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Cathy Leidersdorff of Architectural Flooring Resource: Long Term Thinker

by Peter Carey



Cathy Leidersdorff

What does it mean to be a resource? The word can refer to a person or place with supplies, support or aid. Being “resourceful” can refer to an individual’s capability, ingenuity and initiative when facing difficulties. In a relationship-based industry like commercial interiors, however, being a resource to others is a position of influence requiring earned respect. In our current economic climate of low budgets and fast turnaround for construction projects, most resources, human or otherwise, are having their capabilities tested on a daily basis.

Since all construction projects require a finished floor, it helps interior designers and architects to be surrounded by resources in the flooring business that are focused on doing the job right the first time, as opposed to getting the job done quickly and poorly.

For more than twenty years, **Cathy Leidersdorff** has been a trusted partner to many in the New York Tri-State design community. She and her team at **Architectural Flooring Resource (AFR)** have earned their reputation as

a trustworthy confidant for designers, developers and end users. A conversation with Ms. Leidersdorff yields a glimpse into the thinking that has led her company to an influential position in its market. This influence comes from a hearty mix of honesty, experience, and eyes trained on the future of every business relationship.

To call AFR just a flooring contractor would be to miss the point of what sets them apart: they care deeply about the quality of the work they do. Ms. Leidersdorff notes that the care and the quality of the work put into each project elevates their standing with specifiers and end users alike.

“One of the things I always tell my customers,” said Ms. Leidersdorff, “is that I have the capability to sell them anything; any brand of carpet or flooring – it doesn’t matter. However, I’m not going to sell anyone the *wrong* flooring for their application.

Because of our deep experience in the flooring business we regularly assist and advise on the many details to consider and the type of flooring mate-



Seven air-conditioned basketball courts installed by AFR at Basketball City in NYC



AFR's resource library of carpet and flooring binders

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rials that will work best in a particular application. And sometimes what won't work is just as important to know. We are able to advise and bring value not just to the architectural firm that uses us, but also to the general contractor."

Acting as a critical link between a designer's aesthetic intentions and firsthand knowledge of how each flooring product performs in real-world applications, Ms. Leidersdorff notes that she and her team of experienced installers and advisors know that honesty with respect to known weaknesses or shortcomings is the best way to make professional relationships last. Helping a client avoid a costly mistake is usually not quickly forgotten.

"Our value proposition is that we are going to save our customers money," she said. "It may not be immediately, but over the long run, we will save them money. More than anything we are problem solvers; often through problem avoidance."

Located on the sixth floor of 135 West 27th Street, AFR's office boasts one of the biggest carpet and flooring resource libraries in NYC. "Any designer looking for carpet or any other flooring product is welcome to visit us. In one setting, designers can find everything that is available to fulfill their project vision, rather than having each carpet rep visit their design studio individually. Instead of a process that may take half a day or longer, we can find designers what they need very quickly."

Ms. Leidersdorff takes the name of the company, Architectural Flooring Resource, seriously. Being a flooring resource for the design community involves a blend of technical know-how, a knack for keeping in touch with current aesthetic sensibilities and knowledge of the performance capabilities of the many products in the marketplace.

"Some junior designers who are doing the first pass of selecting flooring materials for A&D projects do not yet have enough experience to parse the



Resilient floor installation by AFR: Manhattan Star Academy



Wood flooring and carpet installation at Harper Collins headquarters in NYC



Sports flooring is a specialty at AFR: the basketball court of Lehman College in NYC

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products available in the marketplace today. They may come to us and say they are looking for product that costs \$2.50 a square foot, but it has to be funky and new and different and it has to hold up to the environment where it is installed.

These days, everybody's thinks polishing concrete is cheap, but it's not. Using an already installed substrate may still require several steps of finishing. You have to bead blast it, then polish it, and then you have to seal it; all of a sudden the flooring budget jumps from \$2.50 to \$6.00 a square foot."

To that end, Ms. Leidersdorff has a favorite motto she uses when people claim she is priced too high: "Cheap pays twice." She notes that most experienced architects and designers know what they are looking at and will know if a flooring product is good quality or not. "Many times, they have chosen a bad product and tell me it is all they can afford for this project. I understand the situation, but it is unfortunate when we all know a particular product is not going to perform over time. It will perform long enough for everyone to get paid, but a year or two down the road the product *can* and most likely *will* fail."

