

Greenwashing or Brainwashing?

The reality behind “Sustainable” Interior materials

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of sustainability in the interior design field, the quantity of materials available as being eco-friendly and eco-responsible is growing and growing. However, this increased demand has also brought about greenwashing whereby goods are being sold as being environmentally friendly yet do not hold up to the standards of the environment. In this paper, the critical assessment of these claims on whether they are influencing informed decision-making or distorting the perception of the users with false stories will be made, and therefore whether greenwashing has become a form of brainwashing.

The study evaluates commonly used interior materials through life cycle assessment, certifications programs, and case studies. The perceptions on sustainable materials among the users were surveyed to find their level of knowledge about it, and how they felt about it. The findings indicate a wide gap between the way individuals perceive sustainability and its real state, and implies the possibility of how marketing communications can contribute to the decision-making process in design. The paper emphasizes the need to be candid, conscious and capable of critical thinking to ensure the reality of sustainability in interior design and not a hoax.

1. INTRODUCTION

A lot of this has changed over the recent design environment where sustainability is no longer a fringe idea and is a force governing the way interior designers conduct their business. As people grow more aware of the issues of climate change, environmental degradation as well as natural resources depletion, designers and consumers alike are frantically searching a way to find a solution that would have the least environmental consequences. Consequently, sustainability with regards to the material, energy saving solutions and responsible designing

techniques have taken the centre stage in modern interior designs. Green, eco-friendly, natural, sustainable are becoming common terms used throughout the industry that affect material decisions and branding and general design stories.

But as much as there has been this increased focus on sustainability, a similar issue has cropped up in the aspect of greenwashing. Greenwashing is the act of marketing, marketing goods or resources as environmentally friendly with no sufficient data or disclosure to demonstrate that when marketed as ecologically sound. In most instances, marketing tactics feature selective properties like the fact that a material is low VOC or that it looks natural, but do not pay attention to other important factors such as energy intensive production, chemical makeup, or how the product will be disposed of. It is this selective correspondence that gives a falsely optimistic vision of sustainability.

The effects of greenwashing go beyond marketing; it affects decision-making in various levels. Designers can take shortcuts, usually having time and budget limits, by going based on information supplied by the supplier or product labels without looking further. In the same vein, when coming into physical contact with an image, consumers become more likely to view visual elements (e.g. earthy, organic finishes, etc.) as indicators of sustainability which builds on the problematic perceptions. This means that, materials that seem environmentally friendly, might in fact be an important source of environmental degradation when they are considered as a whole lifecycle.

This state of matters leads to one of the most important, urgent questions, should sustainable interior materials really have a positive impact on the well-being of the environment or is it rather a narrative built by the brand and perception? The solution is in the exploration of the apparent nature of materials as well as the concealed environmental expenses.

The research paper will set out to critically explore the genuineness of sustainability claims using interior design material. It is aimed to analyse popular materials with the lens of a lifecycle, determine trends of greenwashing in the industry, and perceive how it is being formed in the industry by marketing and design trends. The study introduces the idea of more informed, responsible and transparent material selection practices by filling the gap between desired and real sustainability.

In the end, this study has highlighted that there cannot be real sustainability in interior design with shallow labelling and visual connotations. It demands a detailed knowledge of materials, a skeptical analysis of assertions and a change towards materials that are evidence based in design choices that focus on the long term effects on environment rather than short-term attractiveness.

2. OBJECTIVES

The main aim of the study is to gain knowledge of the concept of greenwashing in the interior design discipline and to review how greenwashing affects the choice of materials and design. The research will seek to critically examine popular furniture and interior materials promoted as being eco-friendlier and explore the extent to which these materials may really be environmentally friendly.

The other notable goal is to find the difference between the perceived sustainability and the real environmental impact. This involves the knowledge of the impacts of marketing strategies on the user and designer perceptions. The study will also aim at understanding the degree of awareness of the users in a survey-based study.

Lastly, the research paper will provide recommendations that are practical to implement to ensure that future decisions made by designers, industry practitioners and users are more informed and responsible in a bid to bring about true practices of sustainable interior design.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Greenwashing in Design

Greenwashing is a form of misleading marketing, where companies present their products in a false manner of being environmentally friendly when this is not so. The industry is designed in such a way that in interior design materials are normally described as is environmentally friendly or green, but there is no disclosure as to how it was produced or its composition or disposal effect.

3.2 Principles of Sustainable Interior Design

Sustainable interior design is a comprehensive viewpoint which is notwithstanding of environmental influence and which centers on reduction of environmental influence whilst remaining functional, comfortable, and beautiful. The efficient utilization of resources is one of the main principles so that the material should be used in a responsible manner, and as much waste should be avoided during the design. The use of non-toxic and low-emission materials is another crucial feature that enhances IAQ and the health of people, in general.

