Defining a category

Understanding benefits & expectations is crucial

By Kacey Perinelli

(MLF), which includes rigid core floor- residential and light commercial appliing such as WPC and SPC, has become the most dynamic flooring category in filled extruded core [that] provides suthe industry, taking share from other cat- perior indentation resistance" and is best egories because of its multitude of per- suited for high traffic and commercial formance benefits and stunning visuals. Yet, the exact definition of WPC and SPC continue to elude many consumers.

The term rigid core encompasses both WPC and SPC, as both have polymer cores that are rigid in construction. As per Piet Dossche, Shaw Industries' executive vice president of hard surface and USFloors' president, WPC represents the class of rigid luxury vinyl tile (LVT) flooring products with an expanded or foamed polymer core. SPC refers to the class of rigid LVT flooring products with a solid polymer core.

WPC then, said Dossche, has a "foamed up extruded core with built-in air pockets [that] provide superior comfort and

Tarkett's Transcend SureSet is seen here in a stunning herringbone pattern with natural color variation.

In recent years, multilayer flooring sound abatement" and is best suited for cations. SPC has a "dense, highly mineral applications, he continued.

> With both product types offering significant benefits, such as dimensional stability and waterproof capability, it is no surprise that many manufacturers are continuing to invest in both products. ing WPC or SPC is knowing the differ-Resilient category manager for Shaw Floors, Jeff Francis noted that Shaw Floors will continue to invest in both platforms. "We'll continue to invest in both platforms because we see the value of both Floorté Classic and Floorté Pro. Each offer distinct advantages: Floorté Classic, our WPC product, offers warmth under foot and more comfort under foot, relative to SPC. Our SPC products, Floorté Pro, for example, have a higher PSI and more stability, which is suitable for even commercial use," he said.

Karndean Designflooring not only recognizes WPC and SPC in the rigid core category, but also EPC (expanded polymer core). "Rigid core is the overarching product category, with WPC and SPC as types of rigid core products. We also recognize EPC (expanded polymer core) as a type of rigid core product," explained Larry Browder, chief sales and marketing officer for Karndean.

The breakdown, according to Browder: · WPC: "Combines reclaimed wood and/or bamboo powder, calcium carbonate and a vinvl binder."

• SPC: "Extruded solid with aggregates embedded in the PVC core. There is no middle LVT layer, less expansion and a higher PSI."

· EPC: "Lightweight, has better sound transfer ratings and better flexibility, and is softer underfoot."

Probably the most compelling benefit helped accelerate the category's growth frequencies. To some people, a thicker

at such a rapid pace.

"Since the original technology [for rigid products] was used outside for decking it had to be waterproof or water resistant, so when manufacturers began to bring that type of technology indoors they began to advertise and leverage the waterproof nature of the product. This really helped drive market share gains by this technology because whereas flexible LVT was always waterproof in nature, the rigid category really put the stamp on it and began to yell and scream really loudly, 'hey this product's waterproof," he offered.

WPC DEFINED

The biggest challenge in terms of sellence between the two products. WPC are products that feature an expanded polymer core and tend to be softer underfoot than their SPC counterparts.

Yon Hinkle, director, product, design and innovation for Armstrong Flooring, explained some of the particular materials that comprise WPC flooring. "WPC is a composite material made of thermoplastics, calcium carbonate, and may contain wood flour. Extruded as a core material, it is marketed as being waterproof, rigid and dimensionally stable. Some may call it 'wood plastic/polymer core,' while others refer to it as 'waterproof core.' WPC is typically characterized by a foamed core." Hinkle noted that WPC's thicker construction offers certain advantages, including the ability to better replicate textures for realistic wood looks.

According to Steven Ehrlich, vice president, sales and marketing for Novalis Innovative Flooring, "The most important benefit of rigid core LVT is the ability to hide most common subfloor imperfections. A locking and floating construction makes installation easier and ensures a smoother finish. Because all rigid core is also waterproof, it can be installed in water-prone indoor areas, such as kitchens and bathrooms, with the right installation methods. The most important benefit of WPC is that it offers better acoustical qualities and is softer underfoot."

