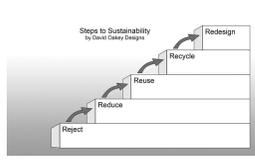


floor trends

Industry Q&A: The Oakeys on Designing Sustainable Floors



Interface's Human Nature carpet tile in Limestone and Kiwi.



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With more flooring companies challenging themselves to expand their sustainability efforts and processes, Floor Trends spoke with designer David Oakey and trend analyst Cindi Marshall Oakey on the future of green and how it ties into a product's design.

David is the founder of David Oakey Designs and has been the exclusive product designer for Interface and its Flor division since 1994. He also leads global efforts in sustainable design for the company.

As a trend analyst Cindi keeps an eye on how fashion, art, interior design and sustainability affect culture. For more information on the Oakeys, call (706) 882-6002 or e-mail info@davidoakeydesigns.com.

What exactly does green/sustainable design mean?

David: In short, sustainable design is cognitive efforts to stop depleting our planet of limited resources like exploiting fossil fuel consumption and conserving fresh water, all for the sake of future generations.

There is a lot of dialogue questioning natural materials versus synthetic. The consumer tends to believe that natural materials are the only way to be green or sustainable. I believe synthetics that are made emulating nature—and utilizing waste to make the product—is the most sustainable method for our growing, international population.

How has the rise of sustainability in the commercial market affected design?

David: When Interface founder Ray Anderson first declared the company was on the path to climb Mt. Sustainability, I was really challenged on getting started. After doing some research, I devised and implemented the Steps to Sustainability process: Reject, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Redesign. First, reject bad materials and processes. Second, reduce materials when possible. Next, reuse

anything feasible; then recycle when achievable. Lastly, when workable, redesign the whole process. The key to the Steps to Sustainability is experimenting with the process gradually and only moving forward when you have exhausted all possibilities at each level. If you jump steps or leap to the top, you inevitably will fail.

Since virgin nylon was made from petroleum—one of the highest levels of embodied energy—using less material was a critical solution. In the early years using the “Less is More” philosophy, we made great strides to reduce yarn usage from 26-28 oz. to 16-20 oz. Over the years, encouraging yarn suppliers to create solution-dyed nylon with recycled content was the greatest feat. Again, it was a gradual process. At first we only had limited colored yarns—black, brown, taupe and grays that were made from industrial waste. We used different percentages of recycled content depending on the look we were trying to achieve. By 2011, using 100% post-consumer recycled content really changed the industry and we now have a vast array of colors to use in designs.

Has green made it harder or easier to design a product, or is it just another avenue?

David: It wasn't easy by any means at first, and it is much more important than simply being another avenue. Every manufacturer has a responsibility to try to manufacture in a more “green” or sustainable way. If you go back to the Steps to Sustainability, everyone can find ways to cut waste, for example—and waste is lost profit.

Would you say the green movement has affected more the flooring design or the construction of the product?

David: The construction of the product is one of the most important elements to the design process—are we using recycled or renewable material, less waste, less water, less embodied energy? Even to the point of considering how long the product will last, and questioning where it will go at the end of its life.

Flooring design plays a role. In 2002, David Oakey Designs had a sustainable design breakthrough inspired by biomimicry with Entropy, installed in the now-patented random installation method. Like nature, no two tiles or modules are alike and can be easily replaced when damaged, extending the life of the floor. This design reduced waste from manufacturing to installation, and then to the customer's repair or replacement.

Cindi: David has already mentioned that waste is lost profit, which all too often gets passed on to the consumer. All these elements contribute to the end result, which is what ends up on the customer's floor.

What has Interface done to make its products greener?

Cindi: Interface and the yarn supplier Aquafil have made huge contributions to the industry, creating restorative enterprises by making recycled nylon fiber out of fishing nets that were previously disposed of in the ocean. Nylon fishing nets do not biodegrade (just like virgin nylon in carpet does not biodegrade in a landfill) so these programs restore the damage done by other industries. With Interface's Networks program, they pay for the labor to retrieve the fishing nets, which also enhances the human aspect of sustainability.

Do you see green design making inroads residentially, into the single-family home?

Cindi: Today, pushed forward by the millennials, we see green going mainstream at the consumer level. Brands like Nike, G-Star Raw and even H&M and Walmart are promoting environmental practices and products. TED Talks also contribute to bringing awareness and "coolness" to making smarter, green choices. Some consumers intentionally buy "green" while others buy green products selected for color or style that simply complements their decor. At Flor, the consumer brand by Interface, about 90% of the product line offers styles that are made of 100% recycled content. It's a major criteria for the styles created by David Oakey Designs.

Has LEED for Homes helped influence residential design?

David: LEED has been very good for the interior design industry by forcing designers to be educated and certified, bringing a heightened awareness to sustainability.

Cindi: As a trend becomes more popular—ideally to mainstream markets—it has the most powerful impact on our culture. LEED for Homes will make environmental design and consideration more commonplace and have a long-term effect on society. Eventually, it will become the norm rather than the exception, and that is good.