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## A Sustainable Sell

By Kyle Roderick  
(From the NKBA's *Profiles Magazine*)

By now, most of us realize that building and furnishing with ecologically sustainable materials and energy-saving appliances is the key to enhancing personal and planetary well-being. Still, the best news of all is that green kitchens and baths can look beautiful, conserve resources, and save money both in the short and long term. As of January 2006, the annual market for green building products and services added up to \$7 billion, posting a 37 percent increase over 2004, according to the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC).

"Clients are delighted to learn how eco-smart kitchens and baths can be lovely, livable, and cost effective rooms, in addition to being better for the environment," says Michael Kienzl, owner of Bradco Kitchens and Baths, a full service showroom in Los Angeles, California. "Some people are under the mistaken impression that going green means ultra-expensive," says Cary McLean, CKD, owner of Designs for Living in Oak Park, Illinois. "They're often pleasantly surprised when I present the financial benefits to be gained from installing such energy-savers as argon gas windows, skylights, or doors, which insulate more effectively than double pane windows."

Acknowledging that financial and time constraints may rule out 100 percent green kitchens or baths, McLean notes, "Even if you're on a tight budget, you can still create a room that makes it easy for the customer to live and work comfortably while making a more positive environmental impact."

"I tell my customers that if everyone made a few small but significant changes, it would dramatically lighten our collective environmental load," Kienzl added. "A few crucial energy-saving elements, such as Energy Star appliances, tankless water heaters, fluorescent lighting, or low-flush toilets, will greatly reduce the carbon footprint made by that house, while also saving the owner hundreds or even thousands of dollars a year."

## A Green Primer

Also referred to as "sustainable design," "eco-design," or "environmental design," green design is an umbrella term for an ever-expanding, international trend within the fields of architecture, landscape architecture, engineering, industrial design, and interior design.

The purpose of green design is to produce places, structures, rooms, products, and services that are beautiful and functional, while reducing the use of non-renewable resources like water and petroleum. "Besides minimizing the environmental impact and connecting people with nature in a positive way, green design is a necessary tool for creating environmentally sustainable homes and communities," says David Linzer, CKD, of Designs by David L. in Delray Beach, Florida.

Today's green design growth is in part a reaction to our global environmental crisis. Between massive industrial growth and pollution, population increases, depletion of natural resources, damage to ecosystems, and loss of biodiversity, people are becoming increasingly aware of how eco-smart home improvements can benefit the planet, themselves, and their families. "I'm continually surprised by the number of customers who come in asking for formaldehyde-free cabinetry because the wood in their kitchens and bath cabinets made them sick," says Kienzl.

Green designers like Linzer point out that many widespread environmental and health problems are caused to a great degree by conventional home design practices. Linzer, who currently serves as the Vice President of the South Florida Chapter of the NKBA, asked the provocative question, "How good are we as designers if we're not selling products that are healthy for the humans and pets living in the home?"

"A green kitchen or bath does far more than help reduce energy use and eliminate negative environmental impacts," said Karen Kalnak, owner of Green Home Chicago, a green kitchen and bath showroom/design center catering to the high-end market. "These rooms embody the deep value of natural beauty and recycled materials to improve the inhabitants' quality of life and health."

### How Green Is Green?

If you ever wonder how green a given product may be, you're not alone. "Sometimes, it's hard to know whether a material or product that's advertised as such really is ecologically sustainable," added Linzer, referring to the practice of "green washing," which is also known as "little green lies."

For example, beware of any so-called LEED-certified products, such as cabinetry, countertop materials, or flooring. The fact is, LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) is an ecology-oriented building certification program run under the auspices of the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC). It is not, and never has been, an ecology-oriented product certification program.

According to the American Institute of Architects, the 69 LEED points that make up the program's specific design points and considerations can be reviewed in a two-hour meeting, during which time the design team and the owner can decide what level of LEED compliance is desirable for their building project. Hence a green product may qualify for points toward a LEED certification without being a LEED-certified product.

