The frontlines of fabric

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By Chris Crowell
Hotel Design

Hotel design and fashion cross paths in many ways, but most notably when it comes to fabric selection. The furniture, architecture and lighting comprise the body—but the fabrics are definitely the clothes.

Much like an actress choosing a gown for the Oscars, designer Jenny Haworth, formerly a senior interior designer at Design Poole, says one of her first steps after considering a theme for her design is to look for a “wow fabric”—a fabric that makes a statement.

In particular, Haworth looks for a pattern or design to jump out at her.

“It might not be the color you’re looking for,” she says. “A lot of times, you can take that back to the company and they’ll recolor it for you, and it can affect where your whole color palette goes, but you might think it looks better than what you already had. Finding that initial wow fabric is key. You start to limit yourself going in with color in mind first.”

And she says the wow doesn’t necessarily come entirely from the fabric itself, but in what it adds to an architectural or art element that’s the real focus of the room.

“If you have gigantic windows, maybe you want a really large pattern for the window treatments and that’s your interest. Especially if your view is important.”

But the Oscars aren’t every day. Sometimes fabrics just need to play a role in the design, like socks or a belt. And when choosing these fabrics for a purpose instead of a wow, it’s important to consult with the brand or hotel owner for any specific requests they have—in terms of double-rubs or budget constraints—mull over what the job of the fabric is going to be and then communicate that to the fabric vendor.

The biggest mistake designers make is “not letting fabric companies know what the end use is,” says Amy Benjamin, VP at Duralee. This is important for two reasons: For one, she says, the chosen pattern may not be reproducible for the specific purpose intended. “Or [the fabric may be] beautiful and expensive and they want it for a [small] budget and to look exactly like that,” she said.

These details can be easy to overlook as a designer, but fabric manufacturers consider these details the most important part of the selection process. Not considering them is like buying jeans based on the look and not considering the fit.

Joe Kilby, director of contract for Schumacher & Co., and VP of the Association for Contract Textiles board, says to always pay attention to local fire codes first, but he also says cleanability often is the No.1 attribute to consider.

“It could be addressed by the fiber or the end-use application,” he says. “It’s going to be different for draperies than bedding. If it’s bedding, is it washable or do you dry clean it? Those issues vary depending on the property. It’s not one size fits all.” End-use cleanability options Kilby mentions are nanotechnology and Crypton.

John Schroeter, founder and president of Applied Textiles, says a fabric education is beneficial for designers, especially
Even beyond knowing the differences in sheers, drapery, bedding, seating and indoor and outdoor products, he says it’s important to understand the manufacturing process.

“The performance fabric model is changing dramatically,” he says. “Now [there are] performance technologies that are cost-effective for bedding, sheers, wallcoverings ... any is available for performance technologies for a reasonable price and offered globally.”

However, Schroeter says the manufacturing and processing technology can treat fabrics a variety of ways, providing near limitless opportunities for a designer, but he warned against the chemicals in some of these techniques, especially for designers concerned with taking their designs green. In particular, he called out volatile organic chemicals, like formaldehyde.

“There’s a tremendous amount of research in the apparel and footwear business, testing fabrics to be sure we know what’s in them,” he says. “Because something is called green doesn’t mean that it is. What’s in it? How much recycled fiber? Is it recyclable after I specify it?”

If green is your concern, look into these aspects as identified by the ACT: fiber sourcing, safety of materials, water conservation and water quality, energy, recycling practices, air quality in manufacturing and social accountability.

“At this time, the best advice is for the designer to look to each supplier to provide details regarding any product that is being marketed with sustainable attributes,” Kilby says. “The designer and his or her client will need to determine if these attributes meet the sustainability goals for any given project.”

According to Benjamin, sustainability isn’t as big of a factor in fabrics as it is in the rest of the hotel, especially when budgets are taken into account.

“It is costly,” she says. “To create the fiber, it adds a couple dollars more to the end product. While I know there are some [benefits] ... you can be green-certified and not have green fabric—that’s not where your points come from. I think it’s starting to become important, but it’s taking time,” she said.

