

MICCOS 2013

Promoting Sustainable Commodities

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First-Hand Insights into Global
Timber Trade and Industry

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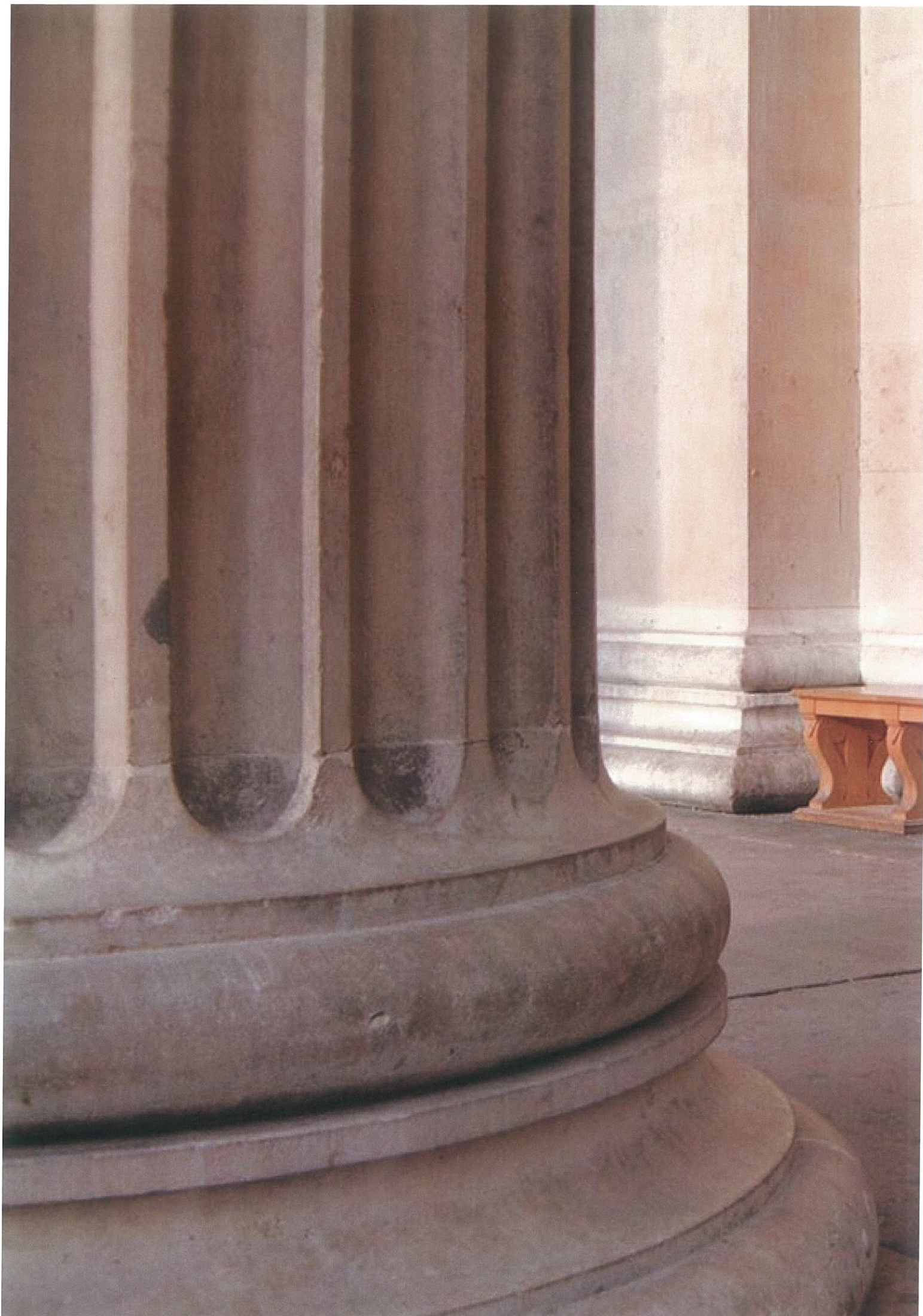
Brings Home Two Awards

