

American cherry and maple twist and bend to form ‘The Invisible Store of Happiness’

Sculptor Laura Ellen Bacon and furniture designer / maker Sebastian Cox collaborate to create an elaborate installation out of American hardwoods

July 24, 2015 - The Invisible Store of Happiness is a three-meter high ode to wood and craftsmanship. The installation involved two of the UK's brightest talents - furniture designer/maker Sebastian Cox and artist Laura Ellen Bacon - who took three months to craft the structure out of American hardwoods. Showcased for the Clerkenwell Design Week (CDW) in the archway in front of the historic Museum of the Order of St John in London from May 19 - 21, 2015, the dramatic installation was hand-crafted out of American soft maple and cherry and consisted of a mighty steam bent frame that gave way to thinner, weave-able strips manipulated to twist and flow into a whirlpool of texture and shape.

The American Hardwood Export Council (AHEC) has supported the project to allow experimentation with these timbers and to celebrate their potential. Working with Sebastian Cox, one of the UK's foremost makers, challenges the way wood works in a way nobody else does. And Laura Ellen Bacon, with her artistic sensibility, coupled with her wonderful sculptural work in willow, is the perfect complement to Sebastian's approach. Sebastian Cox conceived the project and led by his growing passion for Life Cycle Assessment (LCA), took it to AHEC as a proposal. He then asked Laura Ellen Bacon, whose poetic willow sculptures he has always admired, to join him for the project.

“The Invisible Store for me has become a store of many things,” says Sebastian Cox. “It started out as a store of our shared passion of making, but as the project unfolded it became a store of much more; education, ambition, pride, late nights, steam, experimentation, unknown quantities, passion, cups of tea, swear words, and so on! The whole thing has been the biggest thing we’ve ever undertaken, and we couldn’t have done it without Laura’s creativity, experience and calm nature.”

The maple and cherry have been crafted into an elliptical-shape frame that showcases fine craftsmanship and impeccable cabinetry on a grand scale with huge arcs of steam bent cherry wood, hand-jointed together in mostly glue-less draw-bore mortice and tenon joints. Through complex machinery the components of this solid frame are effectively shredded into strips and made supple and weave-able from time spent soaking in the River Thames beside Sebastian's Woolwich workshop. These strips were boldly manipulated by hand, flowing and twisting into the space to create a whirlpool of texture and shape, all held within its mighty external frame.

"As a sculptor, I have enjoyed the refinement of form that has been possible with these woods; allowing the curves and stability formed in the head to find their feet in the finished, grounded form," says Laura Ellen Bacon. "I know this to be a true collaboration: both Sebastian and I have merged our language of form and function, like merging two colors to acquire a new shade. For my part, I was hoping to find a way to distill the act of making into a solid form of containment, perhaps a little like blending a perfume and pouring it into a vessel. With our use of scale, solidity and precision, we have been able to use the wood as the essence."

Cox is best known for making handmade furniture with sustainable materials from the UK's woodlands, but his passion for the progressive research AHEC is conducting into Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) led him to approach AHEC. Using the latest LCA modeling techniques developed by thinkstep (formerly PE International), the Invisible Store of Happiness has been environmentally profiled and the carbon footprint of the whole structure, on a cradle-to-grave basis, is just 173kg CO2 equivalent - that's less than an iPad Air 2. The hardwood forest resource in America is so vast that the wood used in the Invisible Store of Happiness will have been replaced in the time it takes to walk from one end of the installation to the other.

"We can use data from AHEC and the US Forest Service to calculate how quickly timbers we use get replaced in the U.S. forests through natural regeneration. I was fascinated to see the speed at which the timber I used in the Wish List project (for the London Design Festival 2014) was regenerated in the American woodlands. I believe the entire design community should be more aware of LCA and we should be dedicated to measuring the environmental impact of the things we design and make.

Similarly, people should be able to know the true environmental impact of the things they buy and have in their home. Projects like this demonstrate the importance of things like LCA,” adds Cox.

