

BRUCE IRVING

renovation consultant

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Happy spring to my newsletter subscribers and clients. I will abjure lame jokes about greenness and the new season and instead move right into an admission that will probably not ingratiate me to some of you.

Truth is, I've been a skeptic about many aspects of the green building movement. My eyebrow arches when, for example, someone uses bamboo flooring (which is held together with lots and lots of glue, often containing formaldehyde, and is shipped to the US on bunker-oil-burning ships) to floor a new "green" 11,000 sq. ft. house. Tough too to get on board when magazines feature low-VOC paints on one page and walk-in showers with multiple heads and bodywashers on another. Greenwashing, marketing whatever's hot, and just trying to make ourselves feel better as we change almost nothing about our consumption habits—the suspicion of these plus the thought that a year's worth of green living is negated by 2 minutes' operation of a coal-powered electricity plant...you get the picture.

But after my time in the desert of cynicism, I've been reminded that every little bit helps, and just because larger forces are at work doesn't mean we do nothing as individuals—as long as we keep lobbying against the big stuff, like coal-powered electricity plants. To this point, "Why Bother?", Michael Pollan's excellent piece in the New York Times magazine of April 20, is worth a read: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/20/magazine/20wwln-lede-t.html>

This may not rate as my *Green Album*, but here are a few things that have caught my attention.

Three Good Sources for Green Building Products

1. For folks in the Boston area, F.D. Sterritt Lumber in Watertown, Mass., was the first retail lumberyard in New England to receive FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) chain of custody certification, and after a slow start, business has grown 200% since 2005. Jack Mackin, third-generation operator, and his partner Clayton Schuller stock FSC-certified hardwoods and plywood, a full line of low-VOC adhesives and caulking. Their latest green product is a heavy-metal-free pressure-treated lumber called Wolmanized L3 Outdoor Wood.

www.sterrittlumber.com

2. A spinoff of the traditional building supply company MarJam, Green Depot has been around since 2005 and has five showrooms with 15 distribution centers up and down the East Coast. They report a customer-push situation—with homeowners leading the charge into non-toxic cleaning products, paints, adhesives, carpets and other low-VOC products. Conservation of natural resources comes in second as a topic of concern, leading customers to choose plant-based

(rather than petroleum-derived) products such as bamboo, cork and FSC-certified wood flooring, as well as natural linoleum. www.greendepot.com

As an aside, I'm a huge fan of linoleum, having seen it manufactured and knowing you could probably eat it for breakfast, it's so natural. It also wears like iron. One brand worth checking out is Marmoleum (www.themarmoleumstore.com).

3. And in Braintree, Massachusetts, is GreenSource Supply and Design, where founder/CEO Robert Botelho makes a point of vetting each and every product he sells, often to the point of visiting the plant. I met him at this year's Building Energy trade show in Boston, and he impressed me with his intimate knowledge of green products and how they're made. www.greensourcesupply.net (new site under construction.)

A couple of hot sellers in the green retail space:

- IceStone Pavers are manufactured in Brooklyn, New York from 100% post-industrial waste – for interior and exterior use in patios, walkways, bathroom floors, gardens, shower surrounds, and more. Essentially, IceStone Pavers are double-recycled, as they are constructed from the broken pieces and overruns from IceStone's 100% post-consumer recycled glass countertop manufacturing process. That said, remember that no material is perfect, and IceStone, despite its many accolades, still contains concrete, a very energy-intensive thing to make.

- Kährs QuietStride Underlayment is manufactured from 90% post-consumer recycled tires, which are ground up into scrap, bonded with latex, and adhered to a fiberglass/cellulose backing using a low-VOC adhesive. A typical discarded truck tire yields enough recycled rubber to produce about 40 square feet of underlayment. QuietStride is used as a soundproofing layer under hardwood or engineered flooring, with excellent acoustical abatement.

Going Whole Hog

If a brand-new green house is on your shopping list, a very interesting company is Zero Energy Design. Based out of Charlestown, Massachusetts, and working all over the world, it's a company of architects, mechanical engineers, and financial analysts who bring a rigorous cost-benefit approach to the task of green design and building. I heard about them when I saw their design for a 7000-square-foot house being built on Cape Cod (which I will be writing about in an upcoming issue of *Design New England*). Not only is the building beautiful, but it will produce as much energy as it consumes over any given year.

A new service they offer is a \$900 “renovation recommendation” tailored to your home—it includes product recommendations, analyses of various HVAC and photovoltaic installation scenarios, and prescriptions for improved indoor air quality and energy and water conservation. www.zeroenergy.com

Geothermal Made Clearer

I've helped several of my clients investigate geothermal heating and cooling systems over the past couple of years, and we've been amazed at how complex and diffuse the trail of information is. Apparently we aren't the only ones, as a new company called HeatSpring Energy has sprung up to act as a clearinghouse for all matters geothermal. Based in Cambridge, they bring educational and training courses to professionals and homeowners around the country, as well as publishing a contractor “green pages.” www.heatspring.com

And Most Importantly....

Give your house good insulation, especially in the roof, and an efficient heating and cooling plant. Since 50-70% of a home's energy goes to heating and cooling it, you will be well on your way to being green. And don't forget: renovating is recycling at its best.

Meanwhile, on the Self-Promotion Front...

It seems like the idea of renovation consulting is gaining traction. The *New York Times* ran a story in March that profiled me and a few other likeminded, like-businessed souls across the country (<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/13/garden/13coach.html?ref=garden>), New England Cable News interviewed me recently about my services (http://www.bruceirving.biz/necn_interview.html), and the CBS *Early Show* is planning on following me around one of these days. In each case, the journalist has clued in on the value of having an objective observer participating in the process. The metaphors fly fast and thick (You're like a wedding planner! You're like a marriage counselor!), but the consensus is that every party at the table (husband, wife, architect, builder) has a better chance of being heard if there's someone there to keep the communication flowing. It helps when that person has been through lots of projects, because perspective is very helpful in the thick of things.