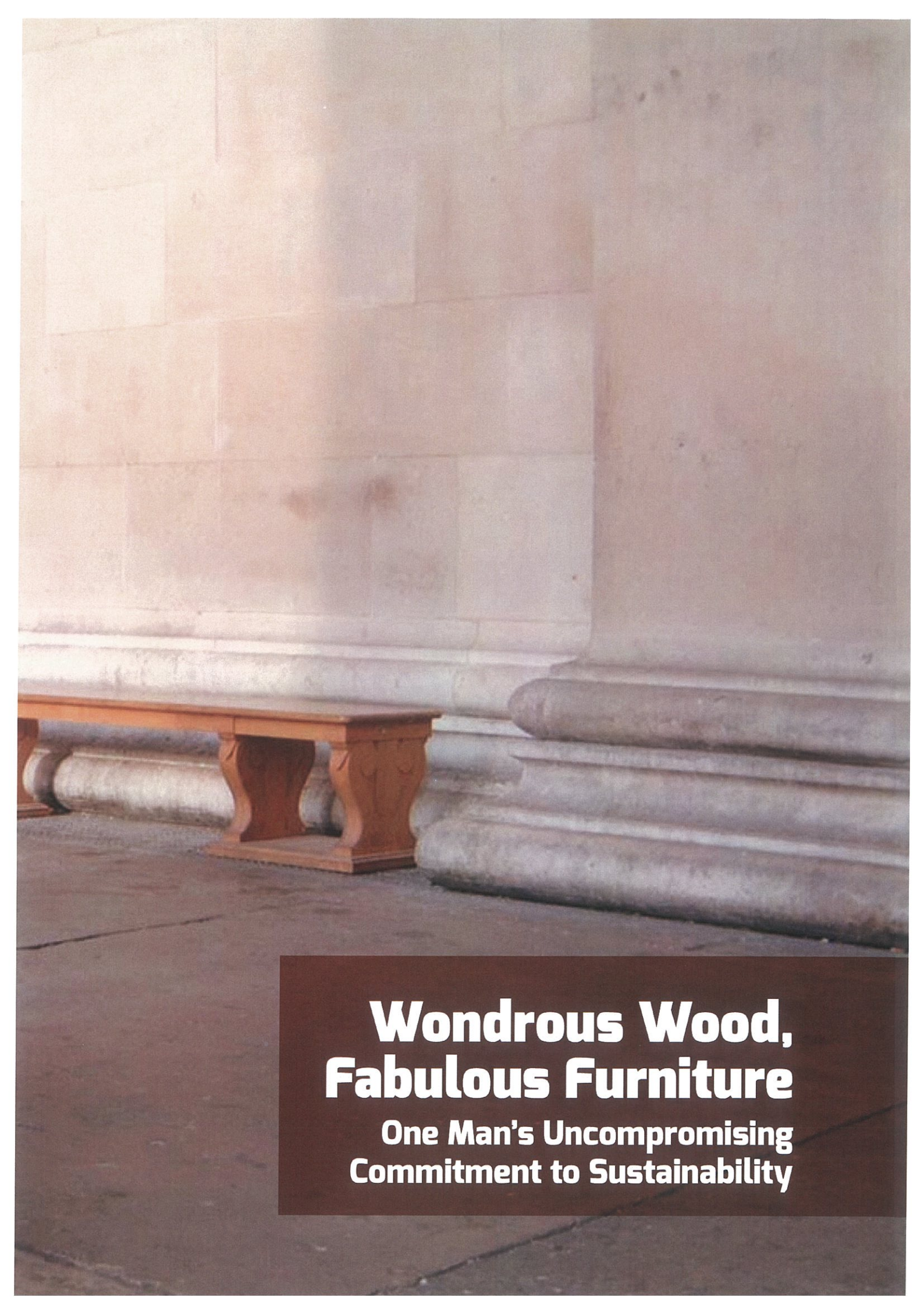
Cover Story

Wondrous Wood, Fabulous Furniture

One Man's Uncompromising
Commitment to Sustainability







Wondrous Wood, Fabulous Furniture

**One Man's Uncompromising
Commitment to Sustainability**

Halfway through his Cambridge days, Luke Hughes switched from History to History of Architecture, and now makes a living by designing and making furniture. According to Luke, good furniture not only speaks visually but also embodies integrity, with oodles of personality thrown in, and is ready for a long-term relationship with its user. Is it any wonder that he loves timber best as the main material for his craft? *TIMBER MALAYSIA* caught up with the furniture craftsman, who lives and breathes sustainability, to discover more about his 32-year old business and his endless love for timber.



