

Biophilic Brands

THOUGHTS BY THINK WOOD



Can Wood and Nature Boost the Bottom Line?

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Influential brands around the world are bringing nature indoors, through the use of wood and other natural materials, all in the effort to attract customers, enhance the buying experience and boost the bottom-line. And they might be onto something. Recent research on retail sales suggests this new focus on nature may actually help nurture profits.

McDonald's Chooses Wood Customers Are Lovin' It

In the American Midwest's largest city, one of the world's most recognizable brands—McDonald's—is showcasing how wood can bring value and help express the company's growing commitment to environmentally conscious choices. For its Chicago-based flagship restaurant, the three-quarters-of-a-century-old fast food chain is shaking off its plastic-clad brightly colored interiors for an exposed timber design, along with more sustainable, naturally hued materials. The choice to use wood came early in the process with the goal of "design authenticity." As Carol Ross Barney of Ross Barney Architects explains, some durable materials aren't always authentic and eco-friendly. Mass timber offers durability, resilience, and sustainability. And "because you can use CLT like any panelized material, such as precast concrete or steel, it's a robust, cost-effective, and green alternative."

In addition to CLT, the restaurant features more than 70 planted trees at ground level, a green roof, and floating glass garden of ferns and white birch trees. The green roof features edible plants including apple trees that will be harvested and donated to the Ronald McDonald House. The project signals the fast food giant's interest in biophilic and eco-friendly design. The iconic burger chain began this shift back in 2016 when it moved away from red and yellow mostly synthetically interiors in favor of more natural materials and nature-inspired color-palettes. McDonald's also announced they would be opening two "green concept restaurants" in Canada.

GREENING THE GOLDEN ARCHES | For its Chicago-based flagship restaurant, the 75-year-old fast food chain is shaking off its plastic-clad brightly colored interiors for an exposed timber design, along with more sustainable, naturally hued materials. (Top Photo - Photos courtesy: Ross Barney Architects | Photography: Kendall McCaugherty, Hall+Merrick)

ADDING MASS TIMBER TO THE MENU | The restaurant features more than 70 trees at ground level, a vegetated roof space and a floating glass garden of ferns and white birch trees. (Bottom Photo - Photos courtesy: Ross Barney Architects | Photography: Kendall McCaugherty, Hall+Merrick)

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Portland brands embrace their timber past.

More than 2,000 miles west of the Windy City, is a region whose history is steeped in thick forests and heavy timber. Portland is a city that is quickly becoming an iconic brand onto itself, known for its woody, eco-friendly and hipster vibe. This brand is increasingly expressed in Rose City's retail architecture—characterized by natural materials, timber construction and sustainable design.

And one Portland-based design firm—LEVER Architecture—is leading this trend with projects such as Union Way, a 10,000 square-foot retail renovation project that serves as much a civic function—a pedestrian connection between city blocks—as a retail experience. Reminiscent of European passageways and Middle Eastern bazaars, LEVER put its own unique stamp on the timber-clad arcade that packs nine different retailers/restaurants into a covered galleria including Danner, the iconic Oregon boot brand, California-based retailer All Good and local clothier Bridge & Burn crafts apparel.

RETAIL THERAPY | Shoppers at Portland's Union Way—a 10,000 square-foot retail renovation project connecting 9 unique stores—are enveloped by Pacific Albus siding and abundant natural light. (Photos courtesy: LEVER Architecture | Photographer: Jeremy Bittermann)

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Biophilic design a natural fit for Canadian retailers.

Biophilic design is also a natural fit for [Mountain Equipment Coop \(MEC\)](#), Canada's biggest retailer of outdoor gear whose brand and mission are firmly anchored in sustainability and stewardship.

MEC put eco-conscious timber-framed architecture front and center in its newest [flagship store](#), located in Vancouver, British Columbia. The three-story mass-timber structure was constructed using locally sourced CLT and [glue-laminated timber \(glulam\)](#), will make natural, exposed wood central to the shopping experience.

"MEC is setting the precedent here. I think we're going to see a lot more commercial development with this sort of construction," said Ron McDougall, a mass timber specialist with Structurlam, the wood fabricator for the project.

Money Grows on Trees

A recent report on the economics of biophilic design found that participants said they were more inclined to make a purchase if in an environment characterized by views to nature, intermittent greenery, big trees, and vegetation. In the same study, participants were willing to pay up to 20 percent more for practical expenditures (such as a sandwich for lunch) and up to 25 percent more for general merchandise (for example a new jacket or a watch).^[2]

While the benefits of biophilic design are still being researched, initial findings and anecdotal reports indicate a strong potential to boost a brand's value. And undoubtedly, wood can play an important role, making the retail experience more inviting, calming, and connected to nature.

BRINGING THE OUTDOORS INSIDE | MEC, Canada's largest outdoor gear retailer, puts eco-conscious timber-framed architecture front and center in its newest flagship store, located in Vancouver, British Columbia. (Photo courtesy: Kenneth Chan / Daily Hive)



Can Biophilic Design Impact a Brand's Bottomline?

All of these investments in wood construction and biophilic design look nice, but do customers really care? A recent study conducted by the University of Laval suggests that they do, concluding that exposed structural wood can have a positive impact on customers. A survey of 100 randomly selected customers compared shopping experiences in a wooden building compared with a steel building in three types of stores: a supermarket, a home renovation center, and a furniture store. In all three cases, a higher number of customers expressed greater satisfaction with the aesthetics of the wooden building than with the steel building. And customers were more inclined to describe the wooden building as ecological, healthful, and warm.^[1]

Impact of wood on shopping experience.

Wooden supermarkets	Wooden home reno center	Wooden furniture store
95% noticed the wooden structure	67% noticed the wooden structure	75% noticed the wooden structure
80% think the wood structure has a positive influence on their shopping experience	68% think the wood structure has a positive influence on their shopping experience	71% think the wood structure has a positive influence on their shopping experience
79% think the store strongly differentiates itself from other stores of the same type		21% of visits exceeded 30 minutes
17% of visits exceeded 30 minutes		

[1] CecoBois, Construire En Bois, Volume 10, Autumn, 2018, p.7,
https://cecobois.com/publications_documents/CECO-11987_Journal_Automne_2018_FINAL_LR.pdf

[2] The Economics of Biophilia, Terrapin Bright Green, 2012, p.20-21
<https://www.terrapinbrightgreen.com/report/economics-of-biophilia>

Sources