

AT THE FINISHING LINE

The finishing touches to a project can be the most important. Over the next five pages **Dean Gurden** and **Kate Wheel** explore the latest developments in three areas of the finishings sector, including the increasing role of spray plaster and the latest in veneers. But first, what's new in wallcoverings?



New perspectives: Bbi installed these wallcoverings in the reception area of marketing group Freshwater's Raglan House office in Cardiff

THE RECESSION HAS LEFT ITS MARK on all aspects of the construction sector – right down to trends in wallcoverings. But that's not simply because money has been in short supply. As Angela Paterson, marketing director at Tektura Wallcoverings, explains, the downturn has also influenced styles and colours in different markets.

She's noticed a widespread increase in demand for conservative, timeless looks and stable, neutral colours – and she doesn't believe an upturn will change that. "We think the appeal of timeless designs may endure and will be looked upon as a fashionable statement in itself," she says.

It's likely that wallcoverings themselves will remain a timeless option. André Morrall, associate

designer with architect ttsp, sees them as an invaluable finishing option for clients and specifiers, even in a downturn.

"Wallcoverings add another dimension to a room – they are softer and more tactile and help define the functions of a workspace," she says.

Acoustics are another important reason to use wallcoverings rather than paint, she adds. "It highlights the fact that clients want every part of the interior design to function as effectively as possible."

Among the many finishes now available, she still uses an old favourite, silk-effect vinyl. "But the technology is more advanced now," says Morrall, "particularly from suppliers such as Vescom, which manufacture wipe-down surfaces."

She's excited about one new development, highlighted at the recent Ecobuild exhibition in London – 'living' walls featuring very small plants planted on vertical surfaces.

"It hits all the right buttons," she says. "It's a living, breathing feature that cleans the air by reducing CO₂, changes by growth and provides a controlled

SUSTAINABILITY ISSUES

The green agenda is as important for wallcovering suppliers as it is for any other aspect of the construction sector.

Tektura's sustainability policy outlines its recycling efforts – "35 tonnes of recycled content in our vinyl wallcoverings in 12 months" – and its plans to launch natural and manmade alternatives to vinyl this year. Dixon Turner Wallcoverings' website declares: "100% of waste solvents from the printing processes are recovered and recycled... We have installed the most up-to-date (and expensive) anti-pollution equipment". And Vescom claims: "We control practically all the stages in the production supply chain. This means we are also capable of limiting the negative impact of our activities on the environment."

James Pack, director of interior specialist Skansen, applauds these efforts but says a lack of consistency is

a problem for specifiers. "It's not apparent to us that manufacturers are uniform in their environmental evidence. Each is doing a great job, but one manufacturer's idea of green is very different to another's. We need to simplify the picture for installers and specifiers with better labelling."

A founder of the Ska environmental rating system (see page 38), Pack spells out Ska's approach to wallcoverings, which stipulates that both paper and vinyl products must meet at least one of the following criteria:

- If new, they must be manufactured with at least 80% recycled content
- They must be supplied with an environmental product declaration written in accordance with ISO 14025 standards
- Where paper-based wallpaper is specified, they must meet the criteria of D20 timber.



Suppliers such as Dixon Turner – which provided this atmospheric ceiling for the Hotel Indigo in Paddington, London, last year – are keen to spell out their green credentials

Knowhow: finishes

► method of introducing planting into our schemes.”

John Evans of John Evans Interior Architecture and Design pinpoints other emerging trends. “We are using wallcoverings made from cork, cleverly printed vinyls, faux and real silks, flock printed patterns, woven cloth-based coverings in subtle or natural tonal effects,” he says.

“Trends in wallcoverings seem to be cyclical. Colour palettes change from season to season and creative industries such as fashion exert an influence on designs. Our retail projects have involved combining digitally printed, large-scale photography with in elevations or room sets.”

For many clients, however, value for money is uppermost in their minds. Tektura's Paterson says contract wallcoverings, designed specifically for the commercial sector, offer a more economic solution than designer options. And while new products are emerging – polyester and natural fibre, for example – most contract wallcoverings come in rolls of vinyl that can be produced inexpensively and quickly.

