

ecoscene

Walk the talk

It's easy being green when you know for certain what lies underfoot.

Polished wooden floors are as popular as ever and it's easy to see why. They're hard-wearing, easy to clean and great looking. If they're chosen correctly, they can also be a good environmental option.

Choosing the greenest product involves asking what has been cut down to make the flooring, how the boards have been constructed and what product has been slathered on top to tart it up.

Green interior designer Sharon Hamilton, from Your Abode, says the most environmentally friendly approach is to opt for locally made boards or recycled timber. She also recommends sending old flooring off to be recycled.

If you go with timber boards, look for products grown in sustainable forests – they'll have been certified by the Australian Forestry Standard or the Forest Stewardship Council.

Environa Studio's Jan O'Connor says popular species include Victorian and Tasmanian oak and radiata pine. For flooring with a difference, she recommends clients consider cork from Comcork. "It's an Aussie company with a strong commitment to its environmental policy," she says.

Mix and match

Today, it's popular to build homes on a cement slab, which can increase thermal mass and delay heat flow through a building by up to 12 hours, making a home warmer at night in winter and a cooler during the day in summer.

For a cement floor to act as thermal mass, it must be exposed to solar radiation in winter or cooling breezes in summer. Floorboards inhibit this, so if you are laying a slab and wanting a timber floor, consider combining

polished cement or tiles in the areas that get sun and breezes, with floorboards on the parts that don't.

Beyond the veneer

Floating floorboards, also known as engineered boards, are fashionable for laying over cement. These are typically a thin veneer-laminate on an MDF board backing. "These are quite dubious as they are generally of unknown origin and have issues with unknown formaldehyde and volatile organic compound emission levels due to the adhesives and MDF board," Hamilton says. Her pick of engineered floors is that made by Big River Timbers, which uses sustainable Australian hardwood layers.

Fast-growing alternative

Bamboo is becoming popular because the fast-growing plants are considered truly renewable. A big downside is that it's shipped from China, creating a fairly big carbon footprint. Each board is also several pieces of bamboo bonded together, so it is important to research what glues have been used.

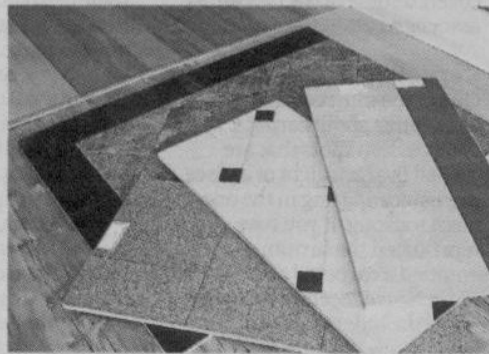
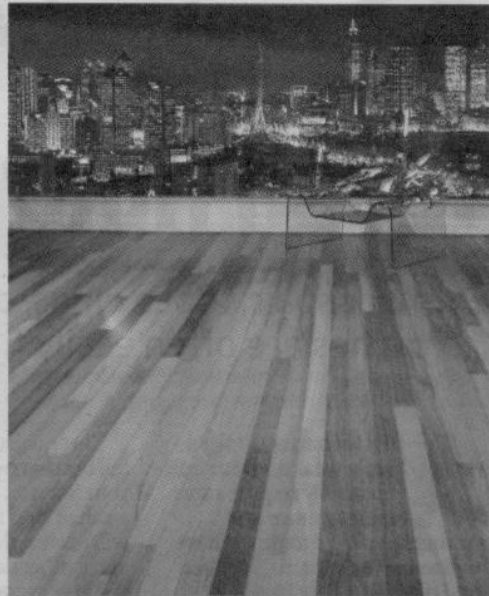
Laying bamboo boards often involves gluing them to the sub floor. Some adhesives used for this are potentially harmful. For example, bamboo flooring specialist Style Plantation recommends its products be glued down with Sika T55. While not classified as hazardous by Worksafe Australia, Sika T55's safety data sheet advises that it contains xylene and solvents, and says asthmatics and people with sensitive

respiratory tracts should avoid all contact with the adhesive.

Like bonded floating timber floors, most bamboo flooring arrives finished. There is no sanding or coating to be done in the home, which can improve indoor air pollution. But it reduces your control over what the boards are coated in.

For the finish

Typically, all floorboards are polished with a two-pack or one-pack polyurethane. These



FLOOR-INSPIRING ... ECO-FRIENDLY OPTIONS INCLUDE (CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE) BAMBOO, CORK TILES AND FLOORBOARDS FROM SUSTAINABLE GROWTH FORESTS.

contain solvents such as toluene diisocyanate or TDI, which can severely irritate the skin, eyes and nose and affect the respiratory, digestive and central nervous systems.

A safer option is a water-based polyurethane such as the Swedish product Arboritec.

Another solution is to use linseed or tung oil finishes such as Livos Ardvos Wood Oil.

While they take longer to dry and need to be reapplied every four or five years, the floor doesn't need to be sanded first, so they can be mopped straight on.

It's also easy to spot-repair scratches and marks.

CAROLYN BOYD