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## Shopping Amid Sustainability



By RALPH GARDNER JR.

Answer this question honestly: If you had to choose between saving the planet and getting a new couch, which would you go for? Obviously, all of us would vote for saving the planet. But what if you really needed that new couch? What if your old one was so beyond shabby chic you were reluctant to invite guests into your bedroom, where the couch sits? Not that we invite guests into our bedroom as a rule.

That was somewhat the dilemma I faced when I visited the ABC Carpet & Home Warehouse Outlet in the Bronx on a recent afternoon. ABC was interested in showing off all of its new sustainable-landscaping initiatives. I was more interested in finding a new couch that would help overcome our home décor embarrassment—indeed, while it would be more a love seat than a couch due to the diminutive space it was destined to occupy and the dimensions of the piece of furniture it was replacing, I aspired it to be so lovely that it would sing our good taste, eclipse the art on the walls and even become a destination unto itself, a centerpiece of our guided home tour.



Andrew Hinderaker for The Wall Street Journal  
Vice Chairman Paul Chapman on the 'green' roof at ABC Carpet & Home Warehouse Outlet in the Bronx.

I realize that would have been a lot to ask of a couch under any conditions, but especially because my hosts, while as cordial as they could be, were more interested in celebrating their new green roof than waiting around while I shopped for a bargain.

Actually, their sustainability efforts consist of three separate initiatives. There's the roof. It's now planted with strips of sedum that are capable of eliminating 50% of approximately 300,000 gallons of storm water that would otherwise pollute the Bronx River. How that's accomplished? Apparently, by the plants absorbing the precipitation, or scrubbing the rain before it enters the river, or through evaporation—though I'm not entirely sure, perhaps because I wasn't paying close enough attention, because I was too focused on furniture.

(On my first pass through the warehouse on the way to Waterwash ABC—another of the initiatives, it's a series of plantings along the Bronx River's edge, conceived by environmental artist Lillian Ball—I spotted a striking modern couch, and comfortable to boot, that had been marked down to \$899 from \$1,395; sadly, it was the wrong color.)

I was also distracted by a bunch of kids with nets who were crabbing on the opposite bank. "As a kid I used to swim this river all the time," said Paul Chapman, the vice chairman of ABC Carpet & Home. "I'd catch striped bass out of this river. And I don't even glow."

Not to put too fine a point on it, but the Bronx River isn't the most pristine body of water. Efforts such as Waterwash are part of the Bronx River Watershed Initiative, the funds for which come from a \$7 million settlement between the state attorney general's office and polluters, the result of raw-sewage violations related to the river.

Waterwash filters storm water from ABC's 30,000-square-foot parking lot, channeling it through pipes into the plantings. "When we first bought the building," Mr. Chapman remembered, meaning in the mid-'80s, "there were over 20,000 tires" littering the river's edge. The store had them removed.

Almost as lovely as the native plantings—as Mr. Chapman put it, all the plants "grew up in the Bronx"—and the parklet, open to the public seven days a week, is the path that wends through. It was created from crushed glass, such as Coke bottles, and emanates a subtle, multicolored glow in the sunlight. It also instantly absorbs water.



Andrew Hinderaker for The Wall Street Journal  
A view of the Bronx River outside Waterwash ABC.

Somebody pointed out a cormorant flying by. And a platform has been erected for an osprey nest. The platform went up too late this season to attract one of the raptors, but hopefully it will next year.

While ABC owns the land and will pay to maintain Waterwash—the company also spent several hundred-thousand dollars to upgrade its roof—the initiative was a joint effort among various government agencies and nonprofits, including the Bloomberg administration's PlaNYC, the Bronx Overall Development Center, Sustainable South Bronx and Rocking the Boat, a nonprofit that imparts skills, such as boat building, to underserved kids. Their members installed all the plantings last summer.

Such partnerships aren't new to ABC Carpet Home, which has been on the forefront of saving the planet—one herbal candle and one natural-fiber rug at a time. "When you're investing in values and the product, you're getting more for your money," explained Paulette Cole, ABC's CEO. "We wanted to hold the torch even higher for values-based consumers."

As impressive as the Waterwash initiative is, especially recalling the area's former incarnation as a tire graveyard (Drexel University has installed equipment to

monitor water quality), Mr. Chapman was apparently so proud of it that he insisted showing me not only the park, but also the drain pipe that leads into it from the opposite direction.



Andrew Hinderaker for The Wall Street Journal  
Inside ABC Carpet & Home Warehouse Outlet.

Fortunately, this required traipsing back through the 287,000-foot warehouse and its furniture showroom—and on the way, we admired the third element of the project: trees planted along Bronx River Avenue that will mitigate even more storm runoff into the river. It also helps kick-start the beautification of Bronx River Avenue, not the city's most scenic boulevard.

As furniture-filled as the showroom was, there didn't seem that much in the way of love seats. "It looks like not too many people are in love," Mr. Chapman noted dryly. "Those two sectionals are terrific."

If only I'd been in the market for a sectional. Also, the warehouse's environmentally friendly recycled furniture—if I'm reading my notes correctly, one of them was upholstered in "truck tarps"—wasn't really in keeping with our apartment's calm, beige color scheme.

My shopping foray was cut short, undoubtedly for the better, when Adam Green, Rocking the Boat's founder and executive director, pulled up in a rubber dingy to take us along the Bronx River. Much of the banks along either side remains lush and undeveloped.

And there were people fishing along it at several points. I'm not sure I'd want to pull dinner from the river's waters. But with efforts such as ABC's, perhaps in the not altogether distant future that may seem a more appealing option than it does at present.

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