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Two Connecticut brothers collect the remains of city trees and fashion them into furniture and art.

The benefits of urban trees are well documented, from storing carbon and absorbing rainfall to easing depression and increasing property values. But what happens to our stately benefactors when they come down due to disease, development, weather, or old age? Millions of trees in the United States meet this fate every year; New York City alone cuts down around 8,000 trees annually.

The urban forest's deceased are generally ground up and sent to the dump, say Ted and Zeb Esselstyn, brothers who create furniture and wall art from felled urban trees and sell them via their business, City Bench. "Urban wood is a seriously un-utilized resource in our country's metropolitan areas," says Zeb. The brothers collect logs of such wood from cities in Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey, though they particularly work with wood from New Haven, where they're based.

Companies such as West Elm peddle furniture made from reclaimed wood, and businesses have incorporated wood debris from such natural disasters as Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy into their designs and spaces. City Bench stands apart as one of the few outfits in North America that works solely with wood from the urban forest, and that does so on an ongoing basis. "The city of New Haven probably takes down around 700 trees a year," says Zeb. "We don't have the capacity to take them all, but we do salvage and mill a lot of them."

Sawmills generally decline to cut urban trees into lumber for reuse due to the wear and tear they show—an effect of their proximity to humans. "We hit metal on a majority of the trees we mill," says Ted, "from bullets to electric cables to nails." Though a typical mill wants to avoid such troubles, "we revel in it," he says. "The beat-up quality is what gives the wood character."

Indeed, these imperfections help make the Esselstyn brothers' furniture funky and unique. One bench, for instance, features an electric bolt protruding from the back of the seat, while other pieces exhibit rough edges and irregular shapes. Such anomalies haven't kept Connecticut corporations and institutions from commissioning the work. Ted and Zeb have fashioned boardroom tables for the likes of the Newman's Own company headquarters in Westport and wall columns for the East Hartford library. Their main business, however, is with individuals who have lost beloved trees on their property. "We've had clients weeping in front of us about the loss," says Ted. "We soften the blow by letting the trees continue to live."



(Courtesy of City Bench)

Such stories support the research of Jill Jonnes, who spoke with my colleague Jessica Leigh Hester of the “essential bond” between city dwellers and their urban forests, documented in her book, *Urban Forests: A Natural History of Trees and People in the American Cityscape*. It’s little surprise, then, that not only individuals, but entire communities of urbanites, feel an attachment to some of their city’s trees.

One such tree for residents of New Haven was the Lincoln Oak, which Civil War veterans planted in 1909 in New Haven Green, the city's 16-acre park, to commemorate what would have been Abraham Lincoln's 100th birthday. In 2012, Hurricane Sandy felled the huge tree. The city made Ted and Zeb the stewards of its remains, and today some of its wood serves as a 14-foot table in a common area of a New Haven apartment complex and a 20-foot bench in New Haven City Hall. "The city made a big to-do about the bench, with speeches, music, and a giant cake," says Zeb. "People in New Haven love the Lincoln Oak."

When Ted and Zeb started City Bench in 2009, they would issue a "birth certificate" for every piece they created, giving the tree's original location, age, and reason for its demise. Zeb even wrote a story about each, relaying historical facts about the area from which it came or the significance of its type of wood. As the brothers have taken on more and more business, they are not always able to provide these personal touches.

Still, says Zeb, they continue to keep the endeavor intimate. "We mill each tree, we touch it ourselves," he says. "And our clients visit us throughout the process. Though we'd like our business to grow even more, we don't want to lose this. We don't want to become IKEA."

About the Author



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