Out of the Woods

Philip Koomen: a sustainable approach to furniture design
A sense of responsibility can only emerge from the acceptance of the oneness of humanity and will only be sustained by a unifying vision of a peaceful, prosperous world society. Without such a global ethic, people will be unable to become active, constructive participants in the worldwide process of sustainable development.

— Bahá’í International Community

Philip Koomen: a sustainable approach to furniture design

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River & Rowing Museum, Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire
17 September 2004 to 7 January 2005
Philip Koomen Furniture Workshop, Checkendon, Oxfordshire
14 to 22 May 2005 (Oxfordshire Artweeks)
Art in Action, Waterperry House, near Wheatley, Oxfordshire
14 to 17 July 2005

Out of the Woods

Pondlife bench, Bourton House, Bourton-on-the-Hill, Gloucestershire (2004)
Creativity and spirituality are intimately related. The concept of the Middle Way is found in numerous spiritual traditions. The Buddhist concept of the *Majjhima Patipada* encourages people in their quest for enlightenment, while suggesting that they avoid extremes. Sufi Islam has the ritual of remembrance, *dhikr*, which teaches that we are capable of embodying the attributes of the Divine and of reflecting these virtues in our earthly lives. The Bahá’í Faith rests on the foundations of all the spiritual teachings which have preceded it. Bahá’u’lláh’s stupendous, complex, mysterious, inspired *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* contains guidelines for a future world civilisation that will bring creativity and ideals into realisation.

Creativity alludes to work of any kind raised to its highest level. When the intrinsic motivation of work is spiritual, creativity is the effortless, impeccable result. Creativity becomes, in the great Sufi master Rumi’s words, ‘the arrow flying’. Our work, be it the selling of tomatoes, the building of bridges, the art of calligraphy or the making of furniture, is a way of expressing our essence and discovering our true identity. The arrow flying, the liberation of the spirit from the fears that bind, is the objective of all spiritual teachings. True creativity is really the art of learning to be free.

**SABIRA FOSTER**

*Architect and designer*  
9 August 2004
Introduction

Out of the Woods:  
_Pondlife_ and other discursive objects

"Home in fact is not a starting point but a point of arrival . . . which (together with its furnishings) syllabize man’s most intimate presence on earth."

Alessandro Mendini, TENDER ARCHITECTURE, IN ALCAN'TARA, ELECTA (1983)

Philip Koomen’s furniture workshop lies neatly folded into the verdant landscape of the Chilterns. It is a definitive English setting. Breathing in the rich fragrance of its freshly cut and drying timbers it is hard to resist a sense of the familiar, a sense of arrival, of coming home. And looking over Koomen’s furniture with its elegant asymmetry, irresistible edginess and wide range of reference (all of which come together stunningly in his _Pondlife_ bench), it is equally hard to resist the thought that it comprises a group of contemplative objects whose real purpose is to serve as: . . . props for meditation on human nature and the nature of things.

The phrase was first employed by Pierre Restany to describe the work of Andrea Branzi, who felt furniture should possess: . . . less the nature of tools and more that of gifts . . . more of a literary value than a functional one.

Indeed there is much that can be read into the furniture that sits at the heart of Koomen’s most recent project _Out of the Woods_. The exhibition marks a defining moment for Koomen and reveals his deep concern with the nature of the post-modern and its relations with material culture, moving beyond Branzi’s interest in the neo-primitive to open up a much broader vision. _Out of the Woods_, for example, is securely framed within the political category that has come increasingly to be occupied by the contemporary crafts and oppositional practices shaped by the issue of right to creative responsibility in the productive process. However, it is not just the issue of creative responsibility which concerns him, for Koomen sees the role of the designer-maker as crucial in addressing the problems of consumption by helping develop a greener and more sustainable global economy. It is this belief which draws together the many strands of Koomen’s work, whose practice shares themes developed by furniture designer-makers as varied as [say] those of Tim Stead and Gareth Neal to David Chipwell, while drawing effortlessly upon influences as diverse as the historic (the arts & crafts) and the exotic (Japan) to the here and now (furniture in the green).

The furniture that makes up the _Trio_ series, for example, is typical of Koomen’s work. With its subtle complexities of line, it has an understated japoisite quality that instinctively draws both hand and eye. It is also entirely in keeping that the design should have come out of a collaborative venture with the American Hardwood Export Council looking to rebrand soft maple, a much neglected species in the USA.

