

Cover Story

It's everywhere: Copper makes a comeback

by Jill Sell
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You're standing on your friends' front porch, waiting for them to answer the door. When you casually glance to your right, you see a very attractive copper chain where normally a downspout might be located. The chain includes a vertical row of what looks like inverted bells. How pretty and clever, you think, not knowing that the rain chain actually has a very practical purpose.

"Rain chains are sometimes used at front entries because they are more slightly than a downspout coming down from the roof or gutter. Instead of trying to hide the downspout, the rain chain is more of an accent. They aren't always practical, but in areas where there's not a whole lot of water, rain chains work pretty well. They are actually pretty amazing," said Sock Woodruff, owner of Custom Gutter in Lake Forest, Ill., and a regional distributor of exterior, residential copper products manufactured by Rain Trade Corp.

Rain chains can take the form of fluted cups, tulips, lilies, traditional or double loop chains and are made from copper or brass. After the water follows the chain downward, it can fill a lovely copper, brass, stone or wooden bowl and overflow like a mini-waterfall, or simply run into a flower bed or a yard. (Prices range from about \$80 to \$200.)

Rain chains are just one of the clever and attractive ways copper is dressing the exteriors of our homes. Copper is hardly a new architectural element, having been used for homes (especially in Europe) for centuries. (It is also man's oldest metal, dating back to more than 10,000 years.) But because of its timeless beauty and practicality, copper is making a statement with today's new homes and correctly done restorations.

We'll be seeing more copper shingles, traditional gutters and downspouts and rain chains, as well as ornamental gutters and conductor heads, weathervanes,



Close-up of copper gutter and ornamental conductor head. Copper Development Association

cupola covers, finials, gutter hangers and downspout brackets (think of them as bracelets for your downspout), gutter end caps and gutter medallions (little decorative "brooches" in the shape of leaves, flowers, shells, animals or family crests or initials).

And, believe it or not, copper gargoyles are showing up on more high-end homes. (Gargoyles were originally water spouts in the shape of a grotesque human being or animal, which projected from a roof gutter to throw rainwater clear.

Stoneridge Condominiums located in Bainbridge Township is a new "village" designed by Anthony Paskovich & Associates Architects and Planners. The upscale "country village homes" feature one- and two-story floor plans ranging from 3,000 to 8,000 square feet. The builders involved in this intriguing plan include Stoneridge Land Co. Ltd., T. Medhurst Builders Inc. and Payne & Payne Builders. Copper is used as decorative element on many of the homes.

"We think the use of copper will add to the aesthetic value of the homes and set our project apart from the average con-

struction project," said Jerry Petersen, a principal with Stoneridge Land Co. "The idea at Stoneridge is to create an English or European flavor with 40 homes clustered on 200 acres. When people leave Stoneridge after looking at our homes, we want them to remember a few outstanding features. Copper on the roofs will be one of those."

Woodruff believes the reason most home buyers like copper is its beauty. Copper accents above bay windows or on cupolas, or used for chimney surrounds, for example, "can break up a really large expanse of roof," creating a more interesting and pleasing look.

But Woodruff also reminds homeowners that copper comes from the old European tradition where things "were meant to last generations," and that they should also appreciate its "longevity and benefits."

"Copper seems like a very trendy product right now, but it's very practical and economical. In America, we don't always understand why we should spend a bit more money today, but still have the benefits and value 30 to 40 years from

On the Inside

We're fallen in love with copper (again) on the exterior of our homes, but we should also appreciate the copper in our houses that we don't see. According to the Copper Development Association:

- Copper plumbing meets or exceeds building code standards in all 50 states. It is the only residential water-pipe material to carry a 50-year manufacturer's warranty. Copper fittings don't wear out and require no maintenance. Contaminants can't penetrate copper.
- Copper can withstand up to 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit without melting and doesn't emit toxic fumes like many plastics when exposed to flame. It also will not become brittle or burst at very low temperatures.

Copper Stats (compiled by the Copper Development Association)

- An average single-family home uses 439 pounds of copper.
- About 10,000 copper range hoods and 20,000 weathervane are produced annually, using about seven pounds of copper each.
- There are about a billion door-knobs in the U.S., weighing in with about 500-600 million pounds of copper.
- Grandfather clocks average nine pounds of copper.
- A solid brass bed weighs 60 pounds.

now," said Woodruff.

The renaissance of copper has inspired researchers to respond to the requests of homeowners, architects and builders. For example, the natural weathering of copper from its bright pink to blue-green patina is a result of the corrosive action of the environment. A patina usually forms in about five to seven years in urban areas, but it may take 10 to 14 years where the air is cleaner.

But some people aren't happy with that consequence. Some homeowners want the patina instantly, so U.S. copper mills have developed man-made, pre-patinated copper sheets. Others don't want the patina to ever form, so scientists have also developed clear-coat products that offer some protection against weathering.

Another plus of copper: Its naturally biostatic surface can actually inhibit the growth of harmful bacteria.

On the cover: Copper arches over the entrance doors to City Hall in Ponca City, OK. Photo courtesy of the Copper Development Association.

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