



DINO ONI



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Floor Plan

Sure. Carpet and tile are still around, and concrete is still trendy, but given a choice, most experts will always go with stone or wood.

If you'd been a peasant in the Middle Ages, your house might have doubled as your barn. And when your animals wandered into your living quarters, and did what animals are wont to do, you probably wouldn't have bothered to clean it up. Instead, you'd have trampled their manure into the dirt floor beneath your feet, in the process creating a hard, durable flooring surface with an odor that advertised "serf."

No kidding. But for all of the ignominious history of floors, it's also true that the desire to create beautiful floors has existed for most of civilization. The Egyptians were making elaborate stone floors five millennia ago. The ancient Greeks made intricate mosaic floors using pebbles. Today, this same decorative impulse defines the industry. "It's very much a fashion business," says Betsy King, showroom director for Cactus Stone & Tile in Phoenix. "It's all about surrounding yourself with beauty."

Consumers enjoy more flooring options now than at any point in history (though notably the animal-dung floor remains do-it-yourself). There's the standard-issue wall-to-wall carpet, of course, and a variety of synthetic flooring materials. Increasingly, concrete is being finished to dazzling effect (see *At Home*, November 2005). But the more things change, the more they stay the same, and today's most popular floors tend to be natural materials with a long and respectable tradition – materials like stone and wood.

"Wood floors are just taking off like mad," says Peter Fay, general manager of Mission Hardwood Floor Company in Scottsdale, which deals exclusively in natural wood floors. Such floors are beautiful, timeless and typically more comfortable to stand on than hard surfaces like tile. And with an incredible diversity of product, there's a look to suit every application.

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“There are literally all kinds of wood, and you pick them for the purpose you’re going to use them for,” Fay says. Mission Hardwood deals in about 300 different kinds of wood – “from apitong to zebrawood,” as Fay puts it – and each varies in appearance and hardness. Hardness is a primary consideration in selecting wood flooring – the harder the wood, the more it will resist dents and scratching. Soft woods, like fir, quickly show wear and tear – not necessarily a bad thing if you’re seeking a rustic effect. Pointing out a fir floor in Mission’s showroom, Fay says, “We call it the ‘On Golden Pond’ look.”

Woods can vary dramatically in appearance, even within species. Part of this is due to the grade of the wood (a measure of its uniformity of grain and the extent to which it is free of knots and other blemishes). Wood that is graded “select” has a highly regular appearance and a fine grain. “If you’re going to put a real slick silk Oriental rug on the wood, you want less grain,” Fay says. On the other hand, if you’re shooting for a rustic look, you may appreciate the quirks of a lower-grade wood. Either way, as Fay points out, grade does not imply anything about the strength or quality of the wood. “It’s not less stable, it’s just a different appearance.”

Speaking of which, the appearance of wood also varies according to how and where planks are sawed from the log. Planks sawed from the top of the log will look quite different from lumber that is “quarter-sawed,” or cut perpendicular to the growth rings. “So you can get an oak floor in different grains and different widths and sawed differently,” Fay says. And the options can be overwhelming. After an initial consultation, Fay will frequently recommend that his customers search through design books and magazines for pictures that appeal to them. Bring them back, Fay says, and “we’ll tell you how that would fit into your design objective. You want to be sure you’re an educated consumer.”

An increasingly popular source of wood flooring is reclaimed wood – lumber salvaged from historic buildings or other structures, like bridges. Such planks can be sorted to achieve a particular appearance, but they often contain unique markings, like the oxidation stains that form around nail holes. And they’ll guarantee that your floor has a story. Fay has used wood from a cotton gin in Mississippi, a bridge in Salt Lake City and the barn where James Buchanan announced his

bid for the presidency of the United States. Because of the limited availability of such woods, they’re typically more expensive than new wood. According to Fay, an average price range is around \$22 to \$30 per square foot installed, compared to an average \$15 to \$20 per square foot for new wood.

You can work decorative elements into your wood floor with parquets – wood “tiles” often made according to traditional designs – or medallions, wood inlays that can be astonishingly intricate. So can inlaid borders, which, like medallions, are frequently made to order. “Anything you can draw we can make in wood,” Fay says. Mission Hardwood Floor Company recommends a natural, tung-oil finish on its floors, with refinishing every three to five years, or as necessary. Routine maintenance, according to Fay, is similar to caring for any other fine wood. “You wouldn’t mop the top of your Steinway piano,” he says. Use dry swiffers for regular cleaning, then a specialty hardwood floor cleaner to tackle stains as they appear.

Stone is another popular flooring material with some surprising similarities to wood. As with wood, appearance differs dramatically between types of stone – marble, for example, gives a very different look than slate. But stone also varies according to where it comes from and how it’s cut. Just as wood can be cut with or against the grain, stone can be cut with or against the vein. And to an even greater extent than wood, stone varies in uniformity. The same type of stone can be highly irregular or nearly monochromatic.

