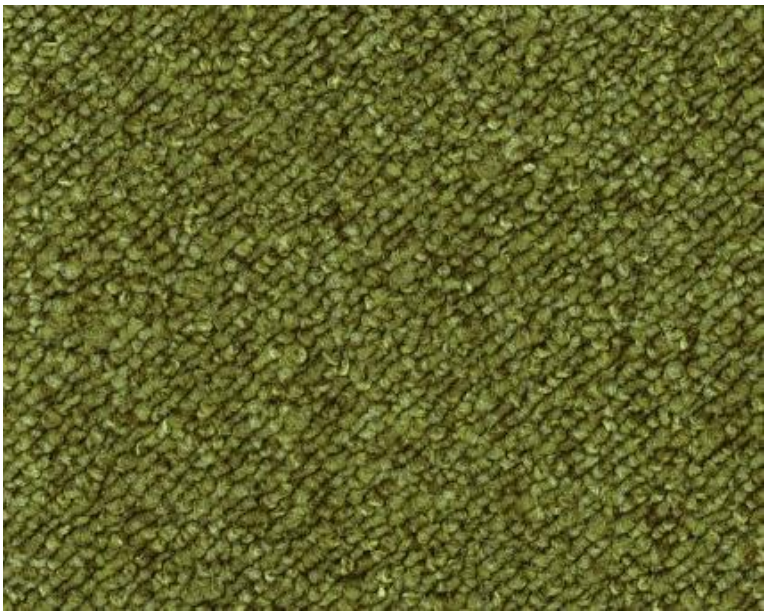

WHOM DO WE TRUST?

[article about choosing sustainable materials for interior design, IN *THE VOICE*, IIDA Newsletter, Metro NYC Chapter, May 2005 by Carol Crawford

When it comes to sorting out the pros and cons of choosing and specifying sustainable materials for a client, decisions must be based on sensible reasons, as well as code restrictions, functionality, and aesthetics. **Where do you turn for guidance?**

Generally speaking, it is bias that guides us and bias that confuses us. If you are environmentally savvy, you understand that there are long-term consequences to factor into your material choices, such as prolonged off-gassing of harmful glues that make indoor air quality less than healthy for workers, particularly when windows are sealed and there is a closed HVAC system. If you are a confirmed "cradle-to-cradle" tree-hugger, you are also concerned with how the product is made at the factory, whether its components deplete fossil fuels and un-renewable resources, or are inherently toxic; You need to know the possible harmful by-products and post-industrial left-overs, like polluting effluents pouring from factory into stream, or if toxic components the leaking into the surrounding earth and groundwater, creating brownfields; where and how are solid wastes disposed, how much and what kind of energy is used for manufacture; what more energy costs accrue to transport the product to site use? Finally, what happens when the product is worn out? Is it dumped into landfill? Burned? Re-cycled? Re-claimed? If so, how? What are the energy and pollution consequences of *that*?

As specifiers, we must also be able to address concern about the up-front costs of "green" materials: are they really more expensive? Are they worth it? As the market for them has increased, the cost has come down dramatically. There is a real need for a source for facts and of unbiased analysis in the search for "green" product choices, especially when a cost comparison with "non-green" materials is involved, as so often happens. Few can afford the time or money for the full Monty of Life Cycle Analysis.

Groping for direction, we should first read the labels ...or ask the manufacturer for the specifications. You can try the MSDS [Material Safety Data Base] files, many free on-line. When the chemical descriptives make your eyes glaze over, you can seek an organization that is dedicated to certifying, one that has a good track record of careful analysis and honest reportage. Greenguard is one of these; they are concerned with IAQ: Indoor Air Quality, and provide detailed analysis of off-gassing and other pollutants put into the air by the materials and products used for interiors.

There are also trade organizations which publish useful information on particular products when you need to know about installation and fiber or backing composition; but they are, understandably, industry spokespersons and lobbyists, and hardly impartial critics. **CRI, the Carpet and Rug Institute, has a helpful set of educational pamphlets about how carpets are made and installed. They don't emphasize value judgements. The Resilient Flooring Covering Institute [RFCI], however, actually filed a lawsuit in 2002 against the State of New York with Tarkett, Inc., in support of the PVC industry (polyvinyl chloride, or "vinyl" manufacturers], after New York established its "Green Building Tax Credit" program which prohibits the use of vinyl flooring because of "serious environmental and public health concerns related to its production"*. The State's Attorney General, Eliot Spitzer, filed a defense of the pioneering program in May 2003, and the suit was withdrawn later that month. Ironically, Gov. Pataki recently allowed PVC pipe to be used in buildings, a clear contradiction of his own program. Ignorance? Oversight? Trade-off? This kind of action leaves environmentally-concerned blinking a lot.**

