

It's a Little Easier Being Green

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Construction companies, Bob Vila-types and architecture firms for years shied away from environmentally friendly products, citing high costs as a deterrent.

Today, that criticism has lost some of its luster, as companies large and small are turning to "green" products as a way to save greenbacks.

Two examples: Carpet made from recycled plastic costs \$8 to \$25 per square yard, compared with petroleum-based nylon carpet at \$10 to \$30 per square yard and wool-based carpet from \$20 to \$80 per square yard.

Alloc floor boards - a man-made product composed of wood pulp - cost between \$2 to \$3 per square foot, compared with oak floors at \$3.50 to \$5.50 per square foot, and bamboo floors at \$4.50 to \$7.50 per square foot.

Denver developer Grant Barnhill has used recycled carpet and Alloc floors in recent projects. "Some of the green items that make a home more efficient also make (the design) more profitable," he said.

Barnhill is an executive with Denver's Portus Funds, a private real estate investment company that thinks green when building and retro-fitting metro-area homes. In some cases, using green products instead of traditional ones saves the company money.

The floors used in Portus buildings are made of sawdust and cost the company half what it would have paid for hardwood, he said. They used the savings to purchase other green products, such as paint or ceramic tile, that are more expensive than traditional products.

While prices for the recycled carpets remained flat this year, the cost for petroleum-based products such as nylon has inched up several times, a result of surging oil costs.

Green carpets make up "an ever-increasing portion of our business," echoed Jim Borrough, a sales manager at Denver's Total Floors Inc. Likewise, green hardwood floors made of bamboo, flaxseed or sawdust are increasingly on his clients' radar. Some recent data suggest that building green saves greenbacks - at least in the long run.

Upfront costs for green buildings are typically 2 percent more than traditional buildings. However, increased energy savings often offset initial costs by as much as 20 percent over a green building's life span, according to a 2003 report by the U.S. Green Council. Still, experts said many builders and contractors are unaware how plentiful green products are.

"Right now, the biggest challenge is actually knowing where to go," said Portus' Barnhill. "If you can find (them), you can get a comparable price."

Finding green products a few years ago was a challenge, said Kristi Ennis, an architect with Boulder Associates who designed the Boulder's environmentally acclaimed Community Foothills Hospital. She searched feverishly for nontoxic paints, and eventually found some the day before the hospital's operating rooms were to be painted.

The industry has since begun to change.

"It's an emerging market," Ennis said, "and the costs for these products are coming down because people are asking for them."

"It's just good business, Barnhill said. "Before we didn't see nearly the number of people who want to live in green buildings as we do now."

"There is a big push for green products," said Jaime Rodriguez, president of Denver's Aztec Custom Rugs and Carpet. "When you look at price and quality, using the recycled products, you are typically getting a better value."

So-called green carpets, for example, are often made from recycled plastic soda bottles. They cost 20 percent less than nylon rugs and are more durable.