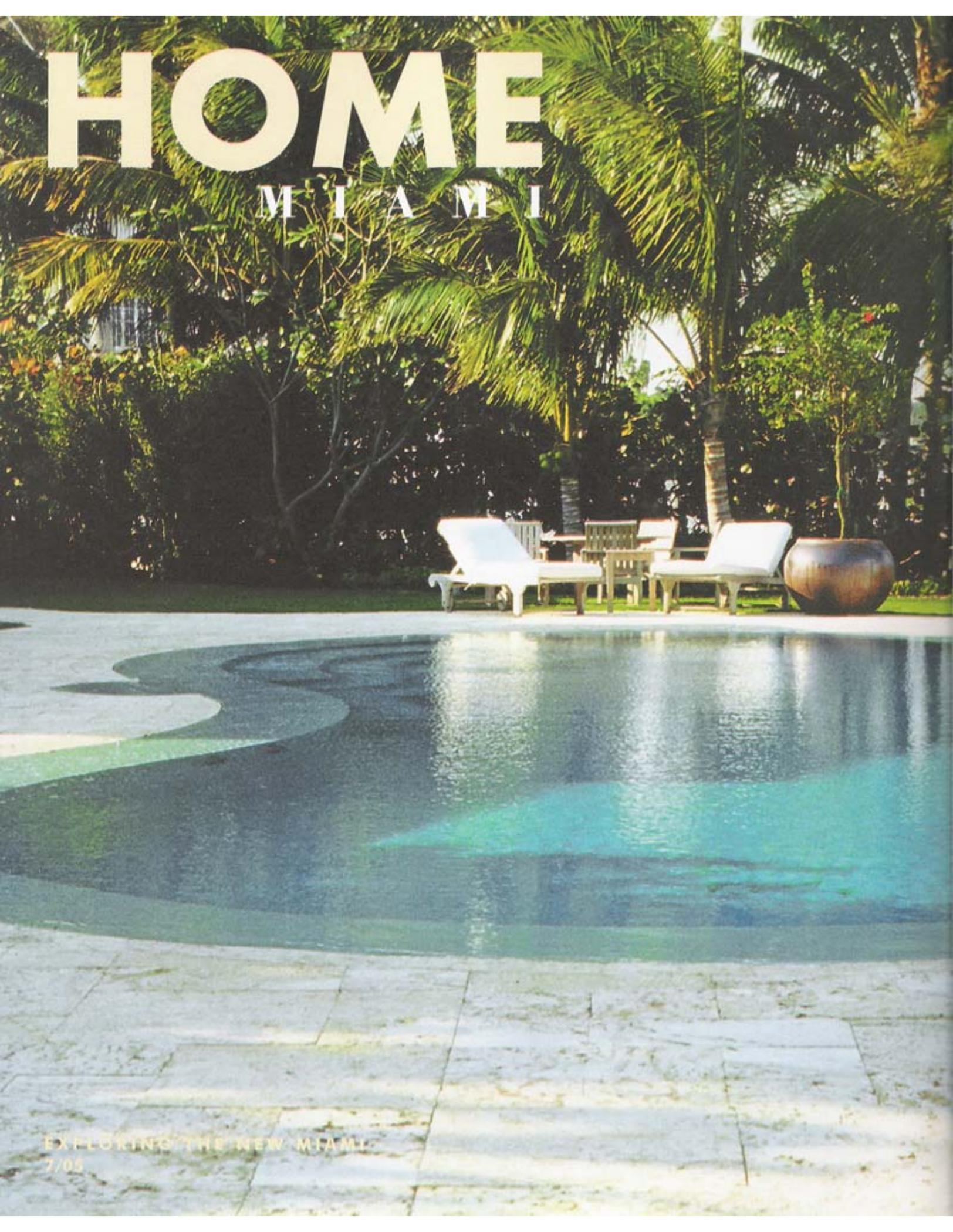


HOME

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EXPLORING THE NEW MIAMI
7/05

New Bamboo

THIRTY STORIES ABOVE the pavement in Shanghai, China, construction workers clamber around the bamboo scaffolding that clings to the glazing of new skyscrapers. At first glance, their position seems precarious, and the pale, slender stalks far too delicate to support their weight. But bamboo, which has been used for scaffolding in Asia for 5000 years, actually has a tensile strength greater than that of steel.

