

What's Underfoot Is Top of Mind

By Cheryl Dangel Cullen

If you want to really “floor” your competition today (pun intended), think materials, texture and patterns — and give up the old idea of sameness, flooring experts say.

Although tastes vary from person to person, “for the most part, upscale buyers want a mix of products and textures today that blend or work together color-wise, rather than the matched look, which is old and passé,” states Pauline Vastardis, President and interior designer for Pauline Vastardis Interiors, Moorestown, NJ.

Doris Pearlman, President, Possibilities for Design, Denver, CO, agrees. “Flooring that combines the use of several materials, such as wood combined with stone insets,” is one of the most prevalent trends, she says.

This mixing extends to most types of flooring, and manufacturers are responding with new choices, says Betsy Amoroso, Communications Manager, Mannington Mills, Salem, NJ.

Variety is also seen in new patterns for carpeting and wood, flooring experts says. For example, “cut and loop carpets [those that combine several tuft styles] are creating interest by adding subtle relief patterns while wide-plank, deep-toned, hand-scraped wood products are adding richness to the décor,” says Dawn M. Schramer, builder selection sales associate for Floor Covering Associates, Inc., Naperville, IL.

As for what's really hot today, Mike Janes, Director of Sales, The Peninsula Group, Inc., Livermore, CA, says the list includes anything

Luxury vinyl tile comes in a wide range of types and sizes today, as well as many decorative accents.



Mixing and matching materials and colors to create patterns are popular trends.

green and anything offered at a lower price, including bamboo; vinyl composition tile; large, 24x24-inch stone tiles; and glass tile borders.

Here are some of the more popular materials and the latest in each category.

NATURAL-LOOKING TILING

In tile, the look of natural stone is in demand, says Amoroso, particularly porcelain tiles with “through-body” color and construction. These tiles offer the look of natural slate and stone, but are easier to maintain and have superior durability. The clay, sand and other natural minerals are so dense that water absorption is extremely low.

Some of today's through-body porcelain “combines the dramatic color play, clefting and ledging of natural stone. With eye-catching variation, no two tiles are alike,” Amoroso explains. “And they're extraordinarily versatile. Tile looks are offered in complete packages so that floors, countertops, backsplashes — even showers and outdoor areas — can be coordinated.”

Glass tiles have become popular, and “mosaics are everywhere,” Pearlman comments. However, she cautions, “they must be used very carefully on floors. Make sure you are using mosaic tiles that are rated for use on a floor or they could pop up.”

Large-format tile, especially in natural products such as travertine, slate, marble and limestone, continue to be the rage. “Twenty-four by 24-inch tiles are now more available than ever in both porcelain and stone materials,” says T.J. Wheeler, Co-President, Andrew Lauren



Laminate today mimics the look of hardwood.

Interiors, Tempe, AZ.

“The use of larger and smaller sizes in the same color and design is being utilized throughout the home to keep the color consistent, but the designs fresh,” he adds.

NEW FACES FOR LAMINATE

Today, those who want the look of wood have a new, wider range of available products, including many new variations of laminate look-alikes. Todd Patterson, Co-President, Andrew Lauren Interiors, points out that “they [manufacturers] are now making laminates in a hand-scraped fashion to better replicate the engineered woods that are so popular. They are also shown in larger-width/varying-sized planks to create a richer look.”

And while “They still haven’t been able to completely diminish the hollow sound of the installation [of laminates], such flooring is a great alternative for busy families and lifestyles,” he says.

Laminate look-alikes, as well a luxury vinyl planks, also now include the exotic styles that are so popular in hardwood, flooring specialists say.

Such products “are incredibly realistic — telling the difference is quite difficult,” and they are great for “the client that wants the look and doesn’t want the cost associated with the look,” Janes says.

The same goes for laminates that mirror the look of tile. “Today, you can find laminate modular tiles that have the sleek look of real rectified tile with thin, embossed, in-register grout lines,” explains Amoroso. “Often, these looks play off what’s hot in porcelain tile — for example, smooth modern marbles or realistic textured slates,” she adds.

Truly Sustainable: Old Flooring Gets a New Life

Green is determining choices in many building products today, including flooring. Because of this, one choice increasing in popularity is recycling of old hardwood floors or turning old wood slats into modern floors, which not only keeps materials out of landfills, but also saves parts of structures that otherwise would be destroyed.

Thomas Campbell has been banking on that trend for the last few years, and it is paying off in a major way. He started his business, The Old Wood Workshop, in 1991 as a hobby. For the next six years, business increased steadily, “but then in 2005, it just exploded. Now, the business is huge,” says Campbell.

“People have been reusing material forever, so it is not a new trend. You’ll find a house built in the 1800s that has something in it from the 1700s,” he says. However, the media and advertisers are catching on because of the connection to green and recycling, he adds.

Campbell’s customers are people who love the look of old houses, including “their old, worn beat-up floors,” which can give a homey look to a new structure.

“If they are building a lodge in Colorado, they want an antique floor to accent the timbers, or if they are building a period house by the shore, they want an old, comfortable floor,” he explains.

Chestnut is one of the hardest antique woods to find because a blight in the 1900s and a hurricane in 1938 wiped out commercial supplies of the beautiful wood.



Reclaimed Versus Resawn

Campbell explains that there are two types of antique flooring to choose from:

- Reclaimed wood flooring, which is antique flooring from an old structure. Such flooring varies by geographic location. In the New England area, where Campbell is located, he finds mostly Northern hard pine, white pine, chestnut and oak.
- Resawn wood, which is antique material taken from factory beams or house beams and sawed into planks to make flooring. According to Campbell, the most common woods found in resawn materials are chestnut, oak and Southern yellow pine, which was used in a lot of factories along the East Coast and in the Midwest.

