Wood you sit on me please?

Trees cut down to make way for a university campus building have been turned into furniture and art

Natasha Ann Zacharias

Dozens of roadside trees felled to make way for a new campus building at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) have been given a new lease of life as beautiful sculptures and furnishings.

The exhibition called NTU Trees: Upcycled is open on Monday at the new extension, more than 20 works by artists, designers, faculty, alumni and students made from these fallen trees on show.

Central Academy of Fine Arts vice-president and well-known sculptor Fan Zhaohui created the first piece, including one that looks like a book that looks like a book stuck on one end of the other, while a visiting artist from Italy, Fabrizio Galli, made two impressive semi-circular, high-backed benches.

The recycled wood also appears in Go-opo NTU: Shop, a student-run business on campus, as clothing and display furniture.

The furnishing was made out of 77 trees and 36 benches that were sourced from NTU’s main campus and the new buildings of the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine (LKC Med), the first in the Experimental Medicine building, where the exhibition is held. The other campus is on Monday Road, near Sembawang.

The trees were common roadside ones — eucalyptus, jackfruit and fig — before they were felled two years ago, the fast-growing species made up more than 30 per cent of trees between 40 and 50 years old.

The exhibition is curated by Mr Faith Teh, 43, deputy director and head of the NTU Museum, and Ms Carolee Pang, 47, deputy director and head of the medical library, and runs until June 2 at LKC Med.

The first priority for the school then, they say, was to save the wood. The idea for an exhibition was to exhibit the items in one place before distributing them throughout the university.

The raw timber went through a treatment process for more than six months before the artists and designers would work with them.

First, the wood was dehydrated and cut into planks that were 5 mm thick. The planks were then kiln-dried to reduce their moisture content to 25 per cent to prevent cracking and warping. Lastly, they were fumigated to prevent insect infestation.

Earlier, before the wood was treated, artist Han, 72, had selected four trees from the sculptures. She wanted to make something to highlight the meaning and philosophy behind education and learning. Fittingly, one of her works is titled Upcycled, an almost ten-metre tall tower of books that is topped off with an open book.

Han, who works in oils and wood, expressed: “I had to be very careful and use thicker strokes,” she says.

Galli, 50, a visiting artist who is the head of the city’s biggest museum, created four pieces: two semi-circular benches, each with a series of tall backrests. The benches seat people in a circle, but not in a claustrophobic way, as spaces were wide.

Galli says that although most people do not appreciate these kinds of wood for their uneven colour tones and grains, the materials are of a good quality. He adds: “I hope that over time, the wood will be beautiful. As for the materials, they constitute a series of “pencil” benches, where raw wood is sharpened to a point at one end and painted at the other end to resemble the matriarch of the wooden tool.

Leather seats were also turned into something functional. One of the exhibitions NTU worked with created 15 benches out of leather seats that came in different shapes, sizes and tones.

Once the NTU Trees: Upcycled furniture and artworks will be moved to various spots in the university.

Ms Pang says: “Some directors at other schools have already reserved their favourites. We hope this project would get others interested in reuse, instead of throwing them away.”

We hope this project would get others interested in reuse, instead of throwing them away.

VIEW IT / NTU TREES

WHERE: Experimental Medicine Building, Collaboration Space, 59 Nanjing Ave, Level 1
WHEN: Monday to Nov 4, from 8.30am to 5pm daily
ADMISSION: Free