



# MATERIAL TRENDS: RECLAIMED WOOD

## FROM HOME FURNISHINGS AND SMALL COFFEE SHOPS

to office buildings and retail environments, sustainability is all around us. While “going green” was once idle chatter in the fixture world, we’re now seeing natural and reclaimed materials play a key role. Brands and retailers are embracing the movement and becoming environmental stewards. Along the way, reclaimed wood has become a major player, helping them achieve both their desired aesthetic and more environmentally-friendly environments.

## TREND ORIGINS

Reclaimed wood’s presence in retail is no longer new. In fact, its roots run deep. The trend began with a desire for upcycling, or taking something without value and transforming it into something useful or creative.<sup>2</sup> In some cases, this repurposing had the added benefit of reducing costs.

The first real trendsetters to emerge were the small, independent boutique stores and coffee shops that had the flexibility and scale needed to take risks and experiment. Eventually, an actual

*“The demand for reclaimed wood products has been steadily increasing as consumers recognize and value the look, feel, functionality and cost of reused wood in products such as flooring, furniture, structural timbers and more.” -Anne Nicklin, Build Materials Reuse Association (BMRA) Executive Director<sup>1</sup>*

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1. Building Materials Reuse Association. “BMRA News.” October 2015. <https://bmra.org/newsletter-october-2015/>.

2. Edwards, Antonia. Upcyclist: Reclaimed and Remade Furniture, Lighting and Interiors. New York: Prestel, 2015.



look and style emerged as the message of social consciousness and the look of reclaimed materials began to catch on with brands and consumers alike.

By the mid-90s the term upcycling gained traction during a period of time when the sustainable movement was surging ahead. The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) was founded in 1993,<sup>3</sup> for example, and Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED) emerged in 2000.<sup>4</sup> William McDonough and Michael Braungart's 2002 book *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* brought the expression upcycling into the public eye and solidified its use in pop culture.<sup>5</sup>

Since then, more specific subsets have come to fruition as brands continued trying new things and delivering different styles such as true reclaimed, industrial reclaimed and antique reclaimed.

## TREND EVOLUTION

The reclaimed trend continued to grow and expand as it merged with the sustainable movement.

### Reclaimed

Reused tires, recycled metal, road signs, old chairs, doors and found objects are all fair game in today's market and have found new life within retail environments.

### Aesthetic Choice

As consumers were exposed to more creative and complex styles, their expectations grew and they began to count on added sophistication. Brands are now starting to think of reclaimed wood less as a



Anthropologie  
Photo: design:retail

way to get credit for being sustainable and more as a way to add warmth and character to their in-store environments.

### Fixture/Product Relationship

This has created a need to pay more attention to the relationship between fixture and product. As more sources for reclaimed materials become available, designers have the ability to choose materials that have a contextual relationship with brands.

### Authentic Look

Brands and retailers are putting more effort into staying true to their DNA while blending a look into their brand. Nike's use of recycled wood bleachers and gym floors within its shops is a perfect example of reclaimed materials adding authenticity to the retail environment.



Nike, Boston  
Photo: Association for Retail Environments

### Whole Environments

The most significant evolution has come as brands have moved this trend beyond a single initiative and into entire fixture programs and throughout full retail environments.

## CHANGING THE CONVERSATION

The best brands and retailers have found ways to scale, but it's meant shifting the conversation from reclaimed to sustainable. This is the challenge brands and retailers must face – finding ways to maintain sustainability while achieving the desired presentation aesthetic. To be successful, it means employing great design and thoughtful production.

› FAR LEFT:  
Anthropologie has won the merchandiser of the year 8 times with design:retail. The visual foundation of their stores relies on their use of reclaimed and reused materials and objects.<sup>6</sup>

› LEFT:  
Nike Boston Softline Specialty Store was one of the 2015 A.R.E. Design Awards Winners for their use of eco-conscious materials throughout the space.

