

The logo for BJELIN, consisting of the word "BJELIN" in a bold, sans-serif font, centered within a solid grey square.

## **DESIGNING FOR THE FUTURE – THE OPPORTUNITY OF HARDENED WOOD FLOORING**

**Emanuel Lidberg, Head of Design at Välinge Innovation, talks about where his design inspiration comes from and how Woodura® hardened wood flooring allows him the freedom to express maximum creativity**

The design philosophy of Emanuel Lidberg is to create products that will last a very long time. This is not just a reference to the durability and longevity of the product – although with Woodura hardened wood you get that too – but it refers to the design aspect as well. If a designer creates an on-trend product for the consumer to install today, but which looks dated in five years' time then arguably the designer hasn't done his or her job properly. The lifetime of the product should be at least 20-25 years.

“We don't operate in a market where we have the most trendy fast-moving products,” says Emanuel, “but we try to go for classic designs that actually use the raw material and enhance its naturalness when it comes to pigments and the colouration of the product, so you can experience the real wood underneath. If you just paint over the wood, you can maybe say today that this is a great colour, but then in two years it will be out of fashion. That is not a sustainable approach. We try to design products that work well where they are installed for a very long time.”

Before working for Välinge Innovation, the sister company to Bjelin, Emanuel worked at the well-known Swedish hardwood company Kährs as design manager for five years, so he knows a thing or two about product design and development in this market.

Where does he get his inspiration from? Trade shows? No, not really. Although he sometimes goes to Domotex, Europe's biggest flooring show, this year he didn't bother.

“It's maybe interesting to go to these shows to see what your competitors are doing,” he says, “but from a design point of view, if you're looking at trends at a tradeshow, you are already too late.”

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“You have to look way back to see trends developing. There have been design trends which the gaming community for example have adopted, then designers get hold of them, then the early adopters pick them up and they get transferred into more fast-moving goods and then the bigger brands start to use them. By the time that trend is appearing on commodity products you can buy in the supermarket, you know it’s too late to react. We have to look at it when it’s at the early adopter phase, in order to see if this is something we need to react to for our product development.

“One example is if you look at the rising interest in patterned flooring like chevron and herringbone. The interest in patterns started to rise about ten years ago, but what did happen two decades ago was that the electronics and textiles sector started to develop more patterned designs. That took a couple of years and then we saw a rise in interest in patterned flooring, but it was a delay of 8-10 years. Now they are really popular in the flooring industry. That is a good example of where you can actually see cause and effect developing from fast-moving goods to interior design. It also indicates the cyclical nature of trends, as we have seen this before with herringbone back in the 1920s and Dutch patterns in the 1950s and 1960s.”

Emanuel Lidberg revels in the design possibilities offered by Woodura hardened wood, his chosen material. Bjelin offers both lacquered products which are rated for heavy commercial use and also brushed lacquer which gives a more tactile feeling of the wood, because it presents the visual effect of the grain in a totally different way.

The Woodura technology comprises an HDF board with the wood powder layer followed by the veneer and then the full ensemble pressed together. The wood powder penetrates down into the HDF board, making it more rigid and water resistant, and the rest of the powder penetrates upwards into the veneer hardening the veneer surface.

This Woodura™ process was developed by Välinge and, as well as being strong and water-resistant with the 5G Dry™ locking system, it also only requires the use of a

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really thin veneer of just 0.6mm thickness, compared to 2.5mm for a traditional parquet for instance. This maximises the amount of product that can be obtained from a log, part of the company's "whole log" philosophy.

"It also means we have a product which actually embraces the natural variation and feel of the real wood, being really tactile and not covered up with too much lacquer," says Emanuel. "The Woodura technology offers the aesthetic of real wood, but in a much more sustainable way and with increased strength and water resistance."

The new Contrast Collection points to the limits of what is possible with such a thin veneer. Utilising its access to the state-of-the-art R&D department belonging to Välinge Innovation, Bjelin has pioneered a cutting-edge approach to enhancing the wood's natural structure. The ground-breaking Woodura surface technology brings hardened wood floors to life, making it possible to use a sophisticated array of nine precision-engineered brushes to seamlessly integrate contrasting pigments into the surface, highlighting the natural grain of the oak. The result is the boldest, most striking aesthetic that we have seen from Bjelin.

"The features of real wood are what attract the consumer," says Emanuel. "It always interests me that many LVT products, for instance, are imitations of real wood. Since these patterns are printed you will see repetitive patterns in the floor and sub-consciously you will have some sort of reaction to that – it's just not natural.

"So if you have an all-natural product, that will be a more pleasing environment for you, not to mention of course that LVT is based on fossil fuel resources, compared to wood which is a carbon trap if you use it as a long life product.

"The same goes for tiles which are also sometimes designed to emulate real wood, but with these tiles you will see a pattern repeating all over. To me nothing can beat the real thing - real wood has so much positive in-built quality perception from the consumer. The feel is also different - real wood feels warm and comfortable."

One of the interesting aspects is the difference in tastes from one market to another.

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Bjelin products tend to be based on Scandinavian looks, meaning that they work with a lot of lighter natural colour tones.

“The basis of my design philosophy is that we are working with a fantastic material,” says Emanuel. “We are working with a real wood and we are not trying to cover that up. On the contrary we want to make designs and surface treatments that enhance the naturalness of the material.

“There are some trend differences between the UK and the more Scandinavian look. In Scandinavia there tends to be a cleaner wood grade, a more Select look to the actual grain of the wood. In the UK it’s more rustic when it comes to the wood grade, with more knots. In the US it differs between the inland areas and the big cities on the coasts, but it’s usually slightly warmer colour tones that are popular. In the midlands of the US there are a lot of traditional gun smoke colours, red tones and darker colours. But if you compare New York and LA for example it’s more of a Scandinavian style and a little bit more variation in the species of the wood as well.

“In the UK and Europe, 95% of the market is oak, but in the US you have some other species like walnut which is also attractive. In Asia they like clean grades, but more red tones and fuller warmer colours and that has to do with their heritage working with a lot more exotic wood species, like merbau and jatoba for example. We aim to accommodate all these regional variations in our product mix.”

Oak is a fantastic material. It’s tough, it has a great grain and it can be used as a base for making different designs, as it’s neutral. The oak that Bjelin uses comes from the Spačva forest in Croatia, which is one of the finest oak forests in the world, where the trees grow really straight and tall, and from where it is possible to get a lot of clean high quality material.

“It is an amazing and aspirational wood,” concludes Emanuel. “In truth it is quite

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possible to produce an aspirational finished product from such material. The trick is to create a product which conforms to all the constraints of price and performance – but which is at the same time also highly aspirational.”

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