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OUR APPETITE FOR WOOD IS INSATIABLE. WHAT IF IT ISN'T INFINITELY AVAILABLE?



A renewable material and natural carbon sink, wood is increasingly used to decrease the environmental impact of the construction and interior industry. But how viable is it to help meet sustainability goals as it becomes scarcer and more expensive?

Wood is widely regarded as a game-changer in the drive to become carbon-neutral. It is in high demand in the global interiors and construction industries and prices are soaring – even more since the EU recently banned Russian timber exports. At the same time, the timber industry capitalises on a natural resource. There is no reason to assume that just because wood is renewable, it is sustainable per se.



e15 sources most of its wood from the Spessart, just 70 km from the Frankfurt-based design firm.

The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), designed to monitor the timber industry and ensure sustainable practices, has been criticized for incorporating ever larger areas worldwide without effectively protecting from illegal logging. This has not gone unnoticed in the design world. Studio Formafantasma has uncovered the extractive forces at work in big timber with its critical investigation *Cambio*. The studio further critically examined these forces at the interdisciplinary symposium *Prada Frames On Forest*, curated in parallel to Milan's *Salone del Mobile*.

As wood is praised as a renewable alternative to fossil-based materials, forests come ever more into focus as carbon sinks and the defense they provide against climate change. This two-fold dynamic presents a dilemma that also affects the interior industry: where is all the wood supposed to come from, and how to ensure sustainable practices when producing and using it? We spoke with three design and interior labels whose product lines and brand identities are deeply rooted in wood to understand from where and how they source their wood and which hindrances and opportunities the material holds for the future.

