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Lawrenceville store supplies demand for building 'green'

Cork, wheat, bark and more

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Steve Mellon/Post-Gazette

Janice Donatelli in her store, Artemis Environmental Building Materials on Butler Street in Lawrenceville.

Maybe she's just lucky, but Janet Donatelli has a knack for starting the right business at exactly the right time.

Ten years ago, when Lawrenceville was just starting its transformation from impoverished city neighborhood to hip, specialty shopping destination, she opened Butler Street Gallery, an antique store on the town's main drag. In 2000, sensing the need for a funky place to enjoy a cup of joe, the Kentucky native transformed the space into Coca Coffee Lounge, a coffee shop that doubled as a modern furniture/jewelry/book store.

As its reputation grew, customers hungered for more food with their La Prima coffee -- and while she made a mean spinach pie, Ms. Donatelli readily admits, "I'm no chef." So four years ago, she handed her apron to three young chefs who expanded it into a full-scale restaurant and shifted gears to the next big thing: green building.

By 2004, Pittsburgh was becoming nationally known for its green movement, with dozens of buildings certified or on their way to certification by the U.S. Green Building Council in Washington, D.C., including the David L. Lawrence Convention Center, the largest certified green building in the world. But the average consumer still had nowhere to go to actually see sustainable products such as cork or bamboo flooring except for trade shows or on the Internet. Her solution? Partnering with friend Linda Metropulos and opening Artemis Environmental, a Lawrenceville store dedicated to green building supplies.

"We wanted people to have access to as many materials as possible in one place."

The store, which is one of 40 exhibitors at the second annual Pittsburgh Design Fair in the North Side on Sept. 28, was far from an instant hit. Architects and foundations were early converts, but it wasn't until the importance of going green hit mainstream magazines that average homeowners -- and their contractors -- wandered in, says Ms. Donatelli.

"It's like any new business," she says. "You have to educate your public."

Now the business has become so well-known for its innovative, earth-friendly home products that it draws people from as far away as Erie, Buffalo, Wheeling, and Columbus.

One of Artemis' biggest selling points is that it offers one-stop shopping for the ecologically sensitive, with numerous items for floors, walls, countertops, windows and bath. Perhaps even more importantly, it showcases "green" not just as smart or responsible, but beautiful.

"People might not think it, but sustainable materials are gorgeous," she proclaims.

The foyer of the Butler Street store is just one example. It wears an coal-black, industrial basalt floor (originally used in the steel industry because it can withstand temperatures of more than 3,000 degrees) and a door Ms. Donatelli recycled from a bank being gutted on the North Side. Its wavy ceiling, meanwhile, is made from discarded bleachers she found at Construction Junction in Point Breeze.

The transom above the door leading into the showroom is even prettier. Ms. Donatelli salvaged the glass block from the 1920 building's small front window and engaged Jeannine and Drew Hine of Vessel Studio on Carson Street in the South Side to blow art glass into its center.

"You use what you have to keep things out of junkyards and landfills," says Ms. Donatelli, who earlier this summer bought out her partner.

Many of Artemis' items require little introduction. Along with cork flooring and bamboo countertops, you'll find one of the best comeback building materials of all time: linoleum, which is made from linseed oil and other renewable natural ingredients. Today, real linoleum comes in an amazing array of colors and is used not just for flooring but on countertops and even walls.

Other products are so cutting-edge you have to actually see and touch them to believe them. Wallpaper that resembles leather or parchment but is crafted out of hand-pounded bark? That would be Barkskin. A stain-resistant countertop composite made from recycled paper that looks and feels like soapstone? It's called Paperstone. Building panels that look like some sort of exotic wood but are actually reclaimed stalks of sorghum straw bonded with a formaldehyde-free adhesive? Say hello to Kirei. An environmentally friendly alternative to traditional plaster? Give American Clay a try.

Artemis is also the distributor of Biofiber Wheat Board, a sheet material made from agricultural waste; Lumicor recycled glass products; Johnsonite recycled rubber flooring; modular FLOR carpet tiles, which have the lowest VOCs in the industry; and recycled aluminum door handles, light fixtures and wall tiles (which also can be used as countertops) from Eleek.

"It's about being creative with products from the waystream," says Ms. Donatelli, who also stocks eco-friendly cleaners and strippers. "There is a story behind every product."

Andy and Lisa Parker are among the green converts, having put Paperstone countertops, cork flooring and a bamboo butcher block in their East End kitchen. They also have Marmoleum "click" linoleum tiles in their basement game room, and FLOR carpet tiles in a home office.

"It feels good to have products in your home that are environmentally friendly," says Mrs. Parker, a jewelry designer.

The fact that they're also safe -- that is to say, they don't contain the harmful toxins or chemicals found in traditional building products -- is an added benefit.

"It's about detoxifying yourself and not passing it on to your children, so they grow into healthy adults," agrees Ms. Donatelli.

Green items, she concedes, often cost more than traditional building products. But that's to be expected; in the case of reclaimed flooring, for example, it's expensive to pull nails out of an old board, strip it and then refinish it.

She likens her shop to the mom-and-pop shops that once thrived on America's main streets.

"It's knowing where your products come from, and supporting your local community," she says.

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