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FOUND WOOD

South African ecological furniture design as seen in the work of Philip Oosthuizen

Unless we change the direction in which we are headed, we might end up where we are going.

Chinese proverb

Victor Papanek (1995:17), in his book *The green imperative*, raises the ecological problems of the world today as a matter of urgency, and proposes that each person in their day-to-day activities is able to minimise the wasteful use of earth's limited resources. Papanek (1995:10) has pointed out that through technology and human development '...we have now truly attained the power to change the natural order of the earth and throw it out of harmony'. He also suggests that designers have a more direct and measurable effect on the environment than the average person, which is reflected in the materials they choose to work with or the sustainability of their products and the interventions of their designs with nature and humanity.

Philip Oosthuizen[1] is a South African industrial designer whose work, in its use of environmentally sustainable materials, reflects Papanek's call for responsible design. This ecological ideal involves the sensitive use of natural resources and avoidance of wastefulness in the pursuit of well-designed functional objects. Oosthuizen's work, however, also embodies an ecological *aesthetic* in its visual homage to nature evoked by the echoing of natural/organic forms and textures. I would argue that he has thus produced a body of furniture that successfully combines both the methodology and the aesthetics of ecological furniture production. Oosthuizen's furniture could be described as conceptually rich, as it carries overtones of the spiritual philosophies of the nineteenth century Arts and Crafts movement, Papanek's ideals, the Zen approach to minimal intervention in nature, and a reverence for indigenous woods both in nature and as used in South African traditional furniture. These visual and conceptual influences provide a framework for a discussion of selected examples of Oosthuizen's work from the exhibition, *Found Wood*, which was held at the Bamboo Gallery in Melville, Johannesburg, 2 - 12 October 2003 (figure 1).

The Ecological Ideal and the Ecological Aesthetic

Oosthuizen was trained as an industrial designer in the 1970s at a time when Papanek's first book, *Design for the real world* was denouncing the problems initiated by a short-sighted design profession that pursued profits rather than designing for needs.[2] The book was not well received by industrial designers at the time, partly because of controversial statements such as '[t]here are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a very few of them' and '[t]oday, industrial design has put murder on a mass production basis' (Papanek 1985:ix). Papanek (1985:67-69) suggested that designers should tithe their time by designing for the poor, the disabled and the third world. The emphasis should be on designing for need rather than for greed, on not destroying the planet and on considering sustainable development. When it was first published the ideas in his book caused a furore in the entrenched design establishment of the day, and the industrial design fraternity verbally attacked both Papanek and his writings. He was asked to resign from his professional organisation and blacklisted by the American industrial design profession (Papanek 1985:xv-xvi). Over the years, however, his moral approach to design has been re-evaluated, as environmental issues have become more prevalent for businesses, governments and individuals; Papanek's reputation as an ethical designer and visionary has become accepted worldwide as people acknowledge the relevance of his message (Mackenzie 1997:8).

As a student, Oosthuizen (2003a) was aware of this clash between industrial design and the ecological ideal raised by Papanek. The aims embodied in contemporary consumer products, with their heavy emphasis on profits, frustrated him and raised doubts about his contribution to such a consumer culture. His work had included industrially designed products (kitchen appliances, for example), but creating furniture had always been an overriding interest, and his design activities became focused on ecologically sound wooden furniture. Oosthuizen's direction does not address the problems of the third world, where mass production is more likely to fulfil Papanek's desire to alleviate the plight of the poor and dispossessed. He complies, however, with Papanek's call for individuals to do whatever they can to minimise the wasteful use of earth's limited resources

In *Green design: design for the environment*, Dorothy Mackenzie (1997:35), explains that the basis of sustainable development lies in the conservation and responsible management of natural resources, and one of the main areas in which a designer can help or hinder this cause is in the choice of materials for a design. Trees or wood are one of the few

