

Green is good

A Seattle retailer asks vendors a lot of tough questions about the environmental impact of their products. She has to—her customers also want the answers.

Text and photos by Lora Shinn, contributing editor

Every Sunday morning, hundreds of Seattle residents visit the Ballard Farmer's Market, cloth bags in hand. They head for stands selling organic produce, farm-raised meats, handcrafted soaps and free-range eggs. Just a few feet from the bustling stalls, Greener Lifestyles beckons with 1,200 square feet of eco-contemporary furnishings and accessories.

A skylight lets in natural illumination, and woven bamboo floors are silent as shoppers enter. Shoppers contemplate wool-stuffed couches, bamboo barstools, modular carpet tiles, silk-cocoon hanging lamps and recycled-silver servingware.

Owner Aimée Robinson relies heavily on foot traffic from the market. Her customers include singles and families. Sales have increased 400% since the store's inception in 2003. In the past year alone, sales increased 25%. Green is good.

Greener Lifestyles, a retailer of eco-friendly furniture and accessories, is in a neighborhood with upscale pubs, shoe boutiques and a farmer's market. Owner Aimée Robinson says she was ahead of the green curve five years ago. Now, vendors are as conversant about materials and manufacturing processes as she is.

Greener Lifestyles also sells salvaged-wood coffee tables, recycled lamps, organic cotton linens, recycled-glass dishes, felt pillows and locally produced modern art. In the back of the store, Robinson offers a selection of cork, marmoleum and bamboo flooring, in addition to carpet and VOC-free paints. Robinson is expanding her earthy touch into a line of sofas, chairs and beds, which she merchandises in themed displays.

Three full-time employees and two part-time employees serve floor customers, receive shipments, assist with special orders and answer phone calls about the furniture line, which is sold nationally through the website (greenlifestyles.com).

Robinson handles other store business, including in-home consultations, merchandise orders and show attendance. Full-time employee Stefanie North, who

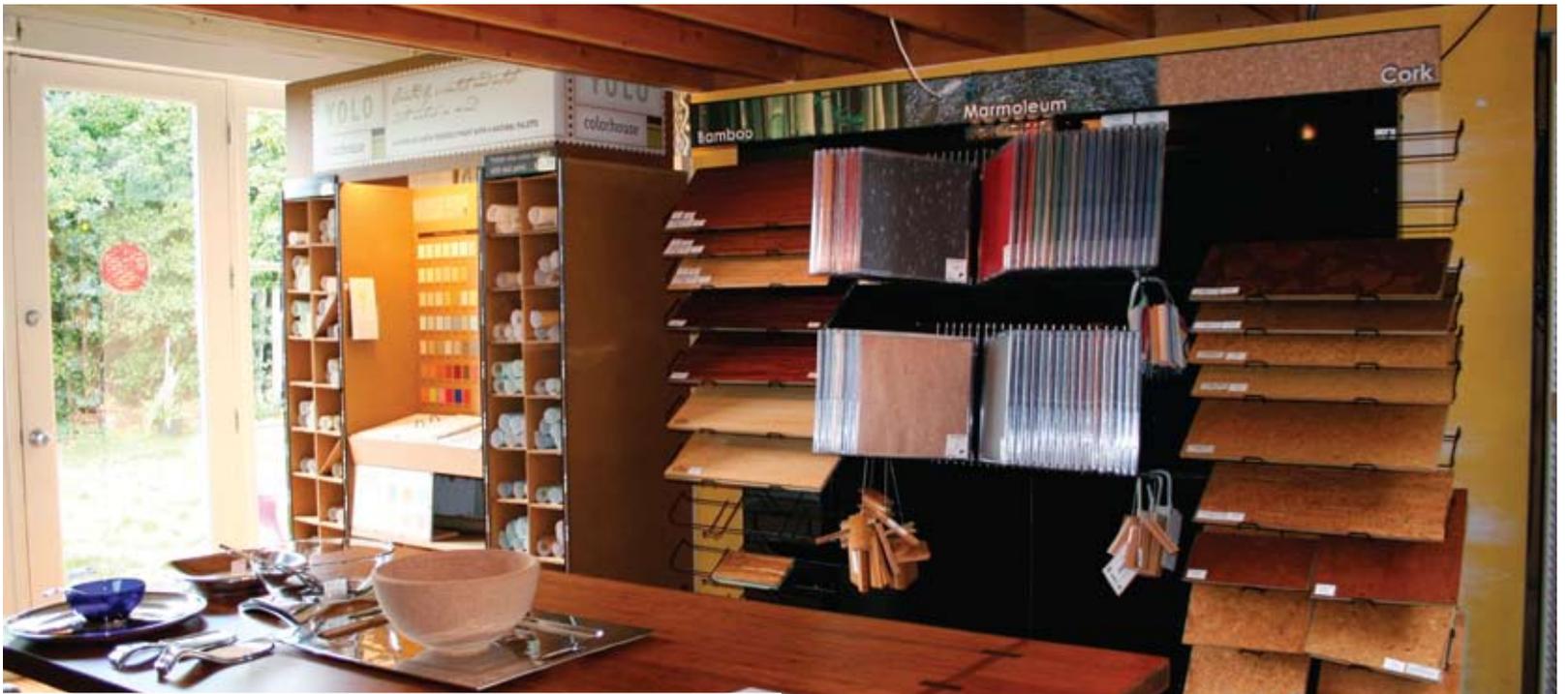
is trained in interior design, helps customers choose fabrics and furnishings, and she assists Robinson in rearranging floor displays on a monthly basis. "We have such a limited space, we have to get creative," Robinson says.

