

# green operations

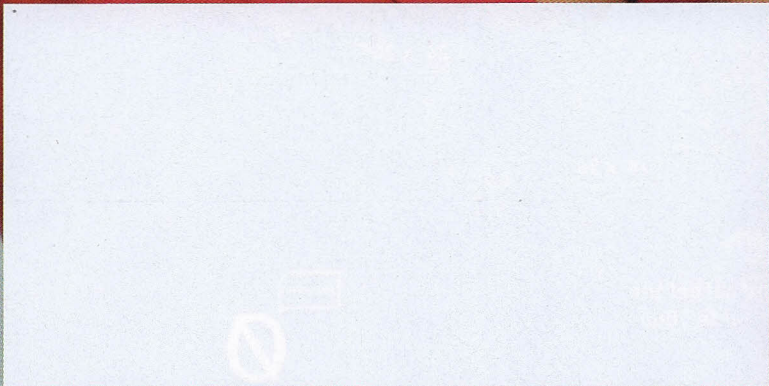
THE MAGAZINE OF SUSTAINABLE FLOORING

**NeoCon**  
**PREVIEW**

**corporate  
comeback**

**ROBIN WILSON**  
**Shaping sustainable design**

**CALGreen**  
**& THE FUTURE OF  
RATING SYSTEMS**



# ROBIN WILSON

Synonymous with sustainable design

BY MELISSA MCGUIRE

She was once featured in the *New York Post's* annual list of the "50 Most Powerful Women in New York." She has worked on renovation projects in the Harlem office of former President Bill Clinton. She was part of a "green dream team" that worked on the private residence of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. She is the first woman to license her name to eco-friendly kitchen cabinetry, which is sold at 500 Holiday Kitchen dealers nationwide.

Meet Robin Wilson, a nationally recognized, award-winning, eco-friendly and healthy space interior designer. With a focus on designing everything from the "foundation to the furniture" for residential and commercial clients, Wilson became an early advocate for clean construction and, thus, a pioneer of sustainable design.

Wilson launched her firm, Robin Wilson Home, in 2000 with a focus on interior design, residential renovations and project management. Over the years, the company has built a strong reputation in the renovation and design business in a style that can best be described as characteristically classic with a modern touch. Her passion for indigenous cultures is found in her use of eco-décor, which integrates textured patterns, natural stone and organic fibers. But today, it is Robin Wilson's mission to combine her passion for design with healthy living.

Wilson insists that an eco-friendly home is all about our overall health in our homes. Her firm lives by four principles:

re-usable, sustainable, non-toxic and recyclable. As an example, she often specifies bamboo flooring for homes from either Dragonfly or Mohawk. "Mohawk strand woven bamboo flooring is made with 100% of the bamboo stalk, creating no environmental waste as a byproduct, and utilizes environmentally friendly adhesives," she said. "And with Dragonfly, the

Wilson was reared with household contaminate concerns after suffering from asthma and allergies. Allergic to pets, pillows, products and even some foods in her formative years, Wilson stressed the significant sensitivity of one who suffers from allergen vulnerability. "I was the person who was wheezing and sneezing indoors, and then I'd walk outside and have the

same issues." To accommodate her allergies, her parents made lifestyle changes, including switching to organic foods and installing hardwood and tile throughout the house. These steps influenced her awareness and desire to work with eco-friendly materials.

Wilson later would watch her grandparents manage homes created for workers in the oil fields of Texas. "The quality of the houses was typical of simple construction with little insulation and ill-fitting windows." After working with the Lower Colorado River Authority while pursuing her undergraduate degree, she became interested in environmental issues as her knowledge of energy, water and power conservation grew. After leaving corporate jobs, she obtained her master's degree in Real Estate Finance at New York University. It

was then that she realized the tie of indoor air quality to asthma and allergens and the need to fulfill her legacy.

Wilson examined the hierarchy of buying green products and noticed buyers tend to focus on their personal eco-system before thinking about the global eco-

Continued on page 16



Robin Wilson combines her passion for design with healthy living.

products have a UV coating that protects against yellowing and another coating that is low VOC. It also uses a lock and click system, which alleviates the need for formaldehyde glue, which can ruin the environmental story in one shot."

The idea of healthy living stems from her childhood. Hailing from Austin, Texas,

Continued from page 15

system. “I’m finding people initially care about aesthetics,” she said. “Then they’re concerned about price. Then it’s their family’s health and the environment.”

Before Wilson can suggest specific products, she needs to have an understanding of the space and how it’s purposed. “The first thing I ask a client is how she wants to use the space. Are there children? Will it be heavily trafficked or is it decorative? The next thing to know is the use of the space. For instance, will an event have women with heels? And third is whether the home is owned or rented.”

After determining the client’s wants and needs, she begins focusing on products. “I always ask myself if a product is renewable or sustainable. I want to know if it can be refinished or if it’s off-gassing.”

