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By Linda Zoffer, owner and lead designer of del ZIO Designs Interiors, LLC
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CONVERSATIONS ON SUSTAINABLE DESIGN

Jodi Sauerbier, Publisher of *New Homes and Ideas Magazine*, accompanied interior designer, Linda Zoffer of del ZIO Designs Interiors to High Point Furniture Market. The magazine had never attended the eleven million square foot international event and was intrigued by the fact that so many manufacturers and vendors have become aware of and further involved with sustainability in the world of furniture and furnishings.

The words “sustainable” and “green” are used extensively these days but what do they mean and how is the furniture industry involved in it? “Green” is used mainly as a marketing word: green design, green products, etc. “Sustainable” refers to maintaining viability, and in this case, ecologically-friendly design, manufacture and lifestyle. To encourage responsiveness in this area of “sustainability”, the Sustainable Furnishings Council (SFC), was founded in October 2006 by Jerry Cooklin to raise awareness within the home furnishings industry to help preserve the world’s forests. He is the founder of PaTs, a Peruvian non-profit organization in the Peruvian amazon. He has been working since 2000 with the Yanesha indigenous community members to become artisans and business people to create a sustainable living for their families while preserving their forests. The rain forest has been the primary source of wood for his furniture company, South Cone,



The EJ Victor Company is committed to educating others on the importance of "green".

and he realized that he had an obligation to protect it. He is a native Peruvian, a dedicated naturalist and has written several books.

Getting back to that October of 2006; Jerry started to talk with manufacturers and organize small meetings during the days at the High Point Furniture Market. He had the ear of several companies who were willing to listen to him and they got on board to develop and become Founding Members of the SFC. Linda Zoffer’s design firm is a member of the SFC and she knew it would be fascinating to meet and speak with a few of these companies during their Market excursion. Each has a different “take” on sustainable furnishings.

One of our first stops was at the showroom of EJ Victor, where we met with Edward

Phifer. The EJ Victor Company continues the tradition of hand-crafted quality furniture. They have been in the furniture industry for decades and had never even thought of or considered the concept of “sustainability”. He said that he and many others in the industry just thought this “green” and “sustainable” idea was the province of “hippies”. A mahogany buying trip became the eye-opener for this company. They were flown into the rainforest jungle and learned that the furniture industry accounts for 7% of the rainforest disappearing. They recognized the need for the livelihood of the products from the jungle and began to popularize more diverse wood species. They continue to use mahogany but are sure to source it from certified plantations. They are involved with the National Hardwood Lumber Association Forestry Reforestation program where 95% of the timber cut by sawmills for furniture is from small landowners who then replant more trees than they are harvesting. Their company also sells Ralph Lauren Home which sources certified woods from Southeast Asia and the Philippines. Edward also told us that a focus on textiles that have a lower environmental impact, such as organic cotton and other eco-friendly textiles and non-toxic



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finishes, creates a better indoor environment; while considering disassembly and recyclability into buying decisions have helped to decrease an impact on landfills. Edward laughed so good-naturedly when he said that they are now committed to educating others on the importance of “green”.

Another stop brought us to French Heritage and our conversation with Henessy (a former American fashion model), who along with her husband, Jacques Wayser owns the company. Jacques was born and raised in France and went on weekly shopping trips to Parisian and sometimes English antique markets. His family ran an antique business begun by his grandfather more than 100 years ago. After meeting and marrying, Henessy and Jacques lived in Paris for 20 years. She told us that the family is always the core of the home. The prestige of the home is never to be passed up and

the health of the home is part of the well-being of it and the family. The two of them wanted to create a company that specialized in creating heirlooms for the future and they were always committed to producing “eco-friendly” furniture. “When you cut down a tree, you plant another one” she continued and went on to explain that this has been done in France for a couple of hundred years. Over time French Heritage markedly decreased their use and acceptance of known toxic chemicals for treatments, binders and finishes and takes responsibility for sharing their commitment to sustainability up and down the entire supply chain. While the company is best known for its French furniture reproductions and its beautiful “maisonette” that is its showroom (which everyone wants to live in), one of the French Heritage lines is the Paris



Loft Collection. It is a transitionally contemporary collection that uses certified, solid reclaimed teak lumber taken from old dwellings on the Indonesian Island of Java. They find that buyers are asking more for sustainable furniture because they are becoming more knowledgeable about it.

