

# Seeing the Forest for the Trees

It can take a lot of trees to build with wood. While timber is celebrated for its potential as a sustainable building material, this is only the case if we know where the wood is coming from.



Increasing interest in sustainable design has seen wood emerge as a coveted resource. Carbon sequestering, naturally abundant, and regenerative, it has become the go-to material for climate-conscious architects. But as forests shrink and our environmental concerns grow, how can we ensure the wood with which we build is truly sustainable?

Forests are essential to a healthy planet. Complex and biologically diverse, they produce oxygen, purify water, stabilize and regulate weather and microclimates, reduce the risk of flooding and drought, and prevent soil erosion. As trees grow, they absorb and store CO<sub>2</sub>—emissions of which drive global heating—converting the greenhouse gas into biomass through photosynthesis. This process makes forests carbon sinks—vast natural reservoirs that help mitigate the effects of climate change by lowering the concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> in the earth's atmosphere.

To continue to act to our benefit environmentally, socially, and economically, forests need to be managed in a way that allows them to meet the market demand for wood without compromising biodiversity or their long-term impact on atmospheric carbon levels. For architects who wish to work sustainably, appreciating the nature of this balance is key. “Understanding forestry is as important as understanding how to build with wood,” says Michael Green, a Canadian architect working at the forefront of sustainable-timber design. “Wood really only works if you have sourced it in the right way.”

Independent forestry certification systems emerged in the 1990s in response to the increase in deforestation globally. Broadly, these systems provide certification for sustainable timber while addressing illegal logging, environmental degradation, deforestation, and climate change. Today, there exists an abundance of such organizations, but the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) is widely considered as having the most stringent accreditation requirements. Founded with the support of bodies like the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Greenpeace, the FSC works to protect forests and their biodiversity by establishing frameworks of best practice for forestry.

← As our natural forests shrink, finding sustainable ways to grow and fell wood has never been more imperative.