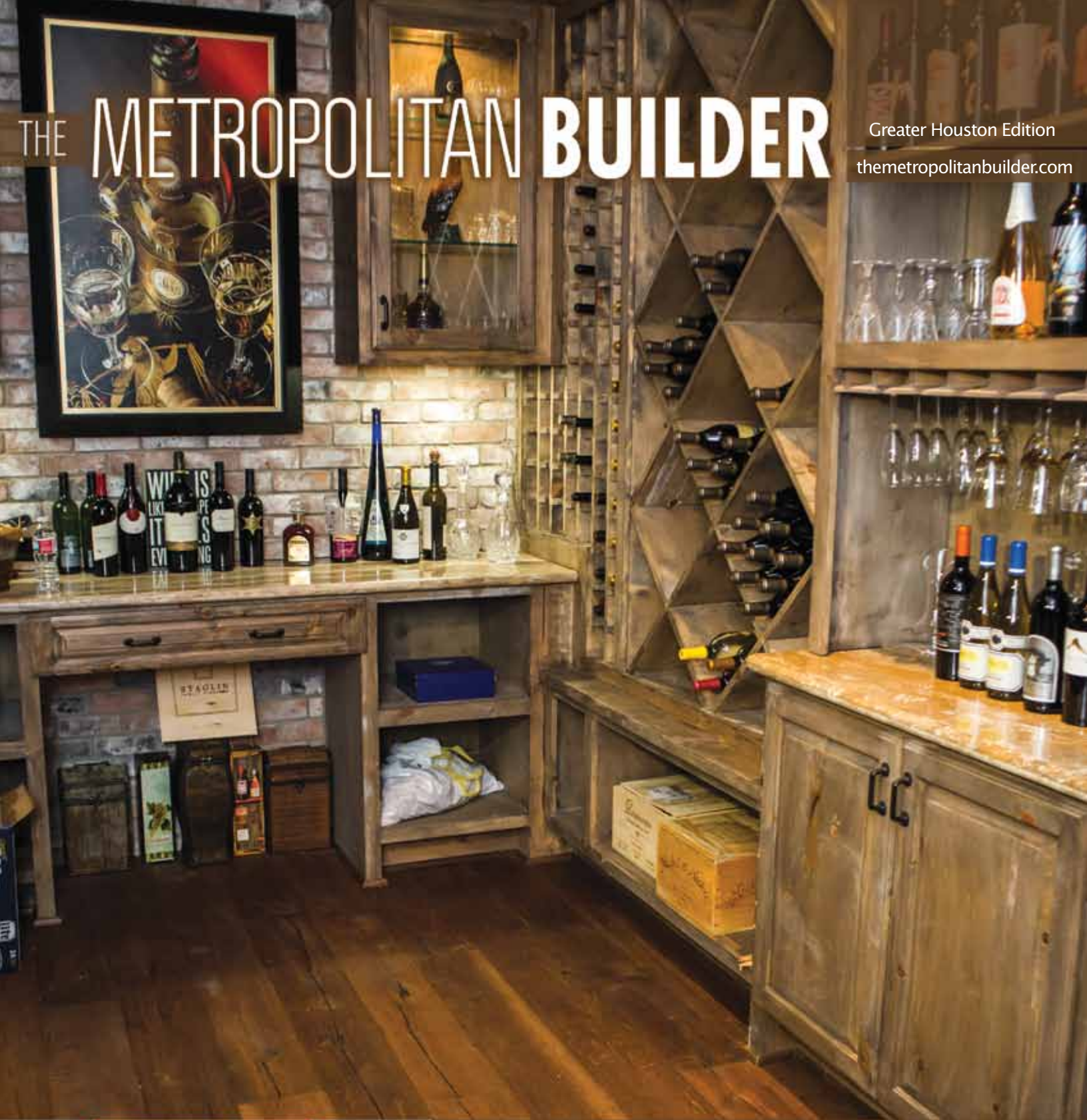


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International Flooring Expands Product Choices

International Flooring | Houston, Texas



International Flooring Expands Product Choices

By Kathy Bowen Stolz

“The most expensive floor is the wrong floor,” according to Richard Arnold, co-owner of International Flooring.

“Flooring is an expensive purchase. It’s not like buying a pair of shoes. When a builder comes to me, I ask a lot of questions. Will you glue it? Nail it? Staple it? What kind of pad? Moisture barrier? I apply my knowledge of construction as a former builder. I educate my customers a little so they will walk out happy.”

Because of changes in the flooring industry, International Flooring (IF) is changing too after 17 years in business. “We are becoming more of a product distributor instead of an installer.”

He continued, “We’re way beyond wood flooring now. We’re putting a very strong effort into a diverse inventory. We now have about 500 different products in our showroom. We offer carpet, luxury vinyl tile (LVT), large-format tile, moisture shields and slab preparation” in addition to reclaimed antique beams, solid wood, engineered wood and laminate flooring.

