

BY DESSIE KENYON

Let's Make Doors FUN Again

A MILLENNIAL MAKES THE
CASE FOR MEDIUM-DENSITY
FIBERBOARD DOORS.

After working in the door industry for over 10 years, I was inclined to think I had seen it all. It is a silly thought considering U.S. construction starts for multi-family housing will be well over 400,000 units in 2019. That is a lot of doors without even counting other segments of the industry. Surely I was bound to run into door options with which I was unfamiliar. It could not be all standard 3 to 4-foot-wide openings with the occasional fancy glass or figured veneer, right?



Top: This intricate geometric pattern provides three-dimensional visual interest.

Bottom: The reveals in this MDF door offer a fresh take on a flush door and were customized with a carefully curated shade of gray.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF VT INDUSTRIES.

At 30 years of age, was I hitting a plateau – same doors, different day? Even after moving from working solely with flush doors to working in a stile and rail facility where several types of innovative products were being built, I admit I was still feeling ... bored. Was this going to be the next 40 years of my life?

Let me preface this by explaining that I am a millennial. Normally I wouldn't choose to openly identify as such, but it is important to note that projections analyzing U.S. Census Bureau data anticipate the millennial population is going to surpass the baby boomer demographic in 2019. If you haven't noticed it yet, you soon will.

I live in a trendy, artsy, millennial-approved area that is growing very quickly. Businesses are popping up so fast that even Yelp! and Google Maps cannot keep up. The building I live in is approximately six years old, and four more complexes have popped up within a block.

Each time a building is constructed, the envelope is pushed to create something different and unique, and each time it makes quite an impression. The details become more and more intricate. My building, for example, showcases local artists' paintings and sculptures. There is even a chandelier in the public restroom. The building across from mine has a rooftop patio adorned with lights and a stage for live bands to perform, using the San Antonio skyline as a backdrop. And the newest complex has its own "main street" lined with palm trees, making it feel like a gated community even though it is right in the middle of the city. The mailroom does not even use keys – just access codes and a computer-based system that pops open storage boxes based on user IDs and passwords. The integration of technology and attention to details is important to the next generation and proof that this is an exciting time in the construction industry, and yet, I am still feeling troubled.

I have friends who live in the newest building on my block and they were rather taken aback when I cringed as I stepped into their apartment. In fact, I have been through each of the buildings in my area and had that same reaction because, despite all those modern touches, each one has the same thing in common – the doors. Molded four and six-panel doors you can hear perfectly through, whether they are open or closed. It doesn't matter how modern the building is – the doors seem to be stuck somewhere in the 1990s, and in some instances, look rather out of place. The retro look does not work here – so, why have they not changed?

Why MDF?

Having switched over to the stile and rail medium-density fiberboard (MDF) door market just a few years ago, I admit it felt daunting. It can be an intimidating product, with many parts and pieces involved in its manufacture and



INSTEAD OF INSTALLING DOORS SOLELY FOR FUNCTIONALITY, THEY ARE BECOMING CENTERPIECES OF THE ROOM – A FOCAL POINT RATHER THAN A WAY TO CLOSE ONE SPACE OFF FROM ANOTHER.

So what is so great about MDF doors?

Some may argue they are nothing special ... they aren't even "real" wood, and aside from having a nice substrate for veneer, garner no excitement. How could anyone have a preference for MDF doors over the reclaimed planks salvaged from an 1880s barn or an intricately patterned plastic laminate? The difference is versatility. Complexity. Repeatability. You may see a slab of MDF, primitive and simply primed for paint, but I see limitless options for design. If you specify that a door be built in MDF, it is built to last. Its customization allows designers and builders to complement any style, mood and space while its construction does not sacrifice safety or performance durability.

The Design

Multi-family spaces are smaller than ever – on average 8 percent from 10 years ago – but still need to feel large to justify the price. It is not uncommon for a property to showcase nine or even 10-foot-tall ceilings, and doors are inevitably needed to fill those openings. MDF doors are readily available and can accommodate wide openings for open floor plans or tall openings to increase the sense of space.

Instead of installing doors solely for functionality, they are becoming centerpieces of the room – a focal point rather than a way to close one space off from another. And individual spaces within a unit may vary, but with the customization available with MDF, it is easy to produce a split face door with a modern two-panel, clean-cut square on one side of the door and a full mirror on the other side. It is equally effortless to provide a flush door with reveals as subtle or dramatic as needed, with no concern for going too deep and cutting into a particleboard core.

Options to retrofit historic spaces are also much more simply duplicated. If it can be drawn using computer-aided design and drafting, it can likely be produced with MDF. (There are limitations to door design depending on hardware, fire rating and opening requirements.



Wide, square grooves in the MDF door face provide a contemporary alternative to standard flush doors with reveals.

many options. Even though I have lived and breathed doors for 12 years, I was a little nervous when my workload started increasing while my familiarity with the product was still developing. The easy part for me was working with a team of industry experts (those manufacturers really know their stuff) who could help fill in the gaps where I needed a better understanding. The world of MDF doors is small, and a good percentage of the men and women working in it have tenures longer than I have been alive.

Always check with your representative if you have special accommodations you would like to have met.) While there certainly are manufacturer and industry standards for design, those standards are merely guidelines and can be modified to fit individual tastes. MDF doors fit the bill in a way your standard cookie-cutter door cannot.

Durable, Secure and Quiet

MDF stile and rail doors offer durability and security. A standard 45-pound-density MDF door ensures solid openings that will endure. Scrap MDF is not donated to local martial arts studios for karate practice, and not because MDF door manufacturers have no heart. The weight, strength and feel of solid core MDF gives occupants peace of mind in a way other opening types cannot. And, in the event a Jackie Chan prodigy does use a door for practicing their moves, MDF material is incredibly easy to repair with a little Bondo putty or spackle and some touch-up paint. For multi-use and heavily trafficked areas, maintenance on this door is not a laborious process and does not need to be contracted out to specialists.

MDF stile and rail doors are also available with fire ratings up to 90 minutes, and because of the versatility of MDF material, a door rated for 90 minutes can match a non-rated door in appearance to maintain consistency and uniformity. You no longer have to compromise the aesthetic of a room or corridor for a fire rating.

In a last effort to boost my credibility within the DHI community, I have a confession to make: I play the ukulele. What is worse (and more significant to this story) is that my neighbors all know it, despite my never having been paid to perform in Texas, where I live. I would like to think that the dog next door (that I hear every time its family leaves for a night on the town) is soothed by my strumming. But in reality, we should never hear each other at all. And we would not with an MDF door – except that the dog is probably louder than an STC 35.

Well-made, solid-core MDF stile and rail doors easily hit sound transmission class ratings of 30 or better with the addition of gasketing and a door sweep. If you have ever been to a party or gathering where the restroom is directly adjacent to the crowd, you know how important privacy can be – and how critical a solid, well-built door is to ensuring that privacy.

Molded panel doors are largely used in multi-family housing. From this admittedly biased millennial hipster's point of view, buildings are missing the mark when doors are overlooked.

The attention to detail in installing chandeliers in common bathrooms and designing automatic package concierge services comes up short if the doors encapsulating these features are not also up to date and match the building's tone. A high-quality, crisply designed door ties the entire concept together and can shift an occupant's mind from "pretty nice" to "oh, wow!"

The next generation's values and expectations are of quality products that are individualized. Status quo is continually being contested. It is time to differentiate ourselves in style, safety and durability and in sound transmission class. And if nothing more, it is time to make doors fun again. +



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The author's ukulele shown atop a custom fluted panel design popular in many high-rise condominiums.