MARKET UPDATE

Pulling through pandemic and promoting U.S. hardwoods

Like its counterparts elsewhere, the UK hardwood sector since March has been preoccupied with coming through the pandemic. But while it took a hit through Covid-19 lockdown, sales have since picked up and some stability has returned to business, so the industry can turn once more to thoughts of market development.

As far as North American hardwoods are concerned, that means promoting their performance potential to specifiers and continuing to make their sustainability case. This is the perspective of a major UK timber importer AHEC has spoken to.

Despite being one of the UK’s largest and more established traders in U.S. hardwoods the importer admits they were significantly impacted by the health crisis.

“We weren’t wiped out, but it was a difficult period and in April we were trading at around 40% of normal levels,” he said. “However we saw a pick up to 60% in May, then 80% in June, while July was a good month. We’re still a bit below budget, but actually ahead of last year and, while there’s obviously concern about a second wave of Covid, trade is now steady.”

Some market sectors are now performing robustly. “The strongest area currently is home improvement and DIY domestic projects,” said the UK importer. “Consumers unable to go on holiday, and perhaps with holiday refunds, are investing instead on their houses. So we’re seeing good sales to such sectors as staircase, kitchen, window, cladding and landscaping manufacturing. Anything destined for these areas is booming.”

Among markets recovering more slowly, perhaps the worst affected by the pandemic is shopfitting. “Some of the bigger, more robust stores did take the opportunity of lockdown to do some refurbishment, but the shopfitting sector overall has taken some steps backward,” he added.

Lines which have picked up quickest include modified, engineered and semi-processed wood products. However, lumber from all sources, temperate and tropical, has been slower. “Demand for North American lumber is pretty good, but we’re still not back at the levels we want to be”, the imported added.

To develop UK sales of American hardwoods and particularly the lesser used species, he added, it’s key to communicate their aesthetic and technical potential to specifiers, the designers and architects.

That is why AHEC’s marketing initiatives, such as its recent Connected design project, which involved nine European designers creating furniture during the lockdown using U.S. maple, cherry and red oak, are so important.

“We long for the time that such species as cherry return to popularity, it’s important to utilize them, but as importers we don’t set the trends, we supply what customers ask for” the importer said. “So it is very important the industry gets through to specifiers. This is something AHEC is very good at, leading the charge on less popular species. Changing designers’ opinions of what’s in vogue is not easy, but we’ve got to keep working at it.”

Convincing the market and particularly the authorities of American hardwoods’ sustainability and legality credentials is also vital.
“The challenge we have in this area is that the bigger housebuilders and manufacturers follow government guidelines on these issues, and UK government procurement policy currently only recognises FSC, PEFC and Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade (FLEGT) certified product has having Category A proof of legality and sustainability. Everything else, including most American hardwoods, falls into Category B,” said the UK-based importer.

“AHEC has done some brilliant work in this area, developing such tools as its American Hardwood Environmental Profile (AHEP) documentation. What we should now do is lobby government to recognise the validity of this and the other environmental evidence produced by AHEC and persuade them to include U.S. hardwoods in Category A.”

**ACTIVITIES**

**SPECIAL PROJECT FOCUS: CONNECTED**

AHEC Europe has undertaken some seriously demanding creative projects in the past. We have worked with many truly exceptional designers to push the boundaries of what’s possible technically and aesthetically with U.S. hardwoods. The outcomes, from decorative products, to multi-storey timber building, have been incredible.

But our latest project, Connected, has been a challenge on a whole different level. It has simultaneously been about exploring furniture design, manufacturing and market potential of three important and underused U.S. hardwoods – maple, cherry and red oak – to encourage a more sustainable use of the U.S. hardwood timber resource. At the same time, it has been a design and making response to the extraordinary environment of the Covid-19 pandemic, which is what has made it so relevant. And it has addressed what are increasingly seeing as the longer-term outcomes: a permanent shift to more remote working and the home becoming more of a living and working/space, with the implications that has for products and materials people want around them.

The end results are featuring in a special exhibition at The Design Museum in London from September 12 to October 11, as well as on AHEC’s first virtual exhibition experience, which can now be accessed online at connectedbydesign.online/exhibition. The nine resulting projects would be exceptional at any time, but in the
current circumstances, they are nothing short of extraordinary.