It is, of course, Koomen’s concern for native hardwoods that figures strongly in _Out of the Woods_ but, in its investment in the local cycle, Koomen’s work is also anchored in the economy of what might be called the _familial_ and is informed by a profound sense of community. Perhaps above all, it is in Koomen’s notion of _signature_ where a unique sense of identity is to be found which, even within the compass of the _semi-bespoke_ (an eminently useful term), remains particularly poignant. His reading of the broader political issues of deforestation on the one hand, set against his poetic accommodation of the possibilities brought about by the incidental onset of infestation and disease on the other, confers upon Koomen’s furniture a luminous historical dimension. Just like the celebrated objects of the recent _onetree_ project, what we have in _Out of the Woods_ is more than just another series of objects (or even in Branzi’s case an _other series of objects_). What we have here is a group of objects which together constitute a series of _lieux de memoire_ or sites of memory.

And perhaps it is here where the true significance of _Out of the Woods_ lies, in
its ability to ground in the Signed & Sealed series a poetic and yet precise sense of
time and place out of a politically (and spiritually) informed practice. There is in
the Out of the Woods exhibition a remarkable certainty about Koomen’s
negotiation of the political and the social, history and identity. All of this testifies
(aptly) to a distillation of over twenty five years of reflective practice, not only
in consultation with private clients but also in conjunction with a range of local,
national and international organisations.

Interestingly enough, it is probably the next twenty five years and the desire to
secure a legacy for his workshop and its fellow designer-makers which most
concerns Koomen now. There is no vanity here, only a testament of faith defined
within the broadest notion of citizenship.

This perhaps returns us to the subject of home and an observation that Branzi
may have made:

> Today’s houses are organised into routes that revolve around an empty space,
> marked out by couches, within which a continuously interrupted conversation is
> supposed to occur . . . the house takes on its meaning only when it receives
guests, who are seated around this empty space.

The concept is neatly framed and the empty space to which he refers is, of course,
a metaphorical one. Out of the Woods and its remarkable furniture offer us a
series of memorable discursive objects to occupy that space.

NICK REG WINSFIELD
Faculty of Design, Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College

1 See A. Branzi, Domestic Animals: The Neoprimitive Style, Thames & Hudson (1987). It should be noted
that the exhibition Domestic Animals (Milan 1986) was co-authored by Nicoletta Branzi.
2 See A. King, The Lost Continent of Craft, in Obscure Objects of Desire: Reviewing the Crafts in the 20th
Century, Craft Council (1997).
3 See Olson & Tsai, (nee) Merrill (2003).
4 These include, among others, AHEC, Timbmet, TWIG and the Chiltern Woodlands Project.
5 This notion of citizenship is developed out of Koomen’s Baha’i Faith.
6 Branzi op cit

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**Out of the Woods**

**DESIGNING SUSTAINABILITY**

The Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro, in 1992, alerted the world to the
problems of sustaining global economic growth. The conference focused on global
issues and problems, including deforestation, biodiversity, and pollution. As a
result, a 500 page document, endorsed by 179 heads of state, recognized the
interdependence of social, economic and environmental issues. It also set out a
plan for Sustainable Development for the 21st Century (Agenda 21).

Recognizing that efforts towards sustainable development must come from
governmental initiatives, Agenda 21 promotes local planning and collaborative action.
However, despite the initial enthusiasm, little progress has been made since the
groundbreaking agreements at Rio towards realizing these goals.

Many scientists predict economic and environmental collapse if current
patterns of consumption and pollution continue. The current disconnected
practices of timber growers, processors, researchers, designers and manufacturers
are a cause for concern.

Furniture designer-makers who work in wood can make a valuable
contribution to developing alternative approaches to sustainable development.
Unlike many manufactured goods, craftsman-made products are designed to be
useful and appreciated for generations. Crafted objects are also more readily
sourced from sustainable local materials, creating a direct link to our natural
resources.

