

Green Growth

PHOTO BY FRANK AHWAMI

Cheryl Nix Murphy of Spruce Eco Studio, right, shows curtains made from recycled Tyvek house wrapping paper to customer Anna White.



Recycled revenue

Interior designers see demand rise for green building products

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Nomita Joshi-Gupta and Cheryl Nix Murphy saw a gap in the burgeoning green building market when they opened Spruce Eco Studio on a tucked away corner of the Warehouse District in 2008.

At the time, green building was a prominent force in post-Katrina reconstruction and supplies were widely available. But when it came to finding low-toxic finishes and furniture, Joshi-Gupta, who was redecorating her own renovated home, had to have carpet and countertop samples mailed in from throughout the country.

"It's great to have an exterior that's green, but you're living on the interior," Joshi-Gupta said.

When Spruce opened in December 2008, environmentally conscious customers sought out the Diamond Street studio to view samples of cork flooring and recycled glass countertop. Since then, the \$50,000 startup outgrew two locations and built a repeat customer base of architects, interior designers and homeowners.

Designers once set on granite kitchen countertops now come to Spruce and look through sustainable alternatives made of pressed granite chips, see the comparative price and are sold, Murphy said.

"A lot of that has to do with availability within the market, of being able to go in somewhere and see green design," Murphy said. "I don't think that many people are going to buy countertops if they can't see it."

Spruce Eco Studio joins a cottage industry of green interior design and

stat of the week

Catching on

\$96 billion to \$140 billion

Projected value of the green building industry in 2013, nearly triple the \$36 billion to \$49 billion range of 2009

Source: U.S. Green Building Council

supply companies largely headquartered on Magazine Street that have made the local green decorating market not only more visible but high-growth. Customers are drawn to the hard-to-find sustainable products and sourcing methods that take into account every raw material, toxin, community and drop of transportation fuel the goes into producing and transporting the items they sell.

When the U.S. Green Building Council created a commercial interior certification program in 2005, green became a buzzword even in decorating, and businesses catering to the movement started to appear en masse, said Dru Lamb, an interior designer at Eskew+Dumez+Ripple and president of the regional chapter of the

International Interior Design Association.

"Generally the people that are creating these stores are the same type of people they are selling to," Lamb said. "They want to do the right thing and they know there's a market there."

And while the popularity of recycled paper lanterns or bamboo dining sets may fade, she said green mandates are becoming standards throughout the construction and architecture industries.

"I could see the décor aspect being somewhat of a fad, but at the same time I think the entire industry is moving toward making those standards the norm," Lamb said.

Joshi-Gupta said green décor allows a wider

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DRU LAMB

interior designer

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range of budgets to go green with less expensive options such as cork flooring, which is gaining popularity among young professionals, for \$3 per square foot, Joshi-Gupta said.

Still, frosted glass countertop made from recycled crystal stemware costs \$220 per square foot and organic fabric hand-woven in India costs about \$100 per square yard.

Peter Seltzer, owner of green supplier Canopy on Magazine Street, said customers are willing to pay slightly more for eco-friendly interiors.

"Ninety-five percent of customers that come into my store already know about the products," Seltzer said. "I'm really not convincing anybody here."

Seltzer opened Canopy in March with a "blind faith" that there was a need for the store's low-toxicity, recycled flooring and countertops, and energy-efficient light fixtures. Canopy now balances a steady flow of residential customers with commercial supply work with clientele such as Tulane University.

Seltzer said he's trying to break more into commercial business and has sold most contractors on the quality and health benefits of low-toxicity materials, though many still balk at a \$40 per gallon price tag on flat, nontoxic paint.

Mike Ward, owner of New Orleans Bamboo, said he expects that to change as state governments issue more green building mandates. His Magazine Street store sells green bamboo home products, ranging from salad bowls to flooring.

"Not only is it going to grow in people's preference, but it's going to grow in legislation," Ward said.

Joshi-Gupta and Murphy said they have already seen the industry grow from niche shops to a network of architects, interior designers and installers who are familiar with green design materials.

"I think that this is going to become the norm. People are looking for it and they want it," Murphy said. •

Cost comparison

While adding solar panels or a cistern to a home can prove costly, Spruce Eco Studio founder Nomita Joshi-Gupta said customers have more fiscal flexibility when decorating with sustainable materials, a factor that's driven business at her Magazine Street studio.

\$3

Square-foot cost for sustainable cork flooring at Spruce

\$200

Square-foot cost for recycled crystal stemware countertop

\$20,000

Estimated cost of a residential solar system before tax incentives and rebates

Source: CityBusiness staff research