In recent years, American designers have begun to appreciate the somewhat astounding technical and aesthetic capabilities of this giant prehistoric grass. It began with bamboo flooring, which

**AN ANCIENT MATERIAL
EVOLVES IN
ASTOUNDING WAYS**

Text Juliette Guilbert

Growing bamboo offers direct benefits to the environment; absorbing carbon, cleaning contaminated soil and stabilizing eroding topsoils.



ABOVE: Bambu's sturdy all-occasion veneerware trays and plates are made of 100% organically grown bamboo that is peeled directly from the stalk. Available from www.bambuhome.com.

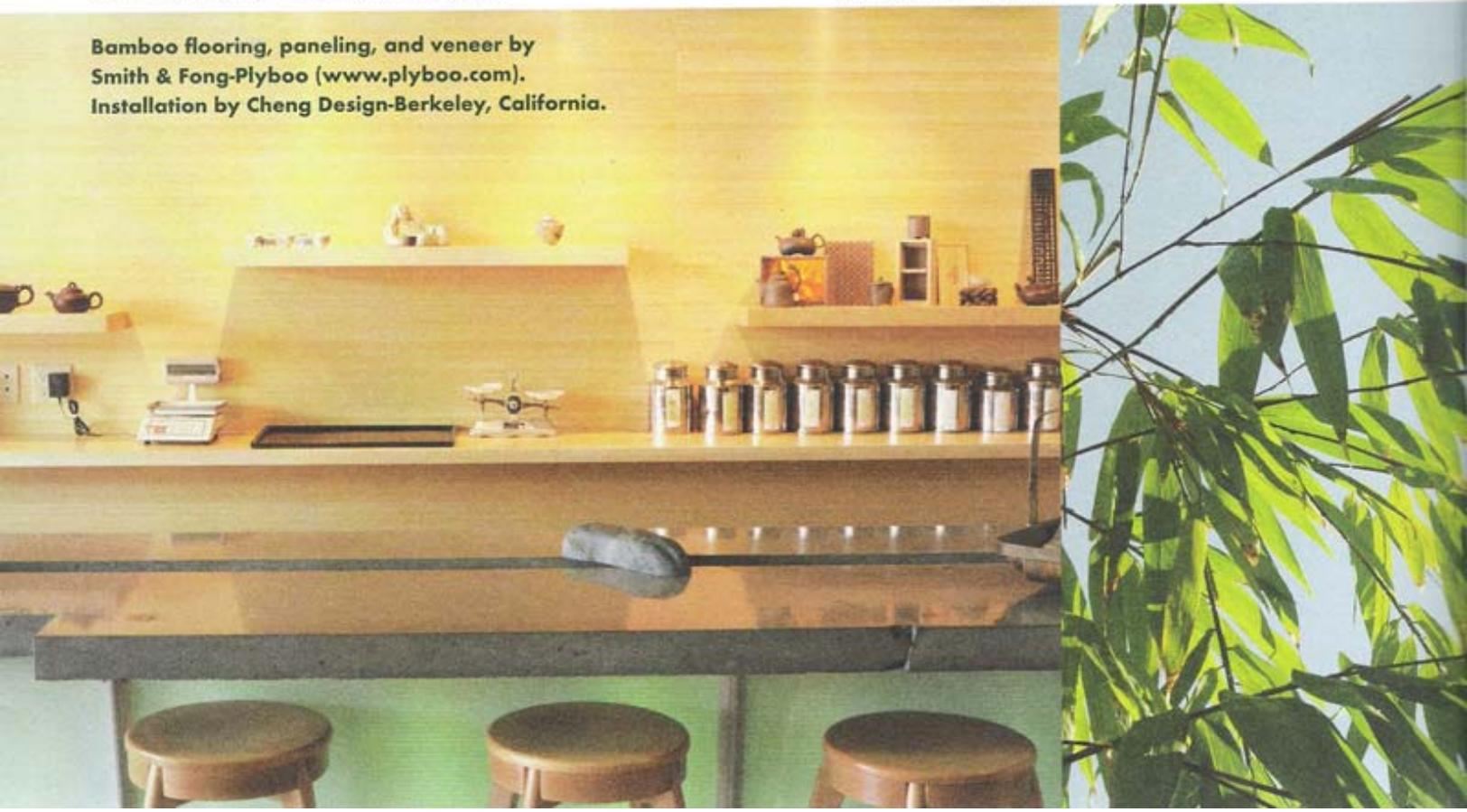
offered a less expensive, equally beautiful, and more environmentally sensitive alternative to tropical and temperate hardwoods. But bamboo's contemporary uses have expanded to include engineered bamboo furniture, modern housewares, and even fabrics—products that, in terms of design, are a far cry from the retro tiki bar sensibility of conventional bamboo furnishings. Back in the 1940s when the designer Paul Frankl was bending multiple bamboo bands for chairs, sofas, and tables, he couldn't have imagined the material would evolve like this.

