

2009/05: Big [Green] Dreams | Part 1 – Small Efforts

contributed by Julie Weber [designer / explorer / cubicle expert]

"The client wants a bubble Jetty top with a mobile BBF," I said into my cell phone one evening while standing in line at the grocery store. The woman in front of me gave me a strange look, and I turned away. This was a furniture emergency and so I had to finish the call, no matter how rude it was or how strange my technical jargon may have seemed. My God, people's lives were at stake; wait, I mean people's desks and chairs and keyboard trays were at stake.

"No, he definitely does not want to go with the metallic finish, and yes, he wants leather on his task chair. Okay, thanks. Bye."

I hung up the phone and started to unload my organic fruit onto the conveyor belt. I sighed long and hard and shook my head. Forty years after the invention of the cubicle, I am an interior designer working for a furniture dealership, designing and selling cubicles by the tens, hundreds and thousands. I went to school to make things beautiful, to create spaces that inspire people. I knew nothing about the environmental impact of the products I loved and wanted to use. As I learn more, my career seems misguided and my industry to blame for much of the ecological crisis that now faces our world. Here I was, buying organic fruit and using my own cloth bag, but I was also selling laminate tops with PVC edges to some guy who had no idea what kind of moral dilemma that caused me.

Five years ago I didn't know anything about PVC, nor did I care. And to be honest, I can't pinpoint when I started to know, or to care. I know it came after the Architecture and Design Industry began to go "green" when they started to think about how the materials in their projects affected the eco-system. I was a new member of the dealership community then, where we furniture people were always thinking about the bottom line. I didn't quite grasp the concept of "re-use" yet. It was all about money, money, money—how much money could we make by selling this chair, or this cubicle?

I started to care years after many of the furniture manufacturers did, like Steelcase, Herman Miller or Haworth. They were thinking green before much of the nation, due to a fantastic book called *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* written by Architect William McDonough and Chemist Michael Braungart.

This book helped to revolutionize the design industry when it was written in 2001. These two men propose in their book, an alternate way of thinking about product development. They urge companies to try and make products that are infinitely recyclable and non-harmful to people or the planet. McDonough and Braungart have since worked with many high profile companies like Ford Motors and the United States Postal service, and have developed a certification based on the concepts in their book.

Today's Cradle to Cradle (C2C) certification is a third party stamp on any given product, classifying it as "green" according to the standards in the book. One thing that keeps me going in my career is the knowledge that those men have certified more products from the manufacturer I sell, than any other company they have worked with. Because we, at my dealership, sell those products as our main line of furniture I can rest assured that at least I represent one company that seems to possess the same values that I do.

I read this book only six months ago and am amazed at the strides my industry has made in helping the rest of the world become more educated about the impact that product development has on the environment, but it also made me aware of just how far we have to go and more importantly, how much damage has been done.

"Are you an owner of the co-op?" the cashier asked me.

"Yes," I answered and handed her my membership card. I belong now to a local co-op, and yet my job often requires me to forget about the "right thing" and concentrate on the most inexpensive thing; often times meaning a product that contains harmful substances like PVC.

PVC is short for poly vinyl chloride and the plasticizers that make it soft and flexible can be toxic. Not only that, but the production of PVC creates and releases one of the most toxic chemicals found today—dioxin. Dioxin's toxicity is second only to radioactive waste.

Not only is it deadly, PVC is difficult to recycle, resulting in much of it ending up in landfills. In my book, PVC is bad; very bad. It has been categorized as one of the "X-substances" by McDonough and Braungart, meaning that it is harmful to the extent that it shouldn't exist or be used anymore and any product trying to

achieve a C2C certification will no longer be able to contain PVC. (McDonough and Braungart 167).

For the last five years, I was unaware that the edges on all of the lunch room tables I specified were made from toxins. And yet, PVC is still used everyday. On 95% of the projects I work on I specify a laminate top with a PVC edge. There are hundreds and hundreds of cubicles out there covered in PVC. It can also be found in plastic bottles (um, hello we drink what is in those!), credit cards, wall coverings and faux leather. Just to name a few.

I bag my own groceries while the cashier rings me up. While I can choose to use cloth instead of paper or plastic, I am forced to specify PVC. At home and at work I recycle everything, even Lean Cuisine boxes and carry-out containers. I compost in my back yard to keep things out of the landfills that can decompose outside in a matter of weeks but stay intact beneath the ground for decades. But I keep drawing cubes, and selling PVC.

Tops without PVC do exist, and products have been re-designed to meet Cradle to Cradle criteria. But my industry is mostly driven by a client's budget and a seller's desire for a large commission. Trying to do the right thing often comes at a premium cost.

I walked out of the grocery store and down the block to my house with a sense of failure. How can my small efforts make up for the massive damage I and my industry have already done? And how do I know what I am specifying in the absence of PVC is any safer or better?

More To Come

Stay tuned. Next month we'll include two more installments in the Big [Green] Dreams series: Small Budgets & Little Victories.