With an approachable but no-nonsense attitude, Ms. Leidersdorff and AFR credit their high level of repeat business to identifying both present flooring conditions and potential future flooring problems in each installation. "Our first customer still comes back to us," she said. "Many of our customers have been friends for 20 years or more; the reason they come back is that I won't pull any punches with them. I will tell them when I think a product is a piece of garbage. If they want to install it that badly, or their boss or client wants it installed, I tell them to get somebody else to put it in. Then two years later, I end up replacing what they 'had to have' with something that is appropriate for the conditions of the space."

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Throughout the commercial design industry, the demand for wood flooring has increased significantly in recent years.

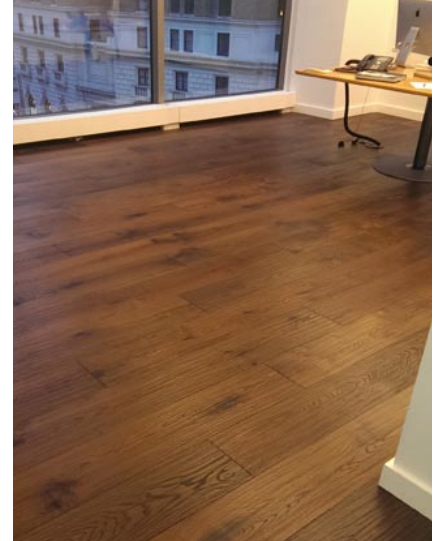
“Wood flooring is a big trend right now, and it will probably be popular until the end of this decade,” she said. “It also happens to be the most mis-specified product around right now. All wood flooring requires that you keep the climate of the installation stable. Heat and humidity cannot fluctuate very much over time, and if they do, the wood will move and curl. Every wood flooring manufacturer tells you that you have to acclimatize the product, but almost nobody does it.”

AFR recently began a partnership with the Austrian wood flooring manufacturer **Mafi**. Ms. Leidersdorff

pursued the partnership because the product is very reliable as well as being beautiful. “I can’t sell something that I am not confident in.”

Indeed, Ms. Leidersdorff’s confidence in Mafi led her to open a showroom for the manufacturer three floors up on the ninth floor of the building that houses the AFR office.

We sell a lot of other wood flooring products in addition to Mafi, but what I am looking for most in wood flooring products and what I’ve found in Mafi is a company that stands behind its product. If there is a failure, I want to be able to go back to the manufacturer and ask them to inspect the installation, and Mafi will always do the right thing.”



A Mafi executive office installation at Interpublic Group in NYC



Barn door installation at the Mafi showroom in NYC



A conference table made of Mafi wood flooring

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Instead of being made from solid hardwood, Mafi wood flooring is an engineered, or multilayer wood flooring system. As with all engineered wood, each layer is oriented perpendicular to the last. Over time, solid hardwood has a tendency to swell and shrink with changes in the humidity in a room. Due to the cross-grain layers, engineered wood typically moves less than solid wood. A top quality product like Mafi has a balanced or “symmetrical” 3-layer construction. The visible top layer and the back layer, or counter layer, are made of the same wood and undergo the same treatment. A mid-layer has corresponding size and strength but does not need to be as hard as the surface layers.

“Many times, designers ask us to write the specifications for their wood flooring projects,” said Ms. Leidersdorff. “We are happy to do it. If they buy the wood, but do not buy the installation from us, we will go to the jobsite the day they are installing it. If we see their installer is not using the correct adhesive or is not taking moisture readings, we will report back to the architect. It is our job to protect them because we know what is in their specification. Maintaining our relationships comes down to adding value, and our clients know they can count on us for that level of service.”

Since 2001, AFR has also been in the floor maintenance business.

