



Furnishing a Healthy Home

Carpets, chairs, and bookcases often use toxic chemicals—but here come ecofriendly alternatives!

BY MARK HARRIS, from CONSCIOUS CHOICE

I FIRST BECAME aware of environmental and health issues in the home in the early 1990s. Recurring health problems had left me increasingly sensitive to various chemicals. I didn't realize it at first, but I had joined the growing sector of those who suffer from environmentally related illness.

That was the beginning of my education about organic foods, organic cotton, nontoxic cleaning aids, and the side effects of lingering in freshly painted rooms. I came to appreciate buildings with windows that open and people who don't smoke.

These days I am—fortunately—healthier. I am also more aware of the

practical challenges that face growing numbers of people who want to reduce the toxins in their homes. Ask me about “off-gassing” and I'll tell you that new furniture and rugs often release vapors from the chemicals that are used to make them. I know from hard experience that indoor air pollution can be a pressing health concern, so I encourage my otherwise eco-aware, recycling, organic-food-shopping friends to start thinking about it. What good is it to set

Organic hemp chair by Bean Products, Inc. with a natural hemp base, sustainably harvested hardwood, organic cotton batting and heavy hemp canvas upholstery.

up a home meditation space, scented with lavender candles, if formaldehyde from your new particleboard bookshelf is slowly, invisibly filling the room with a more toxic form of aromatherapy?

BARRY BURSAK, a Chicago design consultant and former home furnishings entrepreneur, has been aware of the problems of toxic pollution at home for years. He believes that many consumers would buy safe, ethically made home furnishings if they knew how to find them. That's why he organized a remarkable exhibition of healthy home furnishings that premiered at the Chicago Design Show at the city's famous Merchandise Mart. It was the culmination of years of hard work by Bursak and others who believe that home furnishings can be made in a more environmentally responsible way.

The goal was to give both trade professionals and the public more information about ecofriendly home furnishings. Cosponsored by Sustain, a national environmental advocacy group, the exhibit allowed small companies to parade their sustainable products in a high-profile commercial setting.

Visitors to the pavilion could tour examples of an ecologically friendly kitchen, living room, dining room, kid's play area, bedroom, bathroom, home office, and study/reading area. They could pick up heaps of information on sustainable flooring, furniture, lighting, accessories, fabrics, and wall coverings. Even the most well-versed environmentalists found some surprises, such as carpeting made from corn and furniture built from recycled cardboard, wheat, and sunflower seeds.

Bamboo, one of nature's best-kept sustainable secrets, was prominently featured in the exhibit. Bamboo is actually as strong as any American hardwood (including oak, maple, and cherry) and

grows well without pesticides or fertilizers. It can mature in only six to eight years, compared to 100 or more for typical hardwoods, making it much easier to replenish naturally. Bursak, the show's organizer, ran City, a well-known Chicago-area retailer of high-end design collections, for many years. He knows that manufacturers have largely ignored the potential of safe, ecofriendly furniture and home furnishings. "In general, furniture and home furnishings are made with a lot of toxic chemicals, particularly formaldehyde," he says. "The thinking [among manufacturers] has been that supporting our efforts to give customers a choice would be like telling the public that there are things wrong with what the industry is doing."

Although formaldehyde-laden particleboard and other toxic building materials have been widely used in home furnishing only since the 1950s, many manufacturers can't imagine not using them. Yet a spokesperson for the Hardwood Plywood Manufacturers Association admitted to Lynn Lawson, author of *Staying Well in a Toxic World* (Lynnword Press), that he would certainly look for "low-formaldehyde products" if he were adding on to his own house. He hastened to add, however, that he didn't consider formaldehyde a great problem.

Lawson herself learned about the health risks of conventionally made furniture after she bought a handsome wood desk for her new computer. Working at her computer, she began feeling dizzy. She reached down and felt the lower edges of the desk: rough plywood. Suspecting formaldehyde (and possibly other chemicals), she put aluminum tape over the rough edges, and the dizziness gradually went away. When she developed a severe all-day headache after a few hours at the computer, however, she knew the problem remained. Next step: hiring someone to apply four coats of a sealer, which she had first sniff-tested for possible reactions. Only then did the furniture become safe for her. This added considerable cost, monetary and otherwise, to the price of her purchase, and explains why many people are happy to pay the extra expense

of eco-friendly furnishings. SO WHAT ARE the earmarks of environmentally friendly furniture? "A good, basic definition of a sustainable wood furniture product," according to Bursak, "is one that comes from environmentally managed forests and uses finishes made with linseed or other natural, nontoxic oils. It's a [manufacturing] process that by definition is free of chemical preservatives." He adds that this is simply the way high-quality furniture was made before 20th-century manufacturers turned to synthetic chemicals.

If you buy a conventional sofa, Bursak says, "the wood is usually soaked in chemical preservatives, toxic glues are used to hold it together, and the wood is then wrapped with polyester fiber. The seat and back pillows contain polyurethane foam and are wrapped

**In a typical sofa,
the wood is soaked
in chemicals and
toxic glues hold it
together.**



with more polyester fiber. Fabric coverings are often synthetics, or possibly 'natural' fabrics, but either way they're dyed with toxic chemicals and then sprayed with 'protective' chemicals." You can expect these chemical products to off-gas for months or even years.

Compare all that to a sustainable sofa with certified forest-managed wood, nontoxic glues, and organic cotton, silk, or hemp batting. It will use natural latex rubber or fiberfill made from a type of recycled plastic that releases no fumes. The fabrics are likely to be made of new, recycled fibers produced with no pollution and free from harmful dyes.

According to Bursak, there is as yet no formal national certification process for home furnishings, as now exists for



Barry Bursak organized a groundbreaking show of ecofriendly furnishings at Chicago's Merchandise Mart.

MARTA GARCIA

organic foods. For the time being, consumers have to rely largely on the integrity of the manufacturer, as well as their own diligence in searching out wholesome products. Bursak encourages consumers to ask retailers what they know about their wares.

NO, YOU'RE NOT going to find a sustainable furniture section at your nearby department store—not yet, at least. But a growing number of small companies are entering the field. Because of the higher cost of sustainable materials and the handcrafting that goes into making such products, the prices are higher than those of mass-produced competitors. Chuck Blumenthal, founder of Chicago-based Bean Products Inc., which expanded from bean pillows to a whole line of sustainable furniture, says the cost is comparable to what you'd pay for low-end designer pieces.

We no longer need to rely on toxic glues and forest-depleting particleboard. We've now got soy-based binders and biocomposite board materials made from wheat, alfalfa, and straw that are safer and just as durable. Even recycled plastics are safer the second time around.

By showing us sustainable design in action, Bursak and others are trying to open our eyes to a new vision of the beautiful home. Let's hope the home furnishing industry gets the picture, too.

➤ Mark Harris is a Chicago-based writer (www.mark-t-harris.com). From Chicago's sustainable-culture magazine *Conscious Choice* (Oct. 2003). Subscriptions: \$24/yr. (12 issues) from 920 N. Franklin, Suite 202, Chicago, IL 60610; www.consciouschoice.com

CAFÉ UTNE: Discuss furnishings, shoes, and tips for green living in the Home forum at www.utne.com/cafe