

Eco-Friendly in the Kitchen

Renovation Project Kept Emphasis on Environmental Mantra: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

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We're environmentally conscious, my husband and I, but there are certain things we can't live without, like air conditioning in Washington's sweltering summers.

When we decided to replace our sagging kitchen cabinets and wheezing refrigerator, we knew it would have been more earth-friendly to keep our kitchen renovations limited, to reuse what we already owned instead of consuming more materials. But one of the things I couldn't live without, I decided right away, was new cabinets.

Since the layout of our small kitchen was dreadful, we decided to start from scratch and create a new, environmentally friendly room.

We envisioned a kitchen outfitted with recycled materials, or with products from plants that could be sustainably harvested -- plants that grow quickly and are easily replenished, such as bamboo. We hoped our new products would be made without toxic chemicals that linger in the air.

We knew about the movement to create entire buildings using materials and methods that are easy on the earth, so we assumed that remodeling sustainably would be a snap. But when I called the few architects who had participated in last year's Green Festival, an annual event that brings together environmentalist consumers, speakers and merchants, they weren't interested in a job as small as our 6 1/2 -by-8 1/2-foot Northwest Washington kitchen.

Luckily, one of the architects referred me to Chris Donaghy, a designer whose Lorton firm, Kitchen Brokers, specializes in green renovations. Donaghy says that green kitchens are just a small part of his business -- he has designed about 14 in the past three years -- but that still makes him one of the East Coast's experts on green kitchen renovation.

I was unable to find any other local designers who specialized in green renovation, but for comparison, we contacted two other kitchen design firms. One told me its designers all had "green training," but then offered us granite for our countertop. We said "no thanks," knowing that granite is definitely not renewable -- once it's removed from the earth, it's gone forever.

And Donaghy's estimates fell in a range similar to the other two companies'. He said that green kitchens tend to cost 20 to 30 percent more than non-green kitchens, which can turn many people away from environmentally friendly materials. Environmentally conscious consumers, Donaghy said, often have "less disposable incomes than our regular clientele. They tend to be teachers, scientists, environmentalists." And new kitchens are expensive.

That was a problem for Scott Carlson and his family. When they moved into a house in Baltimore, Carlson said, the kitchen was "totally trashed and totally outdated." Carlson, a journalist who had written about green building, was hoping to do some himself, but he found many products he wanted to use were "super expensive."

So he made trade-offs and used some materials that were not as green as he would have liked. He built a countertop from Formica, which was not green but was inexpensive, allowing him to splurge a bit elsewhere.

That paid off in his environmentally friendly kitchen floor. Carlson's floor is made from Marmoleum, a brand of linoleum, that's made out of earth-friendly materials including linseed oil and natural pigment. He paid about \$7 per square foot for it.

We did our new kitchen floor in cork. Cork floors are made from bark that is peeled off the tree and then allowed to grow back. Donaghy ordered our cork from Sustainable Flooring of Colorado, which offers 11 styles and colors of cork tiles for \$2.50 to \$5.50 per square foot.

Another option was bamboo, which we used elsewhere, to redo the floors in the rest of our condo. Bamboo, a grass, is as beautiful as wood but quicker to regrow and harvest. Sustainable Flooring sells bamboo for \$3 to \$5 per square foot.

We were also hoping to buy green cabinets. The best-known green cabinet maker in the country is Neil Kelly, in Portland, Ore. Instead of particle board, Neil Kelly makes cabinets out of wheatboard, which is assembled from wheat straw, a waste product that is typically burned or put in landfills, said Paul Quimby, a Neil Kelly customer service representative.

Neil Kelly uses glues, stains and finishes that don't pollute the air with chemicals. And the company makes cabinet doors and veneers from wood certified by the Forest Stewardship Council to have been harvested sustainably.

Alison and Paul Trinkoff of Owings Mill bought Neil Kelly cabinets for their kitchen renovation last fall. They wanted to keep their house free from fumes from standard products, Alison Trinkoff said. Had the Trinkoffs bought standard cabinets, she said, "We're going to have this space, it's going to look beautiful and it's going to stink." Instead, they bought from Neil Kelly and sometimes invite guests not only to look at, but also to sniff, the new cabinets.

"They don't stink," she said. "It is surprising."

Unfortunately, Neil Kelly gave us an estimate of nearly \$8,500 for our cabinets, plus a whopping \$2,000 for shipping from Oregon. That didn't strike us as very green -- it would require so much fossil fuel and produce so much pollution just to get the cabinets to us. Besides, it broke our budget.