Richard said he attends trade shows and talks with

manufacturing representatives to find products that fit the Houston market for style, humidity and installation. “My focus is to fulfill the needs of my customers. I know what they want in looks, colors and price.” He said the most challenging customers are high-end designers who have been to Europe!

“We are focused on product knowledge. Every product I have, I understand it. I trust it. There are so many misconceptions about products from people reading on the internet. I can explain and put everything in context,” he noted.

While there are four basic options in flooring (wood, tile, carpet and laminate), many choices exist within each option. When builders or designers find a product they like the look of, Richard will explain how the product will perform.

“There are a lot of products out there. There’s a lot of crossover. Now there’s tile that looks like wood. There’re wood floors that have a vinyl core. There’s wood that has a vinyl top. There’s tile that is a PCP product; it’s waterproof



and doesn't use grout.

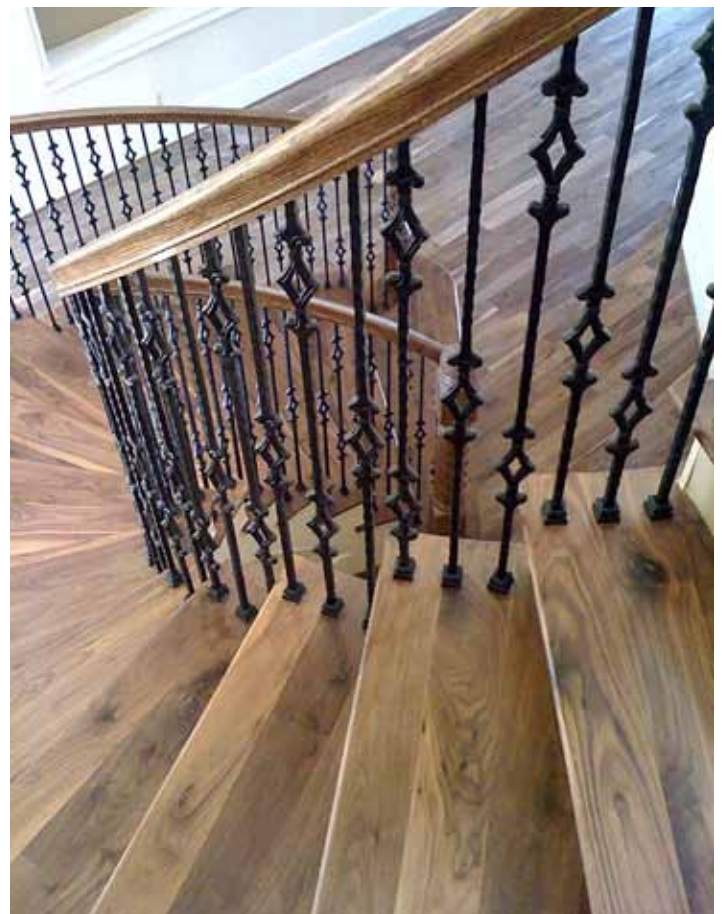
"LVTs are the fastest growing product. It was ugly when it came out five or six years ago. It was very utilitarian. Now it's very good looking. It's hard to tell that it's vinyl. Even I have to bend down to touch it to know the difference.