"Bamboo is sort of a poster child for the environmental building movement," says New York-based architect and furniture designer Michael McDonough, co-founder of the experimental Bamboo Research Initiative at the Rhode Island School of Design. "It has enormous benefits as a plant. Even a genetically engineered lumber tree can take twenty years to come to maturity. Bamboo takes three years." Growing bamboo also offers direct benefits to the environment, says McDonough: It absorbs more carbon (a major source of global warming) than any other deciduous plant, cleans contaminated soil, and stabilizes eroding topsoil after floods and volcanoes.

All of which would be beside the point if bamboo were not also capable of assuming the beautiful, durable forms that make it increasingly attractive to designers. "Because bamboo is springy,

PHOTO: MATTHEW MILLMAN

Bamboo flooring, paneling, and veneer by Smith & Fong-Plyboo (www.plyboo.com). Installation by Cheng Design-Berkeley, California.





Hand-coiled bamboo bowls, naked, or in a choice of seven shades of lacquer by Bambu, available from www.bambuhome.com.

strong, and easily bent, you can do interesting shapes with it," McDonough says. To explore bamboo's unique properties and promote its use in sophisticated modern design, he created the first-ever collection of commercially produced engineered bamboo furniture, a sleek table and chairs made of cold-formed bamboo slats. "We wanted to show off the technical and mechanical ability of bamboo, so we really made tight radiuses," he says. "The chair is also incredibly light—you can lift it with your little finger."

Miami designer Yamir Perez, of the firm Designtribe, Inc., has used bamboo extensively in his inventive and stylish interiors, which usually feature mostly custom-built furnishings. "We used bamboo for a house in the Venetian Islands where the owner never uses air conditioning," he says. "The house is always open to the elements and we needed to find a material that would hold up better than regular wood. It [the furniture] is still there, and except where we used a maple inset in a coffee table, it is as good as new after eight to ten years."

Like McDonough, Perez had an interest in green materials that drew him to bamboo. But he also found that "bamboo worked out beautifully from a design perspective," providing a linear grain that lent itself to the creation of modern shapes but preserved the warmth and earthiness of wood. One of bamboo's few drawbacks, Perez says, is its limited ability to take stain: "It's not as porous as other woods, and you can only get to a medium walnut-honey color from the nat-

In furniture design, bamboo provides a linear grain that lends itself to modern shapes, but conveys a warmth and earthiness.

Architect/designer Michael McDonough's laminated bamboo chairs and table are made of 100% sustainable, cultivated bamboo. See www.michaelmcdonough.com for details.



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LIVING GREEN



ural blond." But McDonough, who is using bamboo extensively in the construction of a web-controlled home called the "e-House" in New York's Hudson River Valley, says he has found ways around this limitation. "You can use hand-rubbed finishes and dyes or the equivalent of dyes, and you can use thinned paint," he says. The bamboo cabinets in the e-House will be a rich claret color; the floors are bamboo, which has been steamed until it is a deep amber.

Bamboo aficionados say that Western design has only just begun to uncover the possibilities of this wondrous plant, which is used in largely deforested China and Japan to make everything from disposable plates to beer.

According to Timothy Ivory, the Miami-based furniture designer who created the bamboo pool bar at the Delano Hotel in Miami Beach, "there are probably going to be a hundred new bamboo products in the next three to five years." Ivory notes that Ford has already produced a concept car made of titanium and bamboo.

Michael McDonough, for one, would like to see bamboo everywhere he looks. His current project is an all-bamboo modular house, which he plans to fabricate in Korea and then exhibit around the world. "Virtually every component of a building can have some bamboo in it," he says. Bamboo can be used as a structural element in concrete slabs and paneling, to create interior finishes and fabrics, and can even be mixed with high-strength plastic and then poured and formed. The possibilities are endless – and amazing. What other building material can do all that, detoxify the environment, and also add flavor to Asian recipes? ■

Hand-coiled bamboo bowls, and plates. Naked by Bambu, available from www.bambuhome.com.