Old Doesn’t Mean Cheap

Pricing varies depending upon the type of material and widths, Campbell says. The wider the plank, the higher the price. “Anything wider than 9 inches is very expensive. There is only a small market and not a lot of wood available in the 12-inch and wider size, so prices there are skyrocketing,” says Campbell.

Campbell’s company used to sell resawn material, but today, he specializes in reclaimed flooring because it is not as labor intensive. He takes antique wood floors out of homes and buildings, photographs the planks for his website and sells the flooring boutique style, online.

According to Campbell, homeowners can purchase an inexpensive new wood floor for about \$1 to \$2 per square foot or pay a little more — \$7 to \$10/square foot for specialty hardwood. Conversely, “my lowest-priced material is around \$3 to \$4 for inexpensive antique wood while an average floor costs \$14 to \$16/square foot.” Find a wood that is really rare and the price can double or quadruple, he adds.

After the floor is purchased, it must be installed, which is starting to be less of a problem than a few years ago, Campbell says. “Old floors must be carefully laid down,” cautions Campbell. “You have to predrill the nail holes and face nail it through the holes. There’s more prep and installation cost but the end product is phenomenal. A lot more carpenters are getting used to it,” he says.

And when it comes to durability, an old wood floor has something going for it.

“These are floors that have already proved their longevity. They may be 100 years old, but they are only more valuable today,” says Campbell.



While carpet appears to have taken a backseat to other flooring choices, it is frequently used as area rugs over tile or wood, as shown here in this bedroom.

BAD NEWS FOR CARPET

Carpet has experienced a drop in usage in many homes, having been replaced by other materials, such as hardwood and tile. In many cases, “carpet is used only in the bedrooms or possibly as an inset in one of the large living/family/great rooms,” Patterson says.

Janes agrees and says that in most living rooms and family rooms today, wall to wall has been replaced by area rugs on top of wood and tile.

Also, the rooms that used to be carpeted are seeing new usage, say some experts.

For example, “in the past, many basements served as a storage areas or fitness areas, mainly floored with commercial vinyl or Berber carpeting,” Amoroso says. Today, those areas are being turned into functional living spaces such as office and entertainment areas, she adds.

Bathrooms have also undergone a transformation. While most used to be carpeted, “now they are a place to let the mind run wild ... with a huge variety of tile and stone surfaces used on both floors and walls,” Pearlman says.

Still, all is not lost in the carpet industry. To recapture some of the market that has been lost to hard surfaces, “manufacturers are being very creative with design and textures. They have also realized that there is a huge need for nice, reasonably priced area rugs that could coordinate with the wood or tile installed throughout most of the home,” Wheeler says.

“Along with the hard surface patterns, carpet has revamped its overall impression from being the basic beige plush to being part of a design platform the room is built upon,” Patterson adds.

Schramer says that friezes and cut-loop carpets are popular because they have all the benefits of carpet — they are soft, quiet and stain resistant — but also offer pattern and texture, as well as durability.

HARDWOOD

Although some of the exotic species of hardwood can be pricey, perhaps the biggest trend in wood flooring today is how much prices have come down and variety has broadened.

As with all types of flooring, patterns and textures are the characteristics that are driving purchases, and manufacturers are coming up with a wide range featuring longer and wider planks, intricate graining and new exotic species. Engineered woods are also moving to the forefront.

“Today, engineered hardwood flooring is becoming the wood product



Hardwood floors continue to be preferred by buyers when budget is not a consideration.

of choice,” Amoroso says. That’s because “it’s more dimensionally stable than solid wood planks; it is easier to install (many companies now offer a ‘click’ installation system); it is more versatile in that it can go below, on or above grade; and it is easier to maintain with factory-applied stains and scratch-resistant coatings,” Amoroso explains. “It’s also more environmentally friendly than solids because it uses more of the log as well as no-added-formaldehyde adhesives and no-volatile organic compounds (VOC) coatings,” she adds.

Still, some people feel green is only at the beginning of its movement and “with green becoming more of a culture instead of a movement,” the products are popular, but the pricing is still not as competitive, Wheeler says. However, he says, “we see it turning the corner, and the pricing becoming more reasonable.”

As sustainable flooring (bamboo, in particular) has grown in numbers of installations, problems also have been identified, Wheeler points out. “[Bamboo] has had customer service issues with splintering and cupping in builder-related installations. The look was very popular at one time, but has decreased in desirability now that more rustic and darker stains are available,” he says.

Another downside to some wood use is warranty, especially with soft wood, adds Janes.

“Wood is a very difficult product to warranty because it requires specific care and maintenance that is not always adhered to by the homeowner,” adds Patterson, who notes at the same time that manufacturers are working to increase wood’s durability. “Manufacturers have made the wear layer and aluminum oxide coatings extremely durable and [now wood can] be used in more areas,” he adds.

Still, “wood flooring is the most frequently requested and desired material if the home buyers have the budget,” Wheeler says. He adds that large planks (6 inches and more) with distressed edging are a fairly new product. The distressed edges are a burn process available on engineered wood previously only done on custom sand and finished wood installations.

Choosing a floor ultimately comes down to personal preference, with experts saying that virtually anything goes. But for those who really want to be on top of what is underfoot, flooring experts tell builders: Don’t be hesitant to mix and match materials to create a one-of-a-kind floor.

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