**Connecting 9 designers, 3 hardwoods, 1 workshop**

*Connected* is so-called because it has involved multiple connections. First of all, it has brought together nine designers in nine cities in nine countries. Their brief has been to create coordinating seating and tables, with the ultimate aim of the pieces coming together in one integrated installation. All of them worked from home in various levels of lockdown, but connected with us and each other remotely throughout the process, including via video diaries.

The enthusiasm with which they signed up to the project blew us away. It is not just the creative challenge they’ve relished. It is also being asked to adapt to a new way of working. Besides the brief, they were sent samples of the three species

A virtual tour of the designs installed at the Design Museum can be found [here](#).

The nine international designers connected remotely throughout the process, including through video diaries. All the video material from the project can be found [here](#).

The designers had a choice of three underused U.S. hardwood species: maple, cherry and red oak.
in a wide range of stains and finishes, plus full technical data on each. It was then a case of multiple WhatsApp, Zoom and Facetime calls with our maker, renowned furniture producer Benchmark. This way they navigated each step of bringing the designs to reality, where necessary adapting initial ideas to the characteristics of the timber and demands of manufacture. For those designers who’s quarantine rules allowed them to get to the exhibition, the launch at the Design Museum was the first time they saw their pieces in the flesh!

It was a journey into the unknown for everyone. That it has worked so incredibly well is down to the imagination and creativity of the designers, the versatility of the material and the timber knowledge and crafts skills of the makers at Benchmark Furniture.

**Connecting design audiences and underused U.S. hardwoods**

The project also aimed to connect the design world with these three species; American maple, cherry and red oak. They are less used in Europe than in the past and, as they are among the most abundant varieties in the U.S. hardwood forest – with red oak the most prolific of all – we as an industry naturally want to sell more. We make absolutely no bones about that. But there’s also an irrefutable environmental case for utilizing a wider selection of timber and we made that from the start of Connected. To make sustainable use of the forest resource, we have to accept what it provides. We can’t keep consuming more and more of the same handful of species.

Some of our designers appreciated this from the outset. For others, it was a fresh perspective on materials use, but they bought into it hugely. We selected the range of samples to underline the timbers’ possibilities and encourage their
consideration for a wider range of applications. We wanted our designers to really explore the untapped potential of this palette of species, not bound by what they’ve been used for in the past.

And they did rise to the occasion. The invention is extraordinary. They have used the wood finished in a variety of ways - stained, painted, oiled - showing it at its very best. Some have used a single variety, others a blend, or they’ve married the timber with other materials entirely. Looking at all the pieces together, you really wouldn’t think this was just three species.

What further differentiates Connected from our previous projects was that we weren’t asking designers to work to someone else’s specification, but to create something for themselves. It was a very different, very personal design dynamic. It had to be furniture they would feel comfortable having in their own home, a home, moreover, that post-Covid will have to be more multi-functional and lower environmental impact. The outcomes are pieces designed both to bring pleasure and joy, and to respond to this change.

Connecting material performance, sustainability and creativity

Shared themes include an emphasis on the natural qualities of the wood and also on durability. Benchmark says it makes each of its products to last at least 100 years. They said that the way one of the Connected tables was conceived and made it could last 500! Another set of furniture is designed to perform both indoors and, on a verandah, outside.

The designers also clearly took on board our proposition that, while we should be utilizing more wood overall, as the ultimate renewable, low carbon raw material, we should make less do more in each product or structure so the resource
Benchmark collected all the material and processing data to enable us to produce a life cycle assessment (LCA) profile for each of the pieces. It’s something we have done with numerous previous projects. We’re communicating the outcomes with the designers, some of whom are more familiar with it than others, and more widely via the AHEC website. What we stress, besides U.S. hardwoods’ superior performance in LCA, is that almost invariably where analysis indicates scope for environmental impact savings in a product, these result in manufacturing/cost savings too.

The Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) of this project shows that when considered as a group, the Connected designs are better than carbon neutral. The total global warming potential (GWP) - often referred as the “carbon footprint” - of the nine Connected designs is minus 342 kg of CO$_2$ equivalent.

