

STEP ON IT

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Jill peruses the contents of Interface's Second Story Collection. The four patterns of the collection are wittily named Sublet, Duplex, Classic Seven, and Brownstone, and are part of the company's Carbon Neutral Floors program.

Words by Allison Paige | Photos by Lauryn Hottinger

Jill Albers of Interface talks next-generation textiles

DON'T TELL ALADDIN, but most carpets are far from magic. In fact, the conventional carpet industry is a notorious polluter from toxic runoff during production to installation, when the off-gassing of volatile organic compounds in flame retardants and stain resisters makes it hazardous to indoor occupants. From fabrication to installation to disposal, carpet can be a dirty business, and that's before anybody even steps on it.

Enter Interface. Founded in 1973, the LaGrange, Georgia, company is one of the world's largest producers of modular carpet tiles. It has since led the charge of what it calls an "industrial re-revolution" to create responsibly produced, Earth-friendly textiles.

Account executive Jill Albers details how her company became an environmental catalyst, evolving from detrimental production methods to the cutting edge of sustainable design.



Founder Ray C. Anderson was once just a young guy selling carpets in small-town Georgia. "He wasn't an astrophysicist or rocket scientist," says Jill. "He saw an innovative product."

"Originally, carpet was broadloom," Jill explains. "It was made on huge 12-foot rolls. You rolled it out and you glued it and you stapled that and you had 14 percent of it going directly into the landfill. You had to cut it and had all this waste."

Then Ray took a trip overseas that proved eye-opening.

"He went to a company in Holland and saw them cutting up carpet into squares and instantly saw that that was the way of the future. He went back to the company he was working for and told them this, and they thought he was crazy. So, he did what any crazy person would do. He started his own company."

The carpet tile business proved to be wildly successful—today Interface is a publicly traded company with net sales in 2018 of \$1.2 billion. Ray might have rested on his

When the opportunity came to move to Maine and to work for Interface, it was meant to be. Ray Anderson has really guided my design career. I wanted to be a part of his legacy. Now I am.”

and kind of sat there and wept and realized that, basically, he was a plunderer of the earth.”

But what started as a crisis of conscience quickly became a quest for innovation. You might even say Interface did an about-face.

Ray created an environmental task force and launched Mission Zero, a company-wide initiative to become carbon neutral across the entire life cycle of their products.

To increase transparency and accountability, in 2008, Interface became the first US carpet manufacturer to publish an Environmental Product Declaration, an independently verified record that measures a product’s environmental impact.

“Now, almost every single one of our competitors has done the same thing,” notes Jill. “It started a complete industry-wide discussion. It’s no longer just ‘What’s Interface doing?’ It’s ‘What is everybody doing?’”

