



WOOD VERSATILE & HARDY

Thermador available at Neff

Regardless of your design aesthetic, the next home renovation project you undertake will likely be appointed with a palette of woods. Little wonder. Wood is a versatile and hardy medium. It can warm a space with reminiscences of bygone eras, or it can cool one down with futuristic lines and high polishes.

With literally thousands of choices, including natural wood and its manmade imitators, how does one begin?

Many designers today, particularly those whose faces regularly appear on reality TV shows, are fond of telling audiences to disregard any long-held rules. That may be too much freedom for those of us who renovate once a decade or less, and who prefer not to live that long with a blunder noticed too late. We're open to branching out, so to speak, with our design decisions, but we prefer a bit of professional guidance along the way. Let us open the door:

"As a designer, I don't try to be matchy-matchy with woods," said Candy Scott of Mood Setting Design + Interiors in Oak Park. "Environments tend to be more dynamic with different wood tones. With that said, some elements of style should be kept in mind. It can't be a hodge-podge."

Her preference is to pair dark floors with lighter cabinets and built-ins, and vice versa, she advised.

"It's important to pay attention to contrast," she said. "You can create contrast through grain or texture or color. You can also use different finishes like high gloss versus low-gloss."

Work upward, said Pat Borg, president and owner at Neff of Chicago kitchen designers and custom cabinet makers.

"If you're putting in a kitchen, for example, start with the floor," he said. "Then the cabinetry, countertop and paint."

But first, a review of the predominant wood products:

- Solid wood may be the most "pure" of wood products, but boards cut from a tree expand and contract according to humidity and temperature conditions. This can cause warping, cracking and bowing. Solid wood is often more expensive than other wood products, but not always.

- Wood veneer is made by layering thin slices of real wood logs over an engineered wood such as plywood or particle board. Veneers are an attractive and sturdy alternative to woods that would be cost-prohibitive or unsuitable for cabinet production.

- Laminates are manmade, photographic reproductions of wood layered over a substrate. They offer great variety and consistency of species, grain and color without the natural imperfections of wood. Some are textured. Laminates tend to be less expensive than solid wood or veneer, but some look more "real" than others. They are often preferred for areas that are exposed to moisture, like basements and children's bathrooms.

"Laminate flooring historically has gotten a bad rap because of the way it sounds," said Scott. "Now they are making underlayments that have more absorption, so it sounds better. Laminates have always had durability and more flexibility in terms of mois-

ture, and you also get the look of wood. Now you get the sound."

A design project must appeal to the senses of sight, sound, smell and touch, or it won't "feel" right, she said.

Wood flooring can be laid in strips, usually slimmer than 2 inches, to express a contemporary feeling. Planks, which are wider than 2 inches and sometimes wider than 7 inches, are desirable in old-world or country-style décor. Parquet is created by making mosaic-like patterns from small pieces of wood in varying colors, shapes and sizes.

Reclaimed wood has become an extremely popular flooring choice for both residential and commercial projects, said Sol Kassorla, owner at Manhattan Forest Products in New York City and the Merchandise Mart in Chicago.

The company, which deals in both new growth and reclaimed wood, specializes in buying up old barns and landmark sites like the Coney Island boardwalk, then refurbishing and reusing the wood.

One recent project is the Soho House Hotel in Chicago.

Reclaimed wood can be processed in two ways: Old face wood is vintage lumber that was exposed to the elements, sometimes for hundreds of years. They

are lightly wire-brushed or hand-sanded while leaving the scratches, scuffs and marks. Sometimes vintage lumber is further aged by banging, hammering or burning to gain special effects.

New face wood is created by shaving off the top quarter-inch of reclaimed wood to expose the pristine untouched surface beneath. It can be refinished in any number of creative techniques.

"You can't get the same beaten and timeworn look or the coloring or the type of growth patterns from new growth," said Kassorla. "You can take new wood and age it, but it doesn't look the same."

Neff of Chicago, also located at the Merchandise Mart, customizes cabinetry in wood, veneer and Euro laminates—which are sourced from Europe. Although wood is perennially in demand, veneers and laminates allow homeowners to enjoy the beauty of exotic woods while reducing the impact on the forests. Laminates can be consistently fabricated in any of thousands of colors and sheens.

"Wood is not a plentiful resource," said Borg. "Expensive logs from Cypress or Africa, these are prized possessions, and over time they will run out."

As for color popularity, Borg said soft grays are in demand. In the Midwest, white kitchens are a classic that will always be in style. Neff offers 37 shades of white.

Some Neff clients choose base cabinets in one color and upper cabinets in another. Many do their islands and island countertops differently from the perimeter cabinets and counters. Still others, preferring a monochromatic appearance, panel their appliances the same as their cabinetry.

Cabinet doors will depend on the look you want, said Borg. Traditionalists may lean toward a raised panel with decorative beading. Contemporary enthusiasts often select a sleek slab one or more doors may have a glass inset. But then you'll have to choose among clear glass, beveled glass, etched glass, translucent glass, divided glass and more."

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Whatever your choices, a kitchen is about understated elegance, and ideally it will flow easily into the adjacent spaces, said Borg.

Scott recently transformed a suburban family's basement into a grand lifestyle space with a warm yet rustic ambiance. The layout includes fireplace, wet bar, media area, game room, full bath and lots of seating.

"The homeowners wanted entertaining space and a counter big enough to spread out pizzas across the island to feed the teenage kids and all their friends," she said.

The finishes are a mix of dark, medium and light tones as well as natural and man-made woods: Among them are reclaimed barn board for support columns and stairs, laminate flooring in gray drift oak, gray wash cabinetry, island in dark espresso, and butcher block counters.

"There are so many wonderful options out there, and all of them play a part in the overall aesthetic appeal of our environment." □

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