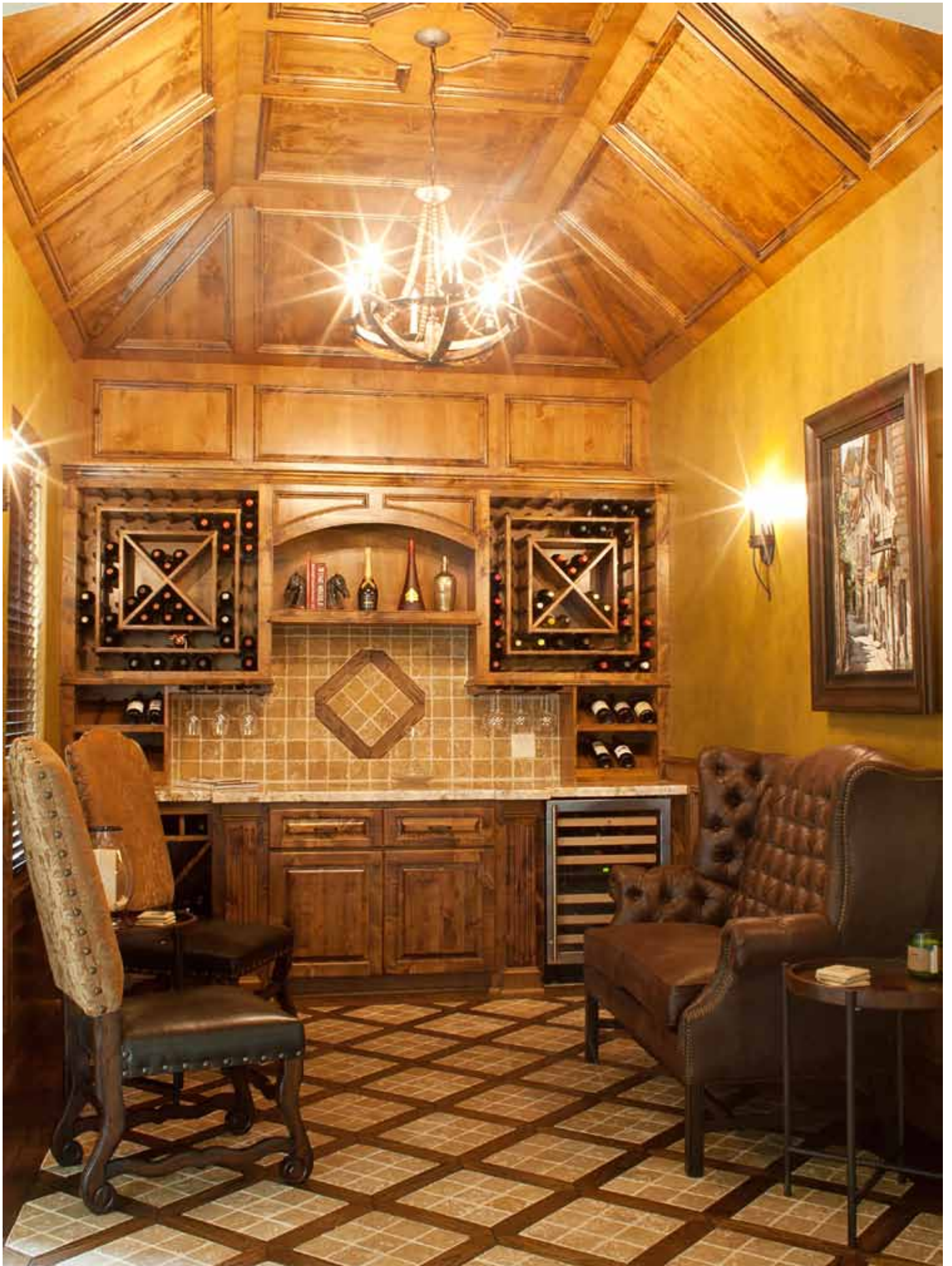
Other trends Arnold is noting: "We're seeing a lot of large format tile. And we're going back to natural, light colors in wood, getting away from the gray. Wire-brushed wood finishes are reappearing instead of hand-scraped."

"With so many choices, people are unsure. People assume the vinyl will be cheapest, but not anymore. Wood may be cheaper," Arnold stated.

"Flooring is actually highly technical." He will happily discuss synthetic vs. wool vs. natural sea grass soft floor coverings (carpet), or solid vs. engineered, or multi-layer vs. hard core, or real wood vs. laminate flooring. He can also provide expert information on how certain products may impact those with allergies.

He said International Flooring is very competitive. "We have selection, variety, great prices. We can do multi-unit pricing. I can go to manufacturers for pricing also because manufacturers will not sell directly to builders."







IF has a 3,500-sq.-ft. showroom as part of its office and warehouse facility. The company is about to expand its showroom area by another 800 sq. ft. to allow it to display 300-400 more products. “We don’t need a mega showroom. Everything is selected by me. I pick everything I want. There’s a lot of junk out there. In big, big retail stores, you see a lot of duplicates. In my showroom you won’t see duplication.”

Arnold claims that “warranty” is a “fake word” in the flooring industry. He said he has never seen a manufacturer’s warranty honored in the 15 years he’s been in the business because it’s so hard to prove what constitutes reasonable wear and tear. However, the “best warranty builders have is me.”

Builders look for vendors who can support their products, he added. “Builders want a new product to fit in their system or to save money. The builder needs to feel comfortable the product will perform. I help the builder keep looking forward. The majority of my clients have been with me for seven to 12 years.”

One reason for those clients’ loyalty is the expert installation that International Flooring provides. “I’m focused on the right application and right installation for Houston. The humidity in Houston makes installation a challenge. We have 85 percent of moisture in our warehouse, but air conditioning dries out houses and shrinks floors, creating major gapping. Raised houses are an additional issue. We encourage builders to let the

wood flooring adjust to the lower 42 percent moisture in a house before installing floors. Builders do appreciate our knowledge, and that’s why we keep them as clients.”

However, many builders and homeowners will turn to a less expensive installer “until it costs them big bucks. Then they come to us to solve their problems.”

All of the sales staff and installers at International Flooring get on-going training in new flooring products and follow the National Wood Flooring Association (NWFA) standards, Arnold said. They also get training from the Greater Houston Builders Association and from manufacturers. International Flooring installation professionals adhere to the company’s protocols and training as well as the NWFA guidelines.

Richard’s role with the company is sales and marketing, and his partner Luis Hernandez’s role is finance and sales. The company also employs an accounting clerk, an office project assistant, a field manager and two back-shop workers in addition to the installer.

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or richard@ifhouston.com*

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