

# Insect Chic: In Colorado, Beetles Create Decor Trend

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## Bugs Give Trees a Blue Streak; Craftsmen Avoid Word 'Fungus'

BY ROBBIE WHELAN

DENVER—Chuck Shifflett hates what the insidious mountain pine beetle has done to the forests of Colorado, but he loves what the insect has done for his kitchen.

Last year, Mr. Shifflett, a property developer and retired Air Force officer, decided that the old, white, vinyl cabinets in his Denver condo needed an update. So he ripped them out and replaced them with cupboards made of wood from trees once infested with the beetles, which carry a fungus that stains the wood a bluish-gray hue.

Mr. Shifflett's kitchen island, as well, is marbled bluish-gray and he plans to panel his study in the blue, beetle-chewed wood.

"The old cabinets were in kind of a country style, which just isn't appropriate for a

downtown loft," said Mr. Shifflett, standing in his apartment, decorated in contemporary art, European metal light fixtures and sleek armchairs. "Now, everybody who comes in here asks immediately about the cabinets. It's incredibly beautiful wood."

Mr. Shifflett's kitchen is on the cusp of the hottest interior design trend in Colorado at the moment: Eco-conscious, with-it home- and business-owners are outfitting their houses and offices in blue-stained beetle wood. It is the latest symbol of downtown chic, up there with countertops made from recycled glass and bamboo-paper lampshades.

"I hadn't seen it used in a home before ours, but now it's super trendy," says Paige Damiano, who built a contemporary house in 2010 in Denver with her husband, who runs sales for New

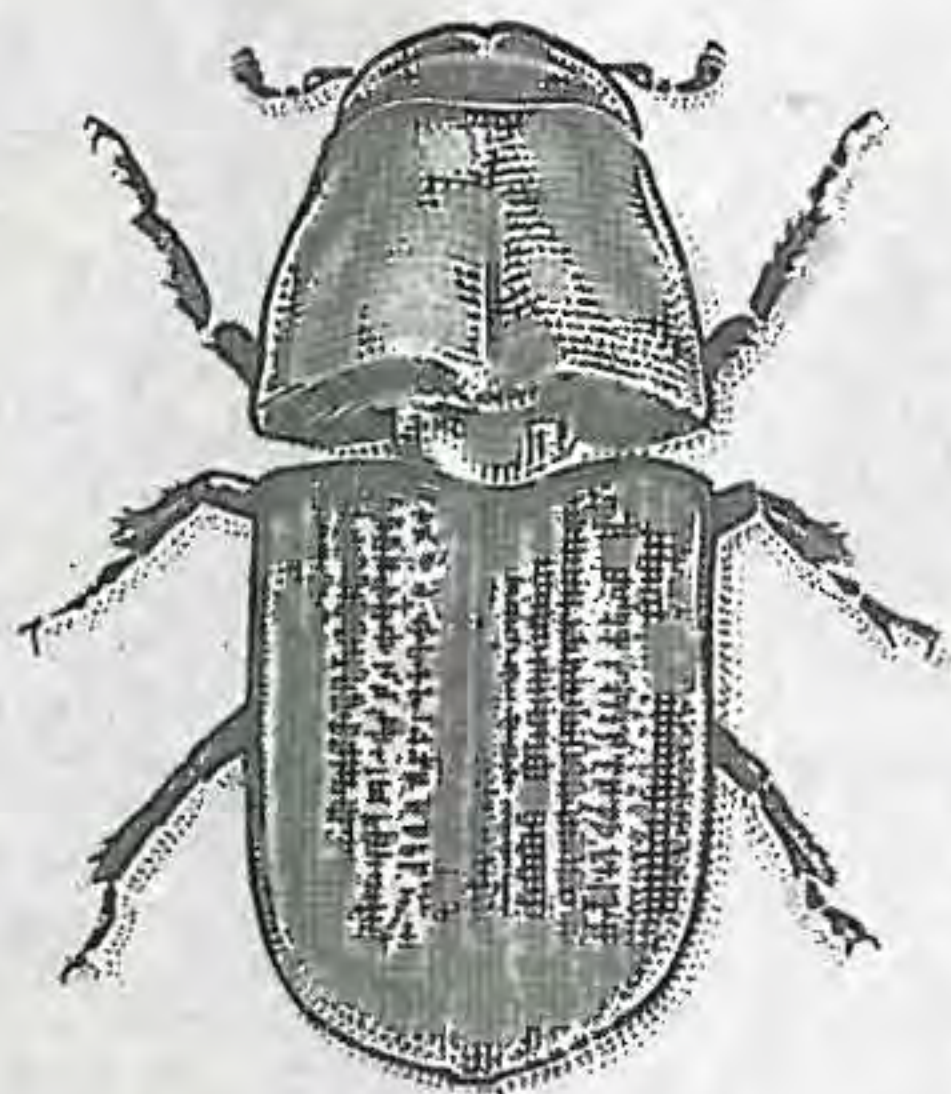
Mexico and Colorado for Burton Snowboards.

