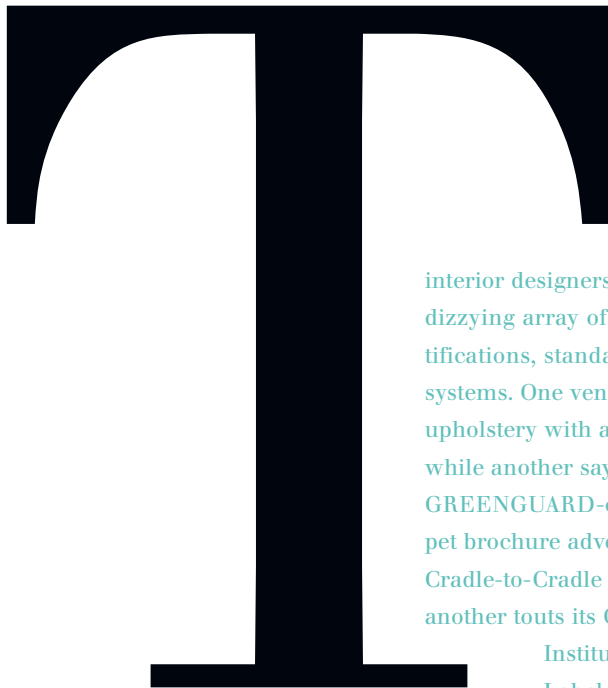


The Green Jungle

WITH SO MANY SUSTAINABLE CERTIFICATIONS AND RATING SYSTEMS FLOODING THE MARKET, IT CAN BE DIFFICULT FOR DESIGNERS TO KNOW WHAT'S GREEN AND WHAT'S GREENWASH.

By David Whitemyer





he seemingly unending number of eco-friendly building materials available to

interior designers has created a dizzying array of green labels, certifications, standards and rating systems. One vendor may stamp its upholstery with a Green Seal label, while another says its product is GREENGUARD-certified. One carpet brochure advertises Silver Cradle-to-Cradle certification, and another touts its Carpet and Rug Institute (CRI) Green Label achievement.

“I think manufacturers are as confused as designers ...,” says Elaine Aye, IIDA, LEED AP, Principal of Green Building Services, a Portland, Ore.-based consulting firm. “Those of us in the architecture and design field have a steep learning curve when it comes to green products.” Aye isn’t surprised by the large assortment of green labels. With the tremendous number of evolving sustainable

technologies and processes, it’s difficult for designers to know the right questions to ask suppliers.

There is no doubt that sustainable materials provide health, environmental and economic benefits, so as challenging as it may be, designers must navigate through the maze of products and determine the better from the good. They also must understand what the ratings and labels mean, and take the initiative to ask questions regarding how products are made, used and disposed.

It’s not an impossible task, but it does involve conducting extensive research and keeping a watchful eye.

SORT IT OUT

Not all green products are created – and rated – equal. “Designers often focus in on just one single attribute of a product,” Aye says, such as whether it’s made with post-consumer recyclables. But that doesn’t get to the heart of what those recyclables are, where they come from or if they contain toxins. “We need to look at the big picture,” she adds.

“THOSE OF US IN THE ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN FIELD HAVE A STEEP LEARNING CURVE WHEN IT COMES TO GREEN PRODUCTS.”—Elaine Aye, IIDA, LEED AP, Principal, Green Building Services

That's easier said than done. The U.S. government defines environmentally preferable products as those having "a lesser or reduced effect on human health and the environment when compared to competing products that serve the same purpose." With such a vague qualifier, there are a number of varying attributes that may define a product as being "green," depending on what's being measured and who's doing the labeling.

Green materials might emit low volatile organic compounds (VOCs)

pre-consumer recyclables, if it's been tested for toxins and its durability.

Most designers aren't lucky enough to have access to such a comprehensive "green bible," and instead must rely on what reps tell them and what the product literature says. Uncovering the truth requires a bit of judicious detective work, and some reps may not understand the ratings any better than the designers. "When a rep tells me that his product is LEED-compliant, it makes me want to ask a lot of questions," Aye says. The

First-party certification, or self-certification, involves the dealer or manufacturer making direct claims about its product's attributes. Second-party certification may be performed by a trade association or vendor. While a second-party certifier may use an independent lab for testing, the certifier still sets the standards by which the lab tests. For third-party certification, credible testing and labeling agencies must be non-profit and have no direct connection with the material or its manufacturer. Bonda cites the popular

"UNLESS [A PRODUCT IS] THIRD-PARTY CERTIFIED, IT DOESN'T HOLD MUCH WEIGHT."

—Penny Bonda, FASID, LEED AP, coauthor of *Sustainable Commercial Interiors*

or provide a longer life and require lower maintenance than standard materials. They can include recycled content or be made of renewable natural resources. They could be produced in energy-efficient factories or made locally. If a product meets just one of these requirements, a vendor can potentially market its material as "environmentally preferable."

Aye's firm has created its own database of green materials. The list digs into various aspects of a product such as the manufacturer's location, whether it contains post-consumer or

U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) certifies buildings for LEED, not materials.

WHO WILL WATCH THE WATCHMEN?

The most important thing to know about a material's green certification is the source of that rating, says Penny Bonda, FASID, LEED AP, coauthor of *Sustainable Commercial Interiors* [Wiley, 2006].

There are three types of certifiers: first-, second- and third-party. "Unless it's third-party certified, it doesn't hold much weight," she says.

GREENGUARD label as a reputable third-party certifier. GREENGUARD Environmental Institute contracts with Air Quality Sciences Inc., an independent laboratory, to test materials brought to them by manufacturers looking to obtain the label. Green Seal and the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) are other accepted third-party certifiers, as is the Cradle-to-Cradle system.

