

Unavoidable impact

Furniture manufacturers have a wide range of materials options available to them. While no upholstery fabric is free from environmental impact, leather comes out well in a comparison against synthetic and natural fibres.

The executive director of the Sustainable Furnishings Council (SFC), Susan Inglis, says that, while no material is entirely free of environmental or social baggage, leather's standing among furniture manufacturers and brands is generally good. "We don't want chrome salts spilling into water," she says, "but it's true that much of our leather today is being produced in a responsible way."

The SFC is a coalition between companies that supply materials to furniture brands and design firms, and international conservation organisations, two of which (the World Wildlife Fund and the Rainforest Alliance) helped set the body up in 2006. Its bronze, silver, gold and platinum hang-tags for furniture materials have earned the recognition of the US's Environmental Protection Agency as a valid label. Its members include specialist custom leather furniture manufacturers American Leather, Elite Leather and Omnia Leather. Its launch came about because furniture manufacturers decided the impact they were having on the environment needed first to be acknowledged and then to be reduced.

A wide umbrella

"There is a range of issues here," Susan Inglis says; "sustainability is rather a wide umbrella, but we all have an impact. Furniture materials suppliers manufacture globally. We use electricity generated by fossil fuels and we use fossil fuels again to transport our materials and finished goods. When we burn fossil fuels we make a contribution to global warming. Then there are questions over deforestation because we use a lot of wood in the furniture industry." The SFC is preparing to launch a 'wood scorecard' report, rating the 57 largest furniture retailers in North America on their wood sourcing policies.

She lists indoor air quality as a further environmental concern because a piece of furniture generally stays put in a particular room and if the manufacturer has used the wrong adhesive or the wrong finish on the upholstery, volatile organic compounds (VOCs) can affect air quality. "Not all VOCs are harmful," Ms Inglis continues, "but some of them are very harmful. The number of people in the US suffering from asthma has gone up 100% since 1975."

Labour concerns

But leather might not be the only material to benefit from plastic's current fall from favour. Cotton is popular as a textile in furniture and in interior design generally, although there are issues with global cotton production. The SFC executive director says the organisation has listed 19 cotton-producing countries around the world in which there are documented cases of slave labour, child labour or forced labour. It's worth remembering, she points out, that the history of North Carolina and other parts of the US south also includes using enslaved people for cotton production.

Linen, hemp and jute are, like cotton, natural fibres, but ones that grow well in relatively low-quality soil. "Hemp can grow in near drought conditions," she says. Retted fibres such as hemp and linen also have the advantage of requiring fewer chemical inputs to the soil and being relatively easy to weave. "Wood fibres, including bamboo and Tencel, are the most complex cohort we've looked at," Ms Inglis says. "Harvesting the plant and making the pulp can lead to a lot of pollution and there have certainly been cases in the past of viscose plants being closed down because of too much pollution. There are a lot of steps involved in making the fibres and these involve the use of carbon disulfide and caustic soda (although retting uses caustic soda too). Tencel is a little bit different; it's not just another rayon because the manufacturers have reduced some of the chemical inputs and pollution. They use no carbon disulfide and are dissolving their own industrial waste."

'A little better' is progress

"Not all fibres are created equal," Ms Inglis says. "We should use organic cotton if we can or cotton from growers affiliated to the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI) [a Geneva-based non-profit organisation that works to promote greater sustainability in cotton production around the world]. Anything that's a little better is progress." But it's not the end of the road for synthetic fibres, she points out, even from a sustainability point of view because it takes far less energy to take the materials back to the polymer stage than to create the polymers in the first place from oil. And if you can return them to the polymer stage, you can use the polymers again and again."

The reality is, though, that little is being done to collect and recycle a huge proportion of synthetic fibres going into furniture upholstery. Susan Inglis says furniture is currently consuming one-third of all the polyurethane foam that the world's synthetic materials manufacturers are able to churn out. "It's a petrochemical product," she says, lest anyone be in doubt. "Petrochemicals can be made in ways in which the pollutants are contained, but we've all heard of accidents, of oil spillages, and the damage they do to the marine environment." Meanwhile, on land, consumers in the US are throwing away 8.8 million tonnes of furniture every year and landfill sites are "crowded".

Interior design is a melting pot of materials, none of which can claim to be completely free from having an impact on the environment. However, leather can hold its head up high.

IMAGE: ALEXANDER SCHNEIDER/KOELNmesse

