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SIX SMALL **Design Strategies** TO **Work Sustainability** INTO YOUR NEXT RENO

By Yvan Marston

BAMBOO FLOORING, PROGRAMMABLE dishwashers, non-VOC emitting paint and formaldehyde-free particleboard are just some of the options available to contemporary homeowners completing green interior design projects.

“A lot of people are now looking at a project’s entire budget and deciding what aesthetics they can do without in order to include more sustainable options,” says Marina Fensham, a GTA-based designer whose firm thinkGiraffe specializes in bringing a sustainable approach to residential projects.

An on-demand water heater can cost \$3,000 and solar panels on the roof could run in excess of \$6,000, but Fensham says clients building additions and undertaking major renovations are increasingly trying to work these items into the scope of the project.

“It’s not just about saving money in the long term on heating and water bills. It really is a matter of people trying to make the right choices and creating a healthy environment for their families,” she says.

While heating and insulation matters are some of the big items on everyone’s sustainable design to-do list, there are a number of smaller strategies to bear in mind when designing your approach:

SHOWER POWER

“Body showers are very popular, but they’re wasteful,” says Ray Binns of Binns Kitchen and Bath in Toronto. While the trend in bathroom fixtures is to model spa amenities, these are often high volume water users. That’s where Binns might suggest installing a recirculating shower, which still gives you the spa-like dousing, but uses a

system designed to recycle water in much the same manner a recirculating jet reuses water in a whirlpool tub.

Binns also points to flow restrictors as another means of saving water. Flow restrictors limit the flow of water, reducing the pressure and the water wasted, and can either be installed inside the showerhead or externally. They’re mandatory on all new home construction, but a lot of older homes don’t have them, he says, adding that getting better quality aerators and newer faucets when you remodel will reduce the water use, “and you won’t notice the difference.”

THE STRAIGHT FLUSH

The toilet is one of the largest users of water in a household, and switching from a 13-litre to a six-litre model could save as much as 110 litres of water a day, according to the City of Toronto’s website.

Dual flush toilets are another bathroom option that can help further reduce water use, says Binns. With one flush for liquid waste and another for solid waste, a dual toilet uses as little as two litres to wash away what a regular toilet might with 13 litres.



APPLIANCE APPEAL

Binns says smart appliances are the way of the future, with dishwasher makers increasingly incorporating programmable operation so that a wash cycle can run during off-peak hours, thus reducing the load on both water and hydro resources.

Other must-haves for every sustainably designed kitchen are Energy Star-rated appliances, which incorporate advanced technologies that use 10 to 50 per cent less energy and water than standard models.



If you really want carpet, Fensham suggests looking at carpet tile from environmentally conscious manufacturers.

ON THE FLOOR

Fensham is not a fan of carpeting. From an environmental standpoint, it's one of the worst things you can do, she says. According to statistics in a news release distributed by Shaw Industries, "more than 25 million tons of post-consumer carpet is deposited in landfills each year, comprising two per cent of all landfill waste." In addition to its massive impact on landfills, carpet has a short lifecycle, off-gasses for a long time and collects and retains dust.

Instead, Fensham suggests using rapidly renewable resources such as bamboo or cork flooring options. But since neither is locally manufactured, using these effectively increases the environmental footprint of your renovation. So while hardwood might be less rapidly renewable, if it is from a local source there's an argument to be made for its use over that of bamboo.



A SEATED POSITION

Formaldehyde is a common ingredient in the construction of particleboard, plywood, panelling and pressed-wood products, so it's best to look for furniture that has a solid wood construction, explains Fensham. As a volatile organic compound, or VOC, formaldehyde contributes to indoor air

pollution (most major paint manufacturers offer non-VOC paint to address similar concerns about home air quality). "Try to go for solid wood or bamboo construction," says Fensham, "that way you know what you are getting. Or you can call the manufacturer to find out what's in the composite materials."

Fensham is also wary of stain-repellent treatments for upholstery. "I think we will likely find these to be harmful in the future," she says. If the decor allows it, she suggests buying furniture with washable cotton covers.





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LIGHTEN UP

The move to compact fluorescent bulbs was met with some dread in the design community, as the light offered by these energy efficient marvels was often little more than industrial. But things have changed, says Fensham, and colour rendition has improved tremendously. Still, people look and feel better in incandescent lighting, so Fensham recommends including a couple of PAR20 lights (40 watts) in the design of new space. These little floodlights have a halogen-like effect that gives off "a cheerful light," she says, adding that, with her background in environmental psychology, one should never underestimate the power of good lighting. ■

Images courtesy of Marina Fensham