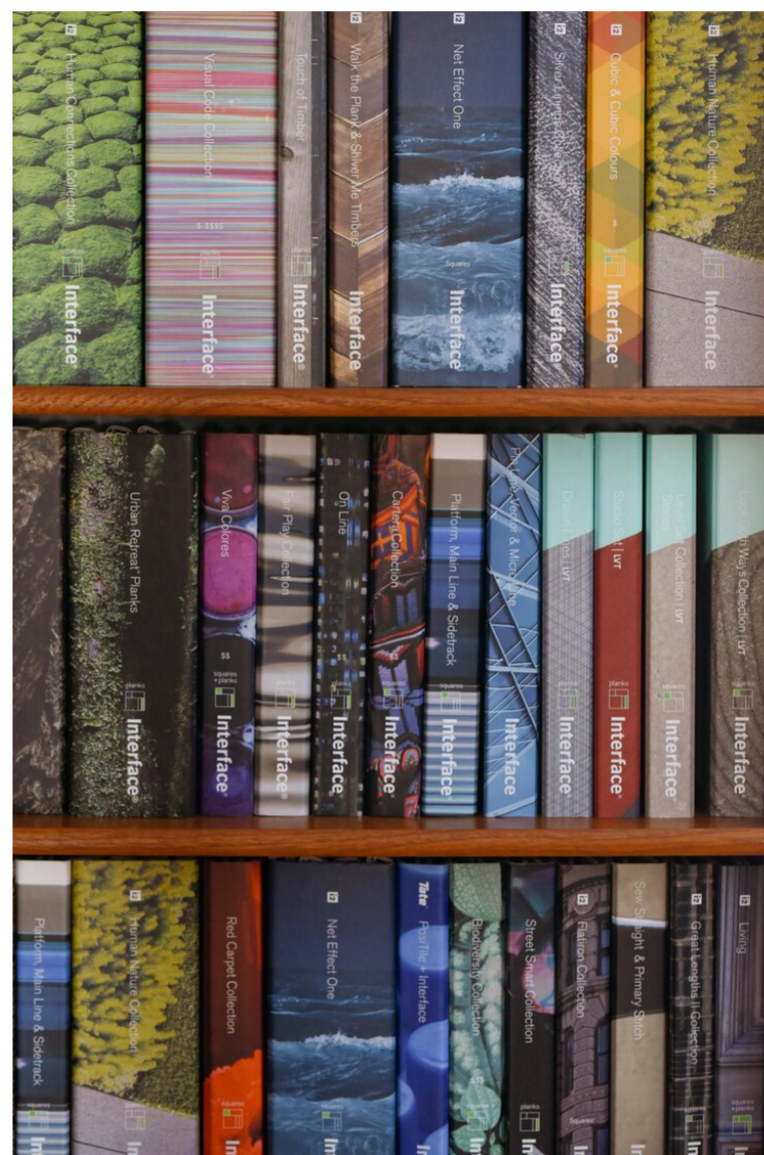
Among their innovations, Interface influenced the development of recycled nylon yarn, created a carpet backing made with recycled content, a glue-free installation product, and a line of carpet tiles that use yarn made from reclaimed fishing nets. In 2019, the company announced that it had met its Mission Zero goal.

“Mission Zero was very much an internal set of goals,” says Jill. “It was to eliminate our footprint. And we realize now that if we stop there, that’s really not helping anything. We need to go further and reverse climate change. Our new mission, called Climate Takeback, is to be carbon negative by 2040.”

Committed to making a difference locally as well as globally, Jill coordinated with Maine Interior Design Association, in July of 2019, to hold the first Zero-Landfill day in Portland. “The idea was to divert all the library materials that get thrown out in the landfill and connect them with teachers and artists.”

Jill’s dedication to Interface’s sustainability mission was recognized last year when she received the Ray C. Anderson award, a company distinction bestowed upon the Interface employee who most embodies Ray’s vision.

“I was very thrilled,” Jill admits. “He is absolutely one of the biggest influences in my life. I am definitely not at this company by mistake. I’m here on purpose.”



In Jill’s office, the colorful binders of the company’s product library create a rainbow of color and texture.



Interface’s seminal 25th Anniversary report. “Being able to say 25 years ago that we’re going to eliminate our negative impact and be carbon neutral—that was unheard of,” says Jill. “Our hope is that we lead by example.”

This summer, Interface will roll out its most ambitious product yet, a carbon-negative carpet tile created using sequestered carbon.

“The prototype was called Proof Positive because we needed to prove to ourselves, from an engineering standpoint, that we could make a commercial-grade carpet tile that would actually be carbon negative,” says Jill.

There are two ways to sequester carbon: naturally or mechanically. “One way is to use plant-based waste,” Jill says. “The other way is to mechanically sequester carbon through direct air capture. You can then take the sequestered carbon and use it to create new materials.”

With this technology, she says, “The carpet can be continuously recycled within our existing recycling program—ReEntry. The carbon is never rereleased back out into the atmosphere.

“Actually, there’s less carbon in the air as a result of making that carpet tile than if it had never been made,” she concludes.

So, while Interface carpets may not actually fly, they are certainly magical in their own right, helping combat climate change one tile at a time.

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