Energy efficiency is also important with the natural lighting and ventilation systems, and energy saving systems are also built into the design.

The concept of waste reduction including recycling and re-use of materials buttresses sustainable practices. Most to the point, sustainable interior design is based on lifecycle thinking, in which any given material should be considered in the longer perspective of its cost to the environment, not its short-term aesthetics or utilization.

3.3 Lifecycle Analysis

Lifecycle analysis is an umbrella approach that is employed to evaluate the environmental impact of a material as a whole lifespan of a material. This starts with the extraction of the raw materials that in most cases cost in the depletion of resources and energy. It then takes into consideration the manufacturing stage where processing and production have the potential of creating emissions and waste.

Another key step is transport, where the materials that are sourced over long distances are a source of carbon emissions. The usage stage analyses the performance of the material with time, such as the maintenance and lifespan of the material. Lastly, the disposal stage determines the material to be recycled, reused or the impact of the material to the environment.

Using lifecycle analysis, it is clear a material cannot be said to be sustainable using one factor. Rather, its total effect has to be considered at all levels.

4. GREENWASHING IN INTERIOR MATERIALS

4.1 Wood and Engineered Wood

Wood is regarded to be a sustainable resource because of its natural origin and renewability. Nonetheless, its effects on the environment are highly reliant on sourcing and processing practices. Timber harvesting is environmentally friendly, but on the other hand, plywood, MDF, and particle board engineered products are produced using synthetic glues, resin, and other treatment options. Such elements do not just lead to a decrease in the recyclability but also create indoor air pollution. Moreover, the fact that large amounts of forests are deforesting and un-sustainable logging techniques undermine the down to assumption that all wood-based materials are eco-friendly.

4.2 Paints and Surface Finishes

Low VOC (Volatile Organic Compounds) are paints that are commonly advertised as safer and more environmentally friendly. They also decrease dangerous emissions in comparison to traditional paints, but they still contain no harmful substances. The majority of them still have chemical additives, which can have an impact on the indoor air quality in the long run. Other environmental effects like production processes and disposal are not always considered with the low VOC and hence these claims are not complete claims.

4.3 Laminates and Decorative Surfaces

Modern interiors have extensively deployed laminate because it is affordable, durable and because of its wide range of finishes. They tend to be promoted as sustainable due to their durability. Laminates are, however, usually constructed out of plastic resin and paper layers which are difficult to recycle and in other words, non-biodegradable. Their production

process is energy consuming and disposal adds to environmental waste in the long-term. This contradiction presents the obviousness of sustainability based solely on durability arguments.

4.4 Furniture and Composite Materials

The use of composite materials like engineered wood, veneers and synthetic finishes is also often promoted as eco-friendly in furniture. Although such materials are economical and enhance flexibility, the materials usually are based on chemicals bonding agents, which are detrimental to the environment and the health of people. The lack of both separating these materials to recycle them also diminishes their sustainability, even though they are encouraged as environmental friendly design solutions.

4.5 Textiles and Upholstery Materials

Interior furnishes including upholstery textiles, carpets, and curtains are considered to be sustainable when manufactured with the use of natural fibres, like cotton or jute. Nonetheless, their effects on the environment are influenced by water usage, dyeing, and chemical procedures. Non-biodegradable, synthetic fabrics are petroleum-based and quite durable. As it happens, sustainability claims in most situations lay emphasis on the material type with no attention on the production process.

4.6 Flooring Materials

Vinyl laying, laminates as well as some form of tiles are often sold as a sustainable flooring substance due to their durability and environmental friendliness. Nevertheless, vinyl flooring is a plastic material, which emits poisonous chemicals during manufacturing and recycling. On the same note, ceramic or stone tiles are manufactured using a lot of energy. These aspects are usually ignored in the marketing aspect hence incomplete claims on sustainability.

4.7 Glass and Metal Applications

Glass, and metals such as aluminium, steel are recyclable materials and they are usually marketed as sustainable. Although recyclability is a good factor, production of these materials is extremely energy consuming initially. Embodied energy is enhanced when used at large scale in interiors, particularly in luxurious designs. Sustainability of those materials is therefore based on the responsible usage and recycling methods as opposed to the properties of such materials.

4.8 Lighting and Electrical Components

LED lighting systems are popular solutions as being eco-friendly. Although they have the benefit of consuming less energy when in use, their production must contain electronic components and rare elements which are hard to recycle. The discarding of these components is an added contributor to the electronic waste, which is a new environmental issue. This means that complete sustainability cannot be viewed as merely energy efficiency.

4.9 Adhesives, Sealants, and Finishing Chemicals

Although adhesives and sealants are not frequently mentioned when it comes to sustainability, they have a remarkable impact on interior design. Most of these products have volatile chemicals that affect the indoor air quality and are detrimental as they are produced and discarded. Although they are necessary, important in construction, and finishing, it is rare that people note their effects on the environmental aspect of sustainability claims.