On their architect's suggestion, the couple outfitted the cabinets, wall paneling and ceilings in the living room of the house with the blue wood.

"You see it popping up everywhere, in restaurants, office buildings, homes," says Ms. Damiano, whose home was featured last year in *Dwell*, a magazine that highlights interior design tastemakers. "People who are into design, Colorado lovers, eco-friendly people all love it, because it looks super awesome, and because it's heartbreaking, when you drive up into the mountains, to see all these dead trees."

The U.S. Forest Service estimates that in the past decade, the beetle has chewed through and killed portions of 40 million to 45 million acres of timber, or about 12% of the forested land west of the Mississippi. The infestation, which first became serious in Colorado, has moved to other states, including Montana,

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*Mountain Pine Beetle*

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Idaho and Wyoming.

Once beetles get under the bark—they typically target lodgepole pines—they deposit eggs that hatch into larvae, which block water flow and cut off nutrients, killing the tree and leaving behind a fungus, which stains the wood in inky streaks that range from grayish-blue to indigo.

Skiers and hikers have complained about huge stands of pine turned gray and unsightly as they lose needles, dry out and die from the beetle infestation. Foresters worry that in the first years after dying, beetle-killed trees are like huge tinderboxes: prone to bursting into fast-moving wildfires.

But over the past few years, a group of artisans and craftsmen have appeared, mostly in Colorado, designing everything from high-end furniture to skis to iPad cases out of the blue wood. One investor has plans to build a ski resort in the Rocky Mountains, with a lodge and houses made entirely out of blue, beetle-chewed wood.

"Everybody's bummed about the beetles, but in one sense, the beetles are the heroes. We're creating all these manufacturing jobs," says Corbin Clay, a woodworker whose company makes custom dining-room tables, desks, buffets and other furniture, exclusively out of beetle-killed wood.

Mr. Clay had never heard of the mountain pine beetle when he moved to Colorado in 2007 and started working at a high-end kitchen fixtures manufac-



Robbie Whelan/The Wall Street Journal

**Corbin Clay, a craftsman from Aurora, Colo., makes furniture out of blue-stained, beetle-killed wood.**

turer. He decided to start his own company last year, focused on beetle-killed wood, called Azure Furniture.

"From a marketing standpoint, we try to avoid the word fungal or fungus," Mr. Clay says. "But I think we've convinced the vast majority of people that the beetles are not going to crawl out and eat their children, and that the fungus is not harmful."

Azure has sold about 190 pieces of custom furniture so far, including \$1,000 dining-room tables and \$700 desks.

Scientists say the wood isn't harmful—the beetles move on or die long before the trees are cut down. But the wood does lose its structural integrity if the trees sit too long after being killed, one reason some builders are re-

luctant to use it for load-bearing frames in houses and other buildings.

There have been other insect-based design trends, most notably wormy maple, a type of wood popular for its pock marks and changes in the grain caused by the ambrosia beetle.

But in Colorado, beetle-wood products are often seen as a small part of the solution to a huge problem.

Charise Buckley, an interior designer from Breckenridge, Colo., started a furniture-design company three years ago called Beetle Kill Blues. She says she has seen sales tick up this year as more people notice how bad the infestation has gotten.

"People feel bad when they see all the dead trees, because

the reason they came here is to commune with nature," she says. "It has become kind of an exotic product."

The most ambitious blue beetle-wood project in the works, however, is taking shape near Leadville, an old mining town high in the Rocky Mountains.

Steve Smith, a Dallas-based banking executive who founded a company that invests for mutual funds and union-benefit plans, has bought 600 acres near Leadville and is planning a \$120 million ski resort called AltaColorado, with a lodge, a spa, and 400 "Mining Era-chic" homes made almost entirely out of blue beetle-killed wood, including walls, bed frames, cabinets, and the finishes in the lobby.

Mr. Smith, who has been visiting Colorado as a tourist for 40 years, says he first noticed the wood while skiing. "I'm a tree-hugging kind of guy," he says. "I saw all those dead trees, and I thought, this is a problem waiting to be solved."

Mr. Smith says his company has filed paperwork with Lake County to incorporate the resort as a new town.

On a recent tour of the property, ski trails wound around dead, beetle-infected trees. At the crest of a hill, a clearing commands a view of an alpine lake.

"I feel that we can create a premium brand out of something that costs very little to acquire," Mr. Smith says, referring to the blue wood. "It's the whole Rocky Mountain thing. This is the way a regional brand gets established."