INNOVATIONS FROM • ABROAD

by Wendy Talarico

New wrinkles and new technologies mark a fresh wave of imported building products

It's hard to buy a building product these days that isn't manufactured, at least in part, in another country. Look around the site and chances are you'll see tools from Japan, hinges from Germany, cabinets from Italy, and heating systems from Sweden.

A number of imports represent a real improvement over what's available in the U.S. Others just look better than their American counterparts or appeal to buyers simply because they're foreign.

Regardless, caution is advised when using any foreign products. Because they are unfamiliar, they may take longer to install, and the instructions may be hard to follow. Calling the company for help is often more trouble than it's worth. Also dimensions may vary, so that the usual tools and spacing don't work. And dealing with replacement parts and repairs can be a real headache.

In general, it's a good idea to check with your local code official before specifying any product that is likely to raise eyebrows. Otherwise the fancy French toilet that your customer just spent a bundle on may wind up in the garage, unused.

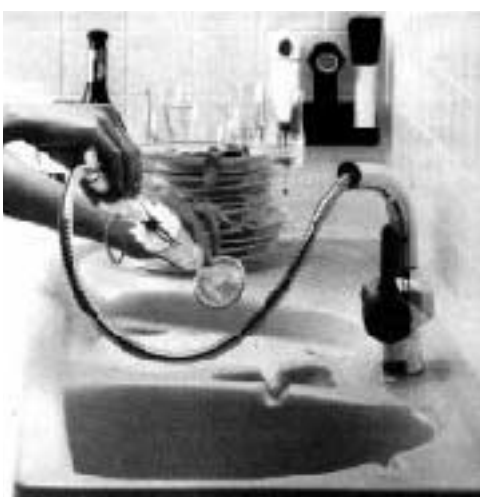
Detachable Faucets

If you've ever tried wrestling a large pot under a conventional kitchen faucet, you'll understand why your customers might request one of the new European pull-out kitchen faucets. By combining the sprayer and the faucet, companies like Grohe America (900 Lively Blvd., Wood Dale, IL 60191; 708/350-2600) have made it easier to wash dishes, scrub vegetables, or fill big pots and buckets — without trying to fit them into the sink. The deck is less complicated as well, since there's no need to install a separate sprayer. That can mean room for a soap dispenser.

Grohe's *Ladylux*, manufactured in Germany, lets the user select a spray or stream flow. The water is turned on and off by a button on the faucet head or with a conventional lever. With 59 inches of plastic hose wrapped in metal casing, the faucet extends farther than most conventional sprayers. The Ladylux is also available with four attachments that can be used for everything from scrubbing pots to filtering drinking water.

Like many European faucets, the Ladylux is finely machined with a sleek design. It's available in a variety of durable finishes, including black, white, gray, and bone, as well as the standard chrome.

The Ladylux faucet, from Grohe, detaches from its base and doubles as a sprayer.



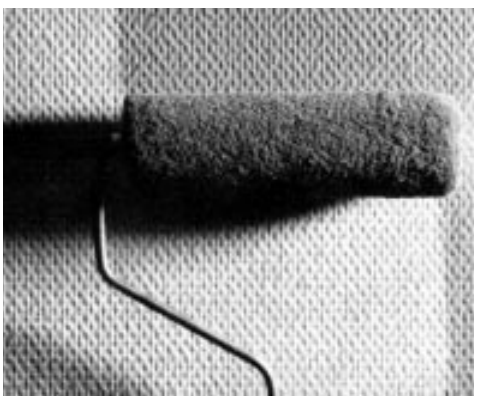
Fiberglass Wallcoverings

Most contractors, faced with crumbly old plaster, will replace it with new plaster or wallboard. But it's a messy and expensive job. Now Swedish wallcoverings made of lightly woven fiberglass will not only cover the offending plaster, they will hold it in place and prevent further deterioration. They also effectively hide old paneling.