Luke discussing technical design details with associate Nicola Davies.

TM: What defines good design for furniture and what is Luke Hughes & Co's design philosophy?

Luke: Architecture, and the way people inhabit it, defines the shape of our furniture. We work closely with clients to understand how they use their spaces before we design or build anything, then draw on our expertise to suggest creative ways of making them work harder. This collaborative approach is maintained from the first brief to fit-out and beyond, offering considered advice on care and maintenance.

We want our designs to connect seamlessly with a building's architecture and provide practical solutions that delight the eye and reward the user. We take great pride in our furniture and never lose our concern for its well-being. Every piece of Luke Hughes furniture is built to last and add value over many years.

TM: Why is timber your number one material of choice for furniture?

Luke: Choice of material is, for us, a moral issue. If one wants to promote sustainability, then the choice of material must fulfil various criteria including renewability, recyclability, social impact and integrity of the source. In the construction industry, few players consider these criteria and certainly do not specify enough timber.

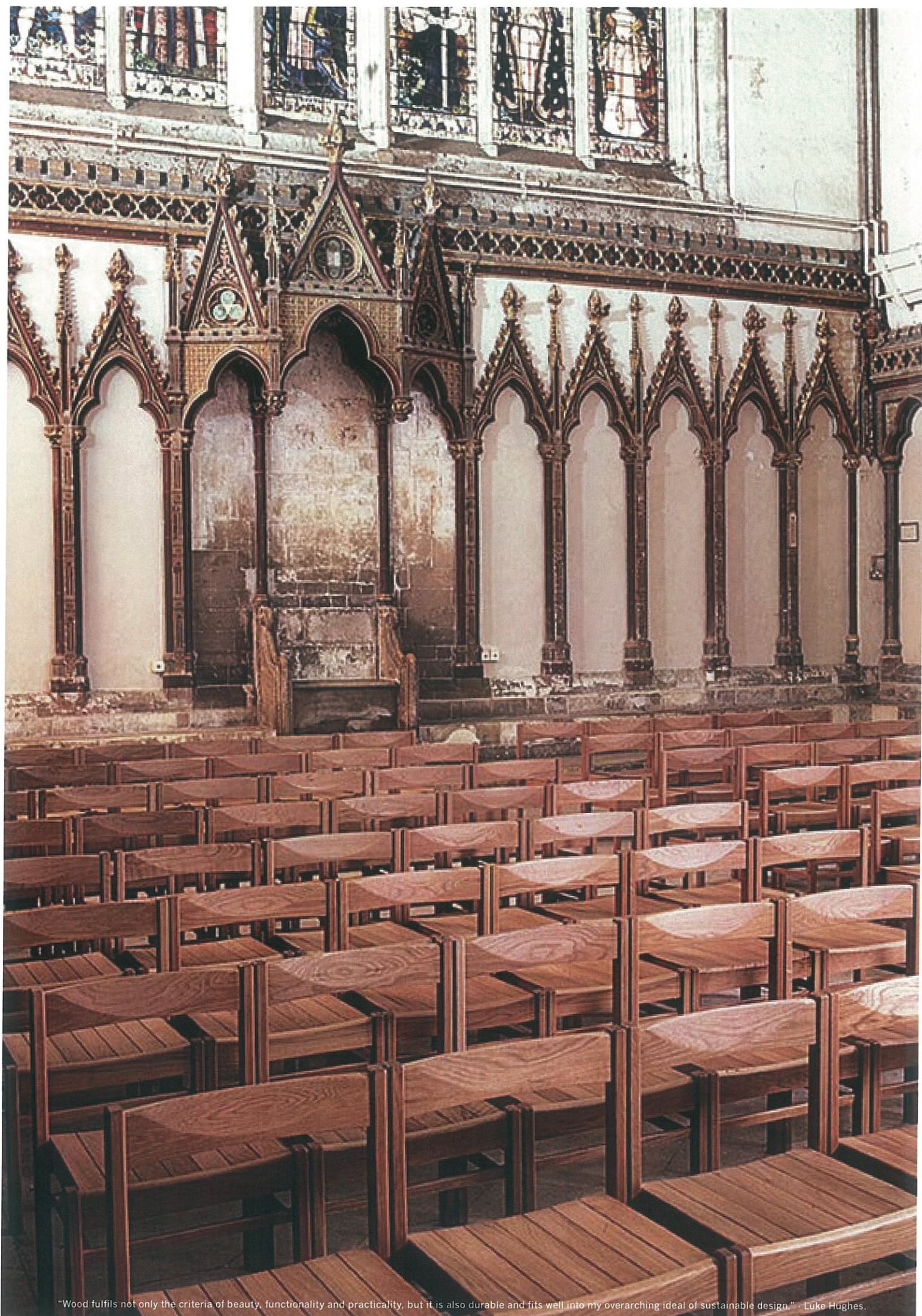
Our business was founded on principles of environmental responsibility. The longer a building and its furniture stay relevant, the longer the carbon stays locked up. The longer it stays locked up, the less we contribute to CO2 emissions. Long life equates with locked up carbon. We design for a 30-50 years minimum.