*"Material choices are less black and white than they used to be. Ultimately it's about keeping wood out of landfills and celebrating the character and imperfections inherent to the material. There are a lot of different ways to achieve that without going 100% reclaimed. Finger-jointed offal wood, for instance, takes manufacturing scraps and turns it into beautiful panels and boards."*  
- Brad Kurz, Creative Director at TCG

3. Forest Stewardship Council. "History." FSC. <https://ic.fsc.org/our-history.17.htm>.

4. U.S. Green Building Council. "USGBC History." USGBC. <http://www.usgbc.org/about/history>.

5. Upcycle Magazine. "What is upcycling?" Upcycle Magazine. January 15, 2009. <http://www.upcyclomagazine.com/what-is-upcycling/#shasha5CnUPgf.dpuf>.

6. Dowd, Jessie. "Best Visual Merchandising Programs." design:retail, September 2015: 76. <http://www.nextbook.com/nextbooks/designretail/201509/index.php#/06>.



## Design

In the midst of this trend, scaling up means designers face difficult choices and realities.

### › Using Materials Wisely:

The first reality is that these materials can be limited and potentially expensive. Finding alternative ways to use them in creative and impactful ways transforms good ideas into great design.

### › Accepting Imperfection:

Brands and retailers must learn to embrace and even celebrate imperfections. When working with salvaged, recycled, reclaimed and cast-off materials, there will be flaws, and the appearance can vary greatly across sources. Designers and brands must accept a degree of variation and recognize that consistency is rarely possible.

### › Staying Fluid:

With limited and inconsistent materials that can change appearance depending on the source, the region and the availability, fixture presentations may change in appearance as well. Great design can ensure a presentation that maintains a cohesive look authentic to the brand DNA while remaining fluid

### › Avoiding Deception:

Consumers are now more familiar with reclaimed materials, which means they can easily spot "faux" reclaimed, so design must deliver a presentation that doesn't mislead them. Instead, it should bring together the reclaimed, repurposed or sustainable material and deliver it in a way that aligns with the brand

› **ABOVE:**  
Reclaimed solid oak was used to create a nesting table for Sperry, with little evidence of its origins in the final product.

*"Good fixtures blend into the environment and allow the product to be the focus. But well-designed fixtures are also about authenticity – they must look real and connected to the product they are featuring. Faux finishes and materials often defeat this purpose." ~ Rick Burbee, Creative Director at mass merchandiser Sears Holding Corp.<sup>7</sup>*

## Production

On a large scale, achieving this look in production while remaining a good steward of the environment is possible, but it requires an expertise in working with China.

### › Source:

Achieving the goal of sustainability in China means helping teach the importance of material choice and source. FSC certified wood, reclaimed materials and recycled materials are all options that China is now offering.

### › Production:

Brands once needed uniformity, so China vendors were trained to have those standards, but when working with reclaimed wood, it's important to stress that imperfections are not only acceptable but desired. TCG has been working with companies in China to help them learn that this trend and this look are not about making carbon copies of fixtures.

### › Look:

Deciding to maintain sustainability while producing a look means making compromises on aesthetics. Elements such as grain, tone and texture are all choices and compromises that must be considered during the design phase.



## CONCLUSION

- › This trend is rooted in something bigger than aesthetics – it is connected with a cultural shift.
- › It has evolved to become more than just small celebrations. It is about a whole environment that is tied to a brand's DNA.
- › On a large scale, the best brands and retailers have learned to accept some realities. Materials are limited, so design must be more fluid and flexible in terms of what materials are used and how they are presented.
- › This doesn't mean trying to trick the consumer, however. Brands and retailers have simply changed the conversation by ensuring whatever material they use is appropriate for the brand and maintains authenticity.
- › Scaling up means working overseas, and TCG has been working with vendors in China to help them understand that this trend and this look is not about perfection and making carbon copies of fixtures.
- › Achieving a goal of sustainability in China is part of what TCG can accomplish. It ultimately means helping these partners understand the importance of material choice and source.
- › At TCG, our experience has taught us to think beyond aesthetics and consider where materials are coming from, how they are handled, and how they come together to support the brand experience.

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