What’s next for Connected?

Our only regret is that, due to pandemic rules, The Design Museum has to restrict visitor numbers, so initially fewer people will see the finished project than would otherwise.

But we’re backing the project with a major digital communication programme and for 2021 we’re planning to take the collection on tour to some of its creators’ home cities. With them as our ambassadors and the caliber of their pieces, we’re confident we’ll really be able to reach out to other designers and strengthen the connection between timber industry and design community. More than ever, Connected has convinced us this is the way ahead for our sector.

**SHARING THE ‘CONNECTED’ STORY**

Here is a round-up of some of the communication tools developed by AHEC Europe to promote the
The project has generated an incredible media interest and we are receiving information requests not only from Europe, but also from countries like Brazil, South Korea and Israel.

A bespoke e-platform has been created and used to share the story behind each of the pieces, as well as key information on the material. This website is fully responsive and features a virtual exhibition of the project.

The team at AHEC has been busy disseminating content regularly on social media, and trying some innovative formats which have proved to work well and achieve a high level of engagement, such as video interviews on Instagram TV, Instagram takeovers from designers.

The social media activity has been constant since the project began and accounts for about ½ of the visits to the Connected website.

Learn all about Connected at connectedbydesign.online

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**SOCIAL MEDIA**

- Views of Connected film on Instagram TV: 30,000
- +500 posts using hashtag #connectedbydesign

**PRESS LAUNCH**

- +40 journalists
- +20 media interviews

**ONLINE HUB**

- +13,000 users of Connected website
- +31,000 pageviews of Connected website
- +2,500 visits to online exhibition

**PR**

- +100 articles online mention Connected
- Online reach +201 million

**NEXT STEPS FOR CONNECTED**

A short documentary targeted at design and architectural audiences will be launched shortly, and a special book about the project will be released later this Autumn

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The Connected reach in numbers.

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**Launch event at the Design Museum in London**

The project was launched on 11 September at the Design Museum with a press event. Over 40 press attended, mainly from UK as it was expected due to the current circumstances. We also had a few international journalists as well as 5 of the 9 designers (the other four sadly couldn’t be there due to quarantine restrictions). Numerous media interviews took place and it was a great moment to film interviews with our designers after having seen their pieces for the first time.

**Strategic PR**

The team developed a comprehensive press kit for the project including imagery, interviews and video content which has been distributed to press internationally. We have been working closely with the project partners and AHEC PR consultants to reach as many people as possible.

It’s only been a couple of weeks since the launch, but the project has been widely featured in the press, from Wallpaper* and the Financial Times, to Polish National radio and Spain’s main newspaper, El Pais.

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**Connected online hub**

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**Social media activity**

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PR HIGHLIGHTS

Connected
American red oak, maple and cherry
Financial Times | UK

189k print
11.7m online
unique visitors

Connected
American red oak, maple and cherry
Wallpaper* | UK

100k print
461.5K online
unique visitors

Connected
American red oak, maple and cherry
El País | Spain

Connected
American red oak, maple and cherry
ICON Magazine | UK

31.7m online
unique visitors

25,500 print circulation

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Glasgow Home | UK

Glasgow Home | UK

Glasgow Home | UK

Glasgow Home | UK
PR HIGHLIGHTS

**Dezeen**

*Connected*

American red oak, maple and cherry

Dezeen | UK

1.2M online unique visitors

**WP**

*Connected*

American red oak, maple and cherry

WP | Poland

715.8K online unique visitors

**Area**

*Connected*

American red oak, maple and cherry

Area | Italy

45K online unique visitors

**Welt**

*Connected*

American red oak, maple and cherry

Welt am Sonntag | Germany

415k print

11.1m online unique visitors
SOCIAL MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS

- **Connected**
  American red oak, maple and cherry
  Heatherwick Studio | Instagram TV
  +3500 views

- **Connected**
  American red oak, maple and cherry
  Jaime Hayon | Instagram
  152k followers
  +1300 likes

- **Connected**
  American red oak, maple and cherry
  London Design Festival | Instagram
  293k followers

- **Connected**
  American red oak, maple and cherry
  Design Museum | Instagram
  434k followers
  +800 likes
## EXCHANGE RATES

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