Designers need to understand both sustainability and the effect of graceful ageing. They need to understand that bumps and scrapes are a natural part of timber. One of timber's main advantage, however, is that it can always be re-worked to make it good as new.

Wood fulfils not only the criteria of beauty, functionality and practicality, but it is also durable and fits well into my overarching ideal of sustainable design. The ability of wood to be easily maintained depends a lot on how the wood is designed. Unfortunately, few architects are trained in timber detailing and I think they are a little frightened of it. Westminster Abbey has a timber door that is 971 years young and it's still functioning and on its hinges. What does that say about good design and timber's durability?

There's real value in something that lasts a long time. In any case, if you add up the real costs of manufacturing, only about a quarter actually goes on materials and skill. The rest goes on taxes, distribution costs and professional fees (see pie-chart on page 20). If you're only designing for a 10-year life, you're bound to pay huge amounts just on taxes and fees. Better by far to plan for the long-term and put more into higher quality materials and promoting a sense of permanence.

Timber has another appeal: poetry. It has the ability to evoke memories, to talk of the past and with that comes a degree of dignity. Timber also has tactility and warmth. Steel, glass and other building materials have their uses but they don't appeal to the same emotions.



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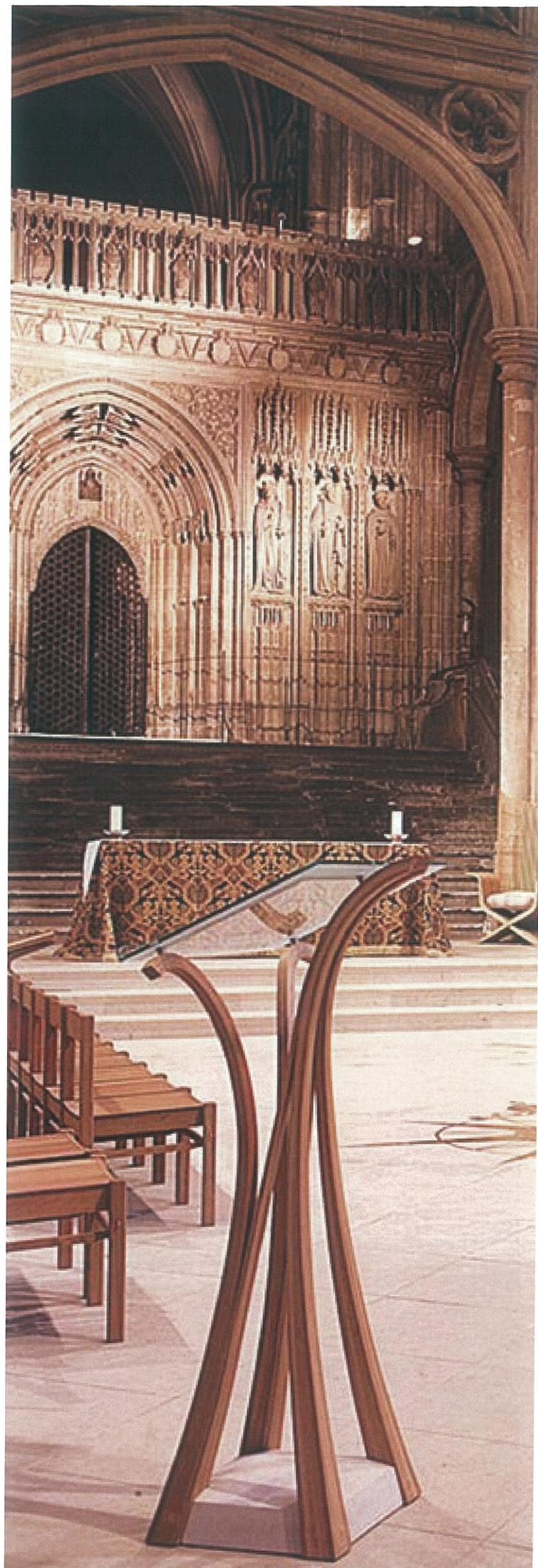
FOR THE LOVE OF WOOD

TM: What is your number one pet peeve on timber usage?

Luke: I've been to Vietnam where they make a lot of contract furniture for hotels and resorts. These are often made in open-air factories and there seems to be little humidity control there. If the finished furniture is destined for an air-conditioned environment, it will surely shrink. If one doesn't know how to design around that potential shrinkage, there will inevitably be defects later. Timber is a material that requires to be understood; once its inherent characteristics are properly managed, it can serve you for generations.

I would like to write a book some day and help people, particularly architects and designers, understand timber. An architect or a designer must be able to ask the right questions on timber.

Details of a prayer desk in European Oak, in St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle, one of the homes of the Queen and Royal Family.





Lectern and chairs in European Oak, in the nave of Canterbury Cathedral, made for the enthronement of Archbishop George Carey in 1991.



Prayer desks in European Oak, and Holy Table in American Black Walnut, decorated with 17th century solid silver candle stands.

TM: What is your idea of “sustainable living” and transcending short-term trends; and how does your design philosophy and processes contribute to that concept?

Luke: We believe that the best furniture is not only fit for purpose, but also inherently “right” within the architectural space it occupies. Its utility endures over time, offering an exceptional return on investment when purchase price, lifespan, maintenance costs and revenue generated are considered.

Creating sustainable designs isn’t just a process; it’s a way of life which should be embedded in people’s psyche. It isn’t just a matter of ticking the right boxes. For me, choice of materials plays a huge role, especially in terms of the resources required to convert something into a usable material.