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2 detail

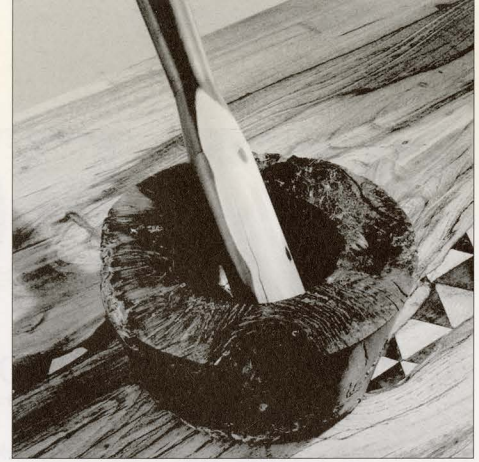

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Figure 1
Exhibition *Found Wood* held at the Bamboo Gallery in Melville, 2-12 Oct. 2003. (Long table in centre foreground)

Figure 2 and detail
Executive Desk. White stinkwood, English oak, kiaat.

Figure 3
Pestle and Mortar. Ebony, acacia burl.

renewable resources, and the decision to use only found wood became an issue for Oosthuizen because of the guilt concerning deforestation and the planetary consequences of poorly considered industrial design and planned obsolescence. There is no guilt in found wood; in fact, as Oosthuizen (2003a) says, '[I]t is not wasteful to use the wood and when it is no longer useful [as furniture] it can be thrown back into nature and through biodegrading will replenish the planet.' One can only truly assess the environmental impact of a product if its effect is measured in all the stages of its life, not just while it is being used, nor after it has been discarded or recycled. This idea is encapsulated by Mackenzie (1997:37) as the 'cradle-to-grave approach',[3] and in the light of this consideration the use of found wood is actually healthy for the planet, as a natural resource has been provided by nature without necessitating the death of a tree.

In Europe, trees are increasingly acknowledged as precious. For example, in the United Kingdom, old trees are 'listed' and the historical value of these trees is recognised officially. A 'listed' tree needs the permission of the Royal horticulturist to have a branch pruned or to deal with any part of it. In South Africa, although we do not usually list our older trees, there are some examples of the government introducing awareness programmes aimed at preserving indigenous forests and bushveld. The Department of Water Affairs and Forestry has, within the last few years, begun an initiative called 'working for water' where the help of local communities is enlisted to clear the land of exotic and invasive species of plants that drain increasingly scarce water resources. Similar initiatives, such as the project at Montibello in Cape Town, use these discarded exotic woods to make very natural looking garden furniture. This indicates that, nationally, there is an awareness of an urgent need for the preservation of indigenous bush, but Oosthuizen (2003a) suggests that there is still not enough realisation of what local woods are truly capable of – what their potential is in manufacture, and how they should be managed to ensure sustainability. Consequently he only uses found wood because it is wood that is available and unused, or he finds wood on sites marked for development, where trees are about to be removed and are unlikely to be utilised elsewhere. An example of this is sites demarcated for road construction.[4]

The origins of each piece of found wood are also incorporated into an aesthetic that is appropriate both to the natural forms and textures of the material and the psychological associations of wood and nature. Oosthuizen (2003a) is of the opinion that our interface with the world is impoverished when huge, old, beautiful trees are cut down and turned into anonymous planks. There is a certain satisfaction in showing where and how the raw material came about by allowing it to dictate the nature of the end product, demonstrating the potential to be found in a piece of wood and incorporating the ecological aesthetic in his practical employment of the ecological ideal. An example of this can be seen in his *Executive desk* (figure 2) where the irregularity of the table's shape expresses the irregular shape of the huge trunk from which the entire table top is taken. This was made, in fact, from the largest white stinkwood trunk that Oosthuizen had ever seen and he estimates it is around 100 years old (Oosthuizen 2003b). Such large slabs of wood do not stay perfectly flat so he has inserted adjustable wedges (figure 2, detail) between the top and the trestle supports to accommodate possible future distortion. Another example on a smaller scale is the *Pestle and Mortar.* (figure3) where the mortar is made from acacia wood burl, which is a knot or juncture in the wood that is structurally useless but that now dictates the form of the object and results in something useful and beautiful.