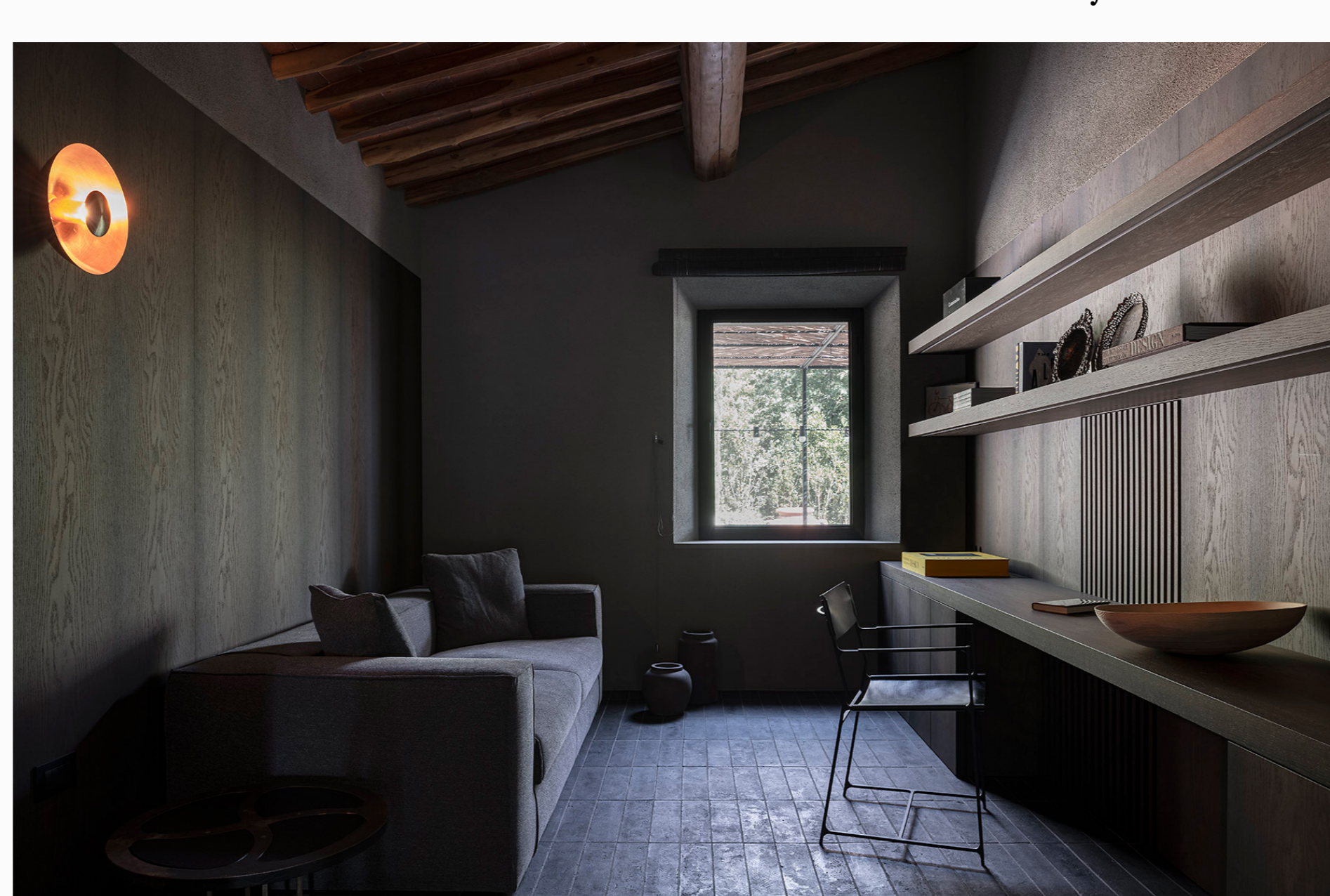


The Arx table from Bullenberg is made of wood grown in architect Albrecht von Alvensleben's family-owned forest in Erxleben, Germany.

Changing climate, decreasing yields

The notion of sustainability originally comes from forest management with its principle of extracting only as much as can re-grow. No one knows this better than Albrecht von Alvensleben. For his Berlin-based label Bullenberg, founded in 2014, the architect works exclusively with wood from his family-owned forest in Erxleben in Saxony-Anhalt. While the bulk of the forest's yield – an average 7,000 solid cubic metres of soft- and hardwood per year – is being sold to local sawmills, he keeps oak trees for the bespoke furniture he produces for clients in Europe and beyond.

In the past three years, though, the yield has diminished severely as the 900-hectare forest suffered from climate change-induced drought, storms and bug plagues. He planted over 250,000 young trees to compensate for the losses: 'The next three to four generations will watch as they grow', he says. 'It will take 80 to 120 years, if not more, until they can be harvested.' His is a rather long-term vision compared to the fast-paced world of furniture fairs and interior commissions. And while he produces his own wood for Bullenberg, he still notices the pressure on the wood market: 'In the case of special-sized furniture we have to buy our wood back from the sawmills at the same conditions as everyone else.'



Holzrausch Casa Morelli.

The need for innovative wood alternatives

Master carpenters Tobias Petri and Sven Petzold, who cofounded the Munich-based label Holzrausch in 1998, combine their own workshop with a design studio. The duo confirms: 'It has become more expensive, complex and time-consuming to obtain the required woods and veneers.' They source wood, with which they realise interiors for private and commercial clients in Germany and beyond, from an established network of wood dealers.

While they preferably work with domestic woods such as oak or ash, they are in tune with the introduction of innovative alternatives such as Karuun, a new material developed by a start-up in Kisllegg, Baden-Württemberg, from the fast-growing rattan to plant which does not grow in monocultures but requires an intact rain forest to prosper. As such, it needs to be harvested from local farmers by hand. According to Petri, 'Karuun points towards a different understanding of the forest as a resource,' he said. 'By buying and processing rattan in Indonesia, the team behind Karuun provides a source of income to local farmers and an incentive to protect the rain forest, helping to sustain the livelihoods of the local community and the ecosystem alike.' At Holzrausch they have successfully realized their first interior with Karuun veneer and have further plans for the material.



e15's Bigfoot table has been designed to showcase the knots and imperfections of wood, using less desirable off-cuts.

Used wood is sparse

The Frankfurt-based design firm e15 has been known for its commitment to wood for well over 25 years. In fact, they can be credited with repositioning solid oak to being the contemporary interior material we know today. Philipp Mainzer, architect and founder, remembers the firm's first furniture fair in Cologne: 'People mocked the sight of our tables that we had made of used wood and that deliberately displayed knotholes and cracks.' The mockery soon turned into appreciation though: three of the original four table designs are still part of the brand's collection, among which Bigfoot, whose characteristic legs are made of coarse heartwood. At the beginning of serial production Mainzer recalls, 'We actually had to convince the sawmill to keep the heartwood for us, which back then was considered too scarce to keep.' This idea is unheard of today as 'wood no longer lies around'.

Today e15, which also offers lighting, textiles and accessories, obtains the greater part of its solid wood, mostly European oak and walnut, directly from a sawmill in the Spessart, only 70 km from Frankfurt. Despite wood becoming scarcer in the Spessart too, returning to their origins and using used wood is no option: 'Old wood is even more difficult to source than new wood and brings the added difficulty of already having specific measures.'

In the face of the latest price rises and supply bottlenecks, it becomes all the more evident that the widely assumed sustainability of wood is much more complex than frequently thought. The almost saviour-like quality that has been assigned to it is far too general as it certainly comes with its own set of issues. Nonetheless, the theme is worthwhile watching as the interior industry continues to grapple with becoming more sustainable.

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