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The Viability of Sustainable and Biodegradable Building Materials in Interior Design: A comprehensive Analysis

Osama Y. El-Tayash, Wesam Awad ABDESLAM, Salem Abdelgader Bader, Fatma Salah Shembesh.Department of Architecture and Urban planning, Benghazi University.

Corresponding Author: wesam.abdeslam@uob.edu.ly

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Abstract:

Sustainability has emerged as a defining challenge of the 21st century, compelling a re-evaluation of traditional practices across numerous sectors. Within the realm of the built environment, the architecture and interior design industries hold a particularly significant position due to their substantial contribution to global material consumption and their profound impact on ecological systems. This research endeavors to comprehensively analyze the potential of incorporating sustainable and biodegradable materials, with a specific focus on bamboo and olive stone waste, as practical and environmentally responsible alternatives to conventional resources such as hardwood in interior design applications.

Introduction

The imperative for this investigation stems from a growing recognition that true sustainability in the built environment extends beyond energy efficiency to encompass a holistic approach that harmonizes constructed spaces with ecological integrity, socio-cultural values, and economic viability. The selection and utilization of building materials are fundamental to achieving this comprehensive vision of sustainability (Murphy, 2024). In regions like North Africa, conventional architectural and interior design practices face increasing pressure due to material scarcity, technological limitations, and escalating environmental degradation. Libya, in particular, exhibits significant ecological vulnerabilities characterized by deforestation and a strong reliance on imported hardwood. This dependence not only contributes to environmental challenges in other regions from which the timber is sourced but also carries considerable economic implications for Libya, a nation grappling with economic vulnerabilities and a heavy reliance on the oil sector. The limited forest cover within Libya necessitates the importation of wood, rendering the country susceptible to fluctuations in global timber markets and disruptions in supply chains. Given Libya's economic reliance on the volatile oil industry, allocating substantial funds for imported building materials can strain the national budget and potentially impede other crucial development initiatives. Simultaneously, Libya generates substantial quantities of agricultural waste, including olive stone residues from its expanding olive oil industry. This byproduct represents an underutilized resource with significant potential for integration into circular economy models. Repurposing such waste can address both existing waste management challenges and the increasing demand for sustainable materials within the construction and design sectors. This research directly responds to the pressing need to reimagine interior design through a sustainability lens, specifically examining the viability of biodegradable materials as substitutes for finite resources like hardwood within the Libyan context.

Methodology

This study is structured to achieve the following **objectives**: to evaluate the feasibility of utilizing bamboo and olive stone waste as sustainable alternatives to hardwood in interior design; to compare global and local applications of these materials through the analysis of relevant case studies; and to propose practical strategies for scaling the production and fostering the adoption of these materials within Libya.

Research questions: ultimately, this research seeks to provide answers to critical questions: How can sustainable materials like bamboo and olive stone waste be effectively integrated into interior design without compromising essential aspects of functionality or aesthetic appeal? What socio-economic and environmental benefits can arise from the widespread adoption of locally sourced biodegradable materials in the Libyan context? And how can collaboration between industries, governmental bodies, and policymakers be fostered to mainstream sustainable practices in the building and design sectors?

Historical Perspectives on Sustainable Architecture and Interior Design

Pre-Industrial Era: Harmony with Nature

The principles of sustainable design, though more recognized today, have roots in early human civilization. In pre-industrial times, societies practiced sustainability out of necessity, using natural materials like wood, stone, and clay from their surroundings, which minimized transportation's environmental impact. These materials were chosen for their suitability to local climates, ensuring comfortable living conditions through passive design.(Wehrey, 2024) For example, ancient Greeks and Romans oriented buildings to maximize natural light and ventilation based on thermal properties. In hot regions, techniques such as rammed earth construction provided excellent thermal mass, maintaining comfortable indoor temperatures. Stepwells in India exemplified functional and climate-adaptive design, serving as cool retreats. Traditional North African architecture also reflected an understanding of climate adaptation. These historical practices offer valuable insights for modern sustainable design (Wehrey, 2024).

The Impact of the Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution marked a shift away from the sustainability of earlier eras, with mass production of materials like steel and concrete prioritizing speed and cost over environmental considerations. (Ben-Salah, 2018) This led to energy-intensive materials and designs that often-ignored local climates. Nonetheless, some architects explored eco-friendly materials like terracotta and adobe, though these efforts contrasted with prevailing trends.

