



Channel Your Inner Architect with the Materials Lab



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A closer look at the School of Architecture's Materials Lab with Jennifer Wong

JENNIFER WONG is the Curator and Director of the Materials Lab at the UT School of Architecture. The Materials Lab is a resource center dedicated to hands-on and in-depth material investigation. The Materials Lab's ever-growing collection features 29,000+ material samples and is reflective of the current building and design markets with a particular focus on smart, emerging, and sustainable materials and technologies.

Some examples of material samples include translucent concrete, building insulation made from recycled jeans, fish leather, and flexible stone veneer. The Materials Lab also supports material research at the University through extensive programming, material grants, and research projects.

RESOURCE RECOVERY: How does the Materials Lab support the University's Zero Waste goal?



MATERIAL LAB SHELVES ARE FULL OF INTERESTING OPTIONS AND FUN TO BROWSE FOR INSPIRATION.

JEN WONG: We deal with a lot of unconventional materials, but make efforts to keep as much material out of the landfill as possible. **Whenever we decommission materials from our library, or receive duplicate samples, we set them aside for students to use in their design projects and models.** For the last couple of years, we've also supported a program called the Material Exchange, which is a give-and-take reuse system in the School of Architecture for students to reuse model-making materials. This year, we're investigating ways in which the program can spread to other departments and universities.

RR: What led you to incorporate zero waste measures into your organization?

JW: Our interest in materials lies beyond the aesthetic and performative qualities that architects and designers often prioritize, and we consider all stages of a material's life cycle – including sourcing, manufacturing, transportation, use, and recovery – to be important. The construction and demolition industry is responsible for 40% of the total waste produced in the US, so **one of our priorities is to instill zero waste awareness and habits in our students – who will one day join the workforce.** It's easy to take materials for granted, as we're saturated with so much 'stuff' – but when you really pay attention to the amount of resources, labor, energy, and time that goes into the products that make up our material world – you see how valuable it really is. A few years ago we organized a field trip to Texas Disposal Systems, an integrated services landfill. **Our tour guide made a prediction that really struck me – he said that sooner or later we'd begin mining landfills for material because it would be cheaper and easier than extracting raw material.** This sort of big picture, systems-based awareness makes it easy to see why shifting to zero waste, and a circular economy, is so critical.

Be creative when identifying people or organizations that may be able to help divert material from landfill.

RR: What advice would you give to other organizations that would like to incorporate similar initiatives?

JW: **Be creative when identifying people or organizations that may be able to help divert material from landfill.** We've established

relationships with local reuse organizations and creatives that value the material that we ourselves don't need. As we become more interconnected, we have realized that there's almost always someone who can re-use or recycle an item in question.

RR: What is one thing you want the UT community to know about the Materials Lab?

JW: Our material library has a lot of examples of products that support zero waste on a large scale. **Everyone is welcome to browse the collection, which is circulating, and we give tours to many groups outside of architecture including art, engineering, and textiles.** This year we are also doing a Green Fee-funded workshop series that teaches participants about sustainable materials in our collection through hands-on, experiential learning. Our first workshop focused on temporary materials, and participants learned about Dell's initiatives to develop ocean waste plastic and also grew their own mushroom-based packaging. The workshop series is open to the entire UT community, and we have four great workshops planned for the spring. •



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