Aggressively partisan groups like **Greenpeace and the Vinyl Institute** tend to square off at extreme opposite poles on the issue of vinyl safety and use; both speak with authority and cite scientific studies to support their claims. When you dig a bit, you begin to evaluate the weight and value of those claims. Greenpeace is a well-known, even famous, non-profit group whose mission is Environmental Justice. Since its founding in 1971, Greenpeace has tackled the most critical environmental issues. Today its work "focuses on six major efforts: saving ancient forests, eliminating the threat of genetic engineering, stopping global warming, ending the nuclear age, exposing toxic pollutants and protecting the oceans"*. They also, along with the Healthy Building Network and Sierra Club, disseminate information on toxic materials.

The Vinyl Institute, founded in 1982, "is a U.S. trade association representing the leading manufacturers of vinyl, vinyl chloride monomer, vinyl additives and modifiers, and vinyl packaging materials". They also aggressively promote and defend the use of PVC. Although the Vinyl Institute proudly cites its contribution to Habitat for Humanity, promoting all-vinyl housing in poor communities, the vinyl plants located in the poorest communities like Lake Charles, Louisiana, have some of the highest rates of cancer and pollution in the country, much of it documented as occurring in the air, water and earth surrounding the vinyl plants. Judith Helfand, who produced the electrifying documentary **film, "Blue Vinyl", in 2002,** exposing the worst environmental offenses of the global vinyl industry, has in turn been highly criticized for her point of view, along with Greenpeace, by industries using vinyl in their products. But even if you are not extreme in demonstrating that Nature's voice must be heard, you have to admit that intense dialogues such as these have been instrumental in raising public awareness of the environmental damages done through pollution and the ruthless harvesting of natural resources.

We cannot forget that choices may be influenced by ideology ...some, good; some, bad. If ideology drives an intent to save the planet, or, at least, to maintain the health and well-being of the public [... *that certainly sounds like the basic ethical and legal mandate for certified interior designers*], then it's <u>*good*</u>. It can also induce an evangelistic fervor to educate your client and your colleagues. That's not exactly bad, but it can be annoying, if not frustrating, as in the arguments for and against using PVC or "vinyl", whose non-use in or <u>elimination</u> from, a product, like carpet tile backing or textiles for healthcare, has become a plus-factor for marketing. But when a product doesn't honestly fill the sustainable mold or if the existence of potentially harmful components are downplayed to capture market share, and the product is advertised as "green", ..then the disinformation and misinformation process begins. It's called "greenwashing"...and that's <u>bad</u>. The word "green" has been converted into bait for customers concerned with environmental safety.

The sad truth is that much of the information and commentary out there is driven by current government policies which overtly favor roll-back of environmental safeguards and favor industrial profit over human health and conservation of resources. I don't advocate that designers become Pollution Police, but good old common sense is needed to maintain a balanced perspective. My mother, and probably yours, would admonish us..."just aim to do the right thing...*and you know what that is!*" So, when evaluating the evaluators, and certifying the certifiers, always ask yourself who benefits, who pays? <u>*Who is in whose pocket?*</u> Next, ask yourself, "Is it hype for market share or is it passion for human welfare?"

I tell my students on the first day we launch into a semester's study of materials and specification that we as designers have a moral responsibility to be honest advocates for our clients, and to educate them when needed. But we have to educate ourselves, first.

Listed below are a few helpful information sources:

Various trade organizations: useful installation, maintenance data but not good for environmental hazards

L.E.E.D. NC or -CI guidelines for green construction and interior finishes in terms of a point system of value, developed by the non-profit USGBC

USGBC: United States Green Building Council, non-profit, established the L.E.E.D. green building rating standards and program; run GREENBUILD conference

ENVIRONDESIGN: annual conference on sustainable design, methods and materials; educational

NRDC National Resources Defense Council

EPA : Environmental Protection Agency, when it isn't party to politics

FSC Forest Stewardship Council certified wood from environmentally managed forests

MSDS
http://www.ilpi.com/msds/#What http://www.ilpi.com/msds/#Internet http://msds.ehs.cornell.edu/msdssrch.asp to cite a few databases

Greenspec: subscription to constantly updated listings of green products and companies

EBN: Environmental building News; issues and materials

HBN:Healthy Building Network keeps you abreast of the politics of environmental issues and the safety of materials in a frank, well-documented way

Greenguard / Greenguard Environmental Institute has a free educational program for Indoor Air Quality

Green@work : magazine and website

http://www.greenbiz.com/

Greenclips: email news service

Environmental Design + Construction magazine (ED+C): great photos of sites, vendor lists

Metropolis Magazine: information; involvement in green issues, design, ICFF.