

DESIGN FEATURE OF THE MOMENT

cork surfaces

SUSTAINABLE AND STYLISH - WHAT'S NOT TO LOVE ABOUT THIS VERSATILE MATERIAL BEING USED INSIDE AND OUT?

FEATURE Keith Flanagan



No longer bottled up, cork is popping off throughout interiors and exteriors as architects adopt the lightweight material across flooring, cladding and wallcoverings. And while its earthy quality makes it an eye-catching choice, cork's strongest appeal goes beyond the surface: it's eco-friendly.

The renewable resource is harvested primarily in Portugal and Spain from the bark of cork oak trees, which are never cut down or harmed in the process (the phrase 'money doesn't grow on trees' doesn't apply here, at least not for cork farmers). And as far as natural building materials go, the perks are legion. Cork is sustainable, recyclable, water and fire resistant – the list goes on.

Initially used for insulation, cork is increasingly being brought out into the open by architects who are using it both inside and outside the home. 'It ticks all the boxes when it comes to thermal and acoustic performance, but it is also breathable, free from chemicals, synthetic resins and carcinogenic materials and creates a healthy environment inside the house,' explains Nimi Attanayake, co-founder and director of London's Nintim Architects.

Beyond function, the material is embraced for its aesthetic qualities, too. Cork's composition adds rich visual interest, and its speckled grain brings an organic touch that makes it an interesting alternative for natural materials like stone and wood. You'll see this not just on walls, but on cork flooring, perhaps the most accessible application, which functions beautifully thanks to cork's natural give (making it comfortable underfoot) while its gentle look brings unique warmth and visible texture.

What can't cork do? We're barely scratching the surface. Here's a look at some of the many ways architects and designers use cork inside and outside the home. ➤

1 SOFT SPOT

Cork's natural resilience provides a cushioned surface, making it a smart pick for kitchen flooring, where people stand for long periods of time. For cooking areas, opt for high-density cork tiles or planks specifically made for high-traffic areas. 'These varieties are more durable and better equipped to withstand daily wear and tear,' explains Fiona Ginnett, co-founder and director at Hackney's Hølte. 'Additionally, ensuring the cork flooring is properly sealed is essential to safeguard against spills, stains and moisture.'

PROJECT BY Hølte

2 CHECK MATES

With variations in shade and colour, cork can be easily manipulated by manufacturers to look like anything from wood to stone. The ability to match other surfaces made it a clever hallway flooring idea in this project. 'Other areas of the upper level have large chequered Italian porcelain pavers in sand and beige tones,' says Yasmine Ghoniem,

director at YSG Studio, noting how cork was softer underfoot while complementing harder tiles in the bathroom and balcony. 'So we chose cork with similar shades in a matching square size to line the main en suite and general indoor passages to sync with them.'

PROJECT BY YSG Studio

3 ZONING LAW

Flexing cork's versatile nature, Brooklyn's Almost Studio used the material to create a few soft zones throughout an airy loft. 'Here cork – through variation of tone, texture, grain and its easy-to-cut shapes – defines without dividing the spaces within the loft,' say studio co-founders Dorian Booth and Anthony Gagliardi. Cork flooring and wainscoting help highlight different spaces, like the seating area here, creating subtle yet visible borders alongside segments of green carpet and white Marmoleum. The effect lets certain areas pop without harsh divisions within the open loft.

PROJECT BY Almost Studio





ANOTHER DIMENSION

As a natural material, cork can lend plenty of visual texture to your interior. That's especially true for this sunlit project in east London, where expanded cork boards are used as a wall finish, adding dimension throughout the interiors. 'Cork gives a wonderful texture to the walls, with its colour softening slightly with time, so it is wonderful when light bounces off it,' says Charles Wu, director at Polysmiths. Better yet? Charles says that cork happens to have a 'wonderful woody scent' when installed (you've got to smell it to believe it).

PROJECT BY Polysmiths



PHOTOGRAPHS (ANOTHER DIMENSION) LORENZO ZANDRI;
(SOUND OFF) MEGAN TAYLOR

SOUND OFF

In this south London extension, architects chose cork cladding boards for external and internal walls primarily for sustainability. But another chief reason is seen, but not heard: cork reduces noise. 'The family's main requirement at Cork House was to have a flexible space that they could all be in at the same time whilst doing different activities,' explains Nimi Attanayake, co-founder and director of Nimtim Architects. 'Cork's acoustic performance means it is able to absorb a lot of the sound and reduce echo within a large space. This is perfect for a family.'

PROJECT BY Nimtim Architects >



INSIDE OUT

For this Camberwell extension, expanded cork cladding and wallcoverings (fabricated by Portugal's Amorim) bring a contemporary look that blends well with the brick Victorian and neighbouring homes. 'The cork will weather over time and change colour to a softer, slightly grey tone from the original colour,' notes Alex Raher, architect and co-founder of Delve Architects. 'It can be used internally and externally, and can also be employed as a thermal insulation for external walls, as it is "vapour permeable", allowing moisture to escape through it.'

PROJECT BY Delve Architects