

Antiques — In Vogue with Green Design

by Margie McNally



Latently, one cannot pick up a magazine or tune into a favorite home improvement show without noticing a feature on the movement toward green design. What exactly is green design? Green means environmentally responsible. It addresses the impact of building and manufacturing on our global and our immediate resources and environment. The tenets of this design paradigm urge us to become cognizant of our lifestyle habits, use less, repurpose materials, and dispose of them in an efficient manner. While much has been written about the benefits of “greening” whole buildings, what of the individual components—the furnishings—that we place inside of them? Furnishings are part of the built environment and should be held to the same environmental scrutiny as the structures that house them. The choices we make when selecting raw materials and furnishings can heed the call of these new environmental attributes, and purchasing antiques as a way to lessen the production of new materials is both an innovative and effective approach.

Yet how are the benefits of green design measured? A wide range of terms and accounting practices from zero energy to being carbon neutral are frequently mentioned, but the term *embodied energy* is perhaps more revealing and to the point. Embodied, or embedded, energy consists of the entire energy cost and impact of a subject, including raw materials used in its production, energy expended in its manufacture, cost to transport it to its destination, and the method of disposal at the end of its useful life. This green “cradle to cradle” philosophy has been developed to lessen the environmental impact of manufacturing and promote a continual cycle of reuse.

But is the embodied energy of antiques measurable? This question was posed to Tristan Roberts, managing editor of *Environmental*

Building News, a leading news and information source on green building. Tristan’s response, “One could argue that the embodied energy of antiques has been long since amortized away into nothing; therefore it’s a matter of looking at the embodied energy of the new furniture and comparing it with just the transportation costs of the old.”

While research and statistics regarding the embodied energy of fixtures and furniture is scarce, frequently referenced statistics show that a typical chair has approximately 7 million Btu’s of embodied energy, which translates into 56 gallons of gasoline. It would take six full grown trees one year to neutralize the carbon pollutants that this amount of energy will produce—and that’s just for one chair. Unfortunately, one of those trees needs to be harvested in order to manufacture the chair.

It should be evident that this impact can be reduced by buying antiques. What could be more eco-friendly? In addition, antiques add history and interest to our interior spaces. Reusing these timeless furnishings offers an alternative to new mass produced pieces that consume precious natural resources and generally have a short consumable life because of poor manufacture.

If buying a new piece of furniture, an alternative to buying from a general retail store would be to use furnishings made from salvaged wood products. There are a number of innovative companies nationwide that salvage logs from underground streams and storm damaged trees as well as boards from antique buildings. They turn this wood into lumber and reuse it for framing, flooring, and fine quality furniture. Compared to newer logs, old wood is more durable and superior in quality; it is often from the era when timber came from larger trees with tighter growth rings, resulting in a stronger finished piece.

Another option is to purchase new furniture made from wood that meets the standards of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), a non-profit agency formed in 1993 to assure proper forest management practices. There are a growing number of enterprising designers throughout the country who produce quality furniture using wood that carries the FSC seal of approval. Also look for pieces covered with less toxic, low VOC (volatile organic compounds) stains and finishes for better indoor air quality.

While the latter two are viable alternatives, the best way to be green with your furnishings is to consider the original recyclable—antiques. Preserve the past and ensure the future. 

Margie McNally, LEED AP, is owner of Interior Elements, specializing in interior design and environmental consulting.

resources

CitiLog, Pittstown, Pennsylvania

www.citilogs.com

CitiLog is SmartWood-certified for the harvesting of trees in urban areas of New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Wood is sent by rail to Amish craftsmen in central Pennsylvania who turn the wood into quality products. Where appropriate, wood is harvested using horses.

Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)

www.fscus.org

An independent, non-profit organization that promotes responsible forest management by evaluating and accrediting certifiers and encouraging the development of national and regional forest management standards.

Green Design Furniture, Portland, Maine

www.greendesigns.com

Quality, hand-crafted, wood furniture using domestically grown solid wood, logged following sustainable forestry guidelines.

Environmental Building News

www.buildinggreen.com

A leading news and information source on green building.