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WORDS

Megan Norgate

Interior designer Megan Norgate discusses the joys and challenges of using recycled materials in your kitchen redesign.

THERE ARE MANY COMPELLING REASONS to use recycled and repurposed materials and products in the renovation of your kitchen, not the least of which is that they can look and feel gorgeous. The patina of age can reveal richness, texture and complexity that is not easily achieved with new surfaces. Recycled materials are also often hardy and less vulnerable to becoming outdated.

Aside from these aesthetic attributes, recycled materials are arguably our best choice for environmentally sustainable design. The environmental benefits of using these materials are twofold. Their use diverts waste from landfill while avoiding the embodied energy costs associated with the manufacture and transport of new interior products.

Houses full of valuable building materials are demolished every day. Happily, some demolition companies take the time to sort out the salvageable from the waste. This is a great practice to support and at salvage yards you can find many very high quality architectural features and hardwood timbers.

Adding to the environmental good of reusing, the longevity and quality of recycled products has already been proven. If they have made it through many years of use and are deemed fit for a second life in your house then you should feel confident they are going to look good for many years to come.

Using recycled materials in home interiors is not always a straightforward project, however. These projects are most successful when time and enthusiasm are on your side, and you don't mind the odd long drive. If you are planning to source and use recycled components give yourself twice the time you would otherwise to find them. If you don't have the time, consider hiring a designer experienced with recycled products who knows where to obtain them. Once you have the materials, engaging capable tradespeople who are

willing to take the extra care and time needed to work with recycled products is also important. Kitchens are one of the most energy-intensive and expensive parts of the home to renovate.

They need to be very durable but they are often the first part of a house to become unfashionable. Fortunately, kitchens lend themselves brilliantly to salvaged and recycled products and the results can be stunning. With careful planning and execution, using recycled secondhand cabinet carcasses, benches or shelving in your kitchen renovation can see you save thousands of dollars. Appliances, sinks and kitchen surfaces can all also be sourced secondhand.

REUSING A WHOLE KITCHEN

It is possible to purchase whole kitchens secondhand. These can be sourced for a fraction of the cost of having a kitchen tailor-made but you need to factor into your budget the cost of removal and installation by a qualified cabinet installer to ensure that it is not damaged beyond repair in the process.

When considering a secondhand kitchen inspect it first, checking for moisture damage to the frames and carcass. Also check that the drawers and cupboards are functioning well. Be imaginative when considering how you can update a high-quality but outdated secondhand kitchen by reusing the cabinet carcass only and adding new doors or staining or painting the existing ones. You can also transform an old kitchen by adding new bench tops, or simply by changing the cabinet handles for a new look.

Galley-style kitchens and simple L-shaped designs are easiest to work with when reusing cabinets. More complicated layouts can be repurposed if you're lucky to find one with the correct dimensions, however most will require some reconfiguring. This can be very fiddly and requires a high level of skill to be done successfully, so DIYers beware. →



Recycled french doors were used for the pantry doors in this vintage-style kitchen.

"Recycled interiors are most successful when you have time and enthusiasm on your side, and you don't mind the odd long drive."

• A recycled jarrah bench top complements the other recycled materials in this kitchen.



• Recycled timber drawer handles.

If you want to use recycled cabinets or benches that are more than 20 years old, remember that contemporary benches are generally at least 600 millimetres deep, while older cabinets are likely to be 450 millimetres deep or less. These can still be used, but only in areas that do not require any appliances, such as dishwashers or ovens, to be built in. Shallower depth benches and cabinetry can be more suitable for storage and space saving in smaller kitchens.

MIXED AND MATCHED

Kitchens are the ideal place to create and mix-and-match solutions. Island benches can be made from old tables, stainless steel workbenches, antique shop counters and industrial benches. Recycled timbers can be used for open shelving, cupboard doors, handles and bench tops. Repurposed antique shelving, pigeonholes, trays and boxes can be used for open shelving and storage.

When using old furniture and timber components that have a painted surface, ensure the paint is not going to chip or flake. Most repainted furniture dated pre-1970s will have a high lead content that must be removed and disposed of correctly. If the existing surface



• A vintage dresser adds colour and character as well as providing storage space in the kitchen.

of the item is intact it is best to leave it undisturbed and paint over it, beginning with a primer and sealer designed to cover enamel-based paints. If you want to take the surface back to timber consider having the item professionally stripped in a non-caustic solution to remove and dispose of all of the paint safely.

NEW PRODUCTS WITH RECYCLED CONTENT

Bench tops can be made out of a number of products containing recycled materials. Stainless steel is very durable, can contain 60 per cent or more recycled content, and is completely recyclable at the end of its use. Timber benches and islands can be made from salvaged or recycled hardwood. Concrete has high-embodied energy, but if it is mixed with a percentage of post-industrial fly ash and poured onsite, it is also a durable heat-resistant surface. Composite bench top products that are made from post-manufacturing waste such as Quarella quartz and EcoTop (an FSC-certified 50/50 fibre blend of 100 per cent post-consumer recycled fibre and bamboo) are also a good option.

CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

Creating a kitchen using recycled materials requires careful preparation, good communication and commitment to an aesthetically pleasing outcome that is also useful and durable. Achieving the result you want depends largely on creative problem solving to reinterpret old objects and materials for a new space, form and function. In the end, the unpredictable nature of the materials available can often create solutions that are unexpected and more interesting. •

Megan Norgate is an interior designer, permaculture designer and sustainability consultant based in Melbourne. As principle of design firm Brave New Eco, Megan works in collaboration with various building designers, permaculturists and craftspeople. <http://braveneweco.com.au>

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