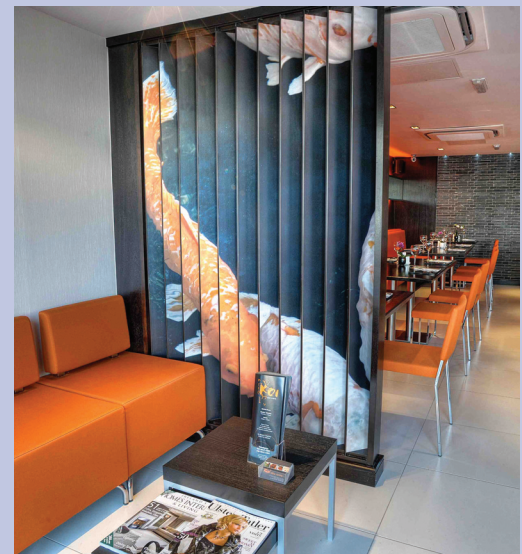
“Vinyl gives manufacturers a lot of flexibility as a base material for overprinting and creating texture,” says Paterson. “Contract wallcoverings are flexible, so can be applied round curves or corners. They are heavier, have a much harder surface than domestic wallcoverings, and are durable, scrubbable and impact resistant.”

This makes economic sense too. Contract wallcoverings, which are designed to fit partitions, cost between £5/m² and £30/m², while resin or sculpted panels, which can generally only be applied to flat surfaces, sell for £45/m² upwards.

Wallcoverings also give clients added value on a practical level. Tektura champions write-on/dry-wipe surfacing – its Walltalker offers a long-lasting surface of film that doesn't catch ink in pinholes and can be wiped clean easily.

Such a solution is ideal for classrooms. The robustness of wallcovering also suits health care settings subjected to abrasion and frequent cleaning. Protection from MRSA bacteria, mould and mildew is built into many options to make them suitable for hospitals, care homes and surgeries.

Whatever the project, it's clear that wallcoverings continue to provide visual excitement as well as value for money where it's needed.



Tektura has come up with designs for an urban bar (top) and a minimalist office (above). Meanwhile, the fish-themed louvre panels (top right) for a restaurant called Koi in Northern Ireland were designed by Richmond

TUNING IN TO DIGITAL

Large-scale printing, increasingly using digitally printed designs, is rapidly growing in popularity, be it bespoke graphics, photography, artwork or simply a company logo.

Ttsp's André Morrall believes the recession has had little impact on companies' desire to make an impact with digital imagery. “Paint is the cheapest option but clients are still committed to making the best impression,” she says. “They see digital wallcoverings as a quick win.”

She cites a striking image of a poppy field chosen recently by British Land for the management offices of its Regents Place development in central London. And for the trading floor of broker Tradition in the City, ttsp specified a sound-absorbing fabric wallcovering made by FabriTrak.

Although digital imaging has been around for years, Tektura's Angela Paterson believes it's still a new concept for many. “We're seeing digital design moving into all sectors now: classrooms, hospitals, restaurants through to retail design,” she says.



Architect ttsp specified this fabric covering for a noisy trading floor in the City

SURFACE VALUES

The traditional skills of plasterers and painters are no longer the only option for contractors. We hear opinions from across the sector about the spray-on alternative

SKILLED PLASTERERS AND decorators have always been in demand. But increasingly in today's high-speed, pre-fabricated construction environment, the traditional approach has met its match. Spray plaster promises a fast, flexible alternative. But how does the technique stack up against traditional plaster and paint?

MITIE Property Services' commercial manager Ian Gordon sums up a key issue: "We have been aware of the benefits of using spray plaster for some time, but the majority of our customers are reluctant to try it out on their projects due to the associated increased costs."

The initial outlay involved in spray plastering – spray machine, sanding machine, training costs – is part of the reason why the system is best suited to larger contractors working on commercial jobs and multi-storey residential buildings. Spray plaster suits these projects because it can be applied quickly over large areas, repaying the investment in equipment with faster completion times.

But this presents another challenge for contractors. The benefits of spray plaster only kick in when there are large areas available for coverage and all areas are free of other trades.

"The key to its success is good site management," says Gordon. "For the system to work effectively, the project manager must ensure enough areas are free from other trades and that there is continuity of work ahead. That means tight control of follow-on trades to minimise damage, as spray plaster is more difficult to patch."

From a subcontractor's point of view, the benefits of the system can be less clear cut. "There is less time spent on



site, which in theory could result in the subcontractor being able to carry out more contracts," says Gordon. "But in today's climate there are not the number of contracts out there to make that argument stand up."

