



A New Chair To Use: Eco-Friendly Furniture

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Many items of furniture, as we all know, are traditionally made from timber, many of it from trees which are not always grown as part of a sustainable programme. This wasn't a major problem in the past, as furniture was built to last. A single item of furniture would be passed through many generations, extracting many years of use from a particular piece. But this doesn't happen anymore, with fast evolving fashion trends and changing lifestyles which call for constant change in one's living spaces.

So the life of a Furniture Designer today is challenging. Your unwritten contract with the world says that you are engaged in the business of improving people's domestic and working environments. The environmentalists, on the other hand, tell you that the present

process of manufacture may endanger the planet.

The choice is to either produce goods at the earth's expense or stop manufacturing altogether. Since neither of these options is viable, we need to find a balance between manufacturing and sustainability. Many designers today are experimenting with innovative ways of design and production that would cause minimal negative impact to the environment. Their work expresses a sense of responsibility that goes beyond simply making the best furniture possible.

Eco-friendly and sustainability concepts in furniture design are fast catching up around the world, but remain alien concepts to the furniture design industry in our country. Investment in environmentally conscious materials, commercially grown sources of



timber, processes and technologies, environmentally friendly chemicals, and thinking through the delivery methods are all new to Sri Lanka.

But a group of undergraduates from the University of Moratuwa's Faculty of Architecture is trying to change that. Students in the Bachelor of Design degree programme specialising in furniture design have ventured into an in-depth research on the innovative use of waste material in furniture design.

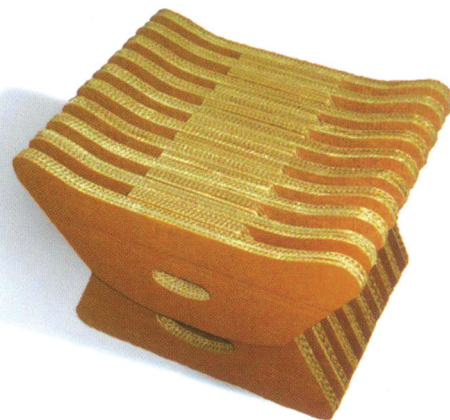
This experimental project has investigated ways of using reclaimed material, and the different cultural implications these varying strategies would evoke. The project called on the student designers to assist in effectively slowing down filling of land by re-using waste material – such as plastic mineral water bottles, newspapers and corrugated cardboard boxes. Many of the selected designs have innovatively used large quantities of these waste materials.

The designers have been quite successful in being sensitive to the environment without compromising design elegance and the aesthetic value of furniture. Their inspiration evolves from the unseen beauty of everyday objects.

The designs shown here are still at an experimental stage and the pieces are only prototypes. As design exercises, these do not aim to solve design issues but should be seen as 'ice breakers' which is expected to drive furniture designers to rethink their approach to furniture design and sustainable material use.

It is amazing how strong, durable, and beautiful cardboard can be when used correctly to exploit its qualities. It's also recyclable, environmentally-friendly, and lightweight - making it easy to use, move and transport. During the design process, the designers attempted to bring in the nature and characteristics of the cardboard as part of the character of the furniture itself. Exposed corrugation patterns and the original colour of cardboard were retained, while only the forms were manipulated to create the furniture.

Hundreds of sheets of newspaper were meticulously brought together, to create unique stools incorporating traditional handicraft techniques with cutting-edge, contemporary design. Durable and ideal for interior use, the real beauty is in the fact that the newspaper stools are of entirely recycled material.



While these are only a fraction of the possibilities, a combination of other materials such as steel, leather, iron springs, and timber, were also utilised as supplementary inputs.

These designs extend the aesthetic life of a mass produced object by giving it a second use. Even more, what is so unique is that these furniture pieces highlight our throw away culture, and the need to provide additional resources for recycling within our cities. This would keep rubbish out of landfills and reduce the need to spend precious energy, when creating furniture from virgin resources.

Recycling in design is not simply about environmentalism, or making crafts from old junk. Sustainability, economy and efficiency are some of the positive implications that go hand in hand with using waste material in design. Yet the social and cultural implications of re-using familiar, old materials in the context of art elicit deeper investigation in order for these experiments to penetrate to a wider audience within Sri Lanka.

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