Seeking greener goods

To find sources, Robinson goes to the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York. When she first started attending in 2003, few exhibitors knew how products were created—except for



The workroom at the back of the store (right) contains floor tile samples and VOC-free paints. Furnishings are displayed in vignettes (below and opposite). The owner says she seeks vendors who make their own products. She sources products at the contemporary furniture show in New York, and by searching online, as well as following up on customers' requests.



European reps, who tended to be more aware of environmental impact. Now, ICFF offers a green pavilion, and vendors have answers for Robinson's questions. She says the change was "exponential and amazing. It was really cool to watch the transition. Before, I was talking at them, but now they get me more and more."

She extends this questioning into any and all purchases. Robinson is wary of "greenwashing" claims (the use of false, misleading or vague terms about a product's environmental friendliness). She asks vendors tough questions about the lifecycle of each product, including:

- What materials are used and how are they sourced?
- What chemicals go into manufacturing (glues, dyes, etc.)? How do they impact the local and global environment?
- Does it contain VOCs (volatile organic compounds), formaldehyde, polyurethane or PBDEs (polybrominated diphenyl ethers, a flame retardant)?
- Where is the item made? Who makes it? How does the manufacturing impact the local economy?

She verifies information with the Environmental Protection Agency, Washington Toxics Coalition and other organizations. She looks for credentials from the Forest Stewardship Council

or stamps of approval featuring the EU Flower, ISO 14001 or Oeko-Tex Standard 100.

Robinson seeks furnishings with a clean, modern design. "I love to work with people who actually make the stuff—smaller businesses and family businesses," she says. "That's ideal, if I know how they made it and their ethics. It's more sustainable in the long run."

Robinson also sources merchandise online and by customer request. She works with about 50 vendors. Store employees are intimately familiar with each aspect of the item's production, from raw material to floor display. Robinson can tell you what woods are used in the coffee tables and where the trees are sourced. North can explain to concerned customers the differences between synthetic and natural latex.

Seeking durable accents

Robinson prefers high-quality items that will last generations. "If you have serving bowls from your grandmother that are absolutely stunning, you'll do anything to keep them around," she says. "If you have a piece of junk, you'll get rid of it" (thereby adding to the world's debris).

"You can tell when something is done with quality and care. It's a work of art: it moves you, it inspires you, it makes you

feel good," Robinson says.

Robinson ships sofas as far as Louisiana. Increasingly, she finds that customers are asking the same questions of her that she asks of vendors. "They keep everybody on their toes, and we're learning all the time," she says. "It's a dynamic process. I tell people 'please challenge me, because I may be missing something.'"

This new American consumer is concerned about indoor air quality, allergies and the effect of manufacturing processes on the environment.

Many of her customers (age 35 to 55 years old) are parents, who are "worried," she says.

Thanks to word-of-mouth success, Robinson doesn't need to advertise much, beyond a few Google AdWords and in several Seattle "green" directories. However, she participates in many community events, including the Ballard Art-

walk, a monthly exhibition of art within neighborhood stores. She also gives back to her resources, through donations to the Washington Toxics Coalition's annual auction.

Robinson's background is in political science. "I wanted to participate in an economy supportive of sustainable communities," she says. She was inspired to start the store with friends; she became the sole owner in 2006.

Her goal is to expand a custom furniture line into stores outside the Seattle area while increasing her online presence for Greener Lifestyles' Seattle-based store. She also wants to add point-of-sale software to replace handwritten receipts.

Overall, Robinson has realized that "nothing is good or bad in the world." Each fabric, wood or manufacturing process has pros and cons, benefits and drawbacks. However, weighing options through an informed background is the first step on a long road to a greener future. "I just try and find a balance," Robinson says. "That's the life quest. Where do you find the balance?" **HDB**

Retailer: Greener Lifestyles

Location: Seattle

Owner: Aimée Robinson

Size of store: 1,200 square feet

Website: greenerlifestyles.com

Merchandise (retail price range, price of best seller): Sofas and upholstered

chairs (\$1,000 to \$4,000, \$4,000); accent furniture (\$300 to \$900, \$300); seating (\$110 to \$300, \$190); floor and table lamps (\$72 to \$200, \$147); light fixtures and sconces (\$499); outdoor items (\$125); area rug tiles (\$6.99 to \$24.99, \$14.99); decorative pillows (\$45 to \$99, \$45); bedding (\$25 to \$320, \$175); framed and unframed art (\$165 to \$2,000, \$400); photo frames (\$22); functional tabletop (\$9 to \$150, \$47); clocks (\$150).

