



The Global Marketplace Requires Design Professional and Consumer Vigilance

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The global economy has in many ways improved quality of life in the U.S. and elsewhere, but it also requires vigilance from consumers and us as design professionals. Imported products have found their way into every aspect of our lives. Harmful imports from toys with lead-based paint to pet food containing melamine have come into American homes, and now are built into the homes themselves.

Problems arising from contaminated drywall imported from China made *Associated Press* and *Wall Street Journal* headlines recently. According to the *Associated Press*, importation of drywall increased to keep up with the demand of past years' real estate boom and the recovery efforts following hurricanes like Katrina and Wilma.

It has been determined that the imported, contaminated drywall is off-gassing volatile organic compounds, primarily sulfur which is identifiable by its characteristic rotten-egg smell. People have been reporting symptoms of sick-building syndrome - such as irritation to eyes, nasal passages, and throat - which is caused by poor indoor air quality. While it is in debate whether there will be any resulting impacts on health, even an uncomfortable environment is unacceptable. Could you tolerate such conditions in your store or business? Owners of these homes have been taking action to protect themselves by moving, filing lawsuits, and going public. In part this can be attributed to the recent increase in public understanding of the significance of healthy buildings, spurred largely by the LEED Green Building Rating System.

The increased levels of sulfur contaminating the drywall account for the reports of related corrosion of wiring, piping, and personal possessions. Sulfur oxidizes metal, thus also tarnishing jewelry. If not addressed, corroded building components can result in fire or other damaging building failure.

If you are concerned that this faulty drywall may have been installed in your store or business, the signs include the metal corrosion (signaled by formation of a black coating) and smell indicated above, as well as other indicators. The period of note is 2004-2006. Also check the back of the drywall for labels, such as "Made in China" or manufacturers which may be responsible, like Knauf Tianjin Co. or Taishan Gypsum Co. (subjects of related lawsuits). See trusted news sources for developments. Most importantly, contact your builder or contractor.

At Jencen, we make a concerted effort to purchase American-made products for intra-office purposes, whenever possible, as it is important to us to support our local economy. There is an amazing extent of choice in the marketplace today, which can have drawbacks. As architects, it is our professional and ethical responsibility to specify safe products while keeping our clients' budgetary requirements in mind.

For all of your LEED needs, please contact Katie Chew at kchew@jencen.com
For general information, please contact J. Thomas Straga at tstraga@jencen.com



Drywall recently installed in a house.



An example of corroded copper piping, as by the contaminated drywall.

¹ Burdeau, Cain. "Tainted Chinese Drywall Emits Sulfur, Creates a Second Katrina Disaster for Rebuilt Homeowners." *Associated Press*, 12 April 2009.