

Published: 05.07.2006

She sells Earth-friendly items

Sustainable building products fill showroom at Originate

By Gillian Drummond

SPECIAL TO THE ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Confidence, passion and sheer bravado brought Natasha Winnik to where she is now: the owner of a one-of-a-kind company in Tucson that's making its mark on homeowners and the building trade.

This serious, determined young woman never doubted her business plan for a showroom for sustainable building products.

But when it came to trying to get a loan, she found that the banks were not as keen on the idea as she was.

By spring 2003, she had her eye on a former artists studio in Tucson's Downtown warehouse district. Still, with no financing in place — just a "maybe" from one of the banks — she attended the auction for the building's sale and bid on it anyway. "It was a gamble, but my heart said to go for it."

The bank did come through with the loan, and in October 2003, Originate opened its doors. Its mission: to sell building materials that are, in Winnik's words, "environmentally friendly, renewable, durable, nontoxic and healthy."

In its own way, the showroom pays homage to the artists who occupied it before. It's hip and functional, and laid-back in the extreme. Bright canvases by local artists decorate the walls, and there's a long, squishy sofa. In one corner, shelves brim over with Winnik's books and magazines, which are for customers' perusal, too.

The material samples run from the basic — salvaged wood, bamboo and cork — to the wild and colorful, such as insulation made from recycled jeans, and bright, brash tiles made from recycled glass.

Yes, her items are pricier than regular materials, but not prohibitively so, Winnik says. And she says that lines of ecologically friendly paints and cleaners (from BioShield) are pretty competitive.

» A sample of the Earth-friendly products for sale at Originate:

- Cotton insulation made from denim and cotton scrap — "It's nicer to work with than fiberglass," Winnik says, and it's good for chemically sensitive people. Price: 60 cents to 80 cents per square foot.

- Bamboo, used in flooring and cabinetry — a renewable grass, as it grows so quickly. "They consider bamboo to be as strong as steel, and it's as hard as red oak." Price: flooring costs \$4.50 per square foot, and cabinetry is \$200 for a 4-by-8-foot sheet.

- Cork flooring — Taken from the bark of the cork oak tree, this "has natural insulation and acoustic properties." Price: \$4.75 to \$7.50 per square foot.

- Natural linoleum — made from linseed oil, jute and limestone, and available in some bold colors and patterns. "It's anti-static and anti-bacterial, and it's only \$5 a square foot, installed."

» Originate, 526 N. Ninth Ave., 792-4207, www.originateNBM.com

Originally from Maryland, Winnik developed an interest in the environment in high school. That interest stayed with her throughout college and beyond, when she began working as an architect.

She got the bug for using recycled materials after spending time in San Diego working with straw-bale construction.

Realizing that Tucson was a hot spot for natural building, she moved here in 1997 and kept designing. It wasn't long before she decided she'd rather sell the materials than design the buildings — and that the timing was just right.

"People walk in the door and thank me for opening," she says about her clients, the majority of them homeowners but many of them contractors.

Hers is now one of two such showrooms in Arizona, she says, and there are plenty more sprouting up nationwide.

Tucson architect Bob Vint, with whom Winnik worked briefly, is also riding the crest of the pro-environment wave, designing homes, schools and elder-care centers in and around Tucson with recycled materials such as the cotton insulation Winnik sells. (*See the accompanying box.*)

Originate has filled a gap in the market, "without a doubt," Vint says. "It makes it a lot more accessible for the builder, the contractor or the architect to have a single source of alternative materials."

At 33, Winnik says she has no regrets about leaving architecture.

"I don't want to be in a profession because that's what I was trained to do and hate it. I felt burned out, and I was becoming less and less enchanted with it."

Whereas the enchantment with Originate, for its owner and customers, seems to be just beginning.

• *Contact freelance reporter Gillian Drummond at GCDrummond@aol.com.*

» A sample of the Earth-friendly products for sale at Originate:

• Cotton insulation made from denim and cotton scrap — "It's nicer to work with than fiberglass," Winnik says, and it's good for chemically sensitive people. Price: 60 cents to 80 cents per square foot.

• Bamboo, used in flooring and cabinetry — a renewable grass, as it grows so quickly. "They consider bamboo to be as strong as steel, and it's as hard as red oak." Price: flooring costs \$4.50 per square foot, and cabinetry is \$200 for a 4-by-8-foot sheet.

• Cork flooring — Taken from the bark of the cork oak tree, this "has natural insulation and acoustic properties." Price: \$4.75 to \$7.50 per square foot.

• Natural linoleum — made from linseed oil, jute and limestone, and available in some bold colors and patterns. "It's anti-static and anti-bacterial, and it's only \$5 a square foot, installed."

» Originate, 526 N. Ninth Ave., 792-4207, www.originateNBM.com

All content copyright © 1999-2007 AzStarNet, Arizona Daily Star and its wire services and suppliers and may not be republished without permission. All rights reserved. Any copying, redistribution, or retransmission of any of the contents of this service without the expressed written consent of Arizona Daily Star or AzStarNet is prohibited.