Wilson also researches attributes like adhesives and sealants. She looks to see if the product is a resin, wax or contains lead. “Kids lick walls and pets lick floors. I want to know if you could inadvertently bring toxins into your body. And what if there is a major catastrophic event such as a flood? Will the surface be durable?”

**THE FLOORING STORY**

When it comes to flooring, Wilson has worked closely with Mohawk Industries and its family of brands because it provides the solutions she seeks. “I love Mohawk,” she said. “Karastan, Dal-Tile and the engineered hardwoods are my favorite.” She recognizes Karastan for not using vinyl backing and implementing eco-friendly, natural materials. “In addition to their vast sustainability, the products are aesthetically pleasing and can be custom made. For instance, a rug can be turned into a carpet or vice versa. Customizing is very important today.”

Much of Wilson’s success is attributed to the fact she understands sustainable design and beautiful design are not mutually exclusive, according to Jenny Cross, global sustainability director, Mohawk. “She takes care to understand the needs of her clients and to present them with the most sustainable options available to meet those needs. She has brought awareness to eco-design and the beauty of the spaces she has created speaks for itself.”

As a designer, Wilson also pays close attention to what manufacturers are doing



in-house. “I care how the product is manufactured and if it is sustainable.” She notes the importance of having manufacturers relay their green message to the end user. “I love a manufacturer that can make it easy for me or a consumer to find accurate information to form an opinion.” As an example, she cited Dal-Tile, which now has an eco-friendly station in its showrooms that allows people to make a decision based on factors other than price alone. “It’s great for everyone. Plus, they have a huge inventory of ceramic tiles to ensure they have limited shipments overseas.”

In addition to Mohawk, Wilson has also installed Carlisle wide plank hardwood noting the company’s 100% Post Consumer Antique Reclaimed certification from the Forest Stewardship Council.

“We also highly recommend carpet tiles,” she said. “It’s a great idea for anyone, especially people with children. If there is a spill such as a soda, all you have to do is replace one tile.” Wilson has worked on numerous projects with InterfaceFLOR, often cited as one of the leading sustainable manufacturers. “I like its rubber backing as opposed to a vinyl backing. Plus, you can easily install it yourself.”

**ROBIN WILSON HOME**

Today, Wilson’s eponymous design firm, Robin Wilson Home, focuses on consultation with developers, new & retrofit design/construction, showhouses, health-care facilities, office spaces and residential clients. For the past two years, the company has moved toward licensing with major brands to build eco-friendly

**Robin Wilson has suggestions for improving the health of a home. They include:**

- 1. Paint with no-VOC paint.** If the paint of a home is toxic, that is what everyone is breathing in.
- 2. Get an eco-friendly mattress.** Most mattresses are manufactured with chemicals that include flame retardants, petroleum-based foams, plastics, vinyls, fungicides and pesticides.
- 3. Purchase a dual-flush toilet.** Save water and money.
- 4. Switch from carcinogenic cabinets to healthy ones.** by Holiday Kitchens are made with low to no-VOC paint and make a lasting impression without leaving a negative impact on the home. Many cabinets out there are glued together with formaldehyde-based adhesives, which are carcinogenic.
- 5. Opt for recycled countertops.** is a durable surface made of 100% recycled glass in a cement matrix. Each slab is VOC-free, made in the USA and holds Cradle to Cradle Gold Certification.
- 6. Outfit your home with furniture that is good for you and our earth.** Environment Furniture and Mitchell Gold uses sustainably harvested wood and opt for environmentally sound manufacturing practices.



For Robert F. Kennedy's living room, inlaid patterns of contrasting dark and light woods were reclaimed from old barns in Maryland.

design awareness. As mentioned earlier, her RWH kitchen line is sold at more than 500 retail stores. By spring 2012, her retail collection will launch home textiles, pillows and a bath line.

In addition, she created The Nest Store,

a web platform to introduce the consumer marketplace to eco-friendly and eco-healthy products on her website, theneststore.com. "Many artisans do not have the marketing budget, so The Nest Store has provided a medium for them to have their products featured to a wide range of buyers," Wilson said. "It is exciting to review products to determine if they meet our eco-friendly criteria, and then we love to see consumer response. We work hard to identify unique products that are beautiful and eco-friendly in a variety of materials, including bamboo, concrete, metal, soy,

organic cotton, microcotton and mango wood, and others."

Wilson is also providing information on the site, targeting specific audiences that benefit from her sustainable expertise. "So many families are affected by the environment. I want to target those who really need help - mommies to be, cancer survivors who need a pristine environment, and the physically challenged community, especially soldiers."

She believes there is a strong need for eco-friendly information and exposure to those who are health conscious but lack awareness about products. "Healthy products can be affordable as well as aesthetically pleasing."



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