



Green Pioneers

Austin's furniture-making craftsmen have enlivened sustainable designs with atypical materials and daring lines.

By Christopher Carbone
Photography by Ryan Slack

Forty-year-old craftsman Wells Mason moved to Austin in 1986 to study English and psychology at UT, a background that he says allows him to think differently about his work. He also grew up around metal shops and woodworking, and one lesson his father taught him about self-reliance continues to inform how he manages Ironwood Industries, his one-stop design house that's also a metal-and woodworking studio.

Mason's burgeoning interest in working with a wide range of unique materials, most of which are recyclable or reusable, led him to create the Umasi furniture line, pieces of which will be on display this summer at the Houston Center for Contemporary Craft.

"I'm a real junkie in terms of materiality," he says, noting that some Ironwood projects have used up to eight different materials, including concrete, steel, aluminum, feathers, and wood. Often these materials are recycled or repurposed. Mason came up with the idea for Umasi partly because of his interest in mixed materials but also as a way to blur—some might say erase—the line between furniture and sculpture. Indeed, if some of these pieces aren't the most functional, they make up for that with their intellectual component—which Mason is happy to explain. "All the parts that we use to make it up are in some form or way a symbol of reuse," he says. "You look at a chair and you know it's an old telephone pole—that's largely what the Umasi collection does: it challenges our way of thinking about our waste. An Umasi chair might suggest the familiar shape of a chair—but alternatively, it's more subversive than it is functional. In fact, with Umasi, I'm not trying to make anyone comfortable—I'd rather make them uncomfortable."

The Umasi bench will be on display this summer in New York City at architecture mega firm Gensler, which opened a location in Austin earlier this year. The bench is composed of spalted (diseased) pecan that was rescued from an old building in Missouri; tempered glass cannibalized from an omelet pan, recycled rubber from a repurposed exercise ball, and formaldehyde-free MDF (medium density fiberboard). Mason also notes that Ironwood does all of the finishes and uses low-VOC (volatile organic compounds) protective finishes.

