



Cork: the comeback kid

CONTRIBUTING REPORTER KAREN EGLY-THOMPSON INVESTIGATES THE GROWING POPULARITY OF CORK IN INTERIOR DESIGN





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Cork has it all. Enchantingly humble, its mottled texture evokes earthiness and warmth. Combined with its eco-friendly nature and incredible physical attributes, cork continues to achieve a growing presence in interior design.

Although recently considered trendy, cork isn't a new design material. First making an appearance as commercial flooring in the late nineteenth century, it was celebrated for its durability and comfort. Installed primarily in public spaces, cork flooring was frequently found in libraries, town halls and places of worship. Renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright designed cork floors in his residential triumph Falling Water. However, with the introduction of vinyl flooring after World War II, the use of

cork flooring waned, although brief flirtations with the material arose again in the 1960's and 1970's.

Why the recent resurrection? One reason is the declining use of cork grape stoppers in the past decade in favour of alternative synthetic stoppers. The cork industry had to readjust itself to make up for lost revenue. "We got the proverbial kick in the pants," admitted cork giant Amorim Group's spokesperson Carlos de Jesus in a 2012 Wall Street Journal article. De Jesus explained the company's decision to devote more resources towards research and development of cork for other applications. Besides interior furnishings, cork is being integrated into products such as airline seats, automobile trim, and surfboards, among others.

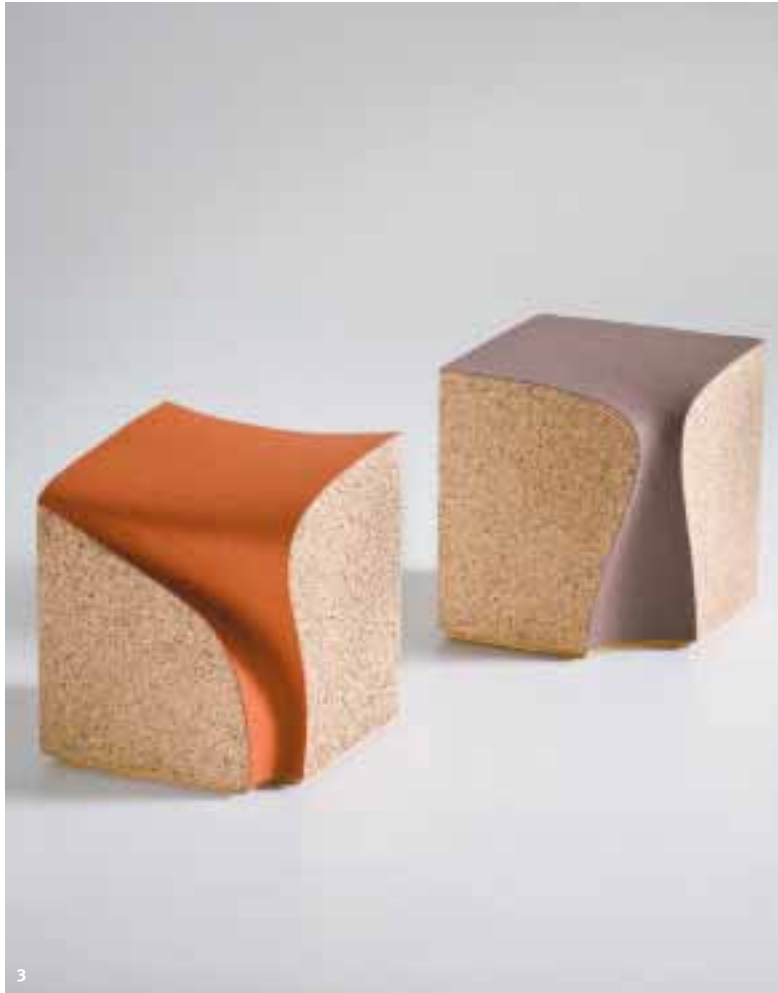
"This material is so flexible and eco-friendly. It's perfectly positioned to become a 21st-century tool," Guta Moura Guedes, director of Lisbon's architecture and design show Biennial Experimental-Design, told the Wall Street Journal.

Cork trees, called cork oak, or more formally 'Quercus suber', thrive in the scant, sandy soil of the arid Mediterranean coast of western Europe and northern Africa. Portugal takes the crown as the world's largest cork producer, contributing approximately half of the global supply.

As explained by The Portuguese Cork Association (APCOR), cork oak trees live on average 150 to 200 years. The trees take approximately twenty five years to produce the bark we know as 'cork', but can then be harvested in nine year inter-

- 1
Float lamp by Benjamin Hubert.
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Phyto lamp by Dan Yeffet and Lucie Koldova. Photo by Ian Scigliuzzi.

CORK DESIGN



vals thereafter for the life of the tree.

Cork's physical attributes are manifold: lightweight, impervious to liquids and gases, buoyant, fire and abrasion resistant, elastic and compressible. Cork is additionally thermally and acoustically insulating, and resistant to mold and bacterial growth. It also has a peculiar ability to store carbon dioxide. These qualities are exclusively unique and cannot be imitated by any other material, natural or man-made.

