

The Right Tree

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By Jason Gilmer

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Reclaimed poplar-bark siding can look rustic or luxe, depending on the application.

The cultural divide between the High Country of North Carolina and the high-couture houses of Paris might seem vast. But an artisan-wood company in rugged little Spruce Pine — pop. 2,175 — is fashioning its wares for French designer Christian Louboutin, whose red-soled shoes are seen on red carpets from Hollywood to Shanghai.

Louboutin's people will use The Bark House's boutique wall paneling as part of their French studio's interior appointments. Bark House owner Christie McCurry, who started the endeavor in 1990 with her husband, Marty, appreciates the posh bragging rights.

But it's not as though they were doing badly before Louboutin. On two recent occasions, the small business received big-time honors. Architectural Record, a trade monthly for architecture and interior design founded in 1891, awarded Bark House its prestigious Product of the Year award (against 400 other entries) for its sustainable poplar-bark panels, reclaimed from felled trees. And Cradle to Cradle Products Innovation Institute, a hard-line eco nonprofit that educates manufacturers to "become a positive force for society and the environment," with a goal no less than "bringing about a new industrial revolution," gave the company its first platinum certification, for Bark House's shingle siding and rustic wall panels.

Exceeding Cradle to Cradle's rigorous standards for materials and process "helps to verify what started out as hunches about our holistic impact in the world," says McCurry. A long-lasting hardwood, poplar is plentiful in the

Southern Appalachians. “We’re not cutting trees for harvesting of bark. It’s a commercial industry already in place in this region,” she explains.

Twenty employees help transform the logging byproduct into fashionable rusticity. Used as exterior cladding on houses and storefronts, for inside walls, and in design embellishments, the bark’s look varies from woody, ridged grooves to dappled matte applications.

All the honors have “increased the reach of architects contacting us asking questions,” says McCurry. And getting appreciation from the level of Louboutin is a boost for aesthetics. “It shows the importance of bringing a natural element into a harsh commercial environment.”

The bark, she adds, “helps to soften the look. It gives texture and interest.”

For more information about The Bark House, call 828-765-9010 or check out the company’s website: www.barkhouse.com.