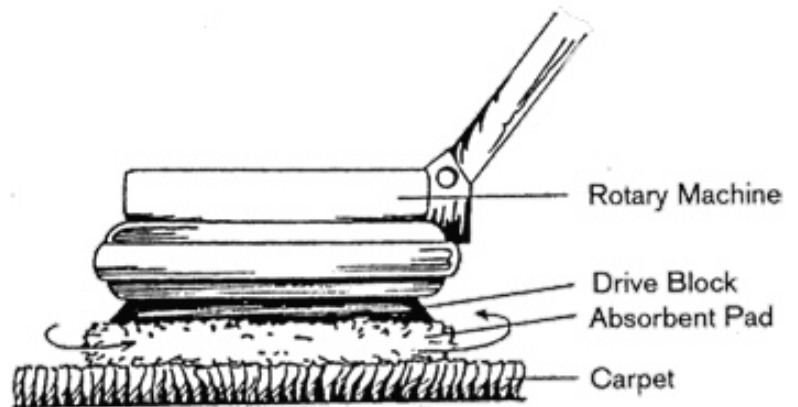
“Maintenance is a science, and we know how to properly clean things,” said Ms. Leidersdorff. “All of my cleaning mechanics came from **DuPont** and they know the proper techniques to get stains out of carpet. For example, most building maintenance crews use Bonnets; these machines don’t extract soil, they just move it around. Every carpet manufacturer states in the warranty that if Bonnet machines are used on the carpet, your warranty is null and void.” Ms. Leidersdorff offers the metaphor of taking a nice jacket or silk shirt to a dry cleaner. “You don’t give your cleaning lady your dry cleaning; you take it to a professional. We are the dry cleaner of the flooring business.”



The symmetrical 3 layer construction of Mafi flooring



Oak Vulcano Molto by Mafi flooring



Bonnet cleaners void carpet manufacturer warranties

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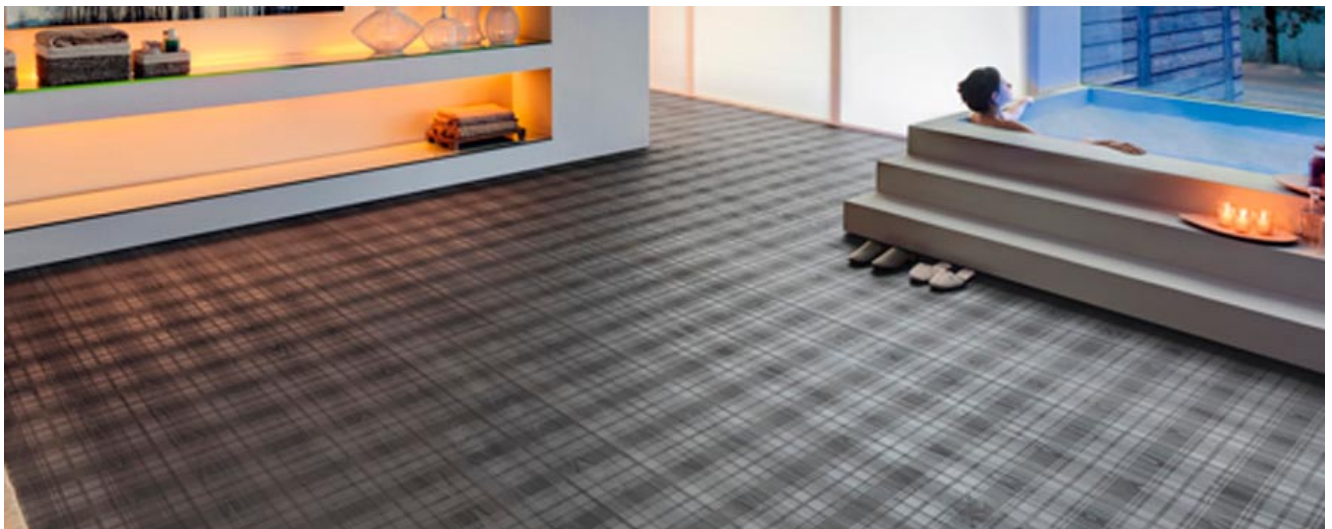
Another aspect of being a resource to the design community is vigilance. “Often times, it comes down to what is *inspected*, not *expected*,” she said. “If you just write the specification and don’t pay attention, anything can happen. You must deliver something that is not tangible. My competitors are bidding the job, but they don’t have a relationship with anyone there. For the most part, other flooring contractors are bidding jobs from general contractors, not architects. For us, there is an obligation to do the right thing for all of the people involved.”

Bad decisions will inevitably pop up at one time or another in most careers, which makes choosing partners to do business with all the more important to a project’s success. Architectural Flooring Resource (AFR) possesses a strong foundation of knowledge, innovation, and, oh yes, resourcefulness.

For more information regarding AFR, visit <http://www.afrny.com>. ■



A barn door installation of reclaimed wood by AFR



Carving Club, an oiled wood floor pattern by Mafi