The Rise of Environmental Awareness

The modern era of sustainable architecture began in the 1960s and 1970s, fueled by rising environmental awareness and energy crises. The 1970s energy crisis highlighted the risks of finite energy sources, prompting renewed interest in passive solar design and energy efficiency. (Jiyan, and Plainiotis, 2006) Architects adopted a holistic approach to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and conserve resources. Influential figures like Buckminster Fuller and Frank Lloyd Wright advocated for energy efficiency and harmony with nature (Jiyan, and Plainiotis, 2006). The 1990s saw the introduction of rating systems like BREEAM and LEED, which standardized sustainable design practices (Murphy, 2024). Libya could benefit from similar frameworks tailored to its context.

Contemporary Approaches and Paradigm Shifts

Contemporary sustainable architecture emphasizes net-zero energy buildings, circular economy principles, and nature-based solutions. Innovations in technology, such as artificial intelligence and parametric design, are advancing sustainable design. A key shift is recognizing that as buildings become more energy-efficient, the embodied energy in materials becomes increasingly important. Material life cycle assessments (LCAs) evaluate the environmental impacts of building materials throughout their lifecycles, underscoring the need for low-embodied energy options (Matta, 2025) In Libya, prioritizing locally sourced materials like bamboo and olive stone waste is crucial for achieving true sustainability.

Environmental Challenges in North Africa, with a Focus on Libya

Deforestation in North Africa and Libya

Deforestation is a major environmental issue in North Africa, driven by agricultural expansion, unsustainable logging, and fuelwood demand. In Libya, natural forest cover is minimal at 0.1% of the total land area as of 2022, and even slight deforestation can have severe ecological impacts in its arid environment. Data from Global Forest Watch shows some forest loss between 2021 and 2023, but comprehensive FAO deforestation data for Libya is lacking (Salah and Bloomer, 2014). Local reports indicate deforestation linked to illegal land sales after the 2011 uprising, exposing challenges in environmental monitoring amid political instability. The ecological effects include habitat loss, increased desertification, soil erosion, and adverse impacts on local climate, emphasizing the urgent need for non-wood-based building materials to mitigate these risks. (URL,2)

Resource Scarcity in Libya and Reliance on Imported Building Materials

Libya faces severe resource scarcity, especially a critical water shortage. (IBM. 2024) which directly affects construction activities. The country relies heavily on imported building materials like hardwood, cement, and steel due to insufficient local production, leading to higher costs and vulnerability to global supply chain disruptions. Recent government policies banning certain imports via land ports could further impact material availability and costs. (Ankory, 2023) However, with significant financial resources allocated for reconstruction, there is an opportunity to develop local industries for sustainable building materials, reducing reliance on imports. Investing in alternatives like bamboo and olive stone waste can help address these challenges.

The Concept of Circular Economy in the Built Environment and the Potential of Agricultural Waste

Principles of Circular Economy in Construction

The circular economy represents a significant change from the traditional linear model of resource use, focusing on sustainability by keeping resources in use as long as possible. This approach maximizes the value extracted from resources, followed by recovering and regenerating products and materials at the end of their lifecycle (Magdich, S., Rouina, B. B., & Ammar, E. 2018). In construction, adopting circular economy principles means minimizing waste, emphasizing the reuse and recycling of materials, and designing buildings for disassembly. This strategy reduces environmental impact by lessening the demand for new resources and landfill waste while conserving finite materials and creating economic opportunities in waste processing and manufacturing. In Libya and North Africa, significant agricultural waste, such as olive stone and date palm fibers, can be repurposed as building materials. Additionally, grain straw can be used for particleboards or compressed earth techniques. Despite challenges in agriculture, the waste generated present's opportunities to develop industries focused on valorizing these materials, including producing bio chart and renewable energy, thereby enhancing sustainability in the local building supply chain. (URL1)

Global Case Studies of Agricultural Waste Utilization in Construction

Numerous successful examples from around the globe highlight the feasibility of utilizing diverse agricultural waste streams in the production of building materials. Particleboards, for instance, have been successfully manufactured from a wide array of agricultural fibers, including rice husks, sugarcane bagasse, peanut hulls, and tobacco stalks, showcasing their potential as sustainable alternatives to traditional wood-based panels (Gauss, *et. al,* 2019). In Spain, research has demonstrated the viability of using ground olive pits in the production of mortar bricks, resulting in improved thermal insulation properties [1]. Studies have also explored the incorporation of various agricultural wastes, such as olive pomace and ash, into cementitious materials and bricks, often leading to enhanced mechanical properties and reduced environmental impact (Ankory, 2023). These global case studies underscore the broad applicability of utilizing agricultural waste in construction and offer valuable insights for Libya in identifying and leveraging its own agricultural waste resources to create a sustainable building material industry.

