



A movement underfoot

January 10, 2013

Sleek tile, richly colored hardwood, thick carpeting — it might seem that today's flooring choices have been around forever. But new versions of time-tested materials reflect a growing practicality in homebuilding, in which qualities such as affordability and longevity are being embraced more than ever.

"My clients are really time-crunched," said Carmin Awadzi, founder and chief executive of Wheaton-based Magnolia Custom Homes, whose clients build homes in the \$800,000 to \$1.4 million price range. "What's important to them is function and durability. If they can find a material that's beautiful and mimics the look of a more expensive, high-maintenance one, it's a no-brainer for them."

For Awadzi's clients, it has been goodbye to natural stone, which has porous surfaces that can absorb stains and require regular sealing to maintain them. Instead, many are embracing porcelain tile, which can take tough knocks in the kitchen and bath and resists spills.

And for those who like the look of walnut flooring but don't want the expense, Awadzi suggests using a more economical type of wood with a walnut-colored stain.

It's typical to see fewer new-product introductions when housing markets are stagnant. The past few years have been no exception, said Steve Goldman, store manager of REXX Rug in Lakeview.

A few changes are worth noting, though.

New choices. "People used to just say 'tile,'" and it was enough to figure out what they wanted, said Jeff Stewart, co-owner of Greater Chicago Installations, a flooring installation company based in Elmhurst. That has changed now, as porcelain versions have entered the market to compete with ceramic standbys.

The attraction? "Porcelain is harder and stronger" than other types of tile, Stewart said. "You could drop an anvil on it."

Stewart said he and his wife own 95 percent of the porcelain dish set they purchased as newlyweds 30 years ago, illustrating the material's strength.

This versatile chameleon comes in versions that mimic stone or wood, typically at more affordable prices. "You literally need to touch it to see that it's not wood," said Denise Benach, director of interior design for Chicago-based Lexington Homes. The flooring material has been popular with buyers at its Lexington Square community in the Bridgeport neighborhood, where many new homeowners have small children, she said.

Another interesting point about porcelain tile, said Helen Velas, president of Naperville-based Eleni Interiors, is that it's colored differently than its ceramic counterparts. "The coloring goes all the way through the tile," she said. "If it does happen to chip, you won't really notice it."

Thinking big. Homes are smaller, budgets have shrunk, but something is getting bigger in this downsized housing market: tile and wood plank sizes.

Brian Brunhofer, president of Deerfield-based Meritus Homes, has noticed the trend. His customers are requesting wide planks for their hardwood floors and 12-by-18, 18-by-18 or 12-by-24-inch tiles for kitchens and baths.

Velas has worked with tiles as large as 24 by 48 inches. "That's practically as big as a kitchen table," she said. "It gives a room a grand feeling — like slabs of stone."

Larger tiles also mean fewer grout lines, she added, something some people consider an eyesore, particularly as grout becomes darkened from wear.

Time-tested hardwood. Some things never change. Homebuyers, for example, just can't seem to get enough of hardwood floors.

"We're seeing more desire for wood throughout the entire first floor," said Christopher Shaxted, executive vice president for Right Residential, which buys and rehabs existing properties throughout the Chicago area. Buyers are drawn to the longevity and durability of wood — the fact that it can be refinished over and over again is a distinct plus, he said.

Many also like the ability to see what's collecting on their floors, particularly if they are allergic to dust or pet dander. It's often difficult to know what lurks unseen in a shaggy or particularly dense carpet. "Hardwood just seems cleaner and fresher somehow," Shaxted said.

Customers of Orren Pickell Building Group continue to request hardwood floors, but some want different types of wood to keep things fresh. "Acacia is a beautiful wood and it's incredibly hard," said Orren Pickell, who is president of the homebuilding firm. Still,

good old white and red oak remain the most popular choices for hardwood flooring among his customers.

Soft landings. Despite wood's popularity, wall-to-wall carpeting hasn't lost its appeal. Basements, bedrooms and family rooms — all are areas where children get down on the floor and play — are prime candidates for cushiony floor coverings.

Another alternative, Pickell said, is cork: "Cork is pretty and it's a reasonable choice," he said. "It comes in a variety of colors, textures and patterns."

Also popular, and practical, are carpet tiles, which can be swapped out easily if one tile becomes damaged. "They make a lot of sense from a maintenance perspective," Velas said. Carpet tiles are applied directly to the floor with adhesive and can be arranged in a variety of patterns.

Mixed materials. While those building homes today tend to be careful with their choices, buyers will make a well-considered splash if they can afford it, said Brian Hoffman, vice chairman and chief financial officer of Red Seal Development, which builds semicustom homes in northern suburbs such as Lake Zurich and Wilmette.

Hoffman's clients mix wide-plank hardwood with stone, crafting eye-catching patterns in public spaces or creating special private spaces where they can unwind in style. Wood planks are installed on a grid that is filled in with tile or stone.

"We're seeing (these designs) in the entryway and master bath," Hoffman said. "People often like to match their flooring to the tile work in the bath."

Also new, Velas said, is an emphasis on texture. She's favoring natural flooring, such as sisal that's installed wall to wall and dispensed from rolls like carpeting.

Flooring today is anything but uniform: Carpets are sculpted with patterns in the weave and with loops cut to differing heights. Wood floors wear distress marks, wormholes and scrapes like badges of honor. Topsy-turvy housing market aside, buyers are willing to embrace imperfection, at least, when it comes to their floors.

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