### Cooking Up a Green Kitchen

One of the first steps to a greener kitchen involves rethinking countertop and flooring materials. Cary McLean sources granite remnants and tile overruns from local fabricators to give her clients beauty, functionality, and environmental responsibility at a great price. She also recycles butcher block from outmoded countertops whenever possible.

For countertops, customers of Karen Kalnak and Michael Kienzl use a lot of Syndecrete, a material composite that consists of concrete and fly ash, which is the non-combustible mineral portion of coal. This solid surfacing material has less than half the weight but provides twice the compressive strength of ordinary concrete. For countertops, backsplashes and kitchen tabletops, IceStone, made from recycled glass and concrete, is another of their favorite green materials.

"Customers like IceStone because it can be made in almost any color," stated John Brady of Interior Reflection Design Studio in suburban Chicago. "The manufacturer can add pigment to the background mix and then select from a variety of sizes and colors of glass." They also like the material as it's strong like granite, less porous than marble, and non-toxic and heat-resistant like stone.

Due to its high recycled content and Cradle to Cradle Certification, IceStone materials can also be used towards LEED points. While some customers love IceStone so much that they put it on their floors, Kalnak is a cork flooring enthusiast because it's naturally beautiful, shock absorbing, and sound muffling. "There's a rubber and cork combination called Expando that's highly practical for people who spend a lot of time on their feet working in their kitchens," Kalnak added.

Those who aren't ready to install green flooring can still save energy and money by selecting Energy Star appliances. These are an outgrowth of a joint program of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Energy.

When looking for new household appliances, only choose models that have earned the Energy Star logo. A complete list can be found at [www.energystar.gov](http://www.energystar.gov). "Using such appliances can save families about a third on their energy bill, with similar savings of greenhouse gas emissions, without sacrificing features, style, or comfort," stated McLean. With the help of the Energy Star program, Americans saved enough energy in 2006 to reduce greenhouse gas emissions equivalent to those produced by 25 million cars, all while saving \$14 billion on their utility bills. A similar program exists in Canada; see [www.energystar.gc.ca](http://www.energystar.gc.ca) for details.

Another easy and inexpensive way to save energy and money is to install a tankless water heater, which will benefit your kitchen, as well as your bathrooms. With a tankless water heater, water doesn't gradually lose its heat in a tank and water coming out of the tap doesn't take as long to heat up on those cold mornings. As a result, the customer saves energy, water, and money. Another plus is that tankless water heaters help reduce carbon dioxide emissions, thanks to their lower energy use.

### Beyond The Box: Green Cabinetry

When it comes to cabinets, "Sustainable kitchen cabinetry is sourced from custom cabinet makers or purchased ready-to-install," noted Kienzl. "It's far superior for family health and the planet, yet many U.S. consumers buy wood and cabinets made with cancer-causing chemicals that are outlawed in Europe and Japan."

Conventional wood cabinets are finished with chemical sprays containing formaldehyde, a cancer-causing chemical. Moreover, they're often covered with paints high in Volatile Organic Chemicals, or VOCs, which morph at room temperature into breathable gasses, including benzene, toluene, vinyl chloride, formaldehyde, ethyl, and mercury. According to the EPA, inhaling VOCs can cause eye irritation, nose and throat discomfort, headaches, allergic skin reactions, declines in serum cholinesterase levels, nausea, vomiting, nosebleeds, fatigue, and dizziness. "For people with children or delicate respiratory systems, or for those simply seeking to create an environmentally friendly home environment, green cabinets, flooring, and furniture are the logical choice," added Kalnak.

Much of the wood made in China is loaded with formaldehyde. Since formaldehyde wafts out of the glues in plywood and into human lungs, it's illegal to sell in many countries, even in China. But in the United States, this wood is routinely crafted into cabinets and furniture. In 2006, China exported more than half a billion dollars' worth of plywood hardwood to the United States—enough to build cabinets for two million kitchens. Formaldehyde exposure has been shown in human studies to cause headaches and sore throats, allergic reactions, asthma attacks, nose and throat cancer, and possibly leukemia.