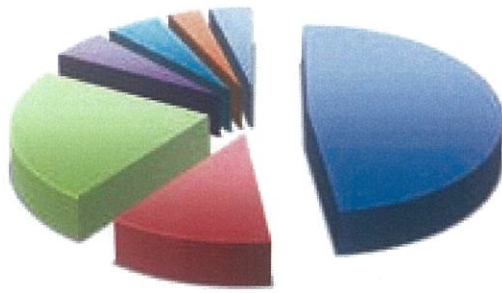
Whenever possible, only the minimum should be provided to make spaces habitable. Creating sustainable designs requires a tremendous amount of careful thought, research and planning that go deep into the heart of promoting humanity: what material shall I use? What curing techniques are eco-friendly to both the user and the environment? Will it recycle well later?

We do a lot of work for Oxbridge colleges and just finished a project for Harvard. We are also working on a few projects for Yale University. Oxford was founded in 1250. Harvard was founded in 1636. The older British and American universities often take a long-term view when furnishing their libraries and lecture halls.

I trust that the Asian growth and its culture of prioritising education will be a big boost to traditional furniture craftsmanship. Many of these schools adopt long-standing values, and are increasingly taking the long-term view on their physical environment.

Another of Luke’s lectern design.





- Labour + materials (the 'craft proportion')
- VAT, PAYE, NI and other indirect taxes
- Property costs
- Legal and professional
- Packaging, delivery, and installation
- Design costs

TM: Tell us about marrying beauty, functionality and practicality in your designs.

Luke: Sometimes I find it hard to understand purchasing patterns. Ten to fifteen years ago, we were looking at the overall feasibility of public healthcare, and hospital design was one of the components in this exercise. The research was clear: hospitals with wards pose a greater risk of infection. So, obviously it would be much cheaper in the longer term to build separate rooms but they still decided to stick with wards regardless of the financial logic! There needs to be a change of mindset and some education. Part of the problem exists when everything gets driven by an accounting process or short-term profit motive: accounting should be a tool and not a driver in decision-making.

When I first came to Malaysia in 1974, I was working on a cargo ship. We were warned not to bring the ship too close to the Chinese junks in case they made holes in the ship, because the junks were made of really tough timbers!

I love designing furniture for libraries. I don't design buildings but I strongly believe the furniture must follow the architecture of a building. I've received appreciation letters from schools and universities saying how much students enjoy being in their re-designed libraries. One sixteen-year-old pupil even wrote to us for an internship because she was so impressed with how we had transformed her school library.

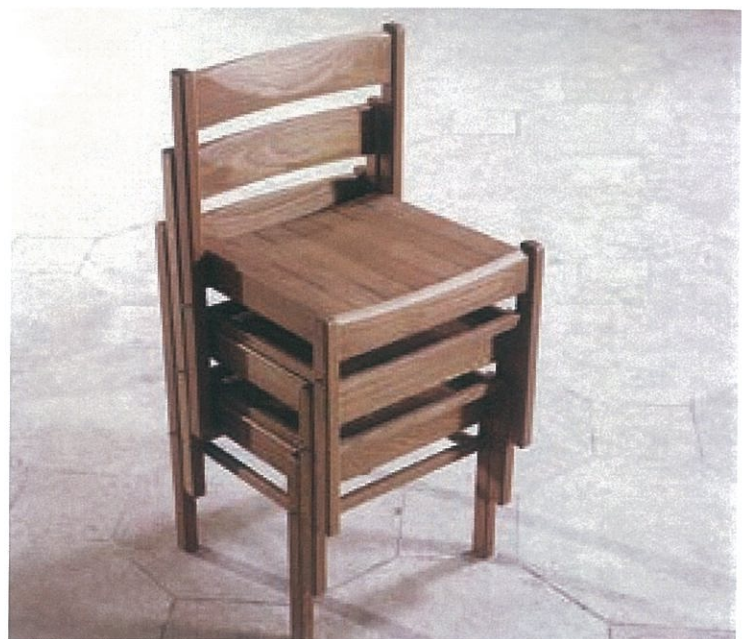
TM: Timber as a raw material has become more expensive. What are your thoughts on combining veneer with solid cheaper wood?

