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Biodegradable Home Product Lines, Ready to Rot

By [PENELOPE GREEN](#)

THE other day, Cody Anderson, an earnest young salesman at Montauk Sofa on Mercer Street, was extolling the many, many virtues of the furniture there while leading me to a buff-colored, chenille-covered, down-filled chaise longue called Stanley. "You want to get right onto it," he said, taking my bag. "Isn't that amazing?"

Ploompf. It did feel pretty good. Yet starting this month, the most noteworthy features of Stanley and other Montauk Sofa pieces will be facets you won't be able to see or feel, like wood frames from sustainably managed forests, uncoated nails, organic fabrics and stuffings, nontoxic dyes and, something extra: biodegradability.

"At first the whole idea was to have as little impact on the environment as possible," said Tim Zyto, chief executive of Montauk. "And then I started to think, wouldn't it be great to have no impact? Then it was, hey, what if the sofa just disappears when you're done with it?"

As much as this scenario sounds like it was lifted from a [Philip K. Dick](#) novel — vanishing furniture! — Mr. Zyto has attempted to make his imaginings a reality, at least in principle (if you disregard those pesky nails), joining a number of other home goods manufacturers and designers who are marketing their products as biodegradable. Not just "green," or "sustainable," but fully compostable, like lawn clippings or kitchen scraps. In theory, their products, under the right conditions, would break down, eventually.

For many of these manufacturers and designers, the word "biodegradable" is a signal that they are trying to adhere to the closed-loop manufacturing model put forth by William McDonough, the green design guru and architect whose 2002 book, "Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things," written with Michael Braungart, a chemist, proposed a new paradigm for the design and production of household goods. One of its tenets is that our stuff, once we're done with it, can be "nourishment" for something new, either by being recycled (or "upcycled") into a product of equal or better value, or by literally devolving into a "bio-nutrient," like compost.

But can you compost a sofa and its throw pillows? Should you?

"It's an admirable idea," said Warren Shoulberg, editor of Home Furnishing News, a trade publication. "But it doesn't seem particularly practical," he said. "Maybe biodegradable means it goes in your backyard, which could signal a whole new meaning for the Appalachian porch look."

Advertising products once marketed for their durability as biodegradable acknowledges that we are in a throwaway society, and that one's furniture may not be an heirloom, to be passed along, but an object of fashion, ultimately destined for the landfill.

Joanna Notkin, a 32-year-old Montreal-based textile designer, guarantees that her brightly colored knitted pillows and chunky, waffle-weave blankets will biodegrade in one year, should you choose to throw them in your composter once you're done with them. They are sold under the name Loooolo ([looolotextiles.com](#)) and have been featured in fashion-forward magazines like Lucky, Domino and Elle. Ms. Notkin described her mandate for her four-year-old company (Loooolo is a typographical representation of 100 percent), as "biodegradable with an aesthetic."

Even mass-market manufacturers are embracing the B-word. Umbra, maker of inexpensive, stylish housewares, uses "biodegradable plastic" for many of its trash cans, which its ads say "break down into powder" in a landfill. And its Garbino can — the swoopy garbage can designed by Karim Rashid — is now made from corn plastic, which Umbra advertises as "completely biodegradable."

"As part of the design process we've been trying to introduce the idea of what happens to a product's end use," said David Quan, who handles sustainable initiatives for the company. "And one of the options, if something is not recyclable, is to have it break down."

WHEN wrestled to the ground, "biodegradable" can be as vaporous a term as "green." ASTM International, formerly the American Society for Testing and Materials, defines the word, in part, as "a degradation caused by biological activity" but doesn't specify just how long that might take. Consumers, by and large, according to a 2006 survey by the American Chemistry Council, believe that "biodegradable" means an object will totally disappear within a year, which makes the purchase of a product like a biodegradable sofa an exercise in magical thinking.

"I see a new generation of marketers who are looking at biodegradability as a panacea to solid waste," said Steve Mojo, executive director of the

Biodegradable Products Institute, remembering the “biodegradable” diapers and trash bags of decades past. Mr. Mojo continued, “There is no data that I’ve seen to support manufacturers’ claims that any plastics will completely biodegrade under landfill conditions.” Tightly packed, covered and relatively dry, landfills are not exactly designed for biodegradation, he said.