On we went to the Phillips Collection, where we met with Mark Phillips and his son, Jason. They happily reported that their products have been “accused of being the ‘jewel of the room’”. Their tag line is “Every Piece is a Conversation”. While they are quick to admit that not every one of their designs is made from 100% eco-friendly products, they are best known for their decorative accents and useful items made with the creative use of recycled materials. They began as a company of discovery; going around the world in order to use the “leftovers” from industries and found objects. “The beautiful Mrs. Phillips,” as she is described by her husband, Mark, is a Romanian-born Architect and does much of the company design, as does Jason who has a degree in Industrial Design. They have fostered the establishment and growth of small companies in SE Asia, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, etc. where their search for the unique has spawned industry. They have a written Social Responsibility Code and foster paying a living wage rather



The Phillips Collection is best known for their decorative accents and useful items made with the creative use of recycled materials, such as these made from recycled oil cans and Coke® bottles.

than minimum wage around the globe. We looked at tables made from recycled Coke bottles, tables and chairs made from petrified acacia wood and chairs constructed from old seatbelts. If anyone has seen the movie, "The Hunger Games" you may have seen the seatbelt chairs that were used in several scenes. Another example of their use of "cast offs" from other industries is their use of pitted travertine marble which is called "cheese stone" and is ordinarily considered a discard in marble production. Outside of their warehouse and office building they now have stations for electric/hybrid vehicles to plug in free of charge.

Tritter Who? Tritter Feefer is the furniture manufacturing company lovingly named after the owners' grandchildren who go by these nicknames. Their non-toxic finishes are unique and do not compromise indoor air quality. Except for their chair line, each item in the collection is designed and handcrafted in their headquarters in LaGrange, Georgia, using sustainable resources and a local, dedicated workforce. We had a fun visit with ML Littlefield, the owner who along with her husband and partner, Bill, is the driving force behind this company that stands on the principle that "green is good". They founded the company six years ago and all of their furniture is customizable, down to the hardware made of



The Tritter Feefer Company stands on the principle that "green is good".

iron which is all hand forged. They stay on top of their operations and investigate and mitigate any negative environmental impacts from their processes, procedures and product. Originally, ML and Bill had been in the antiques business and now as part of their line, they offer old (really old-500 years old), pieces from their Italian Fragment collection that had been in their store 20 years ago, as well as paintings and some beautifully re-purposed items from that

original inventory. While talking we agreed that antiques are a part of the "cradle to cradle" concept in sustainability.

The Harden Furniture showroom was our last stop. Gregg Harden told us that this is a 170 year old family business. Much of the inspiration for their style is generally the 18th and 19th centuries but their product is completely updated in its look. Their lines can complement just about every current taste and all of it is made in the USA. Upholstery is half of their



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Harden Furniture's refurbishment program keeps a couple of thousand trailer loads a year out of the landfills.



business and to stay true to their commitment to sustainability even the springs in the pieces are recycled. They also have sponsored in-store, community and regional educational events on the importance of sustainability. What really makes their company stand out is their refurbishment program.

Harden is a big company.

They take in both Harden and non-Harden products from commercial customers and they are completely re-upholstered and/or refinished. Libraries, Universities such as Georgetown and Harvard, plus several schools in New York used to get rid of their furniture every couple of years because of wear and tear. Now rather than send the stuff off to the landfill they restore it to new. Gregg told us that this keeps a couple of thousand trailer loads a year out of the landfills! A couple of thousand... "Consumers think highly of a company that is socially responsible," Gregg said and he believes that it is common sense anyway to be protective of the environment.

It was a very full day. We learned a lot about these companies and their "green" philosophy. All of them have a checklist of more than 20 Sustainable Standard Best Practices that they review, update and improve upon each year. They are concerned also with producing quality items that can be handed down through generations and even utilized for the future in different ways. While they are not the only companies in the furnishings industry dedicated to caring for the environment, they are a great cross-section of the larger industry. What started out as a small group now has 400 members. When we consider what we are putting into our homes; what we sleep on, touch and while breathing the indoor air each day, it gives us pause to think about the effects on our families, ourselves and our home.

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