Wood: *Cabinet Choice of the '80s?*

by Patrick J. Galvin

This—the dawn of the last half of the '80s—probably finds many builders still living in the '70s or the '60s. This is only natural. Most of us tend to lag behind the times, particularly if we're well established.

But while the start of the last half of any decade is not particularly monumental, it *does* mark a point in time—like New Year's Day or the day we got our first mortgage (or burned it). As such, it's a good time to take stock of the tremendous proliferation of choices we enjoy today in building materials.

This proliferation has occurred in all phases of construction, from cast-iron pipes to PVC, and from logs to pre-fab fully insulated walls. But in this case, let's consider just cabinets.

In 1986, we now can choose among solid lumber ... wood veneer on plywood or particleboard ... printed wood finish on plywood or particleboard ... high- pressure decorative laminate ... melamine panels ... vinyl or polyester laminates ... foils and woodgrains printed on Mylar and transferred to plywood or particleboard... high-gloss polyester ... steel ... polyurethane doors on wood cabinets ... the list goes on.

Of all these choices, what are cabinet manufacturers offering, and what are people buying?

Predominately, the answer is wood. In 1985, it accounted for 72 percent of the cabinets made in the U.S. and Canada. And since wood is what's being produced, wood is what people are buying.

This figure includes European manufacturers that predominately make melamine- surfaced cabinets. Their sales in the U.S. amounted to about $50 million in 1985, about 3 percent of total U.S. cabinet sales.

Most of the remaining cabinet production was split evenly between high- pressure and low-pressure laminates, which captured 13 and 11 percent of the market respectively. This leaves only a small percentage for vinyl, other laminates and steel.

There are interesting facets to these figures.

Real wood always will reign supreme with many consumers, but it's a simple fact that melamine laminates, whether high or low pressure, overcome or bypass all the problems associated with wood.

For example, one of our finest and most expensive cabinet lines is made of steel by St. Charles (which also offers wood and decorative-laminate cabinets). And the Gardencourt line of vinyl cabinets by the Scheirich Co. is certainly one of the better stock lines.

Nonetheless, both steel and vinyl sales are so relatively small that they can only be consigned to the "other" category. It seems that the public perception of steel and vinyl mitigates against sales.

Whether veneered or solid, the wood cabinets that people are buying are mostly oak (80 percent). The remaining species in popularity—ranging down from 6 percent—are cherry, maple, ash, birch, alder, pine, hickory, walnut and very small amounts of chestnut, teak and mahogany.

How much of that 80 percent is veneered and how much is solid is anyone's guess; no breakdown is available. Some manufacturers make a sales pitch for "solid oak," but veneer has real advantages.

For one, a veneered cabinet door is more stable than a solid lumber door, although modern factory finishing makes this a minor consideration except for doors that are 27 inches or more wide.

Instability and consequent warpage can be a real problem for a builder who buys unfinished cabinets, especially if finishing is left to the homebuyer. Changes in humidity from day to day can be a real threat to either veneered or solid unfinished cabinets, but veneer on plywood will be more stable.

Another point in favor of veneer is that it can be matched better than solids. Part of the beauty of wood is that nature makes it randomly, so no two doors ever match each other or the rails and stiles of the face frames. Consumers will buy that fact in concept, but sometimes not in cabinets.

As far as price is concerned, oak runs about 8 percent higher than birch, which was the leading cabinet wood a dozen years ago. The cost of pine is about the same, but although many buyers find its defects (knots) attractive, pine really is too flawed and too soft for cabinets.

Cherry and pecan run about 7 percent higher than oak, while walnut can run as much, as 15 percent more. But walnut varies so widely in grain pattern and is so seldom graded or matched that manufacturers usually get a lot that can't be used, which can boost the price of walnut cabinets.

Pecan and hickory grow together and have similar grains. Either one is about 8 percent higher than oak. When manufacturers buy either, they are get a lot of the other; they can specify how much hickory is acceptable when buying pecan, but it won't have much effect on the appearance or price of the cabinets.

Some manufacturers print walnut, teak, mahogany or other woodgrain patterns onto plywood or particleboard. A variation of this is foil, in which an exotic woodgrain is transferred to the plywood surface. Such printing suffers in durability, but it sure lowers the price.

The warmth, beauty, workability and naturally random patterns and colors of real wood always will reign supreme with many consumers, but it's a simple fact that melamine laminates, whether high or low pressure, overcome or bypass all the problems associated with wood.

They achieve maximum stability. They match in woodgrain and color. And when bought from a custom manufacturer, they can be indexed all the way from ceiling to floor.

There are literally hundreds of woodgrains and colors to choose from in high- pressure decorative laminates. Only a half-dozen choices might be available from any one stock manufacturer using low-pressure melamine laminates, but they would be indistinguishable from the high-pressure versions.

And, just as only an expert can tell a veneer from a solid, very few consumers can distinguish between wood and a high-pressure woodgrain laminate.

It's the builders who make the most of all the choices we have in this last half of the decade, so it's a good time to rethink the whole question of materials vs. appearance vs. price.

Or better yet, think anew about only one point: getting the most value for your money.•

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