



Sleek Surfaces

Formica Group blends technology, design, and sustainability into the environments of the future.

By Jessica Letaw

One of **Formica Group's** most recent earth-friendly innovations started in an unlikely place: **Renee Hytry Derrington's** basement. The group vice president of design was researching how to insulate the basement of her Wisconsin home when she discovered one of the options was a product made from reclaimed, chopped-up denim. Not only had she found a solution for her basement, she'd found inspiration—to repurpose the waste our society generates into a beautiful, durable, flexible product. The evolution of Formica® Brand's internationally acclaimed Reclaimed Denim Fiber line is a microcosm of how Formica Corporation evolved from a manufacturer of '50s-fabulous countertops into a global leader in innovative design.

THE EVOLUTION OF DESIGN

Derrington brought her idea out of the basement to Formica Group's design team, who in turn asked the manufacturing team whether it would be possible to print using cotton fibers (all of Formica® Brand's

surfaces are printed). The printers embraced the design challenge with curiosity and enthusiasm, working to understand every phase of the process, from sourcing to manufacturing to how it would eventually be disposed of, completing the same life cycle analysis they do with all of their products—analyzing water usage and greenhouse gas emissions during manufacturing as well as assessing end-of-life recyclability.

It's the same process the team follows when collaborating with cutting-edge designers like **Jonathan Adler**. “The team wants to work with designers who stretch the definition of laminate design,” Derrington says. Adler—a famous ceramicist/author/designer—fit the bill perfectly, bringing to the table not only his own color palette and out-of-the-box ideas for prints, but a strong enthusiasm for mid-century modern design and a collection of some of Formica Group's earliest original products.

Developing new products is a balancing act between technology, design flexibility, and environmental responsibility. There's no “sustainability team” working to develop new products, says **Jeffrey Taylor**, Formica Group's vice president of innovation and R&D, because “innovation and sustainability go hand in hand. No person focuses entirely on that, but rather builds a philosophy first, which then guides product development.” Formica Group uses many tools to guide that development, including participating in the GREENGUARD product certification, a program that helps to measure the emissions of a given product. By participating in this program during development, Formica Group engages in a continuous feedback loop, measuring the environmental outcomes of each stage of a product's manufacture and highlighting the opportunities to reduce its environmental impact at each one. The reclaimed denim design project ended up earning the GREENGUARD designation, certifying it as a safe interior product producing very low or no volatile organic compound (VOC) emissions.

LOOKING INTO THE FUTURE

Because Formica Group is a global group of companies, manufacturing in and selling to communities all over the world, they're continuously looking for input. “We learn from our team all over the world who has boots on the ground—from the U.K. and Germany to Shanghai and Melbourne, and of course Cincinnati, we're learning what people all over the world are looking for,” Derrington says.

Taylor predicts products addressing health, safety, and recyclability will be the most popular, especially considering the



Formica Group has been in the business for 100 years, leading the laminate world with beautiful design.



**VISUALIZE
YOUR
DESIGN**

Formica Group recently introduced its patent-pending **Formica Envisualizer® Design Platform**, so architects and designers can experiment with patterns. The browser-based, algorithmic design tool invites you to choose from six vector shapes to create your own Formica® Brand-inspired patterns and scale, distort, and randomize objects. Manipulate your design so you get exactly what you want or start with a pre-made option and make it your own. You can share your final creation on Facebook, Twitter, or Pinterest, export it as a fully editable vector image, or use your new artwork as the basis of your next custom laminate project.

success of the Formica **Infiniti™** line, a series made from material that has antimicrobial surface protection, resists fingerprinting, and can be thermally healed. Derrington agrees, adding that people are blurring the lines between their working and living spaces, erasing traditional boundaries and becoming more mobile. She anticipates the push to get off the grid will invite an aesthetic that describes not just man in nature, but how man lives in nature; grasscloth, leather veneer, and reclaimed materials are all predicted to play roles in the Formica® Brand of the (near) future.

TEAMWORK, TEAMWORK, TEAMWORK

In the end, the teams at Formica Group want what most of us want: comfortable, beautiful, healthy surroundings, as well as a sense of pride in responsible stewardship of the natural environment. “It's important to recognize that Formica Group uses a philosophy of sustainability in a powerful way,” Taylor says. “We don't just work cradle-to-grave, we work within a global context. It becomes a way of thinking about the world.”

In the end, the Reclaimed Denim product not only achieved its GREENGUARD certification goal, it recently won the industry's prestigious **Red Dot**, an international distinction awarded to products of outstanding design and quality. That's a pretty good ending for a weekend-warrior basement project. **gb&d**