Detailed Investigation into the Utilization of Olive Stone Waste in Construction Materials

The Olive Oil Production Industry in Libya and Olive Stone Waste Generation

Libya's olive oil production industry is experiencing growth, with an estimated annual generation of 40,000 tons of olive stone waste. This significant byproduct of olive oil extraction presents a notable waste management challenge, as current disposal methods often involve landfilling or burning for energy. These practices can lead to negative environmental consequences, including increased landfill volume and air pollution (Farag, *et. al.* 2020). However, the substantial volume of olive stone waste generated annually in Libya represents a considerable opportunity to valorize this resource and transform it into valuable building materials, aligning with the principles of a circular economy.

Techniques for Processing Olive Stone Waste into Building Materials

One promising technique for utilizing olive stone waste is the production of particleboards. These boards are typically manufactured by binding olive stone particles together using an adhesive. While polyester resin has been mentioned as a potential binder, various other alternatives, including bio-based resins derived from sources like starch or lignin, and even cement, have been explored. The specific choice of binder significantly influences the final properties of the particleboard, including its strength, durability, cost-effectiveness, and overall environmental impact, particularly concerning the emission of volatile organic compounds like formaldehyde. Beyond particleboards, olive stone waste can also be processed into other valuable building materials. Ground olive stones can be used as a filler in concrete and mortar mixes, potentially enhancing their thermal insulation properties (Farag, et .al., 2020).

International Standards and Testing Procedures for Particleboards

Particleboards, regardless of their constituent raw materials, are subject to various international standards that define their quality and performance characteristics. In Europe, EN 312 specifies the requirements for particleboards, covering aspects like mechanical properties, moisture resistance, and formaldehyde emissions [206]. North America utilizes standards such as ASTM D1037 and ANSI A208.1, which classify particleboards based on density, strength, dimensional tolerances, and formaldehyde levels. Research on olive stone particleboards indicates that they can meet or even exceed certain requirements outlined in these standards. For example, studies have shown that olive stone particleboards fabricated with polyester resin at an 80/20 ratio can achieve bending strength values higher than the minimum specified in EN standards. They also demonstrate good moisture content and water absorption rates that align with these standards (Gauss, et . al 2019). However, thickness swelling in some olive stone particleboards has been reported to be slightly higher than the maximum values stipulated in EN standards. Overall, the performance of olive stone particleboards can vary depending on the type and amount of binder used, as well as the specific processing techniques employed (Farag, *et.al.*, 2020).

Existing Applications of Olive Stone-Based Materials Globally

The utilization of olive stone waste in construction materials is gaining increasing traction in various olive-producing regions around the world, particularly in Mediterranean countries. Research has explored the use of olive stone waste in a diverse range of applications, including as a partial replacement for aggregates in mortars, which can improve durability and reduce density (Ankory, 2023). Studies have also investigated the incorporation of olive stone ash into fired clay bricks, finding that it can enhance certain physical and mechanical properties Nasser, *et. al* .(2020). Furthermore, pilot projects and some commercial products utilizing olive stone-based particleboards for interior applications like cabinetry, wall cladding, and furniture have emerged in regions such as Spain and Italy. These existing applications demonstrate the growing recognition of olive stone waste as a valuable resource in the construction industry and provide potential models for Libya to consider in developing its own utilization strategies.

Comparative Analysis of Bamboo and Olive Stone Waste as Alternatives to Hardwood in Interior Design

Mechanical Properties Comparison

Bamboo generally exhibits superior mechanical properties compared to both hardwood and olive stone particleboards in several key aspects. Its tensile strength (around 28,000 psi) significantly surpasses that of oak (around 10,000 psi) and olive stone particleboards (around 2,250 psi). Compressive strength is comparable between bamboo (6,000–8,000 psi) and oak (5,000–7,000 psi), while olive stone particleboards typically show lower compressive strength. Flexural strength for bamboo particleboard can range from 16.5 MPa to 27.4 MPa, while olive stone particleboard has been reported around 15.56 N/mm², and oak ranges from 10-15 MPa (Index Box, Inc. 2025). Olive stone particleboards, however, often demonstrate good moisture resistance, sometimes exceeding that of standard MDF. Bamboo's moisture absorption can vary depending on treatment, ranging from 8-12% after 24-hour immersion for some engineered products.