Tasso (U.S. Tasso, 1239 E. Newport Center Drive, Suite 118, Deerfield Beach, FL 33442; 800/888-2776), one of many manufacturers, offers nine different textures on 39-inch-wide, 54-yard bolts. The wallcovering, which is white and feels like soft burlap, adheres to almost any surface, depending on the type of adhesive used. Since it is non-combustible, the material may be useful for commercial projects. Because it's inorganic, the wallcovering discourages mold and mildew problems. This makes it suitable for use in damp places like basements.

Fiberglass wallcoverings can be painted with latex, oil-base, or epoxy paint. But be forewarned: On the first coat the material sucks up twice as much paint as drywall.

Tasso's paintable fiberglass wallcoverings offer remodelers a quick fix for crumbling plaster.

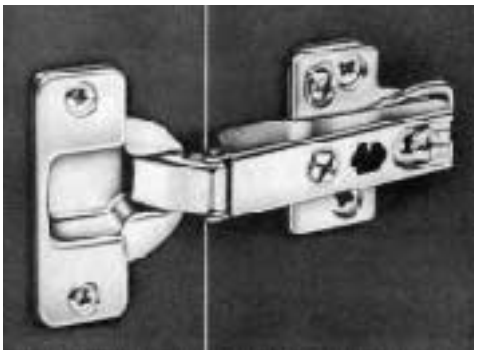


Handy Hinges

European-style hinges, like those first exported from Germany by Grass, offer some definite advantages over their American-style counterparts. They tend to be easier to align and they are invisible from the exterior.

Mepla, a German company (P.O. Box 1469, High Point, NC 27261-1469; 919/883-7121), has developed the *DS Klip* hinge with one additional advantage: doors are easily hung thanks to a hinge arm that simply clips into place on the mounting plate. The doors are just as easy to remove by squeezing the clasps at either side of the arm and lifting. No tools are required once the arm and the plate have been installed.

Mepla's DS Klip hinge lets you quickly hang or remove cabinet doors.

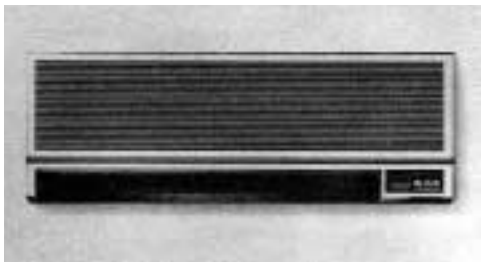


Ductless Heating and Cooling

Mitsubishi's (Mitsubishi Electric, 5757 Plaza Drive, P.O. Box 6007, Cypress, CA 90630-0007; 714/220-4640) split-type ductless air conditioner or heat pump may be just what you're looking for to heat or cool an addition. The system, mounted on the wall or ceiling, is connected to the compressor, located outside, by a length of copper refrigerant line. Depending on the size of the unit, the compressor can be up to 150 feet away from the indoor unit. Capacities range from 9,000 Btu to a four-ton system, ideal for commercial installations since it will heat or cool an area up to 1,600 square feet.

There's an added advantage to a split system: The unit is quiet and unobtrusive, unlike the typical room air conditioner. In fact, it's hard to tell when the system is on. Manufactured in Japan, the unit also includes a wireless remote control with a liquid crystal display that lets you set the temperature from anywhere in the room.

Since there are no ducts to run, the system can be installed by any licensed contractor within three to four hours.



Mitsubishi's ductless heat pump offers a convenient way to heat or cool an addition using a remote compressor unit.

One-Step Stucco

The strength of James Hardie (26300 La Alameda, Suite 400, Mission Viejo, CA 92691; 800/426-4051 or 714/582-0731) Building Products' *Harditexture System*, an alternative to conventional stucco sheathing, lies in the Australian company's fiber-reinforced cement-base panel. The 1/4-inch-thick sheets, which are non-combustible and water and rot resistant, are nailed directly to the studs. After the joints are taped and finished and the boards are covered with a primer coat, the elastomeric stucco finish may be rolled, troweled, or sprayed onto the surface.

