

New Home Design: Material Selection for Home Interiors

Material choices can guide a home interior's entire design, so it's important to know which options are available.

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Issue Date:

July 2011



From choosing cabinetry to flooring, material selection can transform a house into a home. But there are many things to consider—color, texture, scale and, of course, comfort. Because the options are wide-ranging, it's important to have a distinct design scheme in mind.

Here are some of the considerations you should make when selecting interior materials:

The style you want: “The style or the look of the home sometimes dictates the material that a designer would advise their client to use,” says Michelle Lohr, president of GnM Lohr Homes, a build-design company in Austin, Texas. For example, Lohr says a modern style requires certain finishes, such as concrete walls, huge tile floors without patterns, sleek cabinetry, and no window or ceiling moldings.

Leslie Markman-Stern, owner of Leslie M. Stern Design Ltd., a residential and commercial interior design firm based in Chicago, says style especially comes into play when choosing textures. “If the client wants a more polished look, we probably wouldn't use rustic materials but rather something that's smooth, like porcelain, tile or smooth metallic finishes,” she says. For a country feel, she recommends rougher textures or more textured finishes, such as a brushed metal finish for hardware or one that shows some aging of the metal.

Which elements are staying: “We need to keep in mind which materials, finishes and elements are permanent because these will dictate the rest of the decisions,” says Natalia Smith, principal at Idée Chic Design, an interior design studio in Bellevue, Wash. For example, if an existing oak floor is staying but the homeowners want to add new cabinetry, the wood species of the cabinets should be distinct in color and grain pattern to create a perception of depth. If the floor is heavy on the grain side, such as with oak, Smith says she would choose woods with less pronounced grain, such as maple and alder, for the cabinetry.

The budget: The price of materials can have a big impact on the types of finishes you choose. “Most clients have a tight budget,” Lohr says. “So the way to work around this is to find solutions that are cost effective but almost look the same as an expensive option. For example, stone quartz costs more than granite. But there is a type of granite that, if fabricated in a certain way, can achieve a modern look.” However, there is often no suitable replacement for a costly option, so it's up to you and your clients to reconcile what they want with what they can afford. Stern says a primary factor in determining budget is how long the resident will be living in the home. If it's a starter home, the budget will probably be smaller, and the client will want more for his or her money as they will probably have limited funds for some time.

Who will be living in the space: “You have to match the practicality of your client's lifestyle to material choices,” Lohr says. “For example, soapstone countertops are very beautiful and trendy and prominent in modern designs but require a very tight upkeep. If the client is a stay-at-home mom with three kids, that counter would not be a great idea.”

The scale of a home and its natural lighting: Stern says sun exposure is a concern when selecting materials. For example, direct sunlight can affect some types of wood (i.e., cherry wood will become darker in intense light). On the other hand, if a room does not receive much natural light throughout the day, you should avoid dark colors to make the room appear more spacious, Stern says.

Although there are many things to consider when choosing interior materials, the first step is to simply listen to your clients and consider their requests, Lohr says. By working together, you can combine color and texture to create just about any look they desire.

