

SHETKASTONE by

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Who is Stanley Shetka?

Last fall, during the soybean harvest season, Stanley Shetka and a few helpers walked behind a combine picking up scraps--pods, stalks, and leaves--left behind by the farmer. Thirty minutes later, Shetka had turned the soybean leftovers into a three-foot-square board, one half inch thick, stronger than wood, as beautiful as marble, and capable of withstanding outdoor weather changes for years.

Shetka, a 1978 M.F.A. graduate of the University, has taught art for 23 years at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter. His aesthetically pleasing furniture and packaging designs are being used by companies like Herman Miller and Aveda; but his greatest contribution to the design world may be the systems he has invented to improve sustainability.

This summer, CALA students will have a chance to test his patented process that converts paper, cloth, or plant material into usable shapes and functions. Instead of tossing projects into the garbage at the end of the school year, architecture students will save the paper and cardboard, even bits of plastic, and bring the refuse to Shetka to make new drawing boards. The materials will be converted into a liquid slurry, and, without the use of toxic additives, new boards--smooth and rigid, and impervious to moisture--will be created for the students. The product will give the students a great lesson in reuse, put to use when the new Architecture Building opens this fall.

A new house you've already used

Shetka is ready to take another leap into the world of sustainability and what our society needs. He has designed a concept house that might best be described as a self-sustainable bio house. It's constructed of reused materials, and it will run on the byproducts of food and material consumed in the house. Ninety-five percent of the house will be formed using recycled paper; and when it's ready to be lived in, it won't be connected to a sewer system or need a septic system. All the household waste and sewage will be collected and converted into fuel. "[The house] is going to have a system that takes all the waste and turns it into energy--into dry pellets that you can store for 100 years," says Shetka.

He has built a prototype of an all-purpose generator that will use the fuel to provide nearly all the heating, cooling, and electricity for the house. Large components of the house will be made on an assembly line and put together on a concrete foundation like giant Legos. Each wall or roof section will be self-contained, including interior support, insulation, siding, and interior finishing, with plumbing, electrical, and computer utilities already built into each panel.

Shetka estimates that a house like this could be erected in a day, not quite ready to live in, but safe from the elements. "When you put the house together," says Shetka, "you're connecting sections; electrical and plumbing connect automatically. Electricians don't have to spend days; it would take maybe an hour to install the [junction] box that hooks the house up from the post."

Although there isn't a working model of Shetka's bio-house concept, each component has tested out satisfactorily. In a compression test, a chunk of board manufactured by Shetka was compared to wood and steel. When four million pounds of pressure was applied to Shetka's product, nothing happened. With much less pressure the wood started looking like a loaf of bread and a steel I beam was crushed right away.

Shetka has seen the environment change drastically during his lifetime, and it bothers him. "I grew up on a farm. I saw how it worked and how it changed when herbicides and pesticides were put in. We used to fish in drainage ditches; now there are no fish. There are birds that have disappeared. You can't find earthworms in the fields. Bees have disappeared; you don't hear them buzzing in the trees. I have seen this in my lifetime and it's shocking," says Shetka.