

Homeowners on a Hot Metal Roof

Durable, Stylish Workhorse Makes a Comeback

By NANCY KEATES

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More home builders and renovators are saying no to asphalt-shingle roofs, heralding a revival of interest in slate, clay tile, wood shake and other historically popular materials that are considered both aesthetically pleasing and less harmful to the environment.

But most of these options are impractical. Slate and clay tile are heavy and may require structural reinforcement. Wood isn't durable and offers limited fire resistance. And next to mass-produced asphalt shingles, all of them cost a small fortune, even on a moderate-size home.

UP ON THE ROOF

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There is one asphalt alternative whose resurgence is on a fast track -- metal. Most often associated with quaint New England tool sheds and not-so-quaint outlets of the International House of Pancakes, metal roofs are increasingly appearing on new homes and renovations because of their style and relative affordability. Some even mimic the look of slate and wood shakes.

Architectural metal roofs in new-home construction reached a projected 30% of the market in 2007, up from 23% in 2004, according to the National Roofing Contractors Association's latest member survey. Meanwhile, fiberglass-asphalt shingles were used in a projected 44% of new residential projects in 2007, down from 50% in 2004. Slate roofs slipped slightly in that period to a projected 5.1% of new homes, while clay-tile roofs grew slightly to a projected 4.6%, and wood shakes slipped to a projected 2.1%.

Metal roofs can boast of a number of advantages. They are regarded as more fireproof than wood shakes and traditional asphalt shingles, and they last as much as twice as long, contractors say. They can withstand high winds. And when treated with coatings and finishes, they reflect heat, helping keep the house cool and utility bills down in hot climates. As concerns mount over used asphalt shingles clogging up landfills, many consumers like having a roof that is often both recycled and recyclable.

As far back as the 1700s, some of the nicest American homes were topped with metal roofs. Architects say the recent resurgence stems from high-end clients' desire for materials that are somehow more historically authentic than asphalt, yet are less apt to induce sticker shock than slate, tile or wood shakes. "There's a tremendous appetite for traditional, high-quality materials well applied. Metal roofs fall into that category," says Dale Overmyer, a Washington, D.C., architect and principal of Dale Owen Overmyer. He most often uses metal roofs on residential projects in historic Georgetown.

Barb and Edward Nilson couldn't agree on the roof for the house they built 20 years ago in the Seattle suburb of Renton. Mr. Nilson wanted metal because it would last; Mrs. Nilson said it looked too "tinny." They settled on asphalt for the main house and cedar shakes for the guest house. But when it came time to replace the roofs last year, Mrs. Nilson was all for metal. "The new ones look wonderful," she says. "They're more finished." The couple spent \$50,000 for the two roofs that they believe will last 50 years.



Top Left: GAF Materials Corp; Center Top: Tamko; Top Right: Follansbee;
Bottom Left: Getty Image; Center/Right: iStockphoto

OVERHEAD OPTIONS

Asphalt shingles are losing ground to other roofing materials. Costs are what a contractor might pay per square foot and don't include markups or labor.

Descriptions below correspond to the above photos, clockwise from the left)

- 50-year **laminated architectural asphalt shingles** are widely available, easy to install -- and it's hard to beat 96 cents a square foot. But they often are an unconvincing stand-in for wood, tile or slate.
- **Composite shingles and tiles**, made of plastic or rubber and costing \$3.40 to \$4.50 a square foot, are meant to mimic stone. But you probably won't mistake it for the real thing.
- **Metal is energy-efficient**, long-lasting and, at \$1 to \$6 a square foot, usually considered cost-effective. It's slippery, though, and it can be difficult to install. Plus, you'll always know when it's raining.

- **Clay tile costs** \$4 to \$10 a square foot and shares many of slate's pros and cons. Clay-tile roofs are durable and fire-resistant but can be hard to install. Prices vary widely by location.
- **Slate's patina and varied colors** are beautiful, but at \$5 to \$10 a square foot, it could break the bank. Slate roofs last long and resist fire but often require structural reinforcement.
- **Cedar wood shakes**, at \$3.85 a square foot for 24-inch shakes, have a look many homeowners want. But they offer limited resistance to fire and high winds, and they usually need to be replaced after about 20 years.

In an era when custom-built countertops, cabinetry and woodwork are routine, more homeowners want their roof to make a statement, too. "It used to be that a roof was a roof was a roof. People didn't care," says Diane Gola, marketing manager for GAF Materials Corp., which makes asphalt roofing and recently expanded into slate.

Materials used on neighboring houses often influence a homeowner's roofing decision. Many developments restrict the use of materials, and in California, some counties disallow wood-shake roofs to contain the potential spread of wildfires. And then there's social pressure. "If you're in a suburb where everyone else has an asphalt roof, you'd look silly with metal," says Jim Haughey, chief economist for Reed Construction Data, of Atlanta.

Metal roofs have other drawbacks. They are slippery, so snow slides off -- but so do people who might venture onto a wet roof to clear off debris. (The Nilsons had trouble finding someone to clean the leaves and pine needles off theirs.) Rain and hail sound louder. It is important to find experienced contractors, since metal roofs are harder to install than asphalt. These shortcomings aren't lost on competitors. "We're aware metal roofing is being used more now, but we're not sitting around chewing our fingernails over it," says Joe Hobson, spokesman for the Asphalt Roofing Manufacturers Association.

Metal roofs still tend to cost about twice as much as even the most expensive fiberglass-asphalt shingles, with prices varying by metal type -- steel, aluminum, copper or a combination. Still, asphalt roofing prices are rising, too, along with prices of petroleum, from which the roofing is made. Mike Iannone, product manager for Marjam Supply Co., in Farmingdale, N.Y., says asphalt-roofing makers have raised prices 10% since September and are expected to do so again soon.

Regional Preferences

Historically, big slate quarries in Virginia, Pennsylvania and Vermont meant more slate roofs in the Northeast and mid-Atlantic. Abundant forests in the West made wood shakes the cheaper option there. The emergence of low-cost, mass-produced asphalt shingles in the 19th century changed the economics of the U.S. building industry and helped erase some of the distinctions in regional architecture.

Asphalt shingles dominated for most of the 20th century. In the 1970s and '80s, the industry took steps to make a less oil-dependent product, reducing the asphalt content and increasing fillers. The result is a fiberglass-asphalt product known as laminated architectural shingles. Thicker and with more definition, they are supposed to look more like slate, tile or wood. But not all of them are convincing.

This year, Tommy Oswalt considered his options when it came time to replace the asphalt shingles on his 1,500-square-foot 1877 farmhouse in Heflin, Ala. The house is his retreat for hiking, hunting and fishing, and he liked the idea of never having to reshingle or repair the roof again. Metal would certainly cost more than asphalt, but what finally sold him was style. "Metal seemed more historically correct," he says.

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