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Sleek Surfaces

Tasteful trends in countertops and flooring

By Jamie Quinn



This countertop was made using brown camellian. It is one of the many semi-precious stone countertops included in CaesarStone's Concelto collection.

If you want to create a spectacular room, start by making a surface impression. The most beautiful rooms are designed from the ground up, starting with the floor, and then moving to the next best horizontal surface—the countertop.

When it comes to flooring and countertops, there is no shortage of materials to choose from, and although that won't make your design decisions any easier, you may be surprised to learn about the variety of new and improved products on the market.

Consider wood for example; it's a timeless material that creates a look that can survive almost any trend cycle. Over the years, the most widely used hardwood flooring has included oak, maple

and ash. These are popular choices because they are extremely durable. Specialty woods such as walnut, teak or cherry are also widely used and considered quite luxurious. Still, the material receiving the most attention right now is definitely bamboo. It costs about the

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same as a durable hardwood but, if processed correctly, is even more durable. It has a beautiful light grain and comes in a variety of rich colors. It's been around for a while but has only recently received the attention, that some may say, it has always deserved.

Bamboo has been brought into the spotlight recently because it is considered a "green" product. Often called a wood substitute, it is technically a grass and can be harvested every three to five years. Compare that to oak, which can take more than 100 years to reach maturity, and it becomes obvious why the renewable resource is receiving so many accolades.

Denise Turner, past president of the American Society of Interior Designers, says bamboo is here to stay. She recommends using the product in high traffic areas as an alternative to carpet or wood. "It's easy to clean, mildew resistant, flame resistant, warp resistant and moth resistant," she said. Turner does caution her clients against using bamboo or wood flooring in areas that are susceptible

to moisture, such as bathrooms and kitchens. The look of wood can be achieved in these rooms by using synthetic materials that give the appearance of wood.

Another practical option is ceramic tile. There are a wide variety of ceramic tiles available that are manufactured to look just like wood. These ceramics come in a variety of shapes, ranging from squares and planks, to slim or thick strips. They come in several rich, warm wood colors and are becoming extremely popular in kitchens and great rooms.

Patti Fasan, owner, Professional Attention To Tile Installations, says advances in technology have made it possible to create these beautiful wood-inspired ceramic tiles without typical grout lines.

"Now what we do is called rectifying the tile. So, we literally take all four sides of the tile, and with water jet cutters we cut off all four sides, so the tile is perfectly flat. It doesn't have that pillowed edge from the press and it's all the same size."



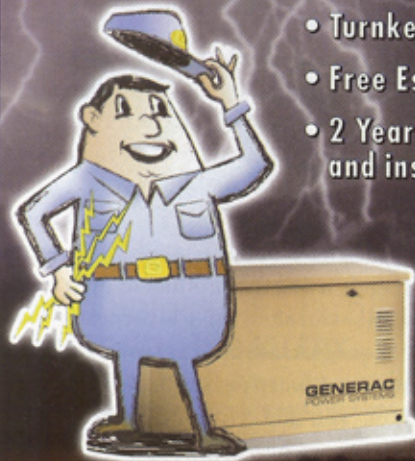
Wood imitation ceramic tiles are a great alternative to hardwood in high traffic areas.

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said Fasan. "As soon as it's all the same size, you only need that hairline joint, the very same joint you'd get in wood, so you don't see the grout line."

While most homeowners are sticking to traditional flooring colors and stains, many are getting creative with patterns. Laying down strips of wood or tile on a diagonal is a popular way to add interest and style to a room. But, if you don't mind spending a little more for installation you may want to try a herringbone layout. It is similar to parquet, but uses individual square modules, which are laid down on a diagonal. Another way to add interest is to create a border pattern around the perimeter of the room. This can work very well to define living spaces in open concept areas of the home.

You can even use wood to create a puzzle on the floor. A new product, called Puzzle Floor, is throwing a curve into traditional wood flooring patterns with its solid hardwood components that are pre-finished, precision-fit puzzle pieces.

If you're looking for something a little softer underfoot, consider cork. It comes

in squares, rolls, sheets and planks. It is also considered a "green" product because the cork tree is not destroyed when the cork is harvested. The bark is taken from the tree every nine years or so, causing no damage to the tree and allowing it to re-grow its bark. Cork flooring is, in fact, a recycled product, made from the waste produced during the wine bottle stopper manufacturing process.

Natural looking floor products are definitely hot this season and Turner says their popularity is likely to continue through 2008 and beyond. "Overall design directions are definitely being inspired by nature," said Turner. This trend is also apparent in the countertop industry, which seems to be moving away from industrial metallic type sur-

"The beauty of a solid surface is you don't have to worry about germs growing in it."...

faces towards softer, natural colored, stone-like materials. "People tend to be a little more conservative on the more expensive investments like their kitchen cupboards and countertops, bringing in the punch and color using accessories and window coverings."

According to Turner, rich browns and taupes are very popular countertop colors right now.

High-end materials such as granite and concrete are still widely used in homes, but are certainly receiving some healthy competition in today's design market. New look-a-like products are now being manufactured as low maintenance alternatives to natural stone. They aren't any less expensive, but they require a lot less up-keep.

"The disadvantage of granite is that you have to seal it, every six months or so. And, if you don't maintain it properly it can actually absorb odors," said Turner. Concrete surfaces have to be waxed on a regular basis. Turner says solid quartz crystal and other engineered stone surfaces are gaining increasing popularity

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Different shades of Puzzle Floor pieces can be used as accents to create a dramatic look. ♦ Puzzle Floor can be installed as a floating floor or glued down.

over granite. "The beauty of a solid surface is you don't have to worry about germs growing in it." Quartz crystal surfaces are designed to look just like natural granite or even concrete and come in a variety of colors.

The highest-end quartz crystal surfaces are manufactured using semi-precious stones. CaesarStone has come out with a line that includes several semi-precious options including jasper and rose quartz. For a high price, these colorful slabs will turn any countertop into

a sparkling centerpiece.

Turner says, whatever flooring or countertop materials you choose, you'll want to make sure to make an investment you can enjoy for a lifetime. She suggests shopping around and consulting with an interior designer before making a decision.

There is no denying the functional and esthetic impact that floors and countertops can bring to a home. Perhaps it really is what's on the surface that counts. ●