Reduce, reuse, refurbish?

With the environment being a primary political issue for many Canadians, some board members and condominium residents may want to establish or incorporate a “green” policy when refurbishing their building. Climate change affects everyone, but most people don’t know how or if they can make any impact. For those board members and condominium residents who make every effort to lessen their impact on the environment, there are now options available for renovations.
Green building practices began to emerge as both high-rise commercial and residential construction exploded across North America. The LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) building standard was developed in the early 1990s in response to the need for environmentally sustainable construction practices. The impact was immediate and positive. New buildings were designed from the ground up to be more environmentally friendly and energy efficient. A spinoff of the LEED program was the development of numerous environmentally sustainable building materials. This development, coupled with the explosion of the condominium residential market in Metropolitan Toronto, was an opportune time to integrate environmentally sustainable building materials into the condominium refurbishment market.

With the largest concentration of high-rise condominium buildings in Canada, Toronto is also home to a vast inventory of older condominium buildings. On average, these buildings are refurbished every 12 to 15 years. The refurbishment process requires substantial resources and generates a sizeable amount of waste. Managing waste is part of the LEED program; as a result, the marketplace has developed practices and materials to aid in the process. New sustainable building materials, combined with waste diversion programs, can reduce the environmental impact of a refurbishment project. Many of the major building suppliers across North America have developed environmentally sustainable building materials and programs in response to customer demand.

**Ceiling Tiles**
In the case of suspended ceilings, a Mississauga-based company has developed a Ceiling Panel Recycling Program. This program involves the company picking up the ceiling tiles that are being removed from a building and recycling the materials back into new ceiling tiles — thus reducing both waste and the need for new material extraction.

**Carpets**
Carpets manufacturers also have a similar program. One of the world’s largest carpet manufacturers has partnered with Siemens Technologies to create the first Waste to Energy facility in the carpet industry. Waste carpet can now be incinerated in this special facility, generating electricity for its manufacturing facilities. The company also offers numerous programs where it will recycle the existing flooring (usually carpet). Clients then have the option of utilizing 100 per cent sustainable carpet for their refurbishment project, and when replacement is required, the old carpet can be remanufactured into new carpet, reducing the environmental impact and the need for raw materials. One company has even developed completely sustainable printed pattern carpet. Printed carpet offers clients not only the freedom of design in typical or unique flooring configurations, but at the same time diverts carpet waste from landfill.

**Wall covering**
Next to carpet, wall covering is the second largest item — and the second largest waste item — in a refurbishment project. Many of the major wall covering manufacturers have recycling programs available in which wall coverings are 100 per cent sustainable. In 12 to 15 years, when the building is due for another refurbishment, the manufacturer will recycle the wall covering that is removed back into new wall covering, diverting any potential waste from landfill. Most manufacturers can also recycle the wall covering into other goods.

**Paint**
Paint is the single largest contributor of VOCs (Volatile Organic Compounds) to the environment. Many refurbishment projects use large amounts of paint, wall covering and carpet adhesives, which also off-gas VOCs. Through market demand and government legislation, the paint industry has also been forced to develop greener products. Recent legislation requires that alkyd or oil paint no longer be available for standard interior painting, leaving only waterborne or latex paint products. As a result, when older buildings are refurbished, they will need to be converted from oil paints to latex paints. Many of the newer buildings have already been coated with latex paints during the initial building phase, making them compliant with current legislation. Paint manufacturers have environmentally friendly paint systems and many products meeting LEED certification, further enhancing the green experience.

These new technologies and programs provide the means to make an immediate impact on a building’s green footprint. As property managers and boards present green alternatives to condominium owners, an added feature that applies to both carpet and wall covering is that many suppliers offer certificates to their clients guaranteeing that all the waste materials were recycled. In turn, boards of directors can provide this information to the building residents, re-enforcing the green experience.

Much can be said for the availability of sustainable building materials, but one of the most important factors in encouraging their use relies heavily on the price point. Typically, when people hear the word “green,” they immediately think “expensive.” And in the early phase of the green revolution, the new technologies were expensive. They weren’t widely used, nor were they widely marketed. That has now changed.

As the demand has increased, more manufacturers have offered sustainable building materials, providing the consumer with more choice. More choice has forced the marketplace to become more competitive, resulting in better pricing. In other words, going green is more affordable than ever before and should be considered as part of every building refurbishment project.

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