Aesthetic Properties Comparison

Aesthetically, bamboo offers a distinct natural look characterized by visible nodes and a linear grain pattern, available in various finishes ranging from light blonde to dark carbonized shades. Olive stone particleboards, on the other hand, can be processed to achieve a range of finishes, often exhibiting a unique speckled appearance due to the presence of olive stone particles, and can also be painted or veneered. Hardwood, in contrast, offers a vast array of colors, grains, and textures depending on the specific species, providing a traditional and often luxurious aesthetic (Saenz, and Cultrone, 2019).

Economic Properties Comparison

Economically, bamboo can be a cost-effective alternative, with material costs for some applications reported to be significantly lower than traditional options like steel-reinforced concrete. Olive stone particleboard production can also be cost-efficient due to the utilization of zero-cost raw material (olive stone waste), with production costs potentially lower than medium-density fiberboard (MDF). Hardwood costs vary significantly depending on the species and market demand, often being more expensive than both bamboo and olive stone-based alternatives (Saenz, Sebastián, and Cultrone, 2019).

Ecological Properties Comparison

Ecologically, both bamboo and olive stone waste present significant advantages over hardwood. Bamboo is a rapidly renewable resource, maturing in just 3-5 years, and boasts a high carbon sequestration capacity. Olive stone waste utilizes an agricultural byproduct, effectively reducing landfill waste and potentially achieving carbon neutrality or even becoming carbon negative when considering the carbon sequestration during the olive tree's growth. Hardwood, with its considerably longer growth cycles (50-100 years) and its contribution to deforestation in many regions, has a significantly higher carbon footprint.

Strengths and Weaknesses in Different Application Scenarios

Engineered bamboo is a strong choice for flooring due to its excellent hardness and durability, while olive stone particleboards may need additional research on wear resistance for this application. Both materials offer aesthetic and functional advantages for wall panels, with bamboo providing good acoustic insulation and olive stone potentially offering better thermal insulation. In furniture design, bamboo's strength and mold ability enable innovative designs, whereas olive stone particleboards are suitable for **tabletops** and cabinetry, showing good resistance to scratches and moisture.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis: Bamboo, Olive Stone Particleboard, and Hardwood

Property	Bamboo	Olive Stone Particleboard	Hardwood
Mechanical	High tensile & compressive strength	Good flexural strength, moisture resistance	Variable strength depending on species
Tensile Strength	~28,000 psi	~2,250 psi	~10,000 psi
Compressive Strength	6,000–8,000 psi	Variable	5,000–7,000 psi
Flexural Strength	16.5-27.4 MPa	~15.56 N/mm²	10-15 MPa
Moisture Resistance	Good (treated)	Good to Excellent	Variable
Durability	High	Moderate to High	Variable
Aesthetic	Natural, linear grain, various finishes	Speckled appearance, paintable, venerable	Wide range of colors, grains, and textures
Economic	Cost-effective, lower material costs	Cost-effective (waste utilization)	Often more expensive
Ecological	Rapidly renewable, high carbon sink	Waste utilization, potentially carbon neutral	Slower growth, contributes to deforestation
Renewability	3-5 years	Waste byproduct	50-100 years
Embodied Energy	Low	Low	Moderate to High
Carbon Footprint	Low	Low to Negative	High
Applications	Flooring, walls, furniture, decorative	Cabinetry, walls, tabletops, furniture	Flooring, walls, furniture, decorative

Socio-Economic Implications of Promoting Olive Stone Waste in Libya

Job Creation and Economic Development

Encouraging the use of bamboo and olive stone waste in Libya's interior design and construction sectors offers substantial job creation and economic development opportunities, especially in rural areas. Establishing local processing and manufacturing industries for these materials can generate employment across the value chain. For bamboo, this includes cultivation, harvesting, transportation, and processing, as well as producing finished goods like flooring and furniture. For olive stone waste, jobs can arise in waste collection, processing, and particleboard manufacturing. Developing these industries can diversify Libya's economy, currently reliant on oil, reduce dependence on costly imports, and create new revenue streams. The financial resources allocated for post-conflict reconstruction present a significant market opportunity for locally produced, sustainable building materials.

Impact on Traditional Industries and Craftsmanship

The introduction of olive stone waste as a building material could influence traditional industries like clay brick and concrete block production. Rather than competing directly, these materials can complement existing solutions. Additionally, integrating local craftsmanship with bamboo and olive stone waste can preserve traditional techniques. Bamboo's flexibility allows it to be incorporated into local designs, while olive stone particleboards can