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With its first retail outpost, designed by Mapos, Green Depot seeks to show general consumers that environmentally friendly goods are affordable, accessible, and anything but boring

By Katie Weeks
Photography by David Pinter, Amy Herring, Colin Brice

Starting at the front door (above), Green Depot's first retail outlet is a purposeful blend of old and new. Inside (opposite), the educational component was just as important as the design. Large graphics showcase the criteria with which Green Depot reviews all of its stock.

As the general public's awareness of environmental issues rises on a steady basis, so too does the debate over what it truly means to be green. In this conversation, Green Depot, a Brooklyn-based supplier of environmentally friendly and sustainable building products, services, and home goods, seeks to prove two things sustainable living is not: boring and unaffordable.

Since its founding in 2005, Green Depot has sought to make green building products and services readily available as well as cost competitive to facilitate the adoption of green practices into standard construction. Targeting the trade, the company's showrooms and distribution centers across the Northeast stock materials that must pass through a filter examining their health, durability, performance, life cycle, natural resource conservation, and energy conservation.

In opening its first retail outlet for general consumers, it was important that the new venue dovetail with this overarching corporate philosophy. "Our mission is to demystify green because green is such a nebulous term that means different things to different people," explains Honey Berk, marketing director for Green Depot. "The design of the store is meant for people to walk in and see a green space that's not beige, not boring, not crunchy. It's very colorful. The idea is to show people that green really is affordable, easy, accessible, and the materials can be quite beautiful."

True to its mission, it's fitting that rather than tearing down and building new, the company commissioned New York-based architecture and design firm Mapos to rehab and renovate a landmarked structure on the Bowery in Manhattan. "The whole neighborhood is keeping with the ethos of the company, with the idea of reuse and turning something older into something new," says Berk.

Like many of its neighbors, the building—the 1885 Young Men's Institute, the home of the city's first YMCA—had a storied history and had once housed the studios of renowned artists Mark Rothko and Fernand Léger as well as author William Burroughs. Remnants of past tenants remained, including original glazed ceramic tile on the wall, the YMCA's maple gymnasium flooring, and a swimming pool added in 1915 that was cemented over in the passing decades. The HVAC system was a patchwork of additions with pipes that still served existing lofts in the floors above what would be Green Depot's basement space and first-floor store. Most recently, the space had served as a restaurant supply store, with tables and chairs stacked chock-a-block to the ceiling.

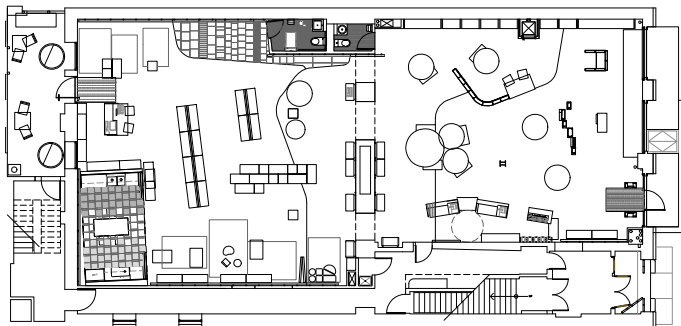
While to some architects and designers these souvenirs would be immediately discarded, to Mapos they served as an opportunity to turn trash to treasure. "We actually directed the demo crew to keep anything they found," says Caleb Mulvena, co-founder of Mapos. Adds Colin Brice, co-



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Displays show slices of green building in progress, such as the various layers within a home's structure (below). Many displays include interactive elements where shoppers can test out materials like various lighting options (opposite) or an array of green cleaners and recycled materials (left).



founder, "Throughout the demo process and continuing through construction, we went to the site often, and as they peeled off layers of wallboard, paint, and junk, we'd find amazing stuff, from an old door or finish to the oddity of the brickwork. The ceiling was a beautiful, old, oak-beamed structure with some interesting steel bracing, while the front windows had these beautiful stone lintels in them. As stuff was taken away, we'd step in and say, 'keep this' or 'take that out and save it for re-use.' It was constant work with the demo team to make sure their axes weren't flying too violently or quickly."

Among the finds: At the street front, existing brick finishes were peeled away to reveal an original Queen Anne-style façade. A large sliding fire door uncovered during demo was relocated to the front room. A massive water heater that had been suspended in the basement and was used to heat the original swimming pool was taken down and cut into rings that were then converted into planters in a back courtyard. The swimming pool itself was converted into a storage room, while the locker room is now the manager's office, with both spaces showcasing the original ceramic tiling. The gymnasium's wood flooring was kept in the main retail area and at the rear of the first floor. Windows onto a large light well were uncovered and cleaned, bringing daylight down into the rear of the first floor.

The design is a purposeful layering of old and new, and this concept translates into the product displays and general visitor experience. "The brief [Green Depot] gave us revolved around two things. One was creating a series of experiences to help educate consumers about what it means to be green, and second was translating those experiences into a retail environment. They stressed that the education component was equal to the design component," says Brice. "We considered it a place where people would need to discover and experience a host of things so we focused on directing their movement through a series of interesting features." Entering the store, for example, consumers see a composition of building slices that demonstrate various facets of green home construction. Moving on, they can pass through a lighting area and play with various light bulbs, before moving on to a colorful paint section. "Each element is strategically placed so people can see the next step, and it pulls them through this path of discovery using key merchandise elements," says Brice. All the while, they are immersed in the reuse practiced in the space itself, which is on track to receive LEED Platinum certification. ■

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