Since the Earth Summit, Philip Koomen has tried to be an active participant in
sustainable development practices by engaging in collaborative work on
environmental issues with organizations such as the American Hardwood Export
Council and Timbmet. Philip Koomen Furniture has developed a range of
strategies and designs to promote sustainability and the local cycle.
Out of the Woods

Craftsmanship and Semi-Bespoke Designs

Craftsmen made furniture usually comes into being through a dialogue between client and designer-maker. In today’s consumer age dominated by branded products, this collaborative commissioning process offers a rare opportunity for clients to be directly involved in defining their needs and aspirations. The act of commissioning furniture represents a commitment to the present and an investment for the future.

Unlike industrial production, where designs are developed and refined through a series of prototypes before production, bespoke furniture makers must resolve design problems on the first attempt. The design time and the hours invested in making these unique pieces of craftsmanship are reflected in the total cost of a piece.

To make designer-maker furniture more accessible and affordable without compromising craftsmanship, the Philip Koomen workshop has developed the alternative concept of semi-bespoke furniture. The clients’ participation is intrinsic to this process but, unlike one-off designs, the outcomes are more certain. To minimize the design costs, clients select from a range of pieces that have already undergone development from concept to prototype. These designs are then adapted to meet the clients’ needs through continued collaboration with the designer-maker. Each piece of furniture is a unique variation on a theme based on the signature of wood, customized dimensions and decorative techniques.

When the furniture is made from locally sourced timber, the act of commissioning furniture initiates and promotes a sustainable local cycle. This way craftsman made furniture becomes a viable alternative to retail buying in the 21st century.

“In our world and in our time we are deeply in need of the values that come under the heading of craftsmanship.”

Charles Eames

Right
Plank chairs in Oxfordshire yew (2003)

Centre, top to bottom
Curved plank table in Oxfordshire Burcot ash (1998)
HG dining table in North American maple (1988)
Pondlife table in cedar of Lebanon and glass (2003)

Far right, top to bottom
Living room furniture in olive ash from Burcot, Oxfordshire (1997)
Forest resources and forest lands should be sustainably managed to meet the social, economic, ecological, cultural and spiritual human needs of the present and future generations.

*Earth Summit 1992*

**Native Woodland and the Local Cycle**

Forestry coverage in England is only 8.5%; in Germany, France and the USA, by contrast, this figure is at least 25%. In the UK we currently import over 95% of our hardwood timber needs, which is partially due to the UK National Forestry policy, which concentrates on extending recreational and landscape use rather than timber production.

Oxfordshire’s woodlands are in a state of ecological and economic crisis. Almost two thirds of UK woodlands are privately owned and most timber resources are poorly used. Oxfordshire’s small woodlands have the capacity to produce timber worth up to £1 million each year, but current production is almost negligible.

Are there any solutions? In an effort to find alternative and sustainable ways of sourcing, processing and utilizing wood, the Philip Koomen workshop makes creative use of local timber resources that are not usually considered commercially viable in the timber trade. Koomen has developed a ‘local cycle’ which promotes greater collaboration and support among woodland owners and local forestry-related businesses. The timber is sourced from estates and woodlands within thirty miles of the workshop in South Oxfordshire. Local sawmills convert the timber into pieces, which are dried on site at the workshop ready for use. By reducing the number of stages in the supply chain, woodland owners are able to negotiate a better price for their timber.

*Opposite, anticlockwise from top left*

A felled oak tree diagnosed with ‘beef steak’ fungus which will produce ‘brown’ and ‘tiger’ figured planks.

Converted brown oak planks put in stick for air drying.

Two consecutive planks selected for a desk top.

Finished desk and chest made from Thame ‘brown’ oak (2003)

*Out of the Woods*
Locally grown trees, which have not been grown specifically for timber production, come in a huge variety of shapes and species. These timbers have many unique characteristics, including knots, cracks, unusual grain patterns, or uneven colouring caused by fungi or age. Because conventional manufacturers need wood that has consistent qualities to maximize efficiency, the variety found in local timber complicates production. For this reason, local timbers are typically used for firewood and low value products.

Yet, unusually shaped trees and planks can inspire unique design forms. The varied characteristics of locally grown timber can be used to create furniture with a distinctive regional identity. Through careful timber selection and design, each piece of furniture may acquire a ‘unique signature’ represented by grain patterns and other distinctive markings which can transform each piece into a celebration of nature and the local landscape. Furniture made with wood of local provenance tells a story about where the wood comes from. Its history connects the woodland, the furniture maker, and the client.