As the Los Angeles Times reported in 2007, one birch plank from China bought at a Home Depot in Portland, Oregon that was labeled as containing formaldehyde was tested by a toxicology research center. It gave off 100 times more formaldehyde than legal in Japan and 30 times more than allowed in Europe and China.

"With no government standards, monitoring, or labeling, U.S. consumers can't easily identify chemical-free products," said Linzer. These days, Linzer is doing brisk business in cabinets made from responsibly harvested solid woods, non-toxic, water-based glues, and formaldehyde-free finishes.

Many people are surprised and sometimes shocked to learn how many chemicals are present in conventional kitchen and bath cabinets, and by how toxic those chemicals are to the human body, even well after installation.

Here are some hot topics on how to sell green kitchen and bath cabinets:

**Health Benefits:** "Using chemical-free or so-called 'green' woods in your kitchen cabinets and flooring is preferable to using chemically treated ones. These woods emit safe gases and keep your indoor air quality fresher and safer," said Kienzl. "With sustainable woods, there's never any outgassing of toxic chemicals, as there is from conventional wood cabinets or flooring."

**Environmental Benefits:** "Buying a green product rather than a toxic and potentially life-threatening one helps support a cleaner world," said Linzer. "Your green kitchen or bath sets a sustainable example for your children to follow and can inspire others who come to your home."

### Organizing an Organic Bathroom

According to John Brady of Interior Reflection Design Studio in suburban Chicago, "On average, toilets are the single largest use of water inside of a house, and older models can use up to five times as much water as state-of-the-art models. You can quickly and easily help your customers save

water by installing an ultralow flush toilet, which are competitively priced."

Brady added that installing a foot pedal-operated sink in the bathroom is another way to save untold gallons of water each year. "Many people forget to turn off the faucet when brushing their teeth or washing up," he said. Foot pedal sinks save you from this wasteful fate and kids love them because they're fun to use.

Another fast and easy way to green your bathroom is to install a bidet or one of the high-tech bidet seats that can be retrofitted to existing toilets, such as TOTO's Washlet or Brondell's Swash. Though the bidet does increase water usage slightly, it can reduce the amount of toilet paper used by 50 to 90 percent. Americans use more than 3.2 tons of toilet paper annually; 54 million trees are cut down for this purpose. The production of each roll requires an average of 1.5 pounds of wood, 37 gallons of water and 1.3 kilowatts of energy.

Then there's the shower. As Brady related, "After toilets and clothes washing machines, showers are the biggest residential water wasters." Today's low-flow showerheads are finely tuned to deliver energy-efficient water pressure. These can save up to 3,000 gallons of water per person per year. They also save power by reducing hot water demand.

Also note that vintage enamel-covered, cast iron bathtubs retain heat longer than modern ones made out of synthetic materials. For people who are as serious about helping the environment as they are about a good long soak, a vintage tub can make a huge difference in both a bath's style and its hot water usage.

In trend-setting Los Angeles, Kienzl is selling a large number of Moda Collection's Zucchetti showerheads, which contain a minielectrical generator that powers a recessed light bulb within. "With this shower head," Kienzl explained, "You don't need a separate light fixture in your shower. How brilliant is that?"

While we're on the subject of light, Kienzl added, "Installing a skylight can save power year-round by letting the sun illuminate your bathroom. There's something very soothing about bathing in a room that's filled with natural light."

Whether you sell your customers on going all the way green or on taking smaller, but significant design elements, you're doing the right thing for the planet and its people. As John Brady noted, "The truth is that many green products are in the fledgling stage and their price points may soon drop to very affordable levels. In the meantime, I'm telling my customers how the long-term environmental effectiveness outweighs most price concerns."

In other words, it's easy being green.



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