In 1993 at the world design congress, *Design renaissance*, in Scotland, Papanek remarked on just such a sensitive approach to design when he said:

What many of us are hoping for is a profound change

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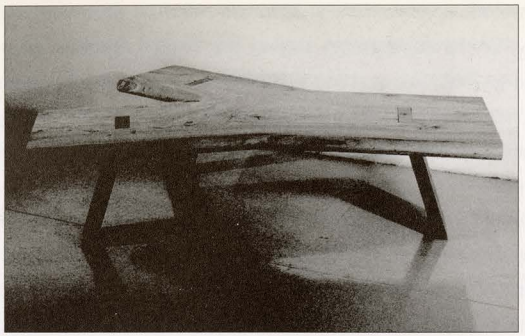

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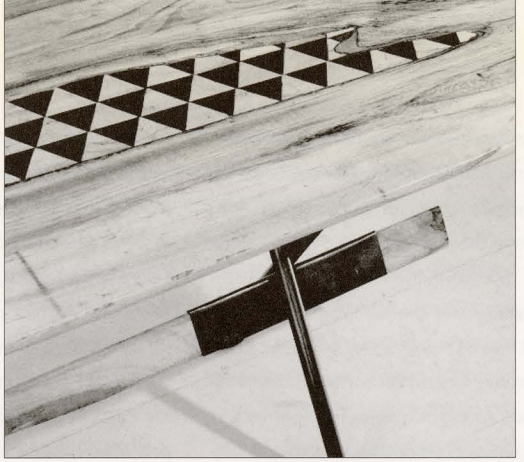

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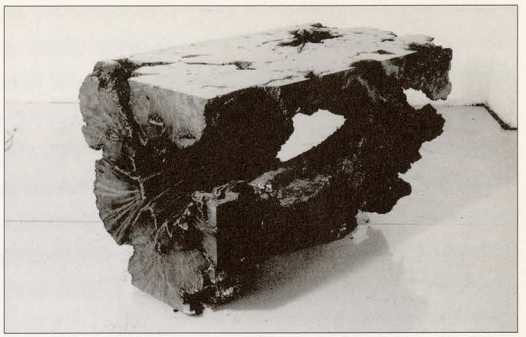

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Figure 4
Pair of screens. English oak, avocado.

Figure 5
Tree fork coffee table. Poplar, cassuarina.

Figure 6
Detail of *Long Table*. White stinkwood, kiaat.

Figure 7
Small block table. Karee (possibly 100 years old).

> in the way things look and work that is based on more than arbitrarily invented style…When design is nourished by a deep spiritual concern for the environment, people and planet, this moral and ethical standpoint will provide new forms and expressions – the new aesthetic – we are all desperately trying to find…The rise of a new aesthetic that is formed by environmental and ecological considerations will be unpredictable in its shapes, forms, colours, textures and varieties, and – at the same time – enormously exciting (Myerson 1995:185).

The result of this aesthetic, as one can see in Oosthuizen's furniture, is often irregular, asymmetrical and organic and this necessitates mostly craft/hand production as an almost sculptural sensitivity is required in order to avoid effacing the natural beauty of the raw material. Hand production also allows more scope for evaluating possibilities within the individual material and adapting the design to accommodate these varying solutions. An example of this can be seen in Oosthuizen's *Pair of screens* made from English oak and avocado wood (figure 4). The top edge of each screen shows the original felling chainsaw cuts, and the soft curve of the screens is a result of the natural 'cupping' of the wood as it dried. Oosthuizen has chosen to work with the man made marks on the wood as it was found and natural metamorphosis during the drying process, rather than trying to straighten the wood or impose any sort of regulated form on the screens. This sense of freedom during the design and manufacturing process is unusual in contemporary furniture. Machine production, as found in most furniture today, is both necessary and understandable for the mass market, but it imposes an aesthetic that is dictated by the needs of the machine and is almost the exact opposite to the qualities seen in Oosthuizen's work.