In any case, there is something quixotic and poignant about makers of home goods — particularly large home goods, like sofas — advertising their wares for their evanescence.

“Their longevity, in the past, has always been part of the thing that gives them value,” said Bill Brown, chairman of the English department at the [University of Chicago](#), best known for his work on “thing theory.”

He explained how the value of a piece of furniture you come in contact with often, like a dining room table or a sofa, draws much of its worth from that contact: the longer we keep it around, the more psychologically valuable it becomes. “We use the ‘object world’ to stabilize human life,” he said. “Hannah Arendt said that sitting at the same table grants man his sameness, which is to say his identity.”

The idea of biodegradable furniture, he said, seemed perverse and comic. “We all live such cluttered lives in which so much of what we have we’d be better off without, yet most of us are better off with our dining room tables or our sofas,” he said. To thing theorists like Mr. Brown, who poses a kind of “my furniture, myself” worldview, degradable home goods suggest an identity crisis.

To some industry observers, like Joel Makower, executive editor of [GreenBiz.com](#), which covers the “greening” of mainstream businesses, “biodegradability seems like a noble attribute but an irrelevant concept. You also have to ask, Is it reasonable to assume that a product will go into a system that will allow it to degrade? Is there a snowball’s chance it would be put on a compost pile?”

Mr. Makower described a notorious experiment called the Garbage Project, wherein researchers from the University of Tucson excavated the contents of landfills and discovered layers of mummified natural objects.

“Hardly anything had broken down,” he said. “Carrots had been mummified for 50 years, and you could tell for how long because of the headlines on the newspapers, also intact, found alongside them.”

One young Canadian designer named John Ryan has sidestepped the landfill conundrum entirely, by presenting objects that “decompose” in a more active manner. (You’ll need a hammer.) His terra-cotta wine decanter and cups are designed to be smashed into bits when you’re tired of them. The outdoor furniture he designed for his thesis project at the Ontario College of Art & Design in Toronto would be made from quarry silt — inspired, he said, by research showing that many urban Canadians buy inexpensive outdoor furniture and throw it out after a season. These pieces look like gleaming white tree stumps; you can smash them up at the end of the season, and sprinkle the dust on the sidewalk during the icy winter months.

Mr. Ryan’s objects are the ultimate disposables, the anti-heirlooms.

Of course, there are other responses to the problem of trash. One is to make objects more valuable, “moving to a place where the more traditional attributes of quality become more important than fashion and convenience,” said David Zucker, a specialist in sustainability at Porter Novelli International, a public relations company.

John Grant, author of “The Green Marketing Manifesto” (Wiley, 2008), and a London-based marketing consultant for socially aware companies and ventures, said people once expected their possessions to outlive them, but now see them as transient, as “fashionable items, to be replaced every three to seven years as the cycles, from baroque to minimal, futurist to rustic, etc., turn.”

He added, “We don’t buy disposable wedding rings. Why disposable crockery?” The industry should emphasize the heirloom concept, he suggested.

There are some signs that might be happening. At the recent Milan furniture fair, said Franklin Getchell, an owner of Moss, the gallery-like design store, one trend in evidence “was the move toward use of more expensive materials and craftsmanship, made so with the expectation they’d be saved and passed on. For the business we’re in, this seems to make much more sense than making something that will fall apart and return to the earth.”

ULTIMATELY, the greenest statement is to ignore the blandishments of the marketers and buy no products at all.

“Consumers are expressing a clear interest in understanding the impact of what they’re buying on the environment. Meaning the whole shebang,” said Mr. Zucker, the marketer at Porter Novelli. But it is often difficult to know what is true or what makes sense, which leads to what he calls

“green confusion.”

Mr. Zucker has been conducting ethnographic research of what he called “highly motivated green consumers,” interviewing them on the street and in environments where they congregate. He said that last November, at the farmers’ market in Union Square, he questioned a man who confessed to being utterly bewildered in his quest to buy green. He told Mr. Zucker, “I don’t know the right answers. I guess at the end of the day I’m trying to buy less stuff.”

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