

wood: a social commentary

WORDS BY ALICE BLACKWOOD

Long the favoured material of the traditional craftsman, wood is renowned for its malleability, warmth and resonance. Many a skilled hand has hewn a soft curve, a graceful line and a lustrous finish from the material. What is it about wood that sees contemporary designers traversing new material territories? Alice Blackwood writes.

In a recent interview on ABC Radio National's *By design* program, Astrid Wootton, general manager for the Design Centre of Tasmania, acknowledged that contemporary designers have a plethora of materials from which to choose. So, why then wood?

Wootton, who heads Australia's only museum collection dedicated to contemporary wood design, feels our connection with wood relates to our convict heritage and the fight for survival in the harsh Australian environment. Tasmanian designers in particular, she says, draw on a long history of living off the land and literally 'making' their future from it.¹

'There's a culture of creating furniture from wood in a very pioneering fashion,'

she says. How does this translate to modern practices, battling plentiful material markets, meeting consumer demand and keeping in harmony with the environment?

Wootton notes that contemporary designers are not necessarily purist in their approach to materials. They are adventurous, 'loosening up' in their attitude towards wood, appreciating its ability to combine 'beautifully' with other materials.

'The days of making a piece of wood-designed furniture purely out of wood have disappeared,' she says. 'What we see developing is a culture where there are many new materials and technologies available to designers.'

Doing just this is jeweller Natalia Milosz-Piekarska. Her delicate, almost sculptural work consists of soft, palm-sized wooden pieces, fused with copper or sometimes silver, enamel or a bead-encrusted string. Drawing on the 'expressive and animated' qualities of wood, Milosz-Piekarska describes the material as being malleable and forgiving. 'It allows me to play with shape, colour and texture. There is a tactility, pulse and seductive warmth to it.'

Also drawn to the warmth and rich quality of wood is Jason Wright-St Clair of CINA. Wright-St Clair explores the conventional and contemporary elements of woodwork, using 'a traditional material with modern production techniques' to create tablemats, coasters and other products. He laser-cuts the wood,

investigating the intricate levels of detail revealed. 'These techniques give the product a look of precision that is normally associated with plastic/metal products,' he says.

Not surprisingly, the warmth and vibrancy of the material also strikes a chord with the modern consumer who craves an emotional experience and lasting connection. Documenting current consumer trends, the 2008 *David Report* identifies this 'need' in terms of scent, taste and feeling. 'We want to search for the unique, playful and exciting, find products and brands that are honest and tell a story.'²

This page: McBride Charles Ryan architecture+interior design, *The LetterBox House*, 2009. Photo: John Gollings



Left: Jewellery by Elke Kramer
Above: Mobile by Limedrop

Right: Pacific Environments Architects, Yellow Treehouse, 2009.

Fast enveloped by a design sector inclined to explore mass-producible synthetics, metals and plastics, wood is becoming a symbol of the bespoke and a unique design signature. It conjures the one-off, emotion-infused culture of craft, rather than mass production, something we see in the work of designer-practitioners such as Jon Goulder who, in recent years, has moved his practice towards 'collectable pieces and lasting designs'.

As a building material, timber is renowned for its versatility, strength and longevity. It is celebrated for the grace with which it ages, for the huge variety of species available and the many ways in which it can be treated and finished.

The Elisabeth Murdoch Hall at the new Melbourne Recital Centre pays homage to the material, accentuating wood's adaptability and richness through architectural application.

Designed by Ashton Raggatt McDougall (ARM), the recital hall emanates a rich, enveloping warmth that instantly softens its breathtaking scale. Lining the hall in timber, ARM uses the material's versatility to great effect, routing plywood panels to create the grain that spreads in rivulets around the walls.

With sustainability inhabiting much of our consciousness – and conscience – wood is both championed and

controversial. Wootton notes that consumers are increasingly aware of a product's origins, and reluctant to invest in ill-gotten goods. Increasingly we see designers salvaging and reusing ageing wood materials, sourcing it from managed plantations.

Finnish furniture producer Artek has taken a highly conceptual approach to sustainability with their 2nd Cycle program. Aiming to raise the stakes of conscious consumption, the company buys old Alvar Aalto wooden stools and puts them back on the market – in doing so they honour the longevity and originality of the iconic items, bringing new life to their ageing patina.





