

Vinyl Wallcoverings - The Right Choice

Vinyl wallcoverings have long been recognized by design professionals as the right choice for commercial interior finishes by combining versatile aesthetics, low maintenance and durability. Some of the technical and environmental information below might be helpful when selecting vinyl wallcoverings for the contract marketplace.

Durability

Vinyl wallcoverings offer virtually unlimited aesthetics and durability. Studies have shown that vinyl wallcoverings are very cleanable and that typically, they outlast other surface treatments (like paint) by a factor of three to five times longer. Over the life of a building, this results in a significant savings in the labor that would be required to repair or replace the other surface treatments, not to mention the fact that it minimizes the “disturbance factor” that is associated with each decorating effort.

Resource Conservation

Unlike other plastic materials that are derived solely from a petroleum base, PVC is primarily derived from salt, a commonly available chemical with near unlimited worldwide resources. Using PVC results in much less demand on the world’s limited fossil fuel resources than other plastics derived solely from petroleum bases. Even when compared to “renewable” resources such as wallpaper, vinyl can be produced using half the amount of energy as would be required for an equivalent amount of paper. It has been estimated that to have similar durability, paper wallcovering would need to be approximately three times as thick as vinyl wallcovering, therefore, the energy costs to produce a paper wallcovering product with similar durability properties would be six times as great as it costs to produce an equivalent vinyl wallcovering product.

Biodegradability

Today, biodegradability of products is frequently a topic of interest. For a product to be biodegradable, it must break down when subjected to attack by microorganisms. While it is possible to develop technology for development of some single use consumer products, it is virtually impossible to develop a durable microorganism-resistant vinyl wallcovering that biodegrades once it is discarded.

Disposal/Landfill

Under Federal landfill regulations, vinyl wallcovering is not considered a hazardous waste and can be safely landfilled. Like all plastics, vinyl is an extremely stable landfill material. It resists chemical attack and degradation and is so resistant to the conditions present in landfills, it is often used to make landfill liners. In addition to the ability for vinyl wallcovering to be safely landfilled, it has an extremely long life cycle relative to other plastic consumer products and contributes less than 0.01% to the total composition of a landfill.

Indoor Air Quality

As with most manufactured and packaged consumer products such as carpeting, fabrics, automobiles, housewares, and furniture, newly installed wallcovering will have an initial characteristic odor. However, testing indicates that the odor quickly dissipates in buildings with normal ventilation systems. The slight odor which may occur when wallcovering is first applied is due to a combination of residual organic solvents related to printing and finishing and stabilizers and plasticizers which are integral parts of the vinyl formulation. In an effort to further reduce odors associated with vinyl wallcovering, much of the Industry is converting to water-based printing and finishing. Wallcovering adhesives, which are 100% water-based and mixtures of natural and synthetic polymers, do not contribute to any off-gassing. Thus, use of vinyl wallcoverings does not raise the types of questions that have been raised with respect to formaldehyde. Formaldehyde typically is used in other building products, such as particleboard; however, wallcovering does not include measurable amounts of formaldehyde and, therefore, would not be a source of such emissions. While a great deal of public attention has been focused on indoor air quality and the “Sick Building Syndrome”, no reported problems have ever been traced to the use of vinyl wallcoverings.

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The “Chlorine Issue”

A movement started in Europe and spreading to the United States seeks to ban products that contain chlorine. Most of the concerns center around the discharge of organic compounds into the world’s oceans and waterways. Banning all products that contain chlorine is not based on sound scientific thinking. Scientists who are familiar with the hundreds of chemical compounds within the chlorine family know that their impact on the environment can range from problematic to benign. Polyvinyl Chlorine is a chlorine based product that falls into the benign category. PVC is one of the most stable end-uses of chlorine; it leaves the chlorine in a form more inert than the salt from which it was made. It has the additional benefits of making vinyl wallcovering inherently flame retardant.

Heavy Metals Elimination

The wallcovering industry has been proactive in the reduction and elimination of cadmium and mercury based pigments, stabilizers and biocides.

No VCM Exposure

Vinyl wallcovering does not result in exposure to VCM. VCM (Vinyl Chloride Monomer) is the chemical from which PVC resin is manufactured, but only trace amounts (less than one part per million) remain in the resin and virtually all of this is removed during processing into the final product. There is no known means by which PVC can revert back to VCM and, therefore, use of vinyl wallcoverings do not entail risk of VCM exposure.

Fire Safety

In the interest of fire safety, vinyl wallcoverings produced by members of CFFA meet the following requirements:

- **Flame Spread & Smoke Development:** Vinyl wallcoverings produced by members of CFFA meet Class A requirements, the best fire rating that can be obtained.
- **Combustion Toxicity:** New York City requires that wallcoverings at point of combustion must be no more toxic than wood when tested according to the criteria established by the MEA (Material and Equipment Acceptance) Division of the New York City Department of Buildings. The CFFA member companies have had their products individually tested and have received MEA approval.

Prepared by the members of

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The Chemical Fabrics & Film Association**

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