

Contemporary Woods | Art and Function

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Urban Wood Encounter 2015

Racine Art Museum Explores Contemporary Furniture



Contemporary studio furniture is dynamic and varied. Since the last part of the twentieth century, artists have employed numerous techniques and materials as they have investigated the conceptual, emotional, and sculptural potential of furniture, as well as its more traditional utilitarian value. As conversations about the environment and the use of natural resources have gained momentum in a broad social context, many contemporary artists and designers have been exploring and questioning the source of their materials.

Challenging “furniture makers and designers to create inspiring and thoughtful furniture from a regionally abundant and underutilized natural resource,” Urban Wood Encounter 2015 emphasizes creative uses for urban wood. Rescued from trees that are not harvested for their timber value, this material would otherwise end up in waste streams when trees succumb to age, injury, or disease.

Offering an expansive lens for understanding material use and value, this exhibition reflects regional artists and designers applying their individual styles and personal interests to this often-discarded wood. Aligning with its contemporary crafts focus, RAM is the first museum to feature this annual event, which also showcases area talent. It is presented in conjunction with Wisconsin Urban Wood, a non-profit organization that is developing partnerships that allow urban wood to be recognized as a valuable resource.



Robert “Andrew” Black Walnut Chairs, 2014 Walnut 36 x 22 x 22 inches Courtesy of the Artist Photography: Don Kerhof



Michael A. Doerr Double Stool with Offset Handles, 2015 Maple Courtesy of the Artist Photography: Steven Roach

About Urban Wood Encounter

Milwaukee area furniture maker Dwayne Sperber is the catalyst behind this exhibition series. Sperber was introduced to urban wood over a decade ago and became a major advocate for its use. He has worked tirelessly to build, in his own words, “awareness and markets for the abundance of wood being removed due to insect, disease, or circumstance.” Sperber’s advocacy, especially with this ongoing series of annual exhibitions, underscores the need to raise awareness for this “new” resource. While Sperber admittedly enjoys the solitude that his studio provides, he exhibits

great passion as a community builder, bringing together all manner of people in support of a material whose use can have “environmental, economic, and societal benefits.”

Not all of the artists featured in the exhibition use urban wood exclusively—but they do recognize the potential and possibilities of the material. Sperber himself feels that his work has become more “organic” since focusing on urban wood as his material of choice. While responding to the particular personality of the wood itself (such as special marks in the grain or rough edges), he also

demonstrates how urban wood can be used in ways that could make it a viable option for standard, common applications.

Another passionate advocate for the use of urban wood is furniture designer and maker, Joseph La Macchia, who has been using salvaged materials for decades and considers it a lifestyle choice. He organized the Urban Wood Collective, a “group of sawyers, woodworkers, wood purveyors, and enthusiasts that participate in salvaging trees from urban environments.” La Macchia balances his desire to create fine furniture with social, ethical, and personal concerns.

An interview with La Macchia highlights one of the challenges he faces using urban wood as a resource—being unable to predict how much material will be available or of what kind. His desire to use the same source tree for a piece

or a collection of related works—combined with his commitment to use urban wood whenever possible—has led him to devise a strategy to obtain material in advance for his inventory. Otherwise, La Macchia reaches out to developing networks of like-minded individuals and organizations.

Other artists, including those using other materials and making different types of work, echo the dedication reflected in the practices of both Sperber and La Macchia. Conversations and considerations regarding “sustainability” permeate popular culture and the art world. Many contemporary artists make

a concentrated effort to understand where their materials originate, with some building this sourcing into their everyday practice. There are projects in other areas of craft that echo the urban wood initiative.

One example is Ethical Metalsmiths (www.ethicalmetalsmiths.org), which describes itself as an entity “committed to leading jewelers and consumers in becoming informed activists for responsible mining, sustainable economic development, and verified, ethical sources for gold, diamonds, and other materials used for jewelry.”

These artists look for ways to balance their conceptual interests and modes of investigating with responsible material resourcing. Rather than forsake one goal for another, they seek ways to meld their interests and to encourage viewers and users of their work to think about the impact of their choices.

Interesting facts about urban wood

- Today there are about 4 billion urban trees in the U.S., with another 70 billion growing in metropolitan areas.

- The number of trees, and hence the volume of wood, removed annually from our nation's urban forests is estimated (due to pests, wind storms, construction, and hazard) to range from 16 to 38 million green tons per year. If these removals were sawn into boards, they would equal nearly 30% of the hardwood lumber produced annually in the U.S.
- Municipalities are faced not only with the volume of tree removals but with the associated financial costs as well. Rising labor and transportation costs, and increased landfill or tipping fees create a financial burden for managers of municipal tree programs.
- Capturing the highest and best use of removed urban wood puts less strain on our forests to supply us with usable wood products and building materials. This is an important step in protecting our natural environment and reducing our overall ecological footprint.
- There is a growing movement by groups of community officials, wood-using industries, arborists, tree care firms, researchers, and public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and others to convert urban "waste" wood to useful products.
- Exhibition affiliate Wisconsin Urban Wood (wisconsinurbanwood.org) describes their goals as follows: " Wisconsin Urban Wood (WUW) links material streams and availability of quality urban wood products and services across our state by building networks of people and businesses that value, use and promote locally sourced wood. Conscientious consumers and businesses are integral to the success of this movement." Future *Urban Wood Encounter* exhibitions will also be undertaken by WUW.
- Through WUW, Dwayne Sperber has been working with the Milwaukee County Zoo to protect and preserve habitats as they utilize removed trees for lumber. Using wood from their property, Sperber has built a piece for the offices that will be donated to the Zoo at the close of the exhibition.

Lena Vigna

Curator of Exhibitions

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