Installation is quick, about three days, according to the manufacturer. Conventional stucco systems may take up to two weeks. Also the system has enough flexibility to give as the building settles, avoiding cracks.

The product, manufactured in California, is available in 15 colors ranging from pale yellow to mauve. It is suitable for residential and commercial applications.

Installation of the Harditexture Stucco System may take as little as three days.

Quick Brick Siding

What may be most unique about Coloroc's (Coloroc USA, Inc., 9453 Ravenna Road, Twinsburg, OH 44087; 216/425-1507) facade system is its installation. Vertical aluminum battens with hooks are nailed to the building at 12-inch intervals. The 24-inch-long siding units, or "stones," are hung on the battens by a lip that runs the length of the stone. The ends are pre-cut at 45-degree angles, allowing them to lap neatly.

The system lets you add extra layers of insulation over the existing finish before installing the battens. Also, since the stones hang about 1/2 inch away from the building, there's air space for ventilation. This helps to eliminate moisture buildup.

By scoring the stones at 12 inches and lapping them at 24 inches, the system imitates "contemporary brick," according to the manufacturer. The finish looks soft and gritty like brick, but it's made of concrete reinforced with polypropylene fiber and sealed with acrylic. While the stones are available in seven colors, the surface can be painted.

The system's installed weight is nine pounds per square. The manufacturer says it will withstand winds up to 150 mph and temperature extremes of minus 40°F up to 176°F. Developed in Sweden, Coloroc will start manufacturing the siding here in January.

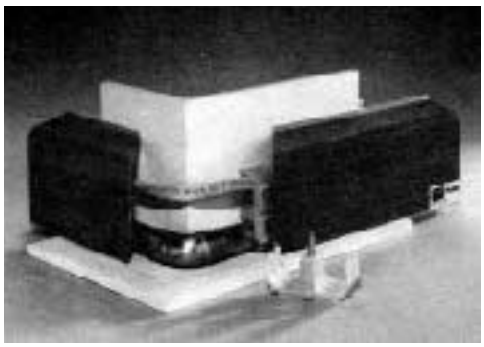
Coloroc's siding stones hang on aluminum battens nailed to the building's exterior.

Hollow Baseboards

One of the most common renovation problems is finding a chase to run the pipes through. You can box in a section of wall, but then the aesthetics suffer and you loose some space. Another alternative is to cut and patch the wallboard.

HZ, a German manufacturer, has developed the *HZ Profile* (Enerjee Ltd., 32 S. Lafayette Ave., Morrisville, PA 19067; 215/295-0557), a 3 1/2-inch-high, 1 1/2-inch-deep hollow plastic baseboard that will cover pipes or electrical conduits up to 3/4-inch diameter. A series of clamps holds the tubing in place and provides clips to which the baseboard attaches. The clips can be adjusted up and down about 1/2 inch to accommodate uneven flooring. The material comes in 10-foot lengths that are easily trimmed with a saw.

Available in a variety of finishes ranging from oak laminate to oak veneer, the baseboard includes fittings such as end covers, joint splices, and internal and external corners.



The HZ Profile hollow baseboard hides pipes or electrical conduits running along the surface of a wall.

Tilt-Turn Technology

Developed in Europe, tilt-turn windows (Marvin Windows, P.O. Box 100, Warroad, MN 56763; 800/346-5128) at first glance seem to operate backwards. While they look like casement windows, they open to the inside instead of cranking out. And like doors, they swing loosely on hinges. Controlled by a lever at the side, tilt-turn windows and doors can also be set to tilt inward from the top, providing good ventilation and making it hard for burglars to let themselves in.

There are other advantages as well. A single flick of the lever locks the windows and doors in at least four locations, making them more secure than conventional double-hung windows or sliding glass doors. Finally, tilt-turn technology creates a tight fit with little if any air infiltration.

