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Environmentally sustainable interior design: A snapshot of current supply of and demand for green, sustainable or Fair Trade products for interior design practice

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Abstract

Although environmentally sustainable interior design (ESID) has become a major issue in interior design practice, according to the literature the frequency with which interior designers make sustainable choices in real practice is still limited, particularly where materials selection is concerned. This research aimed to develop a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes a sustainable material choice and subsequently undertake a study of the current supply of and demand for green, sustainable and Fair Trade (GSFT) products for interior design practice.

In the first instance a desk study of currently available GSFT materials was undertaken. Following this non-participant structured observation of accessibility of GSFT products and a survey on the supply of GSFT materials was undertaken. Finally semi structured interviews with retailers were conducted.

The results demonstrate the wide range of GSFT products that are currently in the marketplace (including fabrics, window treatments, surface materials, flooring, walls and ceilings) and indeed many of these materials and products could be sourced from the retail outlets surveyed during the research. However it was not easy to readily identify GSFT products and frequently the researcher had to look through volumes of materials, relying on personal knowledge and manufacturers' literature to determine the provenance of the materials marketed. Sourcing products in this way is inefficient and time consuming and has been highlighted as a barrier to engaging in ESID in the literature.

Only a small number of the retailers interviewed have actively encouraged their customers to purchase GSFT. This reluctance to promote GSFT may reflect a lack of information on the provenance of materials to hand but also their belief that people are not aware of the benefits of either sustainable or green materials and therefore not engaged in ESID. If they perceived that there was a greater demand for GSFT products, the retailers may choose to promote these materials more effectively.

The research has confirmed how difficult it is to find information on the provenance of materials to encourage the practice of ESID. Better access to a basic knowledge of sustainability as well as more up-to-date information about sustainable materials will play a critical role in promoting sustainable practice.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Transitioning to sustainable design

Traditionally the interior design profession has concerned itself with a one-dimensional practice, to provide aesthetic enhancements to an interior space for a client (Cargo, 2013). Indeed, Yang et al. (2011) describe traditional interior design as relatively backward and conservative, only focusing on fashion, luxury design in small environments; an approach that ignores energy savings and emissions reduction, as well as the harmful effects on consumers' mental and physical health, and environmental pollution (Yang et al., 2011).

However in recent years interior design practice has seen a dramatic shift with design strategies that now focus on providing healthy and sustainable environments for individual's to live, work and play in (Bonda and Sosnowchick, 2007). Society is beginning to recognise the interconnectedness of buildings, people and community in the creation of an environmentally responsible built environment; clients are beginning to understand their role and impact on the environment. As a result they are seeking interiors that demonstrate environmentally responsible, sustainable design (Mazarella et al., 2011; Cargo, 2013).

This interest in environmental responsibility is what has sparked the context and need for environmentally sustainable interior design (ESID) (Jones, 2008).

1.2. Environmentally sustainable interior design (ESID)

ESID is based on the sustainable design principles and strategies common to the built environment as a whole, namely providing physiologically and psychologically healthy indoor environments (Fisk and Rosenfeld, 1997; Kang and Guerin, 2009).

Often the terms green and sustainable are used interchangeably in design. However it is necessary to provide a distinction between the two. In this paper, green design refers to a focus on people issues – their health, safety and welfare; whilst sustainable design encompasses a more global approach – the health, safety and welfare of the planet, so that it is possible for this generation to meet their needs without jeopardising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). In addition it is appropriate to consider Fair-trade goods, aimed at helping producers in developing countries achieve better trade conditions and to promote sustainability. There is a focus on getting a better price, decent working conditions and fair terms of trade for farmers and workers worldwide (Fairtrade Foundation, 2014).

The term ESID encompasses all three concepts and it is the responsibility of those charged with creating interior spaces in the built environment to implement ESID in both new-build and in the renovation/retrofit of existing buildings.

In order to achieve this a holistic approach is required, 'one in which all systems and materials are designed with an emphasis on integration into a whole, for the purpose of minimising negative impacts on the environment and occupant and maximising positive impacts on environment, economic and social systems over the life cycle of a project' (Kang and Guerin, 2009 p.180).

Therefore, in comparison with traditional design practices, where designers are primarily focussed on meeting the clients' aesthetic and functional needs, ESID focuses on the materials' intended application, aesthetic qualities, environmental and health impacts, availability, ease of instalment and maintenance, and initial and life cycle costs (Cargo, 2013; Moussatche et al., 2002; Pile, 2003).

Although ESID has become a major issue in interior design practice, according to the literature the frequency with which interior designers make sustainable choices in real practice is still limited (e.g. Cargo, 2013; Kusumarini et al., 2011; Kang and Guerin, 2009). This 'sustainability gap', as described by Steig (2006), is the disparity that exists between the principles of ESID and the reality of practice. It is characterised by a lack of connection made by designers between their practice and the resulting environmental impacts of that practice (Steig, 2006).

1.3. Aims and objectives

As a result, the aim of this research project was to first develop a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes a sustainable or green material choice and subsequently undertake a study to ascertain a snapshot of current supply of and demand for green, sustainable or Fair Trade (GSFT) products for interior design practice.

2. Literature review

2.1. Materials selection

A number of factors should have led to increased interest, specification and purchasing of sustainable materials and products. These include a greater awareness of and sensitivity towards the World's limited natural resources; a growing demand for healthier, more energy-efficient and environmentally responsible homes and work places; the establishment of Green Building Councils and their promotion of policies and programmes aimed to implement green building projects, such as BRE's Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM), Code for Sustainable Homes (CSH), Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED), Green Star rating systems; municipalities offering incentives to 'go green', such as tax credits for the construction of buildings that are environmentally responsible; and e.g. Environmental Protection Agencies taking on more of a leadership role in actively mandating greener building policies.

However, although there are several groups disseminating information regarding green and sustainable materials

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