The Importance of Handcrafted Work

When discussing the enjoyment of handcrafting an object and providing a counterfoil to industrially produced items, William Morris and the nineteenth century Arts and Crafts movement are invariably brought to mind. The Arts and Crafts movement began as an ideological response, among artists, architects and craft-designers, against the Industrial Revolution in Britain. Elizabeth Cumming and Wendy Kaplan (1991:9) state that the founders of the movement sought to find a gentler alternative to the soulless, repetitive designs created by rampant industrialism (i.e. machine made, mass produced goods that evinced lack of taste in their inappropriate decoration), and promoted '… individualism, the creation of handmade goods in place of machine uniformity, and a reappraisal of design materials'. Their attempt to revive an age of 'good craftsmanship' rather than embracing industrialisation grew from a belief in the moral superiority of good, 'honest' design, and the use of wholesome natural materials.[5] Even today some of these beliefs have maintained their impact for designers, as Peter Dormer (1987:142) explains in relation to contemporary furniture design: '… handmade implies good workmanship, which entails integrity, which equals a good deal for the customer. The good deal is further enhanced by the fact that the object is likely to be unique.'

Many of the principles that formulated the Arts and Crafts ideology could be applicable to Oosthuizen's furniture designs, as well as some of the Arts and Crafts idealism – a striving for a better, purer more wholesome approach to design, with a strong moral base. Of course the moral base in the nineteenth century was rooted in a rather Calvinistic Christian work ethic, whereas Oosthuizen's moral content is more ecologically bound. The inherent principles are, nevertheless, remarkably similar. The critic and theorist John Ruskin (1819-1900), for example, advised artists and designers of the movement to find their inspiration and teaching in nature (Cumming & Kaplan 1991:15). Oosthuizen also looks to nature to provide both the materials and the inspiration,

not only for his designs but also for his handling of those materials. Unlike the Arts and Crafts movement, however, Oosthuizen is not trying to compete economically with mass produced furniture in the market place.

Until the nineteenth century and the full impact of the industrial revolution, craft was a trade – a way of life for many people who filled a necessary function in society. Craft today is the product of a choice, an expression of free will, usually produced by a middle-class craftsman who is not financially dependent on his output (as is the case with Oosthuizen). Dormer (1990:153) explains that:

> Contemporary craft is necessarily peripheral to all mainstream economic activity. If it comes too close to trade, then both the nature of the craftsperson's work and the nature of the artefact is compromised by the need to be price competitive with trade.

He also notes that '[o]bjects that are sold on aesthetic grounds are not subject to competition by price' (Dormer 1990:152). This is where today's craftsman has an advantage over those of the Arts and Crafts movement. William Morris, for example, aspired to create beautiful, well made, hand-crafted objects for all to enjoy, guided by Ruskin's principle of 'joy in labour' (Cumming & Kaplan 1991:7) through which a moral tone could be imbued to the finished piece. This idealistic and democratic ideal was tempered, however, by the ultimate expense resulting from time-consuming hand work and the necessity of competing in a mass market (Cumming & Kaplan 1991:18). The psychological satisfaction and fulfilment engendered by hand crafting an object as an end in itself, however, is ironically still one of the main reasons why people practice craft production today.

Other Design Influences

Although there is a strong conceptual connection between Oosthuizen and the Arts and Crafts movement, the appearance of his furniture is very different in its lack of applied ornament, and probably owes more to the history of Modernism and more contemporary furniture makers such as the Japanese-American George Nakashima (1905-1990). Nakashima's furniture has clean lines and a Zen aesthetic that refers to his Japanese parentage, and, while paying lip service to Modernist rigidity in many works, there is a clear sensitivity to the organic nature of the wood he was working with that recalls the dexterity of the Arts and Crafts movement. He was able to select his timber and oversee the production process in opposition to the mechanisation demanded by current mass-market production (Kaufman 2002:126). His pieces of furniture are idiosyncratic, with free form table tops and unusual butterfly joints which were enormously innovative in the 1960s when they were produced. Frank Maraschiello, of Sotheby's in New York has said of him:

> Nakashima designed with the intrinsic beauty of wood in mind. Rather than disguise the wood's imperfections, Nakashima celebrated them, accentuated them and made them design elements (Kaufman 2002:124).

The descriptions of Nakashima's furniture, particularly his celebration of imperfections in the wood, are remarkably similar to descriptions of Oosthuizen's, without there being a single piece of furniture that one could point to as being stylistically similar.