So why haven't they taken over the building industry? For one thing, tilt-turn technology is expensive. Gearing up to produce the framing costs upwards of $50,000, according to one distributor. While the windows and doors are available in wood, PVC, aluminum, and aluminum-over-wood, PVC is least expensive. A valid concern of some consumers is that the windows are not ordinarily fitted with screens. And the fact that they swing inward is just plain unacceptable to some people.

Tilt-turn windows fit snugly, allowing virtually no air infiltration.

Wallpaper for Exteriors

While Belbien's (Nishiyama Corp. of America, 305 Northern Blvd., Suite 103, Great Neck, NY 11021; 516/466-7570) EX exterior decorative film will never replace paint, the 5-millimeter-thick sheets of weather-resistant PVC may be just the thing for making inexpensive trim look good, especially on commercial buildings. Wrap a sheet of the gray, granite-finish "paper" around a hollow plastic pillar and the casual observer will think the pillar is solid stone.

The rolls of film, imported from Japan, come with a pressure-sensitive backing that adheres to cement, plastic, primed plywood, and steel. The backing is exposed by peeling away a layer of paper. The material is applied with a squeegee and may be cut with a blade. You'll need a heatgun to coax the thick film around sharp corners.

The material is also available in a thinner, interior version. Both films come in 150 colors and patterns ranging from faux marble to leathery finishes and woodgrains.

Belbien vinyl surfacing adds a decorative and durable touch wherever installed, as in this reception area of a theater.

Controlling Vapor

A new vapor barrier developed in Denmark may be the answer to moisture problems in low-slope roofs and cathedral ceilings. The *Hygrodiode Vapor Retarder* (Siplast, 222 W. Las Colinas Blvd., Suite 1600, Irving, TX 75039; 800/922-8800 or 214/869-0070), which may also be used as a house wrap, is made from a layer of absorbent, synthetic felt sandwiched between strips of polyethylene. The strips are staggered from top to bottom and slightly overlap each other. If you hold the product to the light, it looks like a solid film of polyethylene, but strips of the inner felt are exposed on alternating sides. The material is about 8 mils thick.

Water vapor rising from underlying rooms is deflected by the polyethylene strips while water dripping from the roof above is absorbed into the inner felt. Then, when temperatures are right, the moisture absorbed evaporates into the rooms below.

Like traditional vapor barriers, the Hygrodiode is applied to the warm side of the ceiling or wall insulation in cold climates. But it may also be used in warm, humid climates, where it is applied to both sides of the insulation.

Installation is somewhat simpler than with other types of barriers. The Hygrodiode is overlapped about 4 inches and fastened to the joists or studs with staples.

The Hygrodiode Vapor Retarder gets its striped appearance from strips of polyethylene applied over an absorbent layer of felt.

Concrete Clapboards

FibreCem (11000-I S. Commerce Blvd., P.O. Box 411368, Charlotte, NC 28241; 800/346-6147) is one of several European companies producing clapboard siding from fiber-reinforced cement. The material has been available in the U.S. for about two years, although it's been popular in Europe for more than 50 years. It consists of organic fibers (usually cellulose), silica, cement, and water, which are mixed, autoclaved, and pressed into molds. Fiber-reinforced cement, which is also used for roofing, underlayment, and wallboard, offers some clear advantages over other types of siding materials. It won't catch on fire and it won't smoke. Insects don't like it, and it resists fungus and rot. FibreCem's *Handiboard* comes with a 50-year warranty.

Handiboard measures 9-inches wide by 12-feet long, with a thickness of 3/8 inches. Weight per square is 336 pounds with the recommended 2-inch overlap. The material also comes in 4x8 sheets which can be ripped with a diamond saw for soffits and other trim materials. While the material is easily nailed or screwed to sheathing and studs, it may be necessary to pre-drill holes close to the corners to prevent crumbling.

Available in a woodgrain or flat finish, the manufacturer recommends that if the material is painted (the natural color is cement-gray), an alkaline-resistant latex exterior paint should be used. ■

The clapboards on this house are made from fiber-reinforced cement. It consists of organic fibers (usually cellulose), silica, cement, and water, which are mixed, autoclaved, and pressed into molds.

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