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From trees to furniture: a case study of how trees from the Mansueto Library construction site were put to purposeful re-uses

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By [SAGE Ambassador](#) and [Sustainability Council](#) member Cheryl Rusnak

A few months ago, new wooden benches arrived in [Regenstein Library](#) and were placed near the Circulation Department. The story of how these benches came to be is worth sharing.

In Autumn of 2008, the September/October issue of The University of Chicago Magazine included an article entitled "[Trees on the Move](#)" that discussed the relocation and removal of trees on the Mansueto site in preparation for construction. An alumnus of the former Graduate Library School at the University read this article and contacted the Library about the possibility of re-using some of these trees.

Some of the trees were planted in honor of former librarians while others had enjoyed a long life shading the walks that crisscrossed the lawn south of the tennis courts. Where possible, trees were replanted nearby, such as in the Bartlett Quadrangle and North of 56th Street between the Smart Museum and the Young Memorial Building. The Assistant Director for Campus Environment in the University's [Facilities Services](#), Richard Bumstead, who was responsible for the relocation of the trees, contacted Horigan Urban Forest Products about the remaining trees that could not be relocated and were slated for disposal.

[Horigan Urban Forest Products, Inc.](#) (HUFPP) is a company that works to maximize re-use of trees found in Chicago urban areas, salvaging those that are damaged by storms or stand in the way of building construction and allowing them to be re-used. Re-use of existing resources, such as trees, from a new construction site is one of many sustainable building practices that is considered to lessen the impact of construction on the immediate surroundings. HUFPP stored the trees from the Mansueto construction site until a decision could be made about how to mill the trees for future use. The architect and construction team for the building of Mansueto were asked whether wood from these trees could be used anywhere in Mansueto Library. No suitable use was found for this wood within Mansueto, so the Library began considering how it could be used as furniture within Regenstein Library.

The Library needed to find someone to help envision and craft furniture from this lumber. After considering local woodworkers who had worked with HUFPP lumber, the Library decided to work with Scott Chambers of [Fine Woodworks](#). Ash, oak, and maple were the three main types of wood from the site. Even before milling the lumber could take place, the Library needed to decide the type of furniture to be made in order to determine how thick to cut the boards. Early on, the Library decided to create benches and a conference table for the Library Director's Office.

In August 2009 Horigan Urban Forest Products milled the lumber according to these needs and placed it in kilns to be dried.

The Library then worked with Scott Chambers to decide on a style and design for the benches and conference table which he would hand-craft. We decided to also obtain a side table and closet doors for the Library Director's Office. The ash was able to be milled into thick boards that lent themselves to sturdy furniture construction, such as the four benches ultimately fashioned from it. Two of these benches are those near Circulation on the first floor. Two similar benches have been made for the remodeled Special Collections Gallery and are in storage until it is re-opened in Spring 2011. The maple was also milled into thick boards that were used in the creation of a conference table and small side table. The oak provided only a small number of thick boards, and otherwise thinner boards were milled from it. The oak yielded an additional bench (currently near the elevators on the 2nd floor) and the closet doors for the Library Director's Office.

The completed benches and tables were delivered to Regenstein in early June. Construction of the closet doors continued through July and they were installed in mid-August.

The trees grew on the grounds outside the Library for many years. The story of their part in the Library continues. It is incorporated both in conversations about the furniture and by serving users well as they sit on the edge of a bench trying to arrange their piles of books and make their way to the Circulation counter.

Cheryl Rusnak

Check out [our blog Dirt for more photos](#) of the project, courtesy of Cheryl Rusnak and Jane Ciacci.



Completed Ash benches are near Regenstein Library Circulation. (Photo by Cheryl Rusnak)



Memorial Trees blooming prior to replanting. (Photo by Jane Ciacci)



Logs milled by Bruce Horigan and HUFPP employee in North Chicago. (Photo by Cheryl Rusnak)

Head on over to [Dirt](#) for [more photos](#) of the reuse process!

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