The Pondlife bench is one example of this radical rethink of the purpose of furniture and the local cycle. Its unusual form has evolved through the exploration of sweet chestnut thinnings and the relationship between sculpture and design.
and furniture, function and fantasy. As sculpture, *Pondlife* invites one to enjoy the tactile qualities of the sinewy reeds. However, unlike most sculptures, it can be utilised for seating, as a space for respite, contemplation and personal reflection, either in the garden or the home.

The Oxfordshire Woodland Project identified sweet chestnut thinnings from Bagley Wood near Boars Hill, as an under-utilized, durable and locally grown hardwood. The misshapen thinnings – often regarded as a waste product and usually removed to promote the growth of stronger, straighter trees – are particularly suitable for *Pondlife*’s curvaceous carved reeds. The thinnings are cut into halves at the Bagley Wood sawmill and delivered directly to the workshop where they are stored until band sawn and shaped to create the finished *Pondlife* reeds.

The *Trio* range was originally designed for the American Hardwood Export Council (AHEC) to celebrate the latent possibilities of soft maple, an abundant but under-utilized native species in North American forests. Like the *Pondlife* bench, *Trio* is a creative exploration in form, where the boundaries between furniture and sculpture merge and the signature characteristics of individual pieces of wood are incorporated in the design. These two designs have been incorporated into the semi-bespoke range, utilising locally sourced timber.
CELEBRATING BEECH

Although the Chilterns are celebrated for their beech woodlands, beech is not widely used in the UK. Many in the timber and furniture industry perceive beech as a poor quality, ‘boring’ and unstable wood and the market for Chiltern beech has declined steadily in recent years. However, distinctive beech patterns are frequently used in veneer form in countries where the timber is not common. Similarly, pale coloured beech is widely used in Germany, where its susceptibility to movement is overcome through good design. This points to interesting cultural differences that offer the designer-maker a raft of suggestions for creative use.

Concerned about increased reliance on imported timbers, Philip Koomen Furniture and agro-forester Adam Dawson have sought ways to develop appreciation of Chiltern’s beech timber. They have explored current research to enhance beech’s aesthetic value through interventions in the felling and drying process and by creating semi-bespoke furniture designs that celebrate discolouration and disfigurements.

The preservation of the colour of beech after felling is critical to maximising its market value. Because beech wood is prone to colour changes during seasoning, it requires careful management. If kept in the round for long periods, logs will degrade through checking or fungal infection. While logs can be preserved for up to two years if stored in ponds or under sprinklers, this method is very costly. The risk of discolouration also continues after the timber has been converted due to the reactions within the plant cells. Poor storage will, furthermore, induce surface mould, fungi and bacteria. Discolouration cannot be avoided through air-drying alone, as it is too slow at reducing the moisture content below the critical 25%, above which discolouration usually occurs. Forced air-drying techniques preserve colour but can lead to surface checking and wood movement.

Researchers have developed a number of cost-effective methods to improve the range of colour of beech wood. For example, a reddish colour can be achieved by steaming the boards at high temperatures. White beech is attained by leaving the leaves on the tree at the felling stage and artificially slowing the drying process by kilning at temperatures below thirty degrees centigrade.

The possibilities of developing spalted beech timber have also been explored. Spalting is a form of decay caused by fungi. Highly valued by furniture makers, spalted beech is characterized by decorative, dramatic mosaic-like markings that are divided by dark lines. Spalted beech is rare but it is possible to recreate this effect in healthy wood by storing unconverted logs near timbers infected with the fruiting bodies that cause spalting. The result, however, can not be guaranteed.

Whilst being the most plentiful source of locally grown hardwood, beech has been the biggest challenge in this project. The limitations of the processing and the design experiments indicate a more radical rethink of this sadly neglected resource continues to be needed.

ABOVE: A spalted beech log selected for planking

BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT
‘Plank’ chair with scorched finish (2002)
Bench in spalted beech (2002)

“The fool sees not the same tree that the wise man sees.”
WILLIAM BLAKE

OUT OF THE WOODS
The Out of the Woods project emerged from over twenty-five years of developing a workshop practice. It is an attempt to expand the definition of craft-based furniture design beyond the commercial constraints of the market place and the anachronistic public view of craftsmanship.