Oosthuizen does not echo the *style* of other designers who have influenced him, but merely arrives at similar conclusions through separate but similar thought processes. For example, the American furniture designer and craftsman, Ejner Pagh, is also cited by Oosthuizen (2003a) as an influence, but his furniture is often very different to that created by Nakashima. Pagh's coffee table, for instance, consists of two long, irregular, organic pieces of walnut, where the shapes are dictated by the tree trunks from which the wood was cut (Meilach 1981:81). These planks are placed so that they overlap at slightly different heights to emphasise both their similarities and their differences in a Baroque interplay of solids and voids, curves and counter curves. One can almost imagine that they could, with some rearranging, slot together like a jigsaw puzzle. This has more to do with a sculptural sensitivity to materials than with Nakashima's modernist simplicity. The work of both Nakashima and Pagh could be seen as forerunners to Oosthuizen's *Tree fork coffee table* (figure 5), which incorporates both simplicity (a single piece of wood, simply presented, with legs of a contrasting colour that protrude through the table and are visible as rectangular insertions on the top) and organic sculptural qualities suggested by the 'natural imperfections' (the forked shape of the table top dictated by the tree from which the plank was cut).

Contrast, created by differing coloured woods in the case of the coffee table, is one of the identifying marks of Oosthuizen's work and sometimes provides the overriding impact of a piece. One can see this in the *Long table* made of white stinkwood (figures 6, 1). The wood had natural holes in the top and Oosthuizen has emphasised these by filling them with triangular pieces of stinkwood and kiaat, forming a geometric pattern within the organic voids of the surface. The table's decorative effect is created, therefore, by the contrast of both colour and shape.

Oosthuizen's working methods and aesthetic approach to wood also have an affinity with the English master craftsman and educator, John Makepeace (b.1939). Makepeace's furniture is innovative, beautifully crafted and shows a sensitivity to the inherent properties of the woods he chooses in a way that evokes their habitat or their origins by exploiting the natural grain, knots or 'imperfections' as decorative elements. There are also instances of more literal references to the origins of the wood such as the 'tree trunk' supports for the *Liberty table,*[6] or the branch-like back rests for his *Sylvan chairs*[7] where the organic nature of their form reflects the natural woodland of the setting outside the house

8

8 detail

9

Figure 8 and detail
Table with borer pattern. White stinkwood, English oak.

Figure 9
Block Chair. Silky oak, English oak, avocado.

for which they were designed (Myerson 1995:39). He has also created visual puns such as the *Knot Chair*[8] where the wooden seat and backrest are carved to resemble cushions that have been knotted on to the frame of the chair. The pun is emphasised by the inherent scattered knots in the wood that create an interesting texture in the burr elm, which was used for the 'cushions'.

Makepeace has been criticised for concentrating on elitist and expensive 'art' furniture, and certainly he established his career through designing finely crafted furniture for the upper end of the market, such as the prestigious commission for a table and chairs to celebrate the centenary of Liberty and Co. in 1975. His interest in wood, however, took an ecological turn in 1979 when he visited a forest at Longleat with his students and learned that half of the annual forestry crop was made up of young slender trees that were removed as 'thinnings' to allow selected trees more space for mature growth (Myerson 1995:148). These forest 'thinnings' have very little commercial value and were used mainly for firewood or pulp. Makepeace considered this a waste of natural renewable resources, and saw an opportunity to work with the forestry industry to produce a network of sustainable businesses in rural areas and to conserve and manage the forests more effectively (Myerson 1995:148). This provided the initiative for Makepeace's Hooke Park project. An innovative, timber supported, organic structure was built in the forest at Hooke Park as a residential college where students could be trained in forestry and woodwork. The students are taught to make optimal use of forest 'thinnings' for products, furniture and structural designs for building (Myerson 1995:164). There is a correlation, therefore, between the way Oosthuizen approaches his furniture production, using only found or discarded wood, and the motivation that initiated the Hooke Park project.

The ecological emphasis on design at Hooke Park is symbolised by Andy Goldsworthy's (b.1956) circular *Entrance* sculptures (1987) situated at the gateway to the park. Goldsworthy used 'worthless' second grade bent timber from the forest to create his curved forms, following his own belief in working with whatever nature provides, and allowing nature to 'dictate' in some way the finished form, as well as referring to the school's function of finding use for low grade wood. Goldsworthy (1990:2) has said that:

> All forms are to be found in nature, and there are many qualities within any material. By exploring them I hope to understand the whole. My work needs to include the loose and disordered within the nature of the material as well as the tight and regular.