A prime example of this variation is travertine, which seems to be the Valley’s stone of choice. “Travertine is our single most popular stone,” says Betsy King, who ascribes some of its popularity to its exclusivity. But, she continues, the diversity of its incarnations also helps its cause. Travertine comes in a wide range of colors, most of which are desert-friendly. And its patterning can be very busy or very plain. “There’s something for everyone in travertine,” she says. The look of travertine or any other stone can be further varied by its degree of polish or by additional treatments, like distressing around the edges. “There are various ways to get a different look out of the stone,” King says.

The price of stone varies according to its availability and accessibility – rare stones or stones that are difficult to quarry are correspondingly more expensive. The origin of

stone and associated shipping costs also influence the price. Most travertine, for example, comes from Turkey, Italy and Mexico, and shipping costs to Arizona are generally a function of distance.

But appearance and price are only the most obvious considerations in selecting a stone floor, and Chris Upton, sealing and restoration manager for Stockett Tile & Granite Company, suggests a few others. As Stockett's "fire department," as he puts it, Upton frequently works with homeowners who were under-informed when they purchased their stone floors, or failed to realistically evaluate the demands of their lifestyle.

"Have some real dialogue, have some education before the sale," Upton says. He recommends that consumers do the "lemon test" before purchasing stone – squirt some lemon juice on your prospective flooring material and evaluate the effects. Stones such as travertine and marble are easily etched by acids, which create dull, stained patches where they contact the stone. "Tactilely you can feel it, visually you can see it," Upton says. If you – or your young children – are prone to spills, you may want to opt for a more resilient stone. "What are your expectations?" Upton asks. "What's real?"

Like wood, stone floors typically need resealing every three to five years, although this varies by circumstance. "I don't believe in sealing for sealing's sake," Upton says. How to determine whether your stone floors need resealing? Pour a little water on them. If the stone turns dark, it's time to reseal. For routine maintenance, dry mop or vacuum your floors and wet mop with cold water and a neutral pH cleanser as required. Finally, note that some areas just were not made for stone floors. Areas surrounding vanities – where hairsprays and makeup can wreak havoc on stone – are not well suited to high-maintenance natural stone. Ditto for the areas surrounding the toilets. Enough said.

Tile floors typically present far fewer maintenance issues than do stone floors, and with improved technology, tiles can be made to mimic stone with astonishing verisimilitude. Although tiles are typically much less expensive than natural stone, "there are a lot of people in every price range who don't want natural stone," King says. "With technology these days they can create huge variation [in the tiles].... It will blend seamlessly with the natural stone."

But tile can also be used to a very different effect. Among other products, Cactus Stone & Tile represents Sicis, an Italian line of glass, stone and metal tiles and maker of custom tile mosaics. Sicis stone tiles can be used to create floors reminiscent of ancient stone mosaics. But Sicis glass and metal tiles can be assembled into fantastic contemporary designs, including comic book characters, geometric designs or anything else you can dream up. And the timing couldn't be better. "We're just at the beginning of an explosion in the modern style," King says, and Sicis tiles pair beautifully with a sleek contemporary look.

Finally, wall-to-wall carpeting has not completely fallen off the radar screen, although discerning homeowners are increasingly trading nylon carpet for wool. "Most of the carpet that we sell is wool," says Debby Bradford of Bradford's Fine Floors in Scottsdale, which sells carpets and rugs, as well as wood and other hard floors to the design trade. "[Wool] lasts years and years. Nylon doesn't retain its twist – it doesn't retain its color." Bradford works with designers to create custom carpets for their clients and sees more interest in color and design.

"We've been moving away from neutral colors for quite some time," she says. "People want patterns and texture and colors.... People want something uniquely theirs. And while Bradford has seen "much less demand for wall-to-wall carpeting, particularly in traffic areas," she also notes that certain areas in a home – bedrooms, for example – will always call for something soft.

One thing's for sure: Carpeting definitely beats manure.

Resources:

- Bradford's Fine Floors (wholesale to the trade only), 15685 N. Greenway-Hayden Loop, Suite 100-B, Scottsdale, 480-948-8908 or bradford-floors.com.
- Cactus Stone & Tile (wholesale to the trade only), 401 S. 50th Street, Phoenix, 602-275-6400 or cactustile.com.
- Mission Hardwood Floor Company, 9420 E. Doubletree Ranch Road, Suite C-105, Scottsdale, 480-994-0123 or missionhardwood.com.
- Stockett Tile & Granite Company, 7678 E. Greenway Road, Suite 106, Scottsdale, 480-443-1920 or stockett.com.

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