



Greater Richmond Convention Center, Hall D

NAHBS 2010

Sylvan Cycles – Surprisingly Obvious

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Wood seems like such an obvious choice for a strong, durable, and light-weight building material. We've all seen it used on every imaginable piece of sporting goods equipment created by man; bows & arrows, fishing rods, skis, gun stocks, sleds, hockey sticks ... you name it. So it's odd that a bicycle made of wood would take so many by complete surprise at the North American Handmade Bicycle Show.

Sylvan Cycles out of Amherst, MA is creating a lot of buzz with their wood composite bicycles. Show attendees crowd around the Sylvan booth, often 6 deep, many remarking, "Why didn't I think of that?" Sylvan's John Fabel points out, "Yes, wood is an obvious choice. As a frame building material, it has all of the right properties you'd look for in a bicycle. A wooden frame results in a fantastic ride quality due to the resilience of wood."

The main triangles of Sylvan frames are comprised of hexagonal, or pencil-shaped, "tubes" which are held together using bio-sourced resin adhesives. Sylvan engineers their own 4-layer laminate sheets, which are carefully cut and aligned to ensure continuous fiber from end-to-end along each tube. And though they can make narrow wooden tubes for seat and chain stays, they primarily use solid stays because there's minimal weight savings. "Structurally, wood weighs 25-30% less than its steel equivalents," according to Sylvan's Sam Kelley. "Much of the weight of a Sylvan bike is in the steel lugs." Beautifully crafted, stainless steel lugs, that is.

Sylvan only uses sustainable, locally-harvested regional woods like maple and walnut to create their frames. Recently, custom wheel builder **Merlyn Townley, owner of Cyclic Evolution**, approached Sylvan to have them build a mahogany frame. "Sylvan refused. They didn't want to have any part in cutting down non-sustainable forest," Merlyn recalled. "And, that's exactly what I wanted them to tell me." Sylvan did, however, agree to build him his mahogany frame after Merlyn provided his own piece of reclaimed mahogany. The resulting bike will have personal significance for Townley, as the wood is from his late father's sculpture shop.

Because their wood frame prototypes have all been so successful, Sylvan is now making the leap to a true production run. They offer custom fitting and models for racing, randonneuring, 26 and 29 inch mountain, and have two adventure models for touring and cyclocross. A time-trial bike is also in the works.

- Matt Shields