



8 smart questions to ask when navigating sustainable furniture

A close-up photograph of a wooden chair joint, showing the intricate craftsmanship of the woodwork. The wood is a light, natural color, and the joint is a traditional mortise and tenon style with rounded, decorative elements.

Why is sustainability of furniture important

This white paper breaks down the complex and daunting world of sustainable design to help decision makers within the industry find responsibly produced furniture.

How can you take a balanced and informed decision that is not just based on emotional sustainability stories, and how can you do this without it becoming too technical?

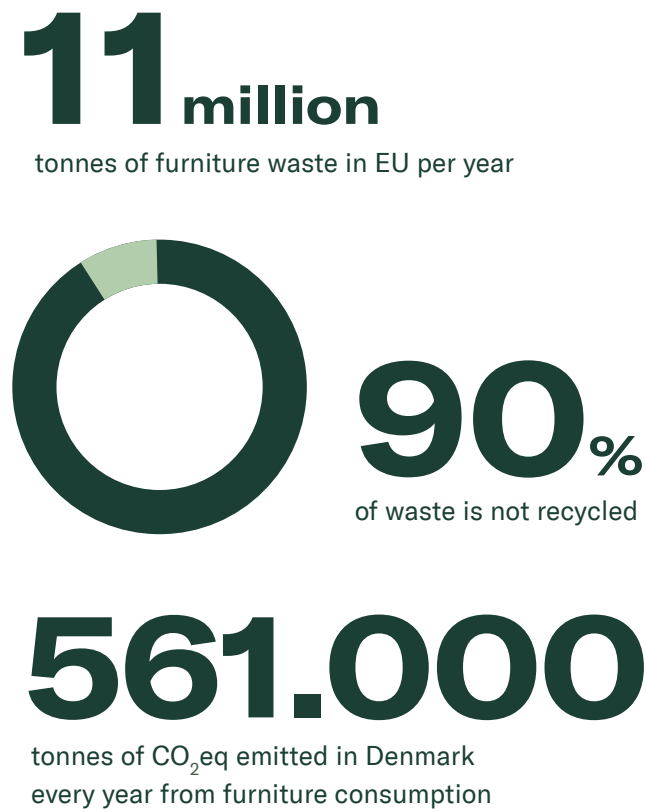
As environmental concerns increase in all sectors, the architecture and design industry is faced with the imperative to increase its contribution to more eco-friendly practices.

Whatever your position, we must all make decisions that reduce our projects' carbon emissions (CO₂eq), reduce the waste that we are responsible for and increase the circularity of the products that we specify.

The urgent need for sustainable furniture design

In the EU alone, 11 million tonnes of furniture waste is generated every year, which corresponds to 5–6 chairs being thrown out per citizen every year. Only about 10% of this waste is recycled¹.

Consumption-based carbon emissions for furniture is high. In Denmark alone, 561 kilotonnes of CO₂eq are emitted every year from furniture consumption², which puts furniture in the top ten most carbon emitting product categories³.



1 EEB, Circular Economy Opportunities in the Furniture Sector, 2017
2 Niras, April 2021
3 Concito, August 2023

What is the problem?

We clearly need more sustainable practices that minimise environmental impact within the furniture sector, so what's stopping us?

The environmental impact of making new products is **not clearly understood or transparently shared by manufacturers.**

New materials that appear to be sustainable can play on visible and emotional solutions, like ocean waste, **masking products that are not part of the circular economy.**

Furniture made with **composite materials, like reinforced plastics and glued upholstery**, contribute to landfill as they cannot be separated and recycled, even if the individual materials would be.

Most products are not repairable, which drives users to discard furniture rather than repair it.

Business models are **not providing customers with the ability to purchase spare parts** to extend product lifespan.

The furniture market for **resell and rental remains quite immature.**

Fast-fashion is accelerating furniture replacement cycles as trends come and go.

Sustainable furniture goes beyond catchy new materials, it requires **new business models and specification processes.** It requires a holistic process across supply and demand.

8 questions to find sustainable furniture

LOOK FOR LOW-IMPACT LIFE CYCLES

1

Demand established eco-certifications

“The Flower” or EU Ecolabel is the official certification of the European Union. Products that have been awarded are made of materials that are safe for the user, sourced sustainably (e.g., FSC certified wood) and designed in a way that allow for basic repair and reuse.

“The Swan” is the official eco-label of the Nordics. It sets strict requirements for materials, production, use and recycling.

Carbon neutral claims from manufacturers must be considered highly questionable. “Carbon neutrality” is often achieved by including either purchased carbon credits and/or carbon storage in materials in the calculations. However, according to official EU guidelines, neither carbon storage in materials nor purchased carbon credits can be included.

2

Compare environmental footprint calculations

Request verified Product Environmental Footprint calculations (PEFs). They allow you to easily compare the sustainable performance of products to ensure there is positive impact on your project and not just a good marketing narrative.

Historically LCAs were documented in Environmental Product Declarations (EPDs) but these have been replaced by more thorough PEF reports, which are based on clear directions from the EU to ensure comparable results. EPDs were based on varying assumptions and self-evaluations, which could make it impossible to compare results.

3

Consider materials used

PEF reports properly account for resources extracted from the earth and the energy needed to process them. The use of nonrenewable materials like plastic and metal are reflected in this, as well as the sometimes highly energy intensive process of creating recycled materials, which must be accounted for.

Renewable materials like wood are often more sustainable, as they require less energy to produce.

Recycled plastic is often considered to be an environmental benefit, but a PEF will reveal the gross impact including extraction, production and waste.

LOOK FOR
EXTENDED
LIFETIME

4

Evaluate the longevity of the design

Avoid products exhibiting an aesthetic based on short-term fashion trends.

Limit trend-led design specifications to lower impact areas like textiles that are naturally high-wear. For example, carpets have a shorter lifespan than furniture, so inject pattern and colour into your design there.

5

Ensure quality so it can last for the intended use

‘EN standards’ testing ensures a basic level of quality to match the intended use of a product.

Choose products tested for contract use with EN-L1 or EN-L2 approval.

6

Check for repairability and upgradeability

Ensure all wearable parts, like felt gliders, can be replaced, but also consider if the manufacturer has a repair service.

Upholstery and soft furnishings wear much more quickly than solid parts, so they must be easily replaceable and stocked by manufacturers.

If the manufacturer does not offer spare parts or a repair service, you are committing your client to costly replacement and future landfill, which may affect their reputation.

7

Clarify how products should be discarded at end-of-life

Every product has a lifespan, which you should consider as part of your specification. The ability to ensure resell or reuse is important to consider upfront. Some manufacturers offer take-back schemes that allow customers to return items directly for repair or recycling.

Make the lifespan of products part of your pitch as more clients are making purchase decisions based on sustainable principles.

8

Choose mono-materials over composite materials

The reason most furniture is not recycled is because products and their upholstery are not designed to be separated at end-of-life. Materials that cannot be separated into their constituent parts are called composite materials.

Composite materials cannot be recycled, they must be discarded via incineration or landfill.

Mono-materials can be returned to their technical or biological cycles to be recycled. Products that use reversible fixings to assemble mono-materials are the best.



Paving the way forward

Sustainable design is not a trend. It's a requirement.

By specifying products that are low impact, long life and circular, you will play your part in the drive towards a more sustainable industry that limits its contribution to environmental decline.

With these 8 questions close at hand, you can be confident that you are making sustainable choices on behalf of your company or your client, and you will be able to communicate your decisions.