

# GlobeLife Style

## THE GLOBE AND MAIL

### Flinstone chic

Why are rough-hewn wood, animal hides and stone furniture finding favour with high-tech hipsters? It's the call of the wild

BY DEIDRE KELLY

Nature has invaded the home. With furniture hewn from gigantic slabs of old-growth wood and tumbled stone floors adorned with sharp-toothed animal hide, the look is contemporary with a bite.

The twinning of stark, minimalist design with monumental and primal materials – call it Flinstone chic – is enabling the most hardened of loft-dwelling urbanites to go a little wild.

“It’s a backlash against mass-produced design,” says Amanda Schuler of Toronto’s Stylegarage. Clients are gobbling up her rugged solid-beam furniture, made of Douglas fir, that has been lightly sanded to let the blemishes show.

Schuler’s stools and tables are similar to pieces by Vancouver’s Brent Comber, whose sculptural wood seating is beautifully finished, but still retains the cracks and fissures of the natural material. “People are ready for something more real in their lives,” Comber says.

Comber’s benches were a hit a last May’s International Contemporary furniture Fair in New York, which featured several other furniture makers, both European and U.S., working in monumental wood.

“I love showing the rings of the wood log,” offers Comber, whose work is carried by Nienkamper and Caban in Toronto and Inform Interiors in Vancouver. “People love looking at that and are amazed that they’re solid. I once saw a woman sitting on one of my benches, weeping. She had a strong emotional connection to the warmth of the wood.”

Part of the appeal of Comber’s work is its eco-factor: he uses “waste” wood – off-cuts of Douglas fir and western red cedar that he gets from sawmills and veneer manufacturers. Salvaged wood is also used in the hefty burlwood tables produced by Kolotech Designs in Campbellville, Ont. Often formed around the roots of the tree and largely hidden underground, burls are rare growths that are prized for their swirling patterns and rich colours. “It’s like working with a diamond,” says designer John Koletic,

whose burlwood often comes from clear-cut and burned forest lands. “You expose the natural beauty of each piece once you cut into it.”

But the wilderness cult is not just about reclaiming old-growth giants. A more extreme version of the rustic look is being recreated with the skins of majestic Canadian icons like the grizzly, the wolf and the polar bear. Ritva Penttila sells bear and wolf-skin rugs internationally through her suburban Toronto distribution outlet Te-Ri. Nowadays, the idea of using such a magnificent creature as a floor covering offends many animal lovers. But Penttila was reluctant to name her source more from a fear of competition: The rugs are extremely popular, she says. (A call to her supplier, a taxidermist in Northern Ontario, revealed that the furs come from registered dealers who obtain them from licensed trappers or at government approved auction.)

It was Philippe Starck who jump-started the current look, notes Sasha Josipovitz, principal interior designer of Toronto’s The Element Group. Starck would pair an exquisitely designed sofa with a tree trunk or a bar made of cut branches.

Josipovitz has gone even further, bringing the landscape indoors: “Instead of tree trunks, what we have tried to do is introduce real gardens like a living room or main entrance.”

For a recent commission in Toronto’s tony Forest Hill neighbourhood, Josipovitz brought oversized palms into the home by recessing the earth bed into the floor. “These are real trees, not displayed in standard clay pots or baskets, but left as nature intended them to be: living, breathing things.”

Stone is also popular for getting that rustic feeling. A Dutch company called Sessio cuts huge slabs of granite into outdoor living-room suites that look like something Fred and Wilma would buy. In Toronto, designer Julian Bowron produces faux stone and iron pieces he calls grotto furniture. “Ever since humans started making highly finished objects, there always has been a desire to return to a simpler era,” Bowron says.

The grotto style arose in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Europe as a response to the over-ritualized constraints of court. Wealthy men would retreat to “grottos” on their estates that featured furniture made of branches, hunker over a fire and smoke their pipes, away from pesky manners and courtesies. Bowron sees a parallel with today’s cubicle dweller who returns home at the end of the day wanting contact with something more elemental.

But this communing with nature trend is not all benign. Ancient rounded granite stones are being bulldozed from beaches to decorate planters and make fireplace surrounds; tiny pebbles are being scooped from riverbeds to make aggregate flooring. While some jurisdictions have laws against collecting beach and river rock, most are as lax as Canada used to be about trees. The irony, of course, is that to feed that craving for lost nature, nature is still being plundered.

But Koletic says there is a potential for artisans to educate. “If we can create respect for natural materials, then maybe we can protect those sensitive areas.”