**Fabric forecast**

Sustainability is a trend for fabrics during the coming years, with increasing demand for materials that are recyclable and manufactured from green materials.

“Obviously, environmentally responsible materials are going to be important not only in fabric but in all building material choices,” says Jennifer McConnell, VP of design, Pearson Company. “Responsible manufacturing is going to play a huge role in determining which fabrics and furnishing are specified for all large hospitality projects.”

According to Deborah Schwartz, art director for Valley Forge Fabrics, sustainability and recycled fabrics have very much become commonplace in the hospitality industry, although she notes that in the current economic conditions, sometimes designers are choosing lower-priced fabrics rather than paying a premium for sustainable fabrics.

“I think that it will be important to continue to develop fabrics that are a mix of new and exciting materials,” Schwartz says. “Instead of a simple texture, maybe [we’ll see] a mix of vinyl and fabric to create a 3-D effect. As technology develops, we will watch the trends from that market and transition it into hospitality.”

Schwartz hopes customers will “look beyond labels and misleading marketing and understand a truly green choice is to review the entire process of how a fabric is a made and then disposed.”

Brian Coughlin, VP at Fabtex, thinks the interest in green fabrics will continue.
"But [interest] will be tested by the market’s response to cost premiums associated with environmentally friendly products," Coughlin says.

Hot in 2010
Satins and sleek fabric will continue to be in high demand, according to Graham Noakes, sales and marketing director for Osborne & Little.

"Although neutral colorways will be the premier choice, there will be a place for tones of lilac and lavender and stronger colors, such as petrol. Luxurious velvets will be used as highlights but are unlikely to be the predominant fabric in a scheme," he says.

Noakes also feels there will be increasing demand for waterproof fabrics suitable for spa and poolside lounging use.

Lee Menichella, president, Chella Textiles, believes 2010 will see more sustainable, solution-dyed fibers with an expanded array of color choices, as well as faux leathers and PVC materials fixed into weaves and patterns.

Colors will reflect the tastes of a new generation of European weavers highly skilled in developing the latest performance textile yarns in colors with urbane sensibilities," Menichella says.

Schwartz says solids and textures will remain a trend next year.

"The two exciting accent colors that can be used with any neutral color palette emerge straight from the fall 2009 fashion runway: classic red and dandelion yellow."

She feels there are three main neutrals that can be used as a base before selecting accents:

- Tuscany (Pantone 16-1219), a warm beige,
- Dried Herb (Pantone 17-0627), the ultimate green neutral, and
- Eucalyptus (Pantone 15-0513), the eternal, practical gray.

McConnell sees color becoming popular again.

"It’s so nice to see warm tones of reds, oranges and purples, as well as bright greens and yellows," she says.

"Traditional is making a comeback. Natural fibers are becoming more important as designers and manufacturers become more environmentally responsible."

Coughlin agrees, saying that color is returning to guestrooms as hotels move away from white bedding, due in part to the operational difficulties associated with maintaining the clean look of the white bed.

"This evolution has implications in the design process, as designers are again using the bed as the focal point to begin their selection of colors and fabrics," Coughlin says. "Watch for fabrics with big, bold patterns and bright colors, especially in bed coverings and window treatments, which provide large-sized visual palettes."

Schwartz says because many designers are inspired when traveling to other countries, one of the new prevalent designs will be bold ikat patterns reminiscent of the blue waters of Capri, Italy, with a mix of deep navy, serene aquarium blue and also a mix of jungle greens to create animal and safari patterns and prints.

Fashion forward
While inspiration sources are all over, many fabric designers are definitely influenced by fashion.

“Our studio is full of color mood boards with cuttings from the fashion pages of glossy magazines,” Noakes says. “I think a repetitive corporate look is definitely passé.”

And McConnell says her staff is “captivated by the New York and Paris fashion week clips on YouTube.”
Schwartz says there are five main areas of inspiration for her company: fashion, residential lifestyle environments, pop culture, sustainability and globalization.

“Fashion is always at the forefront when viewing trends or inspiration,” she says.

