



Interest in Sustainable Furniture Increases as Chatter About IAQ, Deforestation Picks Up

By Glenn Hasek
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Courtesy of Verde Design Studio

NATIONAL REPORT—If the growth of the [Sustainable Furniture Council](#) (SFC) is any indication of the current level of interest in sustainable furniture manufacturing, you can expect to read a lot more about this trend in the coming months. The Council, which was incorporated in March, already has 100 members. While the majority of all furniture purchased for lodging in the United States is not sustainable, that appears to be changing—albeit slowly.

What exactly is sustainable furniture? It most certainly is not furniture that is made with illegally sourced wood, petroleum-based foams, fabrics and other materials, and finishes and glues that include volatile organic compounds (VOCs) that negatively impact indoor air quality (IAQ). According to Susan Inglis, executive director of the Chapel Hill, N.C.-based SFC, it is furniture made from wood that has been certified by an organization such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). It is also furniture with foam, glues and finishes certified as low-VOC-emitting by an organization such as Greenguard. Fabrics should be organic—cotton, wool or hemp, for example. Metal, ideally, should be made from recycled content and be recyclable.

Sustainable furniture takes into consideration the entire lifecycle of the product, where it is made and where its parts and pieces come from. Is the piece of furniture recyclable or biodegradable? These are two other issues considered. Those companies that commit to manufacturing this type of furniture also commit to being open about their manufacturing processes and supply sourcing, participate in third-party certification programs, and emphasize continuous improvement in their business practices.

Impact of Overseas Manufacturing

Is furniture sustainable if it is made overseas? It certainly can be but it is less so if the supplies for it are shipped from thousands of miles away. The furniture already will have a significant carbon footprint as it is shipped as a completed product to the other side of the world. Sourcing supplies locally and manufacturing locally is important. This all reduces the amount of energy required to make and ship the finished product. According to Inglis, furniture manufacturing has been moving quickly



Courtesy of JLF/Lone Meadow

to Asia and mainly China from the United States over the last 10 years.

“The majority of furniture being offered for residential, commercial and hospitality is not close to being sustainable because the majority is manufactured offshore where the requirements for the finishing and materials is very lax,” says Jeffrey Lazar, founder and CEO of Rancho Dominguez, Calif.-based [JLF/Lone Meadow](#), a maker of luxury sustainable seating. “The migration to China is all cost driven.”

Garry Huebner and Michele Fitzpatrick, business partners who run [Verde Design Studio](#) in Chicago, explained that in 2006 alone, there was a 40 percent decline in furniture production in the United States. That means even more fuel is burned to get furniture back into the United States and into its hotels. Verde is another U.S.-based maker of sustainable furniture that is pursuing the lodging market.



Courtesy of JLF/Lone Meadow

“We wanted to build furniture that was either 100 percent recyclable or biodegradable,” Fitzpatrick says. “Many of the pieces on the market today end up in landfills in three to five years.”

Verde uses natural rubber latex in its foam cushioning. The majority of manufacturers use petroleum-based polyurethane foam in their products. Polyurethane generates VOC emissions and has a much shorter lifespan than natural rubber latex material. Furniture manufactured with sustainable materials lasts longer, Fitzpatrick says.

“If you create a piece of furniture that is going to last a long period of time, you are not going to have to worry about the landfill,” she says. “Built well, furniture can get handed down from one user to another. We have to get away from that disposable mentality. Nothing is really disposable. People are also going to have to start asking themselves if they are willing to pay more for an American-made product.”

Verde’s Huebner says there is a price premium of 20 to 30 percent for sustainable furniture but that can easily go down as purchase volume goes up. One of the challenges his company faces, he says, is the manufacturing time expected by those purchasing sustainable furniture. They need to build in more time in their schedules because it takes longer to produce the higher-quality furniture.



Courtesy of Verde Design Studio

Commitment to California

JLF/Lone Meadow’s Lazar says his company is of one of the last U.S. manufacturers to mill, finish and upholster all of its own furniture in the United States. Manufacturing in a sustainable manner made sense for him, especially because of his location in California, a state with strong environmental standards. Lumber used by JLF/Lone Meadow comes from managed forests, finishes are water based, recycled foam is used in cushioning, and metal is from post-consumer recycled steel materials.

JLF/Lone Meadow offers biodegradable, natural fiber fabrics as an option. Many customers specify their own fabrics that may or may not be sustainable. The company's furniture can be found in hotels with brands including Ritz-Carlton, Four Seasons, Marriott, Disney, Hyatt and others.

Lazar says his company is not only doing the right thing from a business and environmental standpoint, but also from a marketing one as well.

“We have been way ahead of the curve from a marketing standpoint,” he says. “We are going to continue to keep driving our environmental theme and message.”

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