The challenge for the CDW installation was to raise the profile of maple and cherry, both beautiful and yet under-appreciated American hardwoods, and to create a three-dimensional form to communicate the environmental benefits of using them. AHEC wanted to challenge perceptions of hardwood, both as a material and as a sustainable and growing resource. With this installation in one of the most important locations - the archway at the Order of Saint John - created by two such passionate and interesting designers, AHEC has been able to create an environment where people are choosing to use American hardwoods because of a better understanding of the material. That understanding encompasses everything from craftsmanship to environmental concerns.

“This collaboration exploits the qualities of wood. The exterior of the piece speaks of its rigidity, its structural qualities; the interior tells of how this may be rendered flexible, descriptive, expressive and loose. The project also pushed the boundaries of what is technically possible with wood given that one of the challenges for wood right now is embracing innovation. Sebastian and Laura shared their findings throughout the process, not just with AHEC, but with a team of interns and students. In this way, the project embodied not just the joy of making, of fruitful collaboration and focused endeavor, but also advocacy and education,” concludes Roderick Wiles, AHEC Director, Africa, Middle East, South Asia and Oceania.

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About AHEC:

The American Hardwood Export Council (AHEC) is the leading international trade association for the U.S. hardwood industry, representing the committed exporters among U.S. hardwood companies and all the major U.S. hardwood production trade associations. AHEC runs a worldwide programme to promote American hardwoods in over 50 export markets, concentrating on providing architects, specifiers, designers and end-users with technical information on the range of species, products and sources of supply. In addition, AHEC also produces a full range of technical publications. For more information, please visit: www.americanhardwood.org.

About Sebastian Cox:

Sebastian has been highly recognized for using the ancient technique of coppicing. By cutting and managing trees in this way provides an abundant source of timber, as well as creating a healthy and diverse woodland. He creates products that are simple in form, functional, unobtrusive, lightweight and durable. His work also shows a strong connection with the making process through visible joints, and honest construction. Manufacturing each

piece by hand, his designs are mostly developed at the workbench rather than on a CAD program. For more information, please visit: www.sebastiancox.co.uk.

About Laura Ellen Bacon:

Laura Ellen Bacon is a British artist who lives and works in Derbyshire. Her sculptures are most often created on site, in both landscape and cityscape settings that have included Chatsworth; Somerset House, London and New Art Centre at Roche Court. Laura's work is also created for interior settings, from private interiors to gallery spaces including, the Sainsbury Centre, Norwich (2011), the Jerwood Space, London (2010) and The Saatchi Gallery, London for 'Collect' (2013). For more information, please visit: www.lauraellenbacon.com.

About Clerkenwell Design Week

One of the best-loved events in the design industry calendar, Clerkenwell Design Week is a three-day annual festival gathering Clerkenwell's long-established design community together. Now in its sixth year, the event has increasingly become a must go-to showcase for the UK and international design community. Last year's show attracted over 32,000 architects and designers, and 250 brands from the UK and across the globe. The global businesses that have made Clerkenwell their home have shaped the borough into the UK's most important generator of creativity and innovation. Serving an infinite variety of other industries easily accessible from across London, Clerkenwell has become home to a plethora of new media agencies, graphic and interactive design studios and more than 200 architectural practices - more per square mile than anywhere else on the planet. In addition, Clerkenwell houses over 60 design showrooms. For more information, please visit: www.clerkenwelldesignweek.com.

About American cherry (*Prunus serotina*)

The heartwood of American cherry varies from rich red to reddish brown and will darken on exposure to light. In contrast the sapwood is creamy white. Cherry can be supplied steamed, to darken sapwood or left unsteamed. The wood has a fine uniform straight grain, smooth texture, and may naturally contain brown pith flecks and small gum pockets.

About American soft maple (*Acer rubrum* / *Acer saccharinum*)

In most respects the wood of soft maple is very similar to that of hard maple, although due to its widespread growth it may be more susceptible to regional color variations. Generally the sapwood is greyish white, sometimes with darker colored pith flecks, and the heartwood varies from light to dark reddish brown. The wood is usually straight grained. The lumber is generally sold unselected for color.