And WPC has its advantages over that rigid core products offer consum- SPC. Explained Barron Frith, CFL North ers is their waterproof nature. David America's president, "The engineered Sheehan, senior vice president, prod- aspect of WPC on the other hand in uct management, Mohawk resilient general allows a superior sound absorpexplained that heralding the water- tion versus SPC, because it is thicker proof nature of rigid core is likely what and different materials absorb different

"ALL RIGID CORE (OR MLF) PRODUCTS SHARE THE BENEFITS OF EASY INSTALLATION **OVER SLIGHTLY IMPERFECT** SUBFLOORS WITHOUT TELEGRAPHING, AS WELL AS LIMITED REQUIREMENTS FOR **ACCLIMATION. ALL THIS MAKES** FOR FASTER, LESS COSTLY AND EASIER INSTALLATION."

-HARLAN STONE, MFA

product also offers a nicer feel and a certain comfort of walk." Of course, he said. these are generalities and specifics will vary based on the manufacturer.

Application is also important when noting the difference between WPC and SPC. WPC is more often used in residential applications than is SPC, though WPC's stability does make it possible for it to be used commercially as well. "WPC is most at home in residential settings, although WPC products generally carry a light to medium commercial warranty," shared Jamann Stepp, vice president of hard surface for The Dixie Group.

SPC DEFINED

SPC by definition is a product with a solid polymer core, as opposed to one that uses foam in its construction. This product is denser and more dimensionally stable than its WPC counterpart, but does not necessarily have the same warmth and softness as WPC.

Hinkle explained the components of SPC. "SPC is known as 'solid polymer core' or 'stone polymer core.' SPC is comprised of limestone, polyvinyl chloride and plasticizers. SPC is still a waterproof product, but it adds greater stability, dent resistance and structure to vinyl plank flooring. SPC typically has a denser core and is generally more suitable for commercial installations," he said.

Novalis' Ehrlich noted that SPC uses minerals such as limestone or calcium carbonate in its construction. As to its defining characteristic, "SPC is best known for a resilient surface," he said, meaning that SPC offers better dent resistance and temperature stability than WPC.

"The fact SPC is a solid core with a higher proportion of limestone allows it in gen-

eral to be a lot more stable to temperature home, work or play as it relates to installavariations and sunlight (the main down-tion options, durability, resilience and perside to WPC), and a lot more resistant to formance," commented Dixie's Stepp. impacts and dents," shared Frith.

product promise, John Heckman, se- SPC offers benefits commercially. "The SPC nior marketing manager, Tarkett, also product category stands out by being hardmentioned the superior dent resistance er and denser, which produced some beneof SPC. "All of these are waterproof. If fits in commercial settings," he said. indentation is important to you, Tarkett suggests you go with SPC or rigid LEARNING TO SELL core. If you're installing over an existing floor or ceramic tile, rigid core is the selling multilayer flooring products way to go. As long as the grout depth is lies in the lack of understanding that within recommended range, there's no surrounds the products, both for conneed to fill in the grout lines to prevent sumers and RSAs. And the category is telegraphing. WPC does not have the changing and evolving at a rapid pace, same dimensional stability in those cas- so education about changes to the catees and normally requires the grout lines gory needs to be continuous. to be filled in for best results."

MSI, also touted SPC's benefits. He ex- product is which, and ultimately make plained that there are differences between the sale. Jimmy Tuley, vice president the two products, as well as many similari- of residential resilient for Mannington ties, but that ultimately, he tends to prefer Mills offered that much of the confusion SPC. "WPC and SPC are both subsets of surrounding the MLF category stems the rigid core category, which I like to call from the speed of innovation that ac-Vinyl 2.0," he said. "Both of these products companies MLF.

have transformed the flooring industry, due to their hero attributes, such as waterproof, trueto-life look and feel, superb durability, fast installation, notably superior indentation resistance on SPC, and killer value. There are encyclopedias worth of details on which is better in which aspects, and how one may theoretically perform better than the other in commercial [versus] residential applications, but I like to take a step back and ask a simple question: What product delivers the best overall performance, best customer satisfaction, and best value? Objectively, researches indicate that SPC offers the magic combination of the three criteria most competitively."

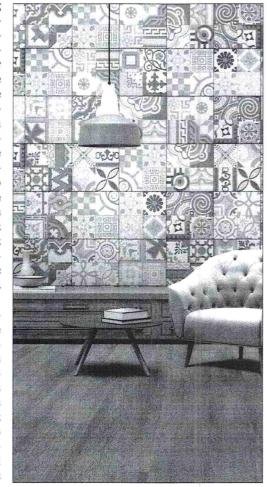
And SPC can withstand exposure to extreme temperature changes in a way that WPC cannot. "SPC on the other hand is more indentation resistant, carries basically the same features and benefits as WPC but is less likely to expand and/or contract when exposed for long periods to extreme heat/sunlight and/or extreme cold. SPC is really the dual threat option in that it is 'right' at

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Harlan Stone, president of the Multilay-When explaining the difference in er Flooring Association (MFA) added that

Ultimately, the biggest challenge with

The constant changes in this catego-Sam Kim, vice president of sourcing for ry can make it difficult to learn which



Above, Coretec The Original from USFloors is showcased in a warm blend of brown and gray tones.

