

Voting With Your Dollars: Third Article in a Series about Flooring

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Every purchase you make is a vote for your choice of resource consumption and product production. Marketing experts add up the votes and use the data to elect future manufacturing levels and types. In other words, when you buy something, you send a message to manufacturers, "I vote in favor of you making more of this!"

Similarly, many purchases are like campaign signs. When your neighbors, friends and relatives see your choices, they might regard your selection as an endorsement.

Also like voting, you may think you can reverse a purchasing decision later, but incumbency has advantages; purchases become habits, and many purchasing choices last longer than expected.

With long-lasting home products such as flooring, the message your purchase communicates can be more complex, since you will probably have the opportunity to explain the choice to your guests.

For example, at a colleague's house recently, I paused for a moment, obviously staring at his new floor, which looked like Brazilian cherry wood, logged fresh from the rainforest. Probably anticipating a lecture about how tropical forest destruction is causing Earth's largest mass extinction since an asteroid killed the dinosaurs, he quickly interjected, "It's laminate."

Laminate is actually a photograph of wood or stone (manufacturers call it a "high resolution image of a natural product"), mounted on other functional layers. On high-end laminates, a texture is applied onto parts of the image, giving it not only the look, but also the feel of a three-dimensional natural object.

Under the image, other layers include a moisture-resistant backing and a high-density fiberboard inner core, sometimes made with recycled content. Over the image is a wear layer, meant to protect the image from fading, scratches, and damage.

Laminate is not always a better environmental choice than wood. Some wood certified by the Forest Stewardship Council or the International Standards Organization's ISO 14000 program is sustainably harvested from tree plantations, resulting in more trees planted for each one cut.

Besides the material type (wood versus laminate) and the credentials of the product (e.g. certifications), a major way to keep your eye on the environment is to buy a durable floor. Even if a durable floor has twice the environmental impact of a product promoting itself

as “green,” if it lasts more than twice as long, the environment benefits can outweigh the cost. Buying carpet made from recycled soda bottles, for example, is great for facilitating recycling, but polyethylene (soda bottle plastic) is really only an environmentally preferable choice for short term flooring, such as the carpet landlords put into apartments in high turnover areas. Carpet made from recycled nylon seems less environmentally preferable when the nylon is from post-industrial scrap (manufacturing waste), but it lasts far longer than polyethylene. Other regenerating materials, such as wool or corn crop residue, are also made into carpet.

The negative environmental consequences of some durable surfaces, on the other hand, can overwhelm the benefits. For example, the U.S. Green Building Council’s **Green Home Guide** says, “Vinyl is the poster child for many things you should avoid if you want to create a safe, green home.” Vinyl emits toxic vapors during manufacture and even after installation, takes too much energy to manufacture, and can pose disposal problems, according to the council’s guide.

Instead, for durability, few surfaces beat stone. Like vinyl, stone is a non-renewable resource and requires energy to remove from the ground and manufacture into flooring, but that is where the similarities end. Stone, such as travertine, is non-toxic and an abundant natural resource.

The drawback to stone is its reactivity to the acid in liquids such as orange juice and vinegar. It can stain. Finish (requiring some chemicals) or polishing can reduce the risk of stain, and stains can usually be removed through treatments or buffing.

When choosing flooring, let your purchase cast a vote for sustainable and non-toxic manufacturing of durable products.

On the net:

<http://www.iso.org/iso/home/standards/management-standards/iso14000.htm>
www.fsc.org

<http://greenhomeguide.com/know-how/article/navigating-the-flooring-thicket-find-the-greenest-way-to-meet-your-needs>

<http://www.builddirect.com/learning-center/flooring/travertine-faq/#ixzz3wWA8DOZI>

<http://www.rainforestrelief.org/What to Avoid and Alternatives/Rainforest Wood.html>