The creation of an infrastructure to facilitate the sourcing, conversion, drying and selection of locally grown hardwoods has fundamentally altered the working practices of the Philip Koomen workshop. The project has increased our understanding of the difficulties and challenges that forestry professionals and the timber trade are faced with, and has created a growing network of collaborators among professionals who derive their livelihoods from local woodlands and the world’s forests.

The Out of the Woods project has produced the Signed & Sealed range of furniture designs, which explore the diversity and characteristics of local timbers. The Signed & Sealed furniture range, based on the consultative semi-bespoke process, aims to find an imaginative compromise between design-led production, and...
the traditional approach of the commercial timber industry, and the practical constraints of using locally sourced non-commercial timber. This tension provides a fertile ground for creativity and a focal point for future research and developments at Philip Koomen Furniture.

The Out of the Woods project has involved some risk and, from time to time, some failures. Yet it has also generated much thought, discussion, and far greater success than originally anticipated. The project offers a promising and viable alternative to the way most UK craft-based furniture workshops currently buy their materials. By making greater use of native timbers, craftsmen and designers can help to strengthen local economies, and promote sustainable woodland management.

Philip Koomen

“
The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens.”

Baha’u’llah
Philip Koomen

Philip Koomen has worked with wood as a designer-maker in the Henley-on-Thames area since 1975. The Bahá’í Faith is a significant influence on Koomen’s work. In his design and craftsmanship he works towards global responsibility through creativity.

Over the years, a number of assistants and post-graduate trainees have worked with Koomen before setting up their own workshops. His current team of designers and craftsmen, who all contribute to the values and aims of the workshop, includes Steve Salt who joined the business in 1983, Nic Smith (1990), Mike Bishop (1994), Chris Harris (2004), and Esmyr van Hees who provides IT and administrative support.

Philip Koomen Furniture has exhibited in Belgium, France, Italy, the United Arab Emirates and the USA. Koomen is also a regular exhibitor at Celebration of Craftsmanship, Cheltenham and Art in Action in Oxfordshire. His furniture has been featured on Meridian TV and Channel 4 and various publications, including Homes & Gardens, House & Garden, The Times, The Independent, London Evening Standard and featured in the book Furniture for the 21st Century by Betty Norbury. His collaborative projects with the American Hardwood Export Council on environmental issues have received international publicity.

In 2001, Philip Koomen was awarded a bursary from Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College to undertake a three year project leading to the award of a doctorate on a sustainable approach to furniture design. The exhibition and catalogue outline the major themes of the project and show some of the resulting furniture. Koomen is a Fellow of the Society of Chartered Designers, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, and an Associate of the Institute of Wood Science.

Sponsors

American hardwood sustainability

The American Hardwood Export Council (AHEC) has been actively demonstrating the sustainability of American hardwood forests, developed over the last fifty years.

AHEC has launched a new position statement on the sustainability of American hardwoods to complement its dedicated website (www.sustainablehardwoods.info). It provides consumers and specifiers with an update on forest management and certification in the United States, which addresses issues of forest ownership, government legislation and sustainability. AHEC also maintains a comprehensive website, which provides technical information, at www.ahec-europe.org from which publications can be ordered.

The American Hardwood Export Council (AHEC) is the leading international trade association for the US hardwood industry.

Timbmet’s commitment to sustainable forestry

Timbmet is committed to long-term protection of the world’s natural forests. The company, a member of the WWF UK Forest and Trade Network, works with its suppliers to source legal and sustainable timber, and to stimulate improvement in forest management worldwide.

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Offers free advice to owners of small woods in the Chilterns.

Northmoor Trust
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Oxfordshire OX14 4RA
Phone 01865 407792
www.northmoortrust.co.uk
The Trust is involved in forest research and the establishment of its own woodland to improve the timber qualities of native species.

Oxfordshire Woodland Project
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Ethics
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www.bahai.org.uk
World Citizenship and Sustainable Development
www.bic-un.bahai.org/93-0614.htm
Out of the Woods 2004
Published by Philip Koomen Furniture, Checkendon, Oxfordshire, England

Acknowledgements

Philip Koomen would like to thank all the following for their help and support with the Out of the Woods project, exhibition and catalogue.

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Commissioning furniture

If you wish to discuss a project, please speak to Philip Koomen or one of his colleagues. Telephone 01491 681122.