product which comes in a roll form, but many of those products are sheet vinyl. Linoleum is made from linseed oil and other natural materials. When the product is installed correctly, it lasts a long time.

old it Down

ark Hirons, senior associate and director of corporate interiors at OWP/P Architects in Chicago, says that the carpet adhesives should have low-emitting or zero volatile organic compounds (VOCs). The VOCs in the adhesives play a part in a green building rating system called the [Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design](#) (LEED) of the [U.S. Green Building Council](#). Products do not get individual ratings from LEED, but the products contribute toward points for the rating.

Carpet Tile

The use of carpet tile has gone up approximately 20 percent in the last couple of years, according to Mark Hirons of OWP/P Architects in Chicago. The product, which has tufted nylon fiber on the top surface, is often used in office buildings for common areas such as break rooms and conference rooms.

One reason for this product's popularity is that it's renewable and recyclable, according to Bruce Goff of Tomus Design in San Francisco. Some carpet manufacturing factories will take the material back from building sites and reuse it.

Another reason for the increasing use of carpet tile is the ability to print a variety of custom design patterns on the surface, Goff says.

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