In Oosthuizen's *Small block table* (figure 7) one can see how this statement could apply equally to his furniture, as the original craggy, weathered piece of found wood has dictated the form and provides the textural beauty of the piece. As a process artist, much of Goldsworthy's work is extremely transitory (working with snow and ice or leaves, for example), but the gates at Hooke Park have a more substantial lifespan including their ultimate recycling in nature. Similarly, there is an exploration of the nature of wood, its growth

10 front

10 back

11

Figure10 front.
Bench. Poplar.

Figure10 back.
Bench. Poplar.

Figure 11
Small cutting boards. Pear, tipuana, milkwood, apiesdoring, wild olive, red ivory.

and transformation and a reverence for natural processes in Goldsworthy's *Tree* series (1996) where found wood is piled up to create circles, towers and pyramids, or thin twigs are stretched along the branches of a living tree or create a cobweb pattern beneath a living branch.[9] Each of these art works is created with as little human manipulation of the raw material as possible;[10] Goldsworthy merely collects, arranges, and displays what nature has provided. It is clear, in Oosthuizen's *Small block table*, that by acting with the minimal intervention possible to perfect/liberate/reveal the final object, Oosthuizen is working in this instance with a Zen approach to nature that echoes Goldsworthy's approach.

Another piece by Oosthuizen that taps into the 'loose and disordered within the nature of the material' (Goldsworthy 1990:2) is a table made of planks of wood that have organic grooves and patterns incised into the surface because of the prior presence of woodworm or borer (figure 8). Most designers, faced with such 'damaged' material, might sand it smooth, fill the grooves, or choose not to use the wood at all. Oosthuizen, however, allows the irregularities created by nature to remain as both a visible and tactile reminder of the history of this particular piece of wood. To further emphasise this irregularity he also deliberately misaligns the planks that form the table top (figure 8 detail), thus creating table edges that are geometrically manufactured but ironically uneven, as a man-made reference to the naturally formed organic patterns on the surface of the wood.

Peter Dormer (1990:162) points out that in machine made objects flaws of any kind are considered intolerable, whereas in hand-crafted goods imperfection is not only acceptable but has become a virtue. The 'imperfections' in Oosthuizen's borer patterned table, however, are inherent in the nature of the material; the woodworking techniques employed in the crafting and finish of the piece are so fine that it falls into the second category of crafted objects discussed by Dormer (1990:164) where '… the objects demonstrate a formidable virtuoso and intricate perfection …'. Perfection combined with inherent flaws creates a kind of complex virtuosity, where both the craftsman and nature are able to communicate with the end user in a very personal and psychologically satisfying way. Compare, for example, the almost Japanese, understated simplicity of the single *Block Chair* (Figure 9), with its beauty residing in the clean shapes and contrasting colours of the two different oaks and avocado wood; and contrast this with the organic assymetricality of the split poplar *Bench* (figure 10), with a raw woody texture at the back belying the fine, smooth finish of the seat and back rest. Oosthuizen (2003b) explains that the latter piece was conceived and cut on site and the saw cut between the seats was necessary to make the bench manageable for working and transporting. But necessity has given it visual interest as the rigidity of the cut contrasts with the lack of geometric form along the top edge and the back of the bench.

With the examples of artists and designers who have had some influence on Oosthuizen's work one can see that he is not specifically aligned to one or the other. For example, the branchlike legs of his candlesticks and the inlays of con-

trasting coloured woods in certain pieces might suggest Makepeace, or the clean lines and simple finish of another might echo something one has seen by Nakashima, but each piece by Oosthuizen is unique. He avoids confining himself to an individual style and tries always to work with sensitivity – sensitive to both the dictates of the material and the needs and wants of the end user. Oosthuizen's furniture is also comfortable, sturdy and practical, and therefore incorporates all the elements to provide functional and psychological satisfaction as encapsulated by the words of craftsman Bob Trotman when discussing his approach to furniture design:

> I am very interested in a symbolic subliminal image of human consciousness when I design furniture. Furniture physically complements our bodies. Chairs and stools support us, tables hold things up and serve us, or provide a common ground for the people seated around them. Even the wood, in its accumulated growth, seems an image of human consciousness (Meilach 1981:95).

