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GEORGIAN INTERIORS

CLASSICAL ROOMS FROM THE PAST

Reclaiming the Past

For some, wood is better the second time around.

BY GORDON BOCK

The Pennsylvania farmhouse kitchen, designed by Period Architecture, Ltd., has informal materials such as the light fixtures, chestnut reclaimed floors, polished nickel fixtures and stainless steel appliances. By traditionally detailing the kitchen and continuing with salvaged floors, the design unites the formal and informal spaces. Photo by Angle Eye Photography.

The classically inspired foyer, designed by Archer Buchanan, plays with volume and light. Careful attention to scale and proportion was taken to create a grand, yet welcoming entry space. The finely detailed millwork, black walnut flooring, and plaster ceiling ornamentation add warm and character to the space. Photo by Tom Crane Photography.

There is something culturally cosmic about generations-old wood finding new life as flooring, especially in a cyclical industry like housing. In fact, recycled/reclaimed wood is a second coming of sorts, with all-but-extinct species being resurrected for new projects and additions, while weathered or industrial boards rematerialize in the living rooms of traditional residences. So what's at the core of flooring woods on the rebound and how they're finished? Some experts expound.

The appeal of reclaimed wood floors has roots as varied as the materials themselves. "Trends play a big part," says Genna Antes at Sylvan Brandt LLC in Lititz, Pennsylvania, "so whatever beautiful pictures people see in magazines—or on Pinterest—is what they're going to like." She adds that the modern-mixed-with-rustic Restoration Hardware look is very popular right now and has been trendy for a while.

Carol Goodwin at the Goodwin Company in Micanopy, Florida, observes that consumers want a timeworn look and wider widths in floors more than ever before. "This trend started a few years ago when U.S. manufacturers increased their rustic, distressed looks to differentiate themselves from lower-cost imports." Reclaimed wood offers this aesthetic in an authentic material, she says, not new wood made to look old, and since it costs one-and-a-half to three times as much as more commercially available wood flooring, it's generally found in upscale homes. Antes adds that reclaimed wood comes close to art for the home. "If you study it, every board's a little different and beautiful the whole way through, not a photo-finish."

Nonetheless, flooring fashion can be fickle. "A couple of years ago, everybody wanted reclaimed wood floors in dark colors," says Antes. "Now people want lighter floors; more of a gray or white-washed look is getting popular." Goodwin agrees. "The gray and worn barn siding look is perhaps more an interior designer trend than a homeowner trend." Speaking of colors, there's evidence the green building movement has also fueled the popularity of reclaimed floors. "Millennials are the most sustainability conscious generation yet," observes Goodwin, "and are likely to pay more for a sustainable product." Antes notes the materials are embodied-energy conscious, "because we are reusing wood that would be demolished, and we're not cutting down any trees."

Reclaimed wood floors is a diverse industry dealing in often regional species that include chestnut, cypress, Douglas fir, Eastern white pine, oak, and Western red cedar. Goodwin explains that the popularity of reclaimed heart pine, one of her company's specialties, is due in part to the extensive demand for it in the past. "It was used to build Victorian homes, hotels, and palaces all up the Eastern U.S. seaboard and across Europe," she says. "We frequently match for repairs, renovations, and additions to these older homes, most often for flooring 2-1/2" to 3-1/4" wide." Heart pine in vertical grain cut was often used for flooring, she explains, because it shrinks and swells even less than flat-sawn cut, "or they might have used a mix of the two grain patterns."

Today wide plank is increasingly popular, she says, and works well when properly acclimated and installed.

Antes says her company has three products with an old, original surface: pine weatherboard, oak weatherboard, and reclaimed attic flooring. "They've been planed on the bottom, and have a new tongue-and-groove, but we haven't touched the surface. On these the color and character are already present, so we recommend just sanding and applying a clear finish." She adds that they have four resawn products cut down from old, reclaimed barn beams: oak, heart pine, white pine, and chestnut. "The regular pine weatherboard is probably the most popular product, then resawn oak, then everything else."

RECLAIMED WOODS

Even so, they can make available beautiful species such as chestnut and heart pine that have been long-gone as standing timber for decades due to disease

ABOVE: A large projecting bay window creates an ideal space for an intimate breakfast area. Designed by VanderHorn Architects, the kitchen and breakfast room share a painted Nantucket beadboard ceiling, dropped beams, and random width black walnut floors. Photo by Olson Photographic LLC.

