

May 4, 2007

Beetle mania strikes Vancouver designers

By ADRIANA BARTON

VANCOUVER -- One man's bug kill is another's natural beauty, according to the sculptors and furniture makers taking part in a new design competition in Vancouver.

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Vancouver designers are now transforming the exotic-looking wood into eye-catching objects. Although the pine is permanently stained after the beetle's attack, it shouldn't be considered tainted, according to Design Vancouver, the cutting-edge consumer expo that's hosting the first pine-beetle-wood design-build competition, starting today.

Designer Judson Beaumont built a rock-tumbler-like device by using sandpaper to turn chunks of pine-beetle wood into flattened orbs that look like river rocks. "They're absolutely gorgeous, precious little items," he says.

His other competition entry is a bench with 20 legs.

Pine-beetle wood retains its structural integrity if it's harvested within a few years of infestation, B.C. forestry officials say. The blue-streaked pine is widely used in the construction industry but, until now, designers haven't explored its aesthetic potential.

Peter Rainier, another contest participant, says the fungus stains enhance the pine-beetle wood. "It's very unique," he says. "It looks like somebody's faded jeans, with grey-blue streaking on it."

Mr. Rainier sees potential for the wood in the manufacturing and furniture industries. For the Vancouver competition, he fashioned a towering sculptural lamp.

Artist and furniture maker Brent Comber says he's using the design contest to tell a story. He calls his submission a "miniature boys' club" complete with little men smoking cigars while sitting on pine chairs that look like they're made of blue Naugahyde. "The club even has a little beetle logo," he says.

Mr. Comber's installation is "poking fun" at the people in power who recognized there was a pine-beetle problem years ago "but didn't have the will to do anything about it," he says.

Since 1993, the pine-beetle outbreak has devastated about 9.2 million hectares of forest, an area almost three times the size of Vancouver Island. Forestry officials expect the beetle will kill 80 per cent of British Columbia's pine forest by the time the scourge runs its course.

In the past year, the beetle's rampage has spread into Alberta's northern forests. The rice-grain-sized pest has chomped its way into at least 1.5 million trees, forcing Alberta last month to declare an emergency.

Climate change is largely responsible for the insect plague, experts says, since there are fewer cold snaps to keep the bug in check. Forestry practices, which result in the planting of a less diverse mix of trees, also play a role.

The design competition is "a way to turn something positive out of something negative," Mr. Beaumont says.

He and Mr. Rainier both say they will continue to work with pine-beetle wood if their creations garner enough interest from architects and interior designers at the Vancouver fair.

Next month, Mr. Beaumont plans to introduce the "denim pine" to design trendsetters at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York.

"This wood shouldn't just be discarded or hidden behind walls," he says.

Bug kill never looked so good.

Design Vancouver starts today and runs until Sunday at the Vancouver Convention & Exhibition Centre. For information, call 604-681-4126 or visit Dvexpo.ca

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