He adds: "The system has lots of advantages, but is not in my opinion as flexible as traditional skimming. Traditional skim is more flexible if return visits are required for areas that have had to be left behind, such as if certain areas of buildings are not watertight."

Classic Excel, a specialist subcontractor in suspended ceilings, drylining and fit-outs, has used USG's Sheetrock interior finishing system on several projects, to achieve a level 5 finish (see Products, page 24). Like Gordon, Classic Excel's managing

director, David Jones, takes a measured approach to its benefits.

"The product is in its infancy in terms of the broader construction market and I believe we are only seeing the tip of the iceberg in terms of its potential," he says. "The main advantages we see with the system compared with plaster skim is that it is so much quicker to apply, is a much cleaner process and does away with the need for an undercoat and, in some instances, a coat of emulsion. It is therefore cost-effective."

Jones agrees with Gordon that the system doesn't fit all projects. "Spray plaster can only be effective on large projects, such as schools, hotels, care homes and residential schemes. I wouldn't recommend using it on smaller schemes or projects where there could be a lot of service penetrations. We have

Tough call: spray plaster used at Glasgow's Langside College will help the buildings withstand student life

Knowhow: finishes

► experienced first hand the issues that arise when additional penetrations are required after our work has been handed over.”

Pegasus Fire Protection has traditionally used ames taping for finishing walls and ceilings, mainly for its fire and smoke protection benefits. Tape and joint cement are only applied to the plasterboard joints and screw holes rather than the whole area, resulting in a smaller percentage of materials being used than traditional plastering. It offers a clean and economical method, so how does it compare with spray plaster?

“We’ve done two or three jobs with spray plaster so far and, yes, it’s a far superior finish to ames taping,” says director Boyd Sinclair. “Unfortunately, it’s also more expensive, although it does make the walls very durable.

“During construction, the ames taping seems to get damaged a lot by the M&E contractors and other trades. We’ve just used spray plaster at Langside College in

Glasgow and the feedback is that it’s far more resilient and able to stand up better to student life.”

Despite concerns such as Sinclair’s about cost, USG business development manager Michael Anderson believes his company’s spray plaster products have benefited from the tough economic times.

“When things are tight, more people are looking at new ways of construction, so they can offer something different to clients,” he says.

Perhaps the main obstacle facing the new system is the culture within the construction industry itself. “So many people and companies are reluctant to change their work processes,” says Jones. “For years they have skimmed and then decorated the walls and ceilings, so many may not want to try a new system.”

Anderson agrees. “The main resistance we have is tradition. But if customers are open minded we have a lot of success.”

CASE STUDY: KINGSWAY HOSPITAL, DERBY

An on-site demonstration was enough for main contractor Costain to switch the specification for 24,000m² of internal masonry walls at Kingsway Hospital in Derby to Knauf MP75 machine-applied one-coat projection plaster.

The contractor is building new hospital facilities for the Derbyshire Mental Health Services NHS Trust as part of a £30m project. Instead of traditional two-coat, hand-applied plaster, it has used the fast-drying Knauf projection plaster. Machine-applied to a wall in short horizontal

bands, then ruled and floated manually for a durable, smooth finish, it enabled a three-man team to plaster up to 150m² of wall every day.

Richard Wood, Costain construction manager at Kingsway Hospital, says the use of spray plaster cut the plastering schedule from 28 to 16 weeks, providing more leeway for other finishing trades. He says: “For us the speed of application was the big advantage, but we were also impressed by the cleanliness of the machine plastering operation – and the finish is magnificent.”



A contractor examines a wall plastered using Knauf MP75 projection plaster

Grand performance: Swift Horsman supplied European Oak veneer for the concert hall at arts centre Kings Place in London. European Oak provides a good-quality finish, the basic veneer costing £4.50/m² to £7.50/m² depending on the quality of the log



LOGGING ON

Veneer producers have also struggled in the downturn – but there have been some interesting developments to cheer specifiers

FIRST THE BAD NEWS. BECAUSE OF the downturn in construction activity, veneer producers have not been cutting speculatively in recent years, which has resulted in a dearth of premium/ architectural-grade veneer logs of all types and, in turn, a lack of availability of good-quality logs in the right lengths.

