

Opposite page:
The central check-out island is surrounded by wood flooring made from recycled Douglas Fir lumber reclaimed from a demolished warehouse and re-milled into flooring.



Left:
The Real Goods brand identity is an important element on the fixturing, which is fabricated from recycled components including strawboard made from an agricultural by product of wheat straw.

Forever Green

Real Goods introduces the “greenest retail store” in America.

Cultural creatives (CCs), according to demographers, are the fastest growing group of consumers in the country. They are tuned into high-tech, good design, community issues, environmental concerns and are hard working with some discretionary money to spend. Their buying habits are upscale. CCs will pay more for products that meet their high standards of ethics and aesthetics.

One individual who understands this particular contingent of consumers aged between mid-30 and mid-50 is John Schaeffer, a former hippie commune folk hero who hung out in the California woods near Eureka and who learned how to live with nature and solar power. Today, Schaeffer has emerged as a dynamic retailer and owner of Real Goods, a store that encourages the concepts of renewable energy and sustainability.

Schaeffer's first venture was the Solar Living Center, an educational retail environment born of his desire to introduce an ecological lifestyle to a committed audience. The concept clicked as only it could in California. The Solar Living Center enabled Schaeffer to reach out to the next generation beyond the Whole Earth Catalog—people who are ecologically conscious but, unlike their predecessors, hold no guilt about being part of the upscale consumer system.

In Los Gatos, an area in Silicon Valley near San Jose, the Chicago, IL, design firm PRAIRIE Fish has just completed Schaeffer's latest dream, “the greenest retail store in America.” The 3,600-square-foot space is a tangible, physical example of sustainable principles which communicates Schaeffer's concept of a healthy balanced life. But its outward sensibility is far removed from the “granola and tahini”

BY BEVERLY RUSSELL

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A compass greets shoppers as they cross the threshold, a reminder of cosmic positioning and a way-finding device to navigate the store. It is made of a material fabricated from recycled tires.



Much of the fixturing was fabricated on castors to allow for greater mobility and flexibility of the merchandise displays.



image that has been a pervasive style of ecological stores in the past. Designers Kent Lawson and Richard Walthers effectively demonstrate that being environmentally benign does not mean being necessarily bland or drab.

The Real Goods store has elegant wood floors made of reclaimed lumber, comfortable carpeting which is 100 percent recyclable, efficient lighting that sparkles up the merchandise but utilizes the least wattage and walls treated with non-toxic paints. All fixturing is comprised of sustainable materials: strawboard made from an agricultural by-product of wheat straw, veneer made from plantation-grown, sustainably harvested poplar, a composite material of soybean and recycled newspaper. Countertops are made from recycled tires with recycled aluminum used for case frames.

A circular "solar" check-out counter is placed in the center of the space, with product categories identified around the perimeter: outdoor living, solar gadgets, kitchen, house-



As an example that environmentally friendly does not have to be drab or ordinary, the countertops are made of off-spec solar panels and recycled tires.



Healthy living is a strong message throughout the store, which has a clean air and water section of merchandise.

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hold, air/water, lighting, clothing and bed/bath. A library and research center offers a broad selection of ecologically-oriented books. There also is a toy department and a tech center. Designer Lawson notes that all the merchandise is high style and on the cutting edge. "It's everything for people who will pay a little more to get something of good quality that also meets their belief that ecology counts."

Not surprisingly, the concept is catching on so fast that the next Real Goods store will open soon in Los Angeles, with Schaeffer's ambition set on a chain that will eventually cross the country. And with this client on their list, PRAIRIE Fish continues to flourish as a leader in green design offering brand identity to retailers while following sustainable design practices. To learn more about their work and philosophy, Lawson and Walthers have curated a new exhibition, "Many of Shades of Green," appearing at the Chicago-based Archeworks, the alternative design school, from May 15 to August 15, 2000. @