The Green Label rating system of CRI, a trade association representing about 95 percent of all U.S. carpet manufacturers, is second-party

certified, Bonda says. “They’re doing good work, but it’s still self-certifying, not third-party,” she says. CRI has set up very stringent standards for its testing of indoor air quality, which – as with GREENGUARD – is performed by an independent lab. The Business and Institutional Furniture Manufacturer’s Association (BIFMA) is another second-party certifier.

First-party certifications are becoming rare as rating systems become more transparent and designers become more educated.

In all three types of certifications, the intentions are noble: to create less harmful goods. But they don’t guarantee a product’s absolute “greenness.” “GREENGUARD, for example, measures the indoor emissions of a product,” says Eugene Lisa, Vice President of Verde Interior Products, a design consulting firm in Orlando. It does not provide any data about recycled content or energy efficiency. “People think more of it than it is. Designers need to understand that indoor air quality is only one aspect of a project.”

Similarly, a product certified by FSC only means its wood came from a well-managed forest. It

doesn’t ensure, for instance, that the item was produced in a low-pollution mill.

Lisa is on a mission to educate designers about the ins and outs of green product labeling and selection. At his seminars, he asks the audience, “Are you better off with a recycled product that has high toxicity or a non-recycled material with low toxicity?”

There’s no correct answer. Lisa preaches that it is almost more important to know what is not environmental about a product than what is.

THEY’RE NOT OUT TO GET YOU

By now, most manufacturers of construction goods have hopped on the sustainability bandwagon and are offering green versions of their products. Additionally, the movement has spawned a plethora of new players to the building materials market – fresh companies inventing innovative materials advertised as fashionable and good for the planet.

But despite all good intentions, Lisa worries about the amount of greenwash going on in the industry, that is, the dissemination of misleading information to conceal a company’s abuse of the environment.



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BREAK IT DOWN

1 Carpet and Rug Institute Green

Label Plus—second-party certification program that measures the chemical emissions of carpet and adhesive products.

2 Cradle-to-Cradle

—product certification introduced by McDonough Braungart Design Chemistry, which includes environmental and human health evaluations, material reutilization, energy use, water quality and social responsibility. It considers a product's life from cradle to cradle (i.e., its recyclability), instead of cradle to grave.

3 Forest Stewardship Council

(FSC)—non-profit and third-party certifier that encourages the responsible management of the world's forests. The group ensures and certifies that the wood in products come from well-managed forests.

4 Green Seal

—non-profit and third-party certifier that certifies products based on a lifecycle approach, from raw materials extraction through manufacturing, to use and disposal.

5 GREENGUARD Environmental

Institute—non-profit that oversees the GREENGUARD certification program, a third-party testing program for low-emitting indoor products and materials.

6 Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System

—USGBC benchmark for the design, construction and operation of high-performance green buildings.

7 The Business and Institutional

Furniture Manufacturer's Association (BIFMA)—non-profit group and second-party certifier that has developed voluntary product and industry standards that support sustainable environments.

8 U.S. Green Building Council

(USGBC)—non-profit dedicated to changing the way buildings are designed, built and operated. The group is made up of more than 11,000 member organizations and 75 regional chapters.

IIDA seeks to promote awareness and knowledge of interior design strategies that reduce negative impacts on our natural environment and improve the health and well-being of all people. For more information about IIDA's initiatives and sustainability goals, visit IIDA.org.



And he is quick to illustrate hidden dangers. Cadmium, known to cause cancer, is found in some fabric dyes. The carcinogenic chemical compound benzene is found in some paints and furniture wax. Antimony is a toxic chemical element included in most plastic drinking bottles, which are often recycled to make textiles. “Why would a manufacturer tell you it has antimony in its product?” Lisa says. “It may be in the product literature, but designers have to read the fine print!”

are Cradle-to-Cradle-certified, a rating system that, West says, considers the entire lifecycle of a product. “We think it’s important to have systems in place that keep our products healthy and out of the landfills,” he says. “It’s part of our corporate philosophy.”

Shaw follows on the heels of Interface, another flooring giant that spearheaded the eco-friendly carpet movement in the mid ’90s. West points out that each manufacturer is doing what it thinks is best for the environment, which may lead to some

apples. For example, Building for Environmental and Economic Sustainability (BEEES) is a software program that uses a life-cycle approach to measure the environmental performance of materials. Another, PHAROS, combines everything that is known about a product into a single open-source and constantly evolving online database.

But nothing can take the place of a designer’s critical eye, and no software or directory should excuse a designer from learning about the

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Jeff West, Cartersville, Ga.-based Director of Environmental Affairs for carpet manufacturer Shaw, agrees there is some greenwashing going on. “But for the most part, manufacturers believe that the things they’re doing are important and good for the environment,” he says.

Taking sustainability to heart, Shaw recently built a state-of-the-art waste-to-energy plant in Dalton, Ga., that converts carpet waste to steam energy. Also, Shaw produces a number of carpet fibers and backing materials that

of the confusion from multiple rating systems and definitions of green.

West is optimistic that over time, sustainability standards will become more encompassing. “It will evolve in such a way that there will be fewer and better standards that more people are participating in,” he says.

KNOWING WHAT TO ASK

Rushing to the rescue, a number of tools have been developed in the last few years to help designers and contractors sort through the green muck and compare materials, apples to

products he or she specifies. Whether a project is corporate, civic or residential, interior designers must consider the health, safety and welfare of the public.

When grilling vendors, Lisa says, designers should inquire about disposal and durability, toxins, transportation, regulations and recyclables.

“It’s the designer’s responsibility to go beyond the buzzwords, beyond the surface,” he says. “They must know how products are made and used, and they must become educated in knowing what questions to ask.” 