The good news, however, is that there is still a wide variety of veneers out there to choose from and stunning effects to be achieved. And more and more are certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), particularly those from tropical forests growing the likes of Brazilian Mahogany, Eucalyptus, Redwood and Santos Rosewood.

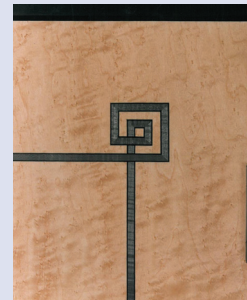
Tsp associate designer André Morrall is a keen advocate of more sustainable veneer, favouring reconstituted timber Alpi (the name of its supplier). This is not a cheaper option, she says, but the fast-growing timber is easily replaced and can be stained to match traditional woods.

“We are currently using it on two of our projects, for BHP Billiton and Nomura. Both clients are striving to achieve the aesthetic qualities of a hardwood, slow-growing timber, but are reluctant to sacrifice slow-growing trees and the environment,” she says.

With careful selection and



Exclusive look: UK Veneer Systems supplied European Oak and American Black Walnut panelling to the Diamond Club at Arsenal's Emirates Stadium to create a luxury viewing venue for its members



Opening new doors: Shadbolt offers a variety of options for office clients

management it's possible to set up a common theme of colours and grains throughout an office building. Matching schemes can be created by hand-cutting and jointing veneers to form patterns, using quarter matching – where four veneer pieces are matched from side to side and from top to bottom to make up larger panels – feather matching, sunburst matching or by using inlays.

Paul Shadbolt, sales director of Shadbolt International, which makes fire and acoustic doors and veneered panels, believes veneered doors are making a comeback in offices.

"Clients are starting to appreciate the many advantages – acoustic, environmental and in maintenance terms – that timber doors offer over glass doors, which have been widely used over the past 15 years."

He points to the use of quarter-cut veneers (where the original log is cut into quarters and the blade slices at right-angles to the growth rings), which has increased significantly recently.

This contrasts with book-matched crown-cut veneers (successive leaves of veneer that reverse each alternate leaf to produce a mirrored effect) and slip-matched quarter-cut veneer (successive leaves with the alternate leaves not turned), which are used to create a warm but understated impression. It produces a repeat pattern and is effective when straight-grain veneers are used for minimalist schemes.

As for materials, Shadbolt believes clients are opting for darker timbers – American Walnut and fumed European Oak, for example – to create surroundings that give a high-quality impression.

To create that effect, it is possible to change the veneer's colour by fuming, smoking, staining, heating or bleaching. Some suppliers fume or smoke veneer with ammonia, which permanently changes its colour and allows you to use standard or lower grade timbers.

Thorpes of Great Glen managing director John Thorpe believes that, given the choice of timbers and costs, contractors play an invaluable role in helping clients choose the right look. "There's a lot more that companies can do to support specifiers – by preparing sample boxes, for example," he says.

TOP TIPS FOR CONTRACTORS SELECTING VENEERS

1 Choose carefully – Investigate the species chosen and its availability. Is the veneer FSC-certified; what's its cost; what are its characteristics? Note that in temperate climates the cutting season for timber is winter, when the sap is not rising, so in late winter and early spring there is a far wider choice of prime quality veneer than in late summer/early autumn.

2 Do the sums – Work out how much veneer you need for every surface and then double it. Raw veneer is bought as a slice through a tree, so once the log has been trimmed and prepared and the leaf cut to the required width, there is about 100% waste. Thankfully it's normally recycled. Work out the sizes needed on site, so you know what your maximum log size needs to be. So, if a door is 2.40m high, you need a leaf 2.50m long, so that you avoid jointing along the length. You also need to know joint widths, to work out how wide your veneer needs to be.

3 Be specific – Contact your supplier and discuss your requirements with regard to the species, colour, grain structure, characteristics and budget. Then arrange to view the veneer.

4 Take time to view – Work on a viewing ratio of 3:1 as not all logs will be perfect or the correct length. So if you need 100m² for a project you will have to view at least 300m² to ensure you source the best veneer for the client.

5 Know your veneer terms – When a tree is felled, sections (logs) are sliced to provide the veneer. The veneer is sorted into bundles of 20-30 leaves, a leaf being an individual slice of veneer. When you select the veneer, you view individual bundles. What you are looking for is length, width, consistent colour and grain structure, lack of defects and the total usable veneer in the log (yield).

Source: Matthew Roberts, business development director, Swift Horsman (Group)