

Old and New

Green countertop options abound, but some may look familiar



Of the three "Rs" of sustainability—recycle, reuse and reduce—one in particular seems to be gaining attention of late, especially as it relates to kitchen countertops.

"Reuse is a big trend among the design community of architects and interior designers," said interior designer Maxine Corbett, ASID, CSI, IIDA, LEED AP, owner of Richlin Interiors. "The intent is to encourage responsible materials management for the client." Whether necessary or not, most kitchen remodels involve replacing existing countertops, but as Jennifer Roberts, environmental consultant and author of *The Good Green Kitchen*, noted, "There's an environmental burden to taking out that material, sending it to the landfill" and then installing something new.

LOST AND FOUND

But what if your client is set on doing away with the old? Roberts suggests first determining if the existing countertops are in good enough condition to be reused by someone else. If so, consider taking them to a salvage yard. In fact, according to Roberts, salvage yards are doing brisk business these days, as leaner times are driving consumers to be more budget-conscious. And for those who still prefer natural stone, they can be a great alternative, as many offer a variety of used pieces of marble, granite or limestone.

Some designers are turning to other rooms in their clients' homes for materials to adapt for reuse. Architect Joan Craig, AIA, LEED AP, principal of Lichten Craig, for example, who is a fan of islands with wood countertops, has been trying to convince a client to repurpose "a beautiful old wood table" already in their possession, "take the top off and use that on their island." If no old tables are available, consider purchasing one. Craig said, "It's a way of being environmentally oriented and you get that wonderful patina and quality of an old wood surface."

NEW CHOICES

Of course, some projects require buying new. On this front, the market is relatively vibrant, with two categories of countertops growing aggressively: recycled glass and recycled paper. As James Sheppard, CEO of Vetrozco, which makes the former, noted, "Even in this economy, we're scrambling to increase production." Such is the demand that "We have seen large solid-surfacing companies start to offer products with recycled glass," said Craig Smith, president of Atlanta-based Dex Studios, which manufactures recycled glass countertops to spec. With so many choices available, Smith suggests going as local as possible. You may also want to consider where the company sources its recycled glass.

Other earth-friendly materials are also making their way into more kitchens. Popular surfaces include butcher block made of sustainably obtained woods and bamboo, which now comes in various patterns and finishes, as well as an old standby, stainless steel, which both Corbett and Roberts tout for its high post-consumer recycled content. "It's a great option for the kitchen," said Roberts. "Not only is it really hygienic, you can keep it very, very clean." Stainless steel is also fully recyclable.

Countless other options are sure to hit the market in the future as technologies develop and green thinking evolves. Along with that, Craig foresees a greater appreciation for sustainable countertop products whose appeal lies not in emulating other materials, but in asserting their own character. Granted, greenwashing will also persist and perhaps even proliferate. Consequently, when in doubt about a countertop selection now and even in the future, you might want to do as Roberts suggests and ask yourself this question: What environmental problem is this solving? ■

—Alice Liao



[1]



[2]



[3]



[4]



[5]

(1) Containing a high recycled content and providing a hygienic surface ideal for food preparation, stainless steel is an old favorite that's finding new popularity in green kitchens. Manufacturers are plentiful, but make sure you choose a good quality steel, Roberts advises. **Elkay** offers custom countertops that are made of stainless steel containing up to 80 percent recycled material and can be fabricated with integral sinks in a variety of shapes and sizes. Circle No. 200 **(2)** Rapidly renewable bamboo has migrated from the floor and cabinets to countertops, thanks to companies like **Totally Bamboo**, which offers solid slabs in 25½-, 30- and 36-in. widths and lengths of up to 8 ft. Made using a formaldehyde-free nontoxic glue, the countertops come in flat, vertical and parquet end-grain patterns in dark and natural finishes. Circle No. 201 **(3)** Olympia, WA-based **Windfall Lumber** makes countertops from reclaimed material, as well as local, sustainably harvested Northwest woods. The reclaimed wood comes from sources as disparate as vinegar tanks and granaries to exotic hardwood pallets and even recycled telephone poles. Countertops are offered in 10 wood species and options, including reclaimed Douglas fir (shown), and can be specified with a nontoxic wood finish. Circle No. 202 **(4)** The demand for recycled glass countertops is growing, as is the number of manufacturers who produce them. **Vetrazzo**, however, specializes in this type of surface and sources its recycled glass from a variety of places, with the bulk coming from curbside recycling programs. Composed of 85-percent-recycled glass, each slab measures 60 in. x 108 in. and has a 3-cm thickness. A wide array of colors and mixes are available, all boasting interesting back stories. Martini Flint (shown) gets its name partly from the type of glass used. Circle No. 203 **(5)** Recycled paper products have seen greater acceptance as consumers become more educated on going green. A popular choice, **PaperStone** is composed of post-consumer waste, recycled paper or cardboard, and bound with petroleum-free phenolic resins made from raw materials such as cashew nutshell liquid. Available in 60-in. x 144-in. panels and ¾-, 1- and 1¼-in. thicknesses, the material is durable, comes in various colors and, unlike stone, is warm to the touch. Circle No. 204