South African Influences

Oosthuizen's study of furniture design has not only centred on overseas craftsmen and artists but also includes examples of local, indigenous, early furniture. He has always been interested in the wood technologies of pioneer people (both black and white), early trekkers and traders as well as indigenous cultures working north of the Orange River, as opposed to the Cape Province (Oosthuizen 2003a). Oosthuizen collects indigenous woods and whenever possible early Transvaal furniture, for example he owns early Transvaal chairs and a table, rudimentary in design and finish, made of *boekenhout* and *tambootie*. This type of furniture is relatively rare because so much of it was burned in the farmhouses during the scorched earth policy employed by the British during the Anglo-Boer War.

One of the reasons for Oosthuizen's interest in early Transvaal furniture is because there is a paucity of information or documentation on early woodworking outside of the Cape Province. There are only a few books on South African traditional furniture and they are all based on furniture from the Cape.[11] Cape furniture stems stylistically from Europe as the European settlers desired furniture that they were familiar with. In her historical discussion of Cape furniture, Mary Cook (in Baraitser & Oberholzer 1978:9-11) mentions that the early furniture makers were also 'imported' along with a large quantity of ready-made furniture from Europe. Cook also explains that country furniture in the peninsula and the Boland eventually developed a style and character of its own, partly owing to obvious reasons such as the use of fewer and simpler tools or indigenous rather than imported woods, and the physical difficulties of getting imported furniture or materials to the new locations. This observation would be even more applicable to the early settlers in the Transvaal who had travelled further from any contact with European trading centres and were limited in what they could bring by the capacity of their wagons. Their tools were thus rudimentary, resulting in very simple basic furniture. Another practical reason for simpler furniture inland is that a town craftsman made a living from his furniture production, his clientele was large and he could devote time and energy to issues of style and refining his craft, whereas in the newly settled areas of South Africa furniture was made only when necessary and in the craftsman's spare time. Once the trekkers moved into the interior in their wagons, necessity was the main impetus and style was seldom an issue.

Much of the stylistic austerity, and the use of unusual wood combinations in Oosthuizen's furniture, stems from his interest in such simple early pieces and the indigenous woods from which they were made. In contemporary South African furniture making there is limited realisation of the properties of indigenous woods and how they need to be worked.[12] The material dictates the structure, form and processes to be followed, therefore the craftsman needs to be aware of the workable potential of each wood. Some woods, for example, do not glue well (woods rich in oils like teak) and need to be constructed without glue, some are strong and can be used for construction, others are not strong but are valuable through their beauty and can be used for smaller objects or as veneers. This practical knowledge of the properties of indigenous woods is what Oosthuizen has learned mostly by studying examples of local early furniture or other wooden objects, and sometimes by trial and error.[13]

Another aspect of indigenous wood that has fascinated Oosthuizen is the intense colours of some woods such as red ivory, for example, which has a very unusual deep pink/maroon natural colour. This enjoyment of colour is one of the identifying marks of Oosthuizen's work and can be seen in his range of cutting boards (figure 11) made respectively from red ivory, wild olive, *apiesdoring*, milkwood, tipuana and pear wood. These are deceptively simple objects, mere slices through the trunk of a tree, obtaining a measure of beauty through the fine, smooth surface and their inherent, intense colours. One of Oosthuizen's goals in creating the pieces exhibited in *Found Wood* is primarily to show how *design* is able to invest a seemingly worthless, forgotten, or discarded material with value, beauty, meaning and usefulness (Oosthuizen 2003b). This can be achieved through even the most subtle adjustments as can be seen in these boards where Oosthuizen has created slightly concave cutting surfaces. This small, seemingly insignificant alteration increases the usefulness of the boards by preventing juices from running off during food preparation.