4.10 “Eco-Friendly” Branding and Material Marketing

Marketing of materials, and not their performance is one of the most critical areas of greenwashing. There is the use of terms like the terms natural, organic and eco-friendly which are usually used without defined terms or certification. This brings about an illusion of sustainability that is done through branding and is not factual. Distortion to emphasize favourable aspects and disregard the adverse effects is a prevalent tactic, and designers and consumers themselves can scarcely make proper choices.

5. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The in-depth analysis of interior materials shows there is a high discrepancy between the perceived sustainability and the real environmental performance. A vast array of materials are touted as environmentally friendly on selective attributes including natural look, performance, or lower emissions, without considering in the context of environment. This discriminatory depiction constitutes the essence of greenwashing in interior design.

Other materials such as engineered wood, laminates and composite finishes are usually positioned as sustainable alternatives because of their cost efficiency and its versatility. Nonetheless, these materials as assessed in terms of the lifecycle analysis reveal some shortcomings like they incur high embodied energy, synthetic chemicals are used, and they cannot be recycled. This means that claims on sustainability are often given on select benefits, instead of conducting a whole-scale evaluation.

Besides, the attention to visual aesthetics is critical in forming the perception. Fabrics imitating the feeling of natural materials like wood-finish laminates or stone-like surfaces invoke a sense of sustainability even though they tend to be natural and extremely toxic to the environment. This visual connotation of the idea of natural appearance and sustainability strengthens false beliefs.

Marketing language is another key observation that is vital. Eco-friendly, green and sustainable are terms that are frequently applied without a standardized definition and evidence to support them. This does not provide a clear picture, and thus the manufacturers focus on promoting positive features at the expense of negative effects on the environment.

These factors, when combined imply that sustainability in interior design is at times turned into a branding strategy as opposed to a scientifically tested practice. This substantiates the main point of the research which is that greenwashing does not merely give a false

impression of materials but changes perception to the point where the users and designers might feel blindly accepting incomplete or misleading information.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Greenwashing in design of interior demands close cooperation of designers, industry experts and users. It is important to make a transition between a perception-based decision-making process and knowledge-driven practices to guarantee actual sustainability.

To designers, the use of research as a guideline in picking of materials is important. This is where the entire life cycle of materials is known including how they are sourced, how they are manufactured, their life cycle, and their disposal procedures. Designers ought to focus on the long run use of materials, which are not only aesthetically pleasing, but also environmentally responsible too. Also, it is not recommended to use only claims provided by suppliers, and independent certifications checks should be promoted.

The concept of transparency should become a guiding principle in an industry-wide perspective. The information on material composition, environmental impact, and restrictions should be given by manufacturers and suppliers in clear, detailed, and accurate information. Such terms that are not accurate or confirmed like eco-friendly should be avoided as much as possible. Enhancing certification procedures and making sure that there are tighter rules can also contribute to decreasing false claims as well as instituting accountability.

Another factor in promoting change is users and clients. Enlightening the population on sustainable materials and getting them to think more critically can enable them to make better decisions. The users should not be manipulated by advertisements or images, but find reliable sources of information and discard sustainability propaganda.

Finally, to promote true sustainability, there should be a unanimous effort towards knowledgeable decision-making and ethical conduct as well as long term environmental sustainability.

7. CONCLUSION

This study critically reviewed the term greenwashing as used in interior design and discussed the truth in the claims of materials that are sold as sustainable. The analysis shows that in the

modern context, sustainability has become the central theme of the current design, despite the tendency to apply this concept selectively, under the influence of biased information and marketing-dominated discourses. By carefully examining some of the most popular interior finishes, it becomes clear that a significant number of products marketed as green products fail to meet the requirements of environmental standards in their overall lifecycle. Answers like a careful energy consuming production cycle, application of synthetic chemicals and the recyclability are some of the factors that bring into question the authenticity of these claims.

Another role in promoting sustainability practices as noted in the research is the role of sensation. Correlations between natural appearance and environmental responsibility and the extensive use of imprecise marketing terms adds to the inaccurate perception of sustainability. This further supports the main thesis that greenwashing can possibly affect both designers and users and result in decisions that take into account all incomplete or misleading information.

To overcome this situation, it is needed to leave the superficial understanding of sustainability and go deeper and more research-oriented. The use of material information to create transparency, user awareness and responsible designer decision-making are some of the major elements of effecting this change.

To sum up, the concept of sustainability in interior design needs to transform into a trend or a marketing device into a more real and tangible practice. With an emphasis on the environment rather than appearances or business concerns, the industry can make a valuable contribution to sustainable development and provide spaces which are not merely attractive to the eye, but also sustainable in the sense of environmental friendliness.

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