Defining

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"First off, this has been and continues to be a very confusing and complicated category because of the speed of innovation and the number of new players in the market," Tuley said. "It is incredibly important that we do as much education about this as possible to ensure the long life and the best uses of this growing category."

There was also some confusion surrounding acronyms in the MLF category previously, but the current consensus is that the acronyms for the product categories are WPC and SPC, with MLF and rigid core both encompassing both of these products. However, most flooring experts will agree that product understanding on the part of the RSA is crucial to ensuring consumers leave with the right floor for their needs. Armstrong's Hinkle explained, "While the acronyms were often used to identify components of the floors' construction - wood plastic (or polymer) core and stone polymer core - they can also serve as more broad identifiers: waterproof core and solid polymer core. As with any innovation, it takes a while for the industry to build consensus, but this is an important step to help create consistency and assist with educating customers about the flooring and its benefits."

It can be hard to sell a product when you aren't sure exactly what the product is that you are selling. Stepp noted that for a time it seemed as though new acronyms were being introduced constantly, but that this trend seems to have faded a bit since the formation of the MFA. "Until the formation of the MFA, the acronym naming convention seemed to have no end in sight. It was almost as if each week there was a supplier pushing their new three letter acronym to the market touting the waterproof composite core attributes of their product. Fortunately, the MFA today recognizes WPC and SPC. This is being done in an effort to educate the RSAs as well as the end-user, specifier and the consumer and to bring consistency to this category of flooring," he told FCW.

And some manufacturers are simplifying the process even further. Lindsey Nisbet, director of marketing, Swiff-Train Company shared that EarthWerks no longer divides the two product categories when marketing its rigid core products. "At EarthWerks we are doing what we can to educate the consumers, without overcom-

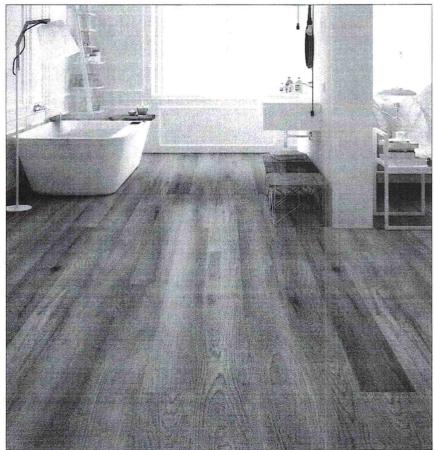
"THE SUPERIOR BENEFITS OF SPC HAS MADE IT THE FASTEST GROWING CATEGORY IN THE INDUSTRY. THESE PRODUCTS ARE MOST OFTEN OFFERED WITH AN ATTACHED PAD FOR COMFORT UNDERFOOT AND NOISE INSULATION. BECAUSE OF THE ADDED BENEFITS THE MAJORITY OF ENGINEERED FLOORS FLOATING FLOORS ARE BASED ON SPC TECHNOLOGY WITH ADVANCED FEATURES THAT INCLUDE HIGH DEFINITION VISUALS LIKE DEEP IN REGISTERED EMBOSS TO GIVE THE PRODUCT AN **AUTHENTIC WOOD AND TILE AESTHETIC."**

-ANA TORRENCE, ENGINEERED FLOORS

plicating the offering. Since both WPC and strives to regulate the various offerings. In of performance," Nisbet explained.

of what the future holds, the category will continue to grow and evolve. However, confusion as to exact classification will likely continue to be an issue as products become more innovative, and the industry

SPC are technically waterproof, rigid core 2019, several new product offerings have products, we have combined them both been introduced in the market that have into the Core Collection, which carries sim- multiple layers but alternative cores that ilar features and benefits at different levels are not currently recognized by the MFA as MLF. Said Stone, "We the MFA are not cur-If the last few years are any indication rently directly involved in the alternative material products at this time, as our charter states, 'polymer cores.' But that being said, we are reviewing the developments in mineral cores to see where they might fit in the flooring ecosystems."



Pictured above is SolidTech from Mohawk, which includes natural graining and knotwork to make this floor truly look like real wood.