



Photo Courtesy of Criswell Davis

THE BOY WHO CRIES WOOD!

TRUMPETING THE VIRTUES OF QUARTER SAWN HARDWOODS

By Criswell Davis

“With his materials the architect can do whatever the masters have done with pigments or with sounds—in shadings as subtle, with combinations as expressive—perhaps outlasting himself. Wood is universally beautiful to man. It is the most humanly intimate of all materials.” — Frank Lloyd Wright

Frank Lloyd Wright was truly an architect inspired by nature and its influence is apparent in his collection of work. As early as 1908, Wright used the term “organic” to describe the marriage between site and structure, believing that every building should grow naturally from its environment. Post World War II optimism resulted in the consumerism of the 1950s, where organic architecture gave way to suburban boxes. When this shift in housing design and construction occurred, wood as a construction material began to take a backseat to other products such as carpeting and linoleum. A more modern, stark form of architecture emerged which drew consumers away from the natural beauty of hardwoods.

In the new millennium, “Green” architecture has taken hold and threatens what had become a trend during the 90s and early 2000s, of the return to hardwood for flooring, furniture, cabinetry and millwork. The “green” trend began in 1998, when the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) established the LEED green building certification program, (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) with the objective to promote healthy and sustainable building practices. LEED points are awarded on a 100-point scale, and credits are weighted to reflect their potential environmental impacts. For the last 12 years, the LEED point system structure has promoted the use of steel, concrete and bamboo; while discouraging the use of U.S. hardwoods, unless FSC certified. While the dissuasion of hardwoods may have been unintentional, the rating system does in fact award more points to bamboo flooring than certified hardwood flooring because bamboo is classified as a rapidly renewing material.

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In 2008, after 20 years in the hardwood industry (12 of those years being with Frank Miller Lumber Company in Union City, Indiana), it was apparent that the time had come to have a fresh discussion about the challenges and opportunities facing not only Frank Miller Lumber but the hardwood industry as a whole. During a conversation with Tim Leyden, VP of Sales, the discussion kept circling back to architects and designers. This group would be our target audience; these people would shape what our world looks like in the future, just as they always have. The question now, was how to reach this identified group.

As a niche hardwood producer, Frank Miller Lumber has seen quotes that reflect unrealistic expectations for the resource and has tried, often in vain, to push the realities of hardwoods back up the design pipeline to the architects and designers without dissuading them from specifying hardwoods. The answer to the question of how to reach the target audience was answered. If we wanted to encourage the use of quartersawn hardwoods and hardwoods in general for residential and commercial design, we were going to have to tell our story to architects. In order to tell our story face-to-face, I would have to become approved by the American Institute of Architects (AIA) to offer continuing education credit to architects for an hour-long presentation extolling the many virtues of quartersawn hardwoods and

U.S. hardwoods generally; and Frank Miller Lumber would need to become FSC Certified, since LEED certification is an increasingly important consideration for architects in contemporary design. By January 2009, Frank Miller Lumber was an FSC certified chain of custody supplier and I, as Architectural Marketing Manager, was ready to set off across the country to metaphorically plant the seeds of hardwood utilization in contemporary designs for the future.

While the focus of the AIA presentation is naturally on quartersawn hardwoods, the primary product line of Frank Miller Lumber, broad brush strokes are used to encourage the use of all species of sustainable American hardwoods. For instance, in order to allay any fears that architects and designers may have about our hardwood resource dwindling, the presentation outlines the empirically verifiable sustainable nature of American hardwoods. As a large percentage of this audience believes that hardwood is clear-cut, time is devoted to discussing selective harvesting and “Best Management Practices.”

Explanation of forest ownership patterns are also outlined, as more than 73% of the hardwood resource in the U.S. is controlled by over 4 million private landowners, most of whom will only harvest from their woods once or twice in their lifetimes. Sharing the factual data that there is nearly twice as much hardwood in the U.S. now as compared to 50 years ago and that actual forestland has increased by more than 18% has proven to be one of the most compelling take-away facts for the audience. For me, it is important that the audience understand two major issues. First, the difficulties facing small lot owners in becoming FSC certified, while mentioning the successful program undertaken by Jack Seifert, State Forester for the Indiana Division of Forestry to bring 600,000 acres of privately held woods under the FSC Certification umbrella. Second, that the entire U.S. hardwood industry is sustainable and carefully managed, whether certified by FSC or not.

It is likely that many in the audience have incorrect preconceived notions of the nature of the hardwood industry. Dispelling these notions is a cornerstone of the presentation. Discussions on technological advances, the carbon negative nature of hardwoods and use of by-products for mulch, paper and fuel for kilns; leaves the audience with a much clearer idea of our industry’s responsible stewardship of this most beautiful of natural resources.

Overall, the presentation is highly visual, with sample boards, a quarter White Oak log (which arouses the curiosity of TSA agents in many airports), an animation of the quartersawing process and many slides of quartersawn U.S. hardwoods in

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