

The Environment



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Green Design Options: Healthier for Clients and the Environment

by Karin Delaney

Sitting down with a client for an initial consultation has always been one of my favorite stages of any new interior design project. So many design style possibilities, so many wonderful materials and product options – the potential space transformations embedded in this nascent phase are positively titillating!

Today, however, with the vast array of environmentally healthy and sustainable products surging into the marketplace, the design process is no longer exclusively focused on aesthetics. Because I am now able to offer my clients so many eco-friendly components for their design projects, this is an especially exciting time to be an interior designer.

With the burgeoning number of products and materials now labeled “green” in the design world, however, it is a daunting task for consumers to determine which products genuinely merit this classification. When working with clients, one of my most important roles is to help them navigate through the overwhelming number of options and educate them in the basic fundamentals that will help them make smart choices. It is my goal to show them how easy it can be to begin transitioning to a healthier interior environment and contributing to the overall health of the planet, while simultaneously creating beautiful interior spaces.

So how does one go about making the transition to a greener, healthier home or business interior environment? As philosopher Lao-tzu advised over 2,500 years ago: “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” Considering the fact that most interior surfaces have some form of paint or stain finish, perhaps the easiest and most cost-effective first step is choosing low or no VOC paint. This is a logical and relatively inexpensive starting point.

Low or no VOC paints provide an especially important green design option because traditional paints contain potentially harmful substances – including formaldehyde, polyvinyl acetates, and ethylene glycols - called volatile organic compounds (VOCs) that can have a major negative impact on indoor air quality. For many weeks and often months after paint has been applied, these VOCs continue to be released as vapors into the surrounding environment through a process called “off-gassing.” From a health perspective, this first step will help clients make a significant move toward improving the indoor environmental quality of their residential and commercial projects.

From a design perspective, paint applications can also deliver a lot of visual impact for a relatively small cost. If project funding is limited, I would advise clients to begin with their bedrooms, since this is the space where they generally spend the most concentrated period of their time.

Subsequent steps in a green interior design project or transition should continue to focus on products and materials that have a direct impact on indoor air quality, such as carpeting, and tile and carpet adhesives, but could expand further to include consideration of the total “carbon footprint” involved in the lifecycle of a particular product or material. By carbon footprint, I am referring to the total environmental impact of a product – from the manufacturing phase to the disposal phase – also known as the “cradle to cradle” cycle. Encapsulated in this concept are all the inherent costs of a product: from production and energy consumption used in manufacturing and transportation, to disposal and, ultimately, to potential environmental and human health care issues.

A number of my clients initially dismiss any prospect of using green products and materials because they are concerned about added costs to their design project. While it is true that the majority of green design products have been priced somewhat higher than their non-green counterparts, because consumers are increasingly choosing these healthier options, costs are beginning to decrease. Another very important role for me as an interior designer is to help my clients understand that even though initial costs may be somewhat higher for green products, it is critical to consider the long-term health, environmental and economic costs for themselves and for society: once again, the cradle to cradle concept.

In the process of incorporating greener and more eco-friendly interior design components, it is possible to control costs by taking small, incremental steps. And because of the wide array of wonderful new green design products available in today's market – including paints, fabrics, recycled glass and metal tiles, natural fiber carpets, and sustainably grown wood products, just to name a few - it is also possible to create interior spaces that are both aesthetically beautiful and environmentally healthy.

While unhealthy for anyone, extended exposure to VOCs can have particularly negative health implications for children, the elderly and people with asthma and other respiratory conditions. When these paint vapors escape to the outdoors, their harmful effects are no longer limited to a single interior space; they combine with sunlight and other pollutants to form smog, ozone and greenhouse gases: key contributors to global warming.

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Karin Delaney, Interior Designer

Karin Delaney entered the interior design profession after devoting over fifteen years, as both an educator and an admissions associate, to independent school education. After working several years as a design associate with a Cape Cod design firm, she established Karin Delaney Interior Design in 2005.

For both residential and commercial clients, Karin offers complete interior design services including design & development assistance; space planning; furniture, materials, finishes and color selection; as well as a wide array of design-based services.

A graduate of Lesley University and the Rhode Island School of Design's Interior Design Program, Karin's design goal – for any interior space – is to provide a harmonious balance of style and comfort. She believes that excellent design is not limited to any particular design style or budget.

Her projects have run the gamut from contemporary urban apartments and classically elegant boutique hotel suites to casual seashore cottage retreats. She enjoys the unique characteristics and challenges of each individual project, and finding creative solutions that meet her clients' objectives. She also believes that well designed spaces should be healthy spaces. She draws on her past experience as an educator to inform her clients about the principles of green design, and offers the option of using the most environmentally sustainable materials and technologies whenever applicable.

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