Conclusion

Oosthuizen's approach to his design work and furniture making may seem unusual in a high-tech, market driven context, but it appears that he is, perhaps unconsciously, tapping into an alternative approach to ecological, sculptural furniture design that can be seen elsewhere in South Africa. The recently completed Earth Lodge at Sabi Sabi game reserve

has furniture designed by the sculptor Geoffrey Armstrong that is remarkably similar in both conception and execution to some of Oosthuizen's work.[14] Armstrong used trees uprooted by elephants or those that were washed down in the floods of 2000 as his raw material. From this 'found wood' he has created extraordinary pieces of what have been termed furniture sculptures (Collard 2003:131-135) which, owing to their scale and setting, can retain more of the organic abandon of unstructured wild wood than would be possible for everyday urban use, but nevertheless function as furniture in the lodge (bed headboards and reception desk for example). This imaginative and dramatic re-use of found wood echoes Oosthuizen's reverence for local woods and their use in our current environment. Oosthuizen's work is somewhat quieter in effect but his designs gently reveal the history and character of each piece of wood. His employment of the ecological aesthetic creates a visual reminder of his ecological ideal. There is an acknowledgement of the beneficial potential in this material that runs as a thread throughout his oeuvre, a potential that is echoed by H. Malherbe (in Immelman 1973:5) in the introduction to *Our green heritage: the South African book of trees*:

> And here the ancient oak reminds one once more that trees in their natural state use the soil, but at the same time enrich it. It is this fortunate cycle which makes forests a uniquely self-replenishing and self-perpetuating source of prosperity and beauty. The advantage of use, and the pleasure of looking at trees and being among them is undimmed by the passage of time. The forests which this generation is privileged to use and enjoy, are preserved for posterity.

Notes

1 Philip Oosthuizen is the head of the Three Dimensional Design Department at the University of Johannesburg.

2 Papanek's first book, *Design for the real world*, was written between 1963 and 1970 and first published in the USA in 1971.

3 The cradle to grave approach acknowledges that environmental issues may emerge at any stage of the life of a product or construction, and calculating the impact overall may be extremely difficult. This includes extraction of the raw material, the processing of ingredients, construction or manufacture, distribution, use and disposal (Mackenzie 1997:37).

4 Finding suitable wood became easier over time as people became aware that Oosthuizen was interested in found wood and they would tell him where to find it or remark on a piece they had seen that he might find useful (Oosthuizen 2003a).

5 This is not to imply that Morris never used machines in his studio production as this was often necessary to fulfil market demands – merely that Morris would have preferred totally hand produced designs.

6 The table is circular with a hollow centre made of limed oak with four interlocking curved sections and a solid support resembling four tree trunks joining at the base. Illustrations of this and the chairs can be seen in Myerson (1995:34-36).

7 These chairs are made in laminated oak with leather seats. Illustrations of them can be seen in Myerson (1995:38-39).

8 Illustrations in Myerson (1995:140-141).

9 Images of these works can be found in *Wood* by Andy Goldsworthy (1996:85-115).

10 Goldsworthy never uses man made materials, such as glue, paint or nails to construct or enhance his works.

11 Books on Cape furniture include: Atmore, MG. 1965. *Cape furniture.* Cape Town: Howard Timmins. Baraitser, M & Obholzer, A. 1978. *Cape country furniture.* Cape Town: Struik. Kench, J. 1987. *Cottage furniture in South Africa.* Cape Town: Struik. Van Onselen, LE. 1959. *Cape antique furniture.* Cape Town: Howard Timmins. Pearce, GE. 1960. *Eighteenth century furniture in South Africa.* Pretoria. There is also a catalogue: Viljoen, Disney & Rabe, P. 2001. *Cape Furniture and Metalware.* Cape Town.

12 There is a long tradition of local timberwork in the wagon making trade but that has not been well documented. There is thus very little record of this industry, which resulted in many indigenous forests being cut down for wagon construction.

13 Many of the early uses of indigenous woods in the Transvaal have been listed in the book *Our green heritage: the South African book of trees* by Immelman, Wicht and Ackerman (1973:49-50), however local furniture is not mentioned.

14 Information and images of Geoffrey Armstrong's sculpture/furniture at the Sabi Sabi Earth Lodge can be seen online at: http://www.sabisabi.com/earthlodgegallery.html

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