Meanwhile, Donaghy had been working to persuade several East Coast cabinet makers to produce green cabinets. The one who agreed was Robert Meyers of Create a Space Inc. of New York. For our cabinets, which were built in June, Meyers used wheatboard, certified wood and non-offgassing finishes. He has since done another green kitchen.

"I'm seeing this to be a great niche business for me," he said. Our cabinets cost less than \$7,000, and shipping from New York cost about \$750.

Choosing appliances was easy. We bought appliances that had earned an Energy Star, a rating that means they have passed an energy efficiency test. Most major manufacturers produce Energy Star appliances. Similarly, finding low-offgassing paint was no problem.

For the countertops, our choices were more limited. We considered a product called Richlite, which is made from paper from certified forests or even recycled paper. It comes in seven earthy solid colors.

But we ended up choosing IceStone, a gorgeous composite material made of chips of glass embedded in concrete. Three-quarters of the glass, which gives the surface a visual depth, is recycled. IceStone makes 20 appealing colors; we chose one that was pale gray, nearly white. Price varies with color, installation and size of the job; an IceStone employee said it is comparable in price to mid- to high-range granite. Our countertop cost \$3,600; a charcoal gray color we liked would have been \$1,000 more.

Other green countertop options include ShetkaStone, a recycled-paper product that comes in a variety of appearances, and EnviroGLAS terrazzo, a recycled-glass composite not unlike IceStone.

When it came time to build the new kitchen, Donaghy hooked us up with a general contractor he trusted, Daniel Jamison, whose company, Straight-Line Contracting, is in Springfield.

Jamison and his crew had some trouble finding environmentally friendly glue. He said he found it less strong than conventional glue and so used more of it. He also said the benign paint was thin and required extra coats.

We wanted to heed the green mantra of "reduce, reuse, recycle," so we set out to find new homes for our old kitchen materials. We advertised our appliances and cabinets as free to whomever would come pick them up. "They even took the sink base that was basically rotted out," said Ned Sinkavitch, the contractor who was working the day people picked up our cabinets, countertop, sink, faucet, garbage disposal, dishwasher, stove, microwave oven and barely functioning refrigerator.

As work proceeded on our kitchen, we reluctantly made two not-so-green decisions. First, we went to check out tile for our backsplash. I had researched tile made from recycled glass, including products from Oceanside Glasstile and Sandhill Industries. We

looked at the Sandhill tiles, and they were gorgeous -- shiny but subtle, like sea glass. But they would have been pricey: We were quoted \$93 per square foot. The manufacturer's suggested retail price for Oceanside Glasstile is also high: \$28 to \$50 per square foot.

And then we spotted some glass tile we both were crazy about that was far less expensive, but we didn't know whether it was made from recycled glass. What's more, it had to be shipped from Asia, a process that would burn fuel, not to mention adding months to our renovation.

But we adored it and decided to compromise our green commitment there. Later, we were glad to find out that half to three-quarters of the glass in the tiles, from a California company called Lunada Bay Tile, was recycled.

In July, our cork floor was installed. We had chosen a swirl pattern of thin green-blue curves breaking up larger areas of tan-brown cork, looking almost like stone. We liked the sample Donaghy had given us, but after Jamison installed the cork in our kitchen, next to our new maple cabinets, it didn't seem to work. The cork and the maple were too similar in color.

With heavy hearts, we decided to replace the floor with another color of cork, closer to white. The extra cork tiles, and the extra work for Jamison, would cost us only a few hundred dollars -- the advantage of a small kitchen -- and we figured we would like the result much more. With that, we decided to pull up the new, unblemished cork floor and replace it with another one.

It was not environmentally friendly of us, but we just had to have a floor that we liked. We're hoping to find other uses for our extra cork tiles.

Our kitchen isn't finished: the backsplash tile just came in, after its long journey from Asia. It's sitting in boxes in the living room, along with the replacement cork, waiting to be installed. But we already enjoy cooking in our new space, and we hope we haven't hurt the environment too much by creating it. We're planning to buy carbon offsets, which means contributing to groups that plant trees or invest in renewable energy, as a sort of voluntary tax to make up for the fossil fuels we consumed in creating our new kitchen.

That kitchen is more than just beautiful, we think. And, like the Trinkoffs, we're glad it doesn't stink.

Lila Guterman is a journalist and lives in Washington.

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