– Paul J. Heney

Nine tips on taking a sustainable approach when creating or designing with fabric

1. Use sustainable, organic or recycled fabrics.
2. Use sustainable fibers that come from rapidly renewable resources with growth and harvest cycles of five years or less.
3. Use recycled fibers that come from post-consumer waste such as water or soda bottles.
4. Use fabrics containing dyes or pigments that meet the metal content standards set up by the Ecological and Toxicological Association of Dyes and Pigments manufacturers.
5. Use loom-state fabrics that come straight from the loom with no additional finishes or preparations.
6. Work with credible mills that look after their local environment.
7. The less the textiles date within the scheme and the longer they last, the less often they need replacing.
8. Source fabrics that are close in proximity to your end user to reduce freight.
9. Consciously try to eliminate the carbon footprint on the environment through every stage.

Source: Jane Riback, fabric design director, Robert Allen Contract; Stephanie Moffitt, design director, Mokum; Manoli Sargetakis, principal, Silver State

By the numbers: Industry abrasion standards

The Association for Contract Textiles guidelines of abrasion result from the Wyzenbeek and Martindale test methods. Heavy duty standards are:

30,000 double rubs on Wyzenbeek
40,000 cycles for Martindale

Source: Jane Riback, fabric design director, Robert Allen Contract; Stephanie Moffitt, design director, Mokum; Manoli Sargetakis, principal, Silver State

Hot fabric colors/patterns in demand for 2010

Jane Riback, fabric design director, Robert Allen Contract:

Brighter blue
Brighter berry
Rhubarb
Peacock (turquoise)
Citron with graphite

Stephanie Moffitt, design director, Mokum:

Blues and purples in every hue
Strong reds
Linen
Soft and dark grays
Plain and patterned velvet

The best ways to prevent fabrics from fading or spotting under direct sunlight

• Specifically designed “outdoor” fabrics should be used in areas that are receiving extended periods of direct sunlight.
• High-energy disperse dyes or high lightfastness pigments will assist in achieving longer lightfastness for a fabric.
• Synthetic sheers at the windows, such as solution-dyed acrylic, provide a great filter to harsh UV, as do blinds.
Close blinds or curtains to protect furnishing when the room is unoccupied.
• Follow manufacturers’ directions for cleaning and care.
• Periodically clean outdoor furniture for maintenance.

Source: Jane Riback, fabric design director, Robert Allen Contract; Stephanie Moffitt, design director, Mokum; Manoli Sargetakis, principal, Silver State

“Washable”—what does it mean to you?

“Washable means that a fabric has been tested and passes a minimum of five commercial washes at either 120 degrees or 160 degrees, depending upon the end use. Also, as part of the laundering criteria, the fabric is evaluated for shrinkage, pilling and overall appearance.”
— Jane Riback, fabric design director, Robert Allen Contract

“Most of our fabrics are recommended to be spot cleaned with a solvent cleaner.”
—Manoli Sargetakis, principal, Silver State

“Washable means the material is machine washable, but that is just the beginning. Knowing we cannot predict how a fabric is going to be treated once it leaves our hands, we make it our mission to make sure that our fabrics are going to look just as good two years into the project as they do on the day of installation. We have tested all of our products with bleach and found that they will withstand commercial bleach sitting on them for four hours without any noticeable change.”
—Kortney Edge, sales director, Trend Green

“Laundered to a maximum of 160 degrees with no noticeable shrinkage. Tumble dry on low setting.”
—Victoria Russo Corea, senior marketing manager, Kravet/Lee Jofa

My favorite type of fabric to work with is ...

“... matelasse constructions with lots of texture. Any fabric that achieves richness of color and definition of design.”
— Jane Riback, fabric design director, Robert Allen Contract

“... project specific. There are so many beautiful fabrics. At Mokum, we love quality fibers and finishes; a fabric not only has to look good and perform, but it needs to feel good as well.”
—Stephanie Moffitt, design director, Mokum

“... post-consumer recycled polyester. We are taking 16 plastic bottles out of the landfill for every yard of fabric that we create. The colors are bolder and brighter and the hand is becoming softer, which allows us to create fabrics that are more residential in feel, yet will still stand-up to the requirements of the hospitality market.”
—Kortney Edge, sales director, Trend Green

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