

# Fast furniture

People have probably heard of fast fashion, and should be familiar with fast food. But what about fast furniture? The impact fast furniture has on our environment is a problem worth discussing.

Like fast fashion, fast furniture is a term which covers everything from cheap, stylish sofas to on-trend homewares and décor items. Unlike fast fashion, however, we have not really reckoned with it yet. There are more homeware brands than ever before. Everyone, from top-end designers to high street names and budget stores, has a stake in the interiors game.

It was not so long ago, certainly within my lifetime, that we bought furniture to last. Dining tables and sofas would have a place in our homes for decades, many handed down through generations. They were a part of our lives and embedded in our fondest memories. It was a time when we used to place

value on our furniture, because it had value. And the reason it had value was because the people who made it placed value on the materials and workmanship. And because we valued it, we looked after it. And if our furniture broke, we fixed it, whether it was a new coat of varnish or new upholstery. And we did this again and again until we could not squeeze any more life out of it. But things were much slower then, and people cared more.

Some big players are already trying to green up their act. IKEA, the Swedish furniture giant, has announced schemes like buybacks of unwanted items, more spare parts, and furniture renting in a bid to make its model more sustainable. But it also makes 15 Billy Bookcases a minute out of particleboard and veneer, which is not very durable and not very fixable. To date, it has made about 60 million of them.



Inspiring the next “material revolution” by creating sustainable and high-performance materials from oil palm waste, **Peter Fitch** together with IOI have set up IOI Palm Wood to commercialise this untapped potential.





We can make ourselves feel better by reselling or donating instead of dumping. But many second-hand stores and salesrooms will not touch furniture that was made within the last five years.

There is also the issue of toxicity in the manufacturing process and in the items themselves, which are often made from low-quality materials, that may leach or disintegrate in potentially dangerous ways. Many fast furniture is made from cheap high-emission particleboard or medium-density fibreboard (MDF), which not only does not last but contains toxic chemicals like formaldehyde.

One of the most difficult things about 'fast everything' is that it has crept up on us slowly. We crave new things, and we have become used to having easy access to them. We are a little more likely to treat ourselves than hold back. That has been a growing measure as a characteristic of our unsustainable culture.

It is not just about our tastes; it is also the ways our economy and our culture are set up. Most of

us do not even remember a time when this was not how the world worked.

But by far the biggest driver is social media. Thanks to the constant stream of fresh content, trends turn over faster than ever.

What can we do about it? Paying more is a big ask — there is a price constraint for many of us, now more than ever. Having more conscious furniture does not mandate that we never buy another IKEA item, it just requires that we are a little more mindful if we do. Here are some tips for buying longer-lasting, healthier and more eco-friendly furniture:

#### **Buy fewer items of better quality:**

As we have come to realise that a home cluttered with stuff does not really bring us the fulfilment we once thought, there has been a widespread shift towards simplifying our lives. A home with less furniture is more spacious and easier to clean. And if consumers buy less furniture then they can afford to spend a bit more on the stuff they do buy, and know that it will go the distance — and probably save them money in the long run.



#### **Legend**

- 1 A consequence of fast furniture — furniture easily discarded after a few years of use
- 2 Opt for better quality furniture that are long-lasting





## SUSTAINABILITY

**Buy for life:** Consumers should invest in a quality piece of solid furniture that will not ever go out of fashion. Explore second-hand and vintage shops with beautiful and quality furniture, and pick up some great bargains.

**Buy timeless and stylish:** Choose classic and timeless styles that will not ever go out of fashion. Explore second-hand and vintage shops with beautiful and quality furniture, and pick up some great bargains.

**Know exactly what you are after and do not compromise:** Before buying new furniture, consumers should first ask themselves if they really need it. And if they do, do not rush in. They should allow time to firstly be clear on exactly what they are after, and then to find the perfect item, one that meets all their criteria like size, style, materials, quality and budget. And if they cannot find it, get it custom-made.

**Seek out furniture companies that use toxic-free and sustainable materials:** Some furniture manufacturers such as IKEA have been proactive in phasing out toxic chemicals and moving towards sustainably-sourced materials.

### HOW SUSTAINABLE IS THE USAGE OF PALM WOOD?

Using palm wood for furniture and building materials can be sustainable with its carbon capture during the products' life. Palm wood, when used indoors, is durable and free from harmful chemicals such as formaldehydes. For example, high-density palm wood boards can last for decades, provided they are dry and manufactured properly.

When wood is decayed, either naturally in the forest or because of the damage caused by usage at home, the carbon stored in the wood is released back to the atmosphere. Therefore, long-lasting furniture can be considered a good way of keeping carbon out of the atmosphere. If the wood is reclaimed for making another piece of furniture, its positive carbon storage environmental impact is even higher. **P**

#### Legend

- 3** Buy furniture that is stylish and timeless
- 4** Do not settle — get furniture that is custom-made to meet strict criteria
- 5** Try to use palm wood furniture, which is durable and free from harmful chemicals

