

Into The Mainstream



Health and environmental considerations in construction are gradually working their way into the mainstream. As Vivienne Reiner reports, furniture and fittings is one sector leading the way.

Buildings account for a sizeable chunk of our global footprint, and there is significant purchasing power in how these buildings are fitted out. Certification processes vary, so it's a good idea to consider a range of criteria, such as how the raw material is produced, the type of binding material and dyes used, durability and whether the product can be recycled.

Furniture suppliers with a conscience

Eco furniture and fittings are fast moving into the mainstream, with a number of commercial and residential suppliers getting

on board and increasing their sustainable range. These include leading Australian interior construction specialist Schiavello, a BRW Top 200 Private Company which, among other things, recently implemented an environmental program that re-acquires its furniture at the end of its life, to recycle or re-use and resell. At premium international and local designer supplier Living Edge, an impressive Good Environmental Choice Australia (GECA) certified range is available, while Stylecraft, whose customers span corporate, government and residential, also offers Green Star products and has accredited staff. →



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1/ Instyle's Life range of fabrics includes the newly released Mammoth. 2/ From Stylecraft's GECA certified Home range. 3/ LIFE Textiles® is locally manufactured to strict environmental criteria utilising exclusively sourced, rapidly-renewable and sustainable natural resources including EthEco® wool. 4/ The GECA certified Box range from Stylecraft. 5/ Tough, long lasting, 100% recyclable; The Cero stool designed by Brian Steendyk from Schiavello.



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Certification bodies growing

At GECA, more than 130 licence applications were received in 2009/10 and of these 67 were approved, representing a growth of almost a third over the previous strong year. In line with global trends for ecolabelling increasingly extending across significant industries such as commercial buildings, building products and textiles, GECA's furniture and fittings segment remained the most popular for the financial year.

Ecospecifier, a certifier and product information portal, has also been experiencing strong growth. Founding principal David Baggs says where furniture and fittings are concerned, the top three issues relate to:

- timber – whether it is recycled or FSC or AFS certified;
- toxins – in some fabric dyes and preservatives (especially in leather) that contain heavy metals such as chromium; and
- volatile organic compounds (VOCs) – foams, glues and some plastics that emit gaseous compounds, bad for the environment and our health.

Australian wood a safe bet

Asia Pacific countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Burma and Papua New Guinea are believed to be major sources of illegally harvested timber entering Australia. And according to an Australian government commissioned report, illegally harvested timber in some African countries accounts for up to 80 per cent of wood harvested. So with land-clearing responsible for roughly a fifth of all greenhouse gas emissions, knowing good wood from bad can make a difference. Many products are not certified, however, and some systems have been criticised for their loopholes. Greenpeace's online Good Wood Guide provides an excellent oversight, explaining what to look for (Australian tends to be safe) and what to avoid, and it also has a database search function.

One organisation offering environmentally friendly wood furniture is Witt Design, which uses wood from sustainably managed Tasmanian forests. Witt Design, whose products are conveniently available for sale over the internet, also avoids VOCs in their glues, varnish and latex foam, the micro-fibre upholstery uses recycled material and the leather is processed to environmental standards.

Quality need not be sacrificed where recycled wood is concerned. Thor's Hammer is one of a number of wood-smiths who put to good use timber salvaged from demolition sites around Australia. The wood is turned into long-lasting, eye-catching re-milled and salvaged floor boards, lining boards, durable hardwood decking, kitchen bench tops, entry doors and tables, and recycled posts and beams. The furniture is available in a finish made from Osmo natural oils and waxes.

Textiles can tread lightly

Textiles comprise one of the biggest industries in the world and are used in buildings for curtains and screens as well as upholstery fabric. While it makes sense to source environmentally friendly fabrics, what looks greenest is not always best.

Award-winning textile designer Instyle made a commitment some years ago to minimise their environmental impact but quality could not be compromised. For their high-performance textiles, the supplier to leading airlines, hospitals and hotels uses a minimum 50 per cent post-consumer recycled polyester, while the LIFE (Low Impact For the Environment) Textiles® range uses non-mulesed wool — not only durable but also sustainable.

Instyle undertook a comparative analysis on a range of textiles before developing the LIFE range. The research shows that renewable resources, such as bamboo, are typically produced like viscose, which can generate highly polluting water and air emissions. As well, it was noted that recycled polyester (recycled PET) is nonetheless a derivative of the petroleum industry and may contain toxic substances. Although PET is often claimed as recyclable, Instyle says companies do not accept recycled PET upholstery/screen textiles for recycling in Australia, and the majority of textiles that find their way into landfills are synthetics, which are not biodegradable. Wool, however, is accepted for recycling and unlike other textiles actually absorbs VOCs from interior environments. With the cost of textiles ranging greatly, depending on the product, it is good to know that the cheapest sustainable woollen fabric is comparable in price to that of lower-priced conventional wool.

Re-use and repair

Fixing older furniture saves money and gives furniture a new lease of life – much of the quality eco-friendly furniture available is re-upholstered. When something goes wrong, furniture may be able to be repaired on site, depending on the problem.

At The Chair Doctor, based in Sydney, repairs and minor adjustments can normally be carried out on the spot. However, major works will need to be undertaken at the factory, with replacement chairs available on loan. The Chair Doctor also cleans chairs and lounges and sells used furniture. Where re-upholstery is required, furniture is re-foamed, seat and back webbing is replaced and pickup and delivery can be arranged.

Info:

www.goodwoodguide.org.au/search.php
www.ecospecifier.org/content/view/full/45
www.geca.org.au/ProductsRegister.htm
www.instyle.com.au/impact_of_textiles.html
www.greenhome.com/products/furniture/

- online shop

www.furntech.org.au/

- Furnishing Research and Development Institute, certifying body

www.carpet-rug.org/index.cfm

- Carpet and Rug Institute, certifying body