

Renewing an Emphasis on Sustainability

Understanding and growing environmental consciousness



Can one design project impact the global environment? It can. Especially when it's part of a comprehensive mission by the designers and the manufacturers of materials and furnishings to encourage sustainability.

It seems obvious that we should all care about preserving the world we live in, but it's not always so clear which of our choices have a tangible negative impact. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates 9 million tons of furniture is tossed into landfills every year, with most of that manufactured within the last 10-15 years. Chemicals used in production and finishing, energy used to manufacture and package products, even carbon emissions from transporting and shipping all contribute to the overall impact. So what can designers, retailers and manufacturers do about it? >

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Anne Smith, is the chief administrative officer and president of domestic upholstery for Hooker Furnishings. For more information, visit hookerfurnishings.com or visit their new showroom in Building 1, Floor 1 Lobby.



Kristin Kong, ASID, LEED, AP, is the founder and principal of K Kong Designs in Atlanta, Ga. For more information, visit kkongdesigns.com.

INSIDE AND OUT

Start from the beginning of a project. Clients and consumers are becoming more aware of their environmental impact and expressing their concerns through smarter buying choices. The most recent Green Home Furnishings Consumer Study by the Sustainable Furnishings Council (SFC) – which targeted homeowners between ages 30-60 with a household income of more than \$50,000 – reports that 97 percent of those surveyed are interested in buying environmentally safe furnishings assuming favorable style and cost is about the same. And the majority of respondents say they will pay up to 10 percent more for environmentally friendly furnishings.

“You have to consider the entire space including lighting and air quality,” says Kristin Kong, ASID, LEED, AP, founder and principal of K Kong Designs in Atlanta, Ga. “Focus on how the surroundings affect the occupants. Having a green space where you can go out and breathe some fresh air is important.”

That’s a holistic approach shared by Hooker Furnishings, a strong advocate of looking at the full picture in furniture manufacturing and sales. The company actively advocates its responsibility by mitigating its environmental impact and concentrating on sustainable practices and resources. The commitment extends through every aspect their business from the lighting and power sources for its plants and biodegradable packaging to using sustainably harvested lumber and minimizing chemicals in fabric finishing.

“We’ve seen a shift most notably with wood (reclaimed, recycled, or sustainably harvested), cushions, covers and packaging. In addition, because larger furniture items must be more carefully packaged to protect them from damage during the shipping and delivery processes, using packaging from recycled or recyclable materials has also become very important to our customers and to our overall sustainability efforts,” says Anne Smith, chief administrative officer and president of domestic upholstery for Hooker Furnishings.

STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE

As consumers are more aware of their environmental impact across the board, some specifically approach a purchase with sustainability top of mind. But often it’s the designer who can offer options while explaining the long-term value. Suggesting natural, renewable, and sustainable products including reclaimed wood, bamboo, organic cotton, hemp fabric, jute and ethical wool is a start.

“Wool might seem expensive but it’s natural, lasting, and renewable. So are organic materials such as bamboo that’s rapidly renewable for flooring,” says Kong. “You have to understand the vendors and their corporate culture. What are they doing to be sustainable? What types of dyes do they use? We want to bring things into homes that are healthy. The more vendors can educate us, the more we can educate our clients.”

Savvy designers will ask smart questions and do research. “Look for FSC certified wood, that’s Forest Stewardship Council. You can check the website to see manufacturers. The Global Green Family site provides ideas about people who are doing sustainable design, and levelcertified.org offers information on furniture and how it’s produced. It just takes some digging to make sure you’re using good products,” says Kong.

Environmentally responsible vendors and manufacturers welcome questions and openly promote sustainability goals. “We partner with suppliers who are committed to sustainable practices and take advantage of programs in the marketplace like FSC certified lumber and fabrics made from recycled plastic..” says Smith.

The Sustainable Furnishings Council offers an online guide with questions to ask about buying items ranging from wood to textiles to paint. Hooker works with SFC as well the American Home Furnishings Alliance and programs such as EFEC (Enhancing Furniture’s Environmental Culture) to continue its sustainability mission.

A FULL PERSPECTIVE

Encouraging clients to look beyond the initial cost is another way to encourage sustainability. Thinking beyond just new purchases, Kong advocates evaluating what a client already owns and emphasizing quality, generational items. “Giving new life to old pieces is one of my favorite things,” she says.

Manufacturers can encourage a longer-term view by providing and promoting quality while creatively incorporating material sources. “Our merchandising teams for all our brands continue to look for ways to bring compelling product to retail floors and ultimately consumers’ homes. To that end, we look for opportunities to incorporate reclaimed or recycled materials whenever possible. When evaluating new materials, sustainability is an important component,” says Smith. “We believe that most consumers look for opportunities to purchase products with a sustainability story and want to partner with brands who are committed to looking after our environment and our overall safety when it comes to home furnishings. The ‘justification’ is the convergence of style, comfort/livability, sustainability, and overall value.”

Manufacturers, vendors, designers, and retailers can all make a positive impact by raising awareness, by asking good questions, and by making informed decisions. It doesn’t have to be prohibitively expensive to provide environmentally responsible product options.

“Human beings spend 90 percent of our time indoors so we should be concerned with what is surrounding us and what these products are made of,” says Kong. “We must seek to reduce the negative impact on the environment from the structures we build and from any negative impact on the inhabitants of the spaces we create.” ■