

GREEN BEHIND THE SCENES

THREE BAY AREA COMPANIES ARE PROVING THAT SUSTAINABILITY IS MORE THAN JUST A SALES TACTIC.

BY ERIN FEHER

Consumers are crazy for green, and the design industry has responded. These days every product imaginable seems to be sporting an eco-friendly seal of approval. So *CH+D* sought out three local companies that are not only selling the idea, but living by it as well. From an Oakland cabinet company that went solar to a San Francisco architect who encourages his employees to bike to work to a Richmond countertop manufacturer that recycles its water, these companies were green-minded before it was bad business not to be.



The Good Sun MUELLER NICHOLLS

“There was so much green noise going on that we decided to just cut through it and put our money where our mouth is,” says Steve Nicholls, the CEO of Mueller Nicholls, a construction and cabinet company in Oakland. In addition to being a longtime leader in the use of sustainable materials—Mueller Nicholls made the switch to FSC-certified woods and nontoxic adhesives back in the early 1990s—the 28-year-old firm just completed a major photovoltaic installation at its 16,000-square-foot millwork shop and offices. “We’ve been advocating solar power for our clients for so long that it was only natural that we adopt it ourselves,” says Nicholls, who never charges a markup to install solar panels on clients’ buildings. Prior to making the switch, the company had already taken steps to reduce its energy consumption as much as possible: The offices and workspaces were revamped to utilize natural light, and high-performance fluorescent bulbs were installed for the days when the sun is less than cooperative or working hours stretch into the night. And while trucks are an inevitable part of the construction business, the company recently invested in a fleet of Toyota Highlander hybrids. Mueller Nicholls’ strict deconstruction and recycling practices include reusing site materials whenever possible; and any scrap wood that is left ends up at nearby Laney College, where Nicholls has developed a woodworking program. “It’s always been about doing things the right way,” says Nicholls.

TOP AND RIGHT: Solar panels now provide all of the power for Mueller Nicholls—no small feat, given that their Oakland facility uses 15 times the electricity of an average house. ABOVE: The company uses commercial woodworking equipment to create carefully detailed custom cabinetry.