Luke: I have no problem with laying good veneer on chipboard, MDF, plywood or other cheaper timber bases. The crucial thing is structural and material integrity and picking the right material for the right purpose. For instance, we never use MDF for horizontal bookshelves as it has no structural integrity when supporting heavy books, but there's every reason to use MDF for vertical uses and for taking paint finishes.

I use veneer overlays on my furniture when it is appropriate. Making bookcases from solid wood is over-specifying. We use plywood and solid wood only for parts that require strength and structural integrity. For chairs, we must use solid wood.

TM: What of passing on your knowledge to the younger generation?

Luke: Currently, the British education system doesn't have a strong enough vocational stream to provide a steady supply of skilled craftsmen for the furniture-making industry. Lately, however, economic logic has driven people to realise that vocational training is very important and could be more desirable to having a third-rate degree. I laud the Building Crafts College in Stratford, which offers many vocational courses from carpentry and joinery to bricklaying and stone masonry as there is currently a huge supply gap for experienced craftsmen in Britain.



Stacking chairs for Canterbury Cathedral.

We have three designers who joined us in the last 18 months, and they are all in their 20's. We have a total of six designers and 21 people in the whole team altogether. We also welcome interns from universities and schools. What I've been doing quietly in my furniture workshop in Covent Garden for the last 32 years is appreciated by others. This is our contribution towards the continuity of our craft. 🏡



"I strongly believe that the furniture must follow the architecture of a building."
– Luke Hughes.

Canterbury Tales and Divine Deals

Luke Hughes & Co (LH & Co) is not interested in quick-fixes. LH & Co perceives their furnishing relationships with clients as just like a marriage: the fundamentals of the solution must be solid because they prefer to be in for the long-haul, rather than for quick fixes.

"There's no point making something that breaks down after three or four years. We view good furniture as an investment, not only by our clients but also by us. Furniture is not just products. They must be designed within context. Good furniture craftsmanship is also about finding practical, long-term and in many cases, trend-proof solutions for the client," explained Luke.

Having built up a dossier of impressive projects, it is no wonder that LH & Co has been sought after to restore or supply furniture in churches and cathedrals. More often than not, wood is a material of choice given its timelessness, durability and versatility.

One of LH & Co's high-profile projects includes the crafting and supply of 350 stacking chairs for Canterbury Cathedral. These chairs, made using American White Oak, can stack up to five high in the aisles of Canterbury Cathedral to facilitate storage.

Another highlight of LH & Co's list of ecclesiastical projects is designing clergy seating for Westminster Abbey, the challenge of which was the uneven Cosmati flooring right before the High Altar. Cosmati flooring is essentially "cut work" formed of elaborate inlays of small triangles and rectangles of coloured stones and glass mosaics encrusted upon stone surfaces.

The floor was laid down in 1268 by order of Henry III who had started re-building Edward the Confessor's Abbey in the new Gothic style in 1245.

"We designed a special foot for the clergy chairs. Sliding wedge feet stabilise the seating. These feet were also lined with felt pads which were crucial to protect the priceless Cosmati flooring," explained Luke.

Four benches and two chairs were designed and supplied in time for the Pope's visit in September 2010. In April 2011, Luke's seating also played host to the royal wedding of the year, that of HRH Prince William and his bride, Catherine Middleton.

"In many projects, our first material of choice is wood. Apart from its warmth and natural feel, it is also the most hygienic material for a public space as it is easy to clean and maintain. Its high strength-to-weight ratio also means that we are able to build strong furniture which is not necessarily heavy, and which can be managed, moved or stacked by only one or two people. Using wood makes all the difference in elevating the quality of usage in a public space," added Luke.

LH & Co has also designed altars, lecterns and choir stalls. Other creations include stacking pews, which have also been designed to suit the interior architectural features of a church, and to fulfil modern-day demands for the multi-functionality of a public place of worship. 🏡