Aside from its superhero characteristics, cork has also become the darling of green design, thrusting it further into the spotlight. Not only does cork fulfil the pursuit on non-depleting, renewable resources, it is recyclable. Unlike wood, cork has an enormous capacity of regeneration. Whereas cork is renewable tree bark, harvesting wood destroys the entire tree. Also, cork oak trees do not require chemical herbicides, fertiliser or even irrigation.

Although the sustainability of cork is a key draw, designers are using cork as a design material for different reasons. Benjamin Hubert creates his Float lamp from a solid block of agglomerated cork. Formed from grape stopper by-product, the block is hand-turned on a lathe to create the shade's smooth, circular



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Eroded Stools es1 and
es2 by IM Lab.

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Cortica chaise lounge
by Daniel Michalik
Furniture Design.

shape. In an interview with Hubert, he cited cork's sustainability features and the warm, ambient light that is achieved as his draw to using cork versus other materials. When asked about the inspiration of the lamp's name, Float, he perceptively explained: "Lamps generally float above a surface, and cork floats - so it's a jewel of a name."

Phyto lamp by Dan Yeffet and Lucie Koldova is the result of a 2011 collaboration in a Glass Is Tomorrow workshop in Finland. Phyto investigates how planes of hand-blown coloured glass intersect each other and create layers enhanced by a diffused light source. Yeffet explains, "Cork was a natural choice for us. During the design process we considered other materials to be used as the base, and the combination with the cork...The visual roughness and the unique combination with the glass made it easy to decide."

New York furniture designer Daniel Michalik chooses to work with cork because of its ability to be physically manipulated, as well as its recyclabil-



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Sofa Brick designed by Aya Koike for Nagayanagi Co. Ltd.

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Corkcomfort Linn Moon cork flooring by Wicanders.



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ity. “Cork has tremendous potential to perform in ways unlike any other material,” Michalik points out. His serpentine Cortica chaise lounge highlights cork’s ability to simultaneously bend in two directions, creating a three-dimensional volume from what was originally a flat sheet. “The pliability of the material allows the user of this lounge to rock gently from side to side or on her back with a great degree of stability. The result is a sensation of floating, weightless and totally supported,” he adds. Michalik also likes cork because it’s waterproof, impervious to rot and mold, allowing it to function as well outdoors as indoors.

Cork proved to be an apropos material for Alessandro Isola and Supriya Mankad of I M Lab to create their eroded series. Within the collection are two modular stools, es1 and es2, originally designed for a wine tasting room in Italy. “The utilisation of the cork and the organic shapes were based on the relation of the cork and to the fluid movement of wine when poured into a glass,” Isola explains. Coloured wool felt is applied to emphasise where cork material had been removed, or where it ‘eroded’ away, and where new surfaces were created. In addition to being environmentally friendly, Isola divulges

“the machinability of the [cork] material makes it perfect for replication.”

Sofa Brick is another modular creation made of cork. Its Japanese designer, Aya Koike with Nagayanagi Co. Ltd., create Sofa Brick as an abstracted iteration of the traditional Chesterfield sofa - inspired by its tufting. However, its application is delightfully left to the user’s imagination. “I used it as a headboard for my bed,” Koike admits.

Dedicated to the design of eco-friendly, modern furniture, Michael Iannone creates strong graphic pieces. “I’m always looking for new types of materials and using them in new ways,” mentioned Iannone, who is based outside of Philadelphia. With a nod to mid-century modern design, his bold Cork Mosaic Sideboard-Circles is fabricated from laser-cut cork wall tiles, FSC certified walnut, and locally sourced wood.

Remnants recovered from the wine bottling industry create Habitus’ Super Tuscan Cork Mosaic Tile. “Irregular shards of virgin cork are shaped by hand and fashioned on sheets to create a one of a kind mosaic tile material,” explains James Valez, marketing spokesperson for Habitus. Modified into chunky 5cm thick pieces, the cork mosaic is suitable for wall applications and uses tile mor-

tar and grout like a typical tile installation. Super Tuscan Cork Mosaic Tile can also be stained colours or varnished to further enhance cork’s natural texture.

Cork flooring is again riding the wave of popularity in both residential and commercial settings. In addition to its natural appeal, technological advances have made cork flooring easier to install than in the past. Wicanders, under the umbrella of cork producer Amorim, is the worldwide market leader in cork flooring. Its Corkcomfort collection features designs varying from serene neutrals to expressive patterned designs made from cork veneers, such as Linn Moon. In 2013, Wicanders even renewed its cork wall covering collection, Dekwall—citing the visual and ecological appeal of cork as an interior design trend.

The popularity of cork appears to be more than just a design trend. Cork is back. The pursuit of ecologically responsible design materials is part of our world’s present and future reality. Perhaps the time wasn’t right for cork in the mid-20th century because the sustainability component was not yet developed — allowing for the next and newest product to win over the public. Today, for all of its attributes, green and otherwise, cork has made a comeback.

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Cork Mosaic
Sideboard-Circles by
Iannone Design.