

## Travel and Trends



**W**ow, what a month! It feels like I spent October either on my feet in an exhibit hall, cooped up in a 737 (or worse, in a “regional jet”), or trying to sleep in a noisy hotel room. I now even have a favorite restaurant in the Baltimore-Washington International Airport.

I attended three conferences in October, starting with Principia Partners’ Wood-Plastic Composite

Conference in Charlotte, N.C. At this year’s symposium, a variety of speakers, including manufacturers’ representatives, deck builders, architects, scientists, decking wholesalers, and decking retailers, discussed their particular niches in 20-minute bites. I came away with three impressions. First, deck builders are getting fed up with new code requirements. Second, wood decking has gained back some market share (the consensus seemed to be that this was driven by wood’s lower cost in a down economy). And third, hardscape as an alternative to deck building is on people’s minds.

The Principia Conference was quickly followed by Deck Expo, this year set in Chicago. On the show floor, at the NADRA awards dinner, and in the shuttle bus on the way to the show, I spoke with a number of deck builders, and they echoed the three impressions I took home from Principia. The new codes are burdensome and drive consumers to contractors who are willing to work without permits, customers are demanding less-expensive decks and using wood is often the way they save money, and hardscape is on more deck builders’ radars.

One profitable opportunity related to wood decking was deck finishing and maintenance. Several contractors I spoke with build nothing but wood decks, and sell maintenance packages with their decks. From the customer’s standpoint, not only do these services

keep the deck looking great, but having a maintenance contract extends the contractor’s warranty as well. From the contractor’s standpoint, he gets to sell the initial finishing, and he’s guaranteed an annual revenue stream from contracted maintenance. What’s the downside to that?

Of the topics covered in the three conferences, hardscape was the one that I knew the least about, which led to my third trip in a month, to the Hardscape North America show in Louisville, Ky. This expo is collocated with the Green Industry Expo, and it’s one of the larger shows I’ve attended. (My favorite part was the outdoor area, where by simply waiting in line, attendees got to play with backhoes, skid-steers, excavators, and other heavy equipment.) One take-away from this show was that, apart from having bigger, more expensive toys, hardscape contractors aren’t much different from deck builders. They’re concerned about maintenance, and green building, and efficiency, and competing with low-ball contractors.

A lot of deck builders view hardscape as direct competition, and in fact it is. Hardscape has a lot to offer that decks don’t. It’s truly a low-maintenance product, and it never fails catastrophically. There are few, if any, code requirements. It looks good, and depending on a few factors, it’s really cheap. You should be worried.

Or, you should consider embracing hardscape. Frankly, it makes more sense than a deck when the house is at grade level. On the other hand, decks make sense when the house is at all elevated or has a backyard that falls away — hardscape costs escalate quickly when the job calls for retaining walls and fill. In many cases, a hybrid system, like what deck builders Greg DiBernardo and Andy Merz talk about on pages 52 to 56 in this issue, makes a lot of sense and opens up a whole new profit center for deck builders.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andy Engel". The signature is stylized and fluid.

Andy Engel  
Editor