As might be expected, installing generations-old flooring has its own nuances. "Wood floors are not rocket science," says Goodwin, "but they are wood science, and that requires a bit of expertise." Her most important tips are to use sufficient fasteners and a proper moisture meter to determine the floorings moisture level. "Reclaimed wood is often denser than second-growth wood, and so requires a pin-type moisture meter that operates on electrical resistance." Sit-on-top meters, she says, can be fooled by wood with varying density, such as river recovered heart pine. Antes concurs on the value of proper moisture content and letting products acclimate to the room before they are installed. "We advise four or five days to a week if you can," she says, "especially if the house doesn't have central air." When products are shipped out of state or across the country, the climate is going to be much different, she explains, and without acclimating, there's the potential for flooring to noticeably swell or shrink over the course of a year. "However, we've had people rush it to two or three days and still have good results."

Choosing finishes for reclaimed floors is actually a spectrum of options that begins with nothing at all and is guided by the desired look and usage, as well as a finish industry that is responding to environmental regulations. "If the customer does not already have

Designed by Braulio Casas, the kitchen and dining room are elegantly detailed with the timber framed ceiling, custom cabinetry, and beautiful reclaimed oak flooring. The feeling of sumptuous height is afforded by placing the public rooms on the third floor of the house as evidence by this picture. Photo by Jack Gardner.

SHOWN HERE AND RIGHT: The entry axis of this house designed by Barnes Vanze Architects runs under the curved stair and culminates in the jewel box sunroom surrounded on three sides by the garden. Interior finishes include natural white oak floors with a flat, dry looking finish and off-white Venetian plaster walls. Photos by Anice Hoachlander/ Hoachlander Davis Photography.

THE FINISHING TOUCH

One of a class of natural drying oils that, like linseed oil, form a film when exposed to oxygen, tung oil has been used for centuries in paints and inks and to create a transparent, durable, beautiful finish on woods. Modern versions for furniture and floor finishing typically modify raw tung oil to improve performance and application. "Polymerized Tung oil is basically heat-treated oil," explains Mary Goderwis of Sutherland Welles in North Hyde Park, Vermont, "which enhances the bonds of the natural, cross-linking mechanisms, and make them even more durable." Other examples include Waterlox Tung Oil Products, which the company says are resin modified "to form a film that is both water-resistant and elastic," and, to a lesser degree, what are sometimes called Danish finishes that may include varnish or other oils.

What leads some people to choose a tung oil finish for a reclaimed wood floor—especially in a period house—is, depending upon the product, not only the subtle, un-varnishy appearance but also the mechanical qualities. "Tung oil has a natural affinity for oxygen; that's how it hardens," says Goderwis, and that can be a good match with woods that have been out in the atmosphere for 100 to 150 years. "It also marries up fine with the resin in the wood," she says, an advantage with resinous species where other finishes may have trouble adhering. Goderwis herself works on many heart pine floors. In fact, one of her clients has been the restoration of Jefferson's Poplar Forest, his 1806 retreat in Forest, Virginia. "They had his archive notes," she says, "and Thomas Jefferson had actually used tung oil on his floors."

an opinion," says Antes, "we usually recommend that they first consider the wood product and decide whether or not they want a stain." Products with an old, original surface usually don't get stained because they already have a natural color, she says, "But if you sand those products down a little, or you buy a resawn product, you might want to stain it." A traditional finish Antes's clients often use is three coats of oil-based polyurethane. "People who don't like polyurethane, and just want a very natural look, often consider tung oil," she says. (See The Finishing Touch)

Goodwin notes that finishes continue to change, and they're all different chemicals, application rates, and drying times. "When doing a site finish, we always tell people the best finish is the one your finisher knows how to use." She says they sell solid flooring (and their engineered floor products) not only unfinished but also factory-finished. In addition, "because there's no such thing as a perfectly level subfloor," they can provide flooring with a micro-bevel to accommodate any minuscule height difference board-to-board. "If it's site-finished, you want square-edge flooring; if it's factory-finished, you want a slight micro-bevel so that you're able to lay the floor without having to pay for extra leveling." Advises Goodwin, "If you've got a professional that knows what they're doing, they should be able to finish a little section of floor for you to make sure you're going to get the color, texture, and consistency you want." ▪

Gordon Bock, co-author of The Vintage House *(www.vintagehousebook.com), lists his fall 2016 courses, seminars, and keynote addresses at www.gordonbock.com.*