Left: Molo design studio, *softseating*, 2006, Kraft paper. Photo: Molo

Right: Ashton Raggatt McDougall, Acoustics: Arup Acoustics, Elisabeth Murdoch Hall at Melbourne Recital Centre, 2008, timber, plywood, seating upholstered in suede. Photo: Peter Ganane Photography

Below: Natalia Milosz-Piekarska, *Beastie*, 2008, wood, oxidised copper, enamel, paint. Photo: Natalia Milosz-Piekarska



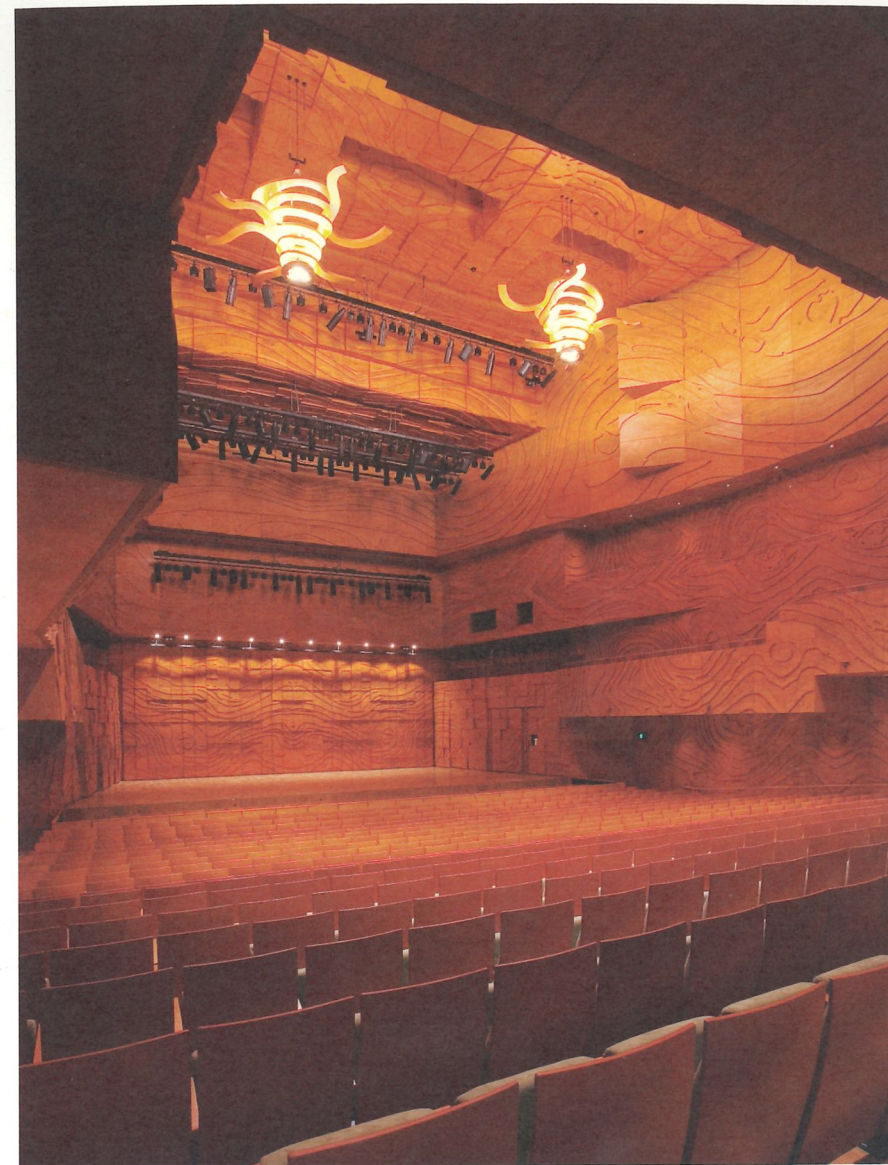
Easing the pressure of demand on timber and wood are materials such as plywood which, as New Zealand designer Kevin Webby says, has been a revelation of sorts, stretching the functionality, 'and to some extent the aesthetic' of wood. Wootton also notes a growing trend with plywood, used to create strong, durable forms while minimising the use of special species.

Not to be forgotten are wood by-products such as straw, bamboo and cardboard – and who can ignore the beauty and simplicity of Molo's cardboard-based soft seating, partitions and lighting? These fascinating products fold shut like a book,

before fanning out into sturdy, lantern-like structures.

Wood is indeed a versatile medium. With the right knowledge and skill, it opens a world of possibility. As a material, it is a visible record of our life and existence, connecting with us in a way other materials cannot. Webby sums it up well when he says, 'It records its use and environment, offering some possibility of knowing its history as well as providing a social commentary'. ●

Alice Blackwood is the Editor of Design Quarterly magazine.



Notes

1. All quotes by Wootton in this article are from Alan Saunders (host), 'Trends – contemporary wood design' series, in *By design*, 12 November 2008, ABC Radio National.
2. David Carlson (ed.), *David Report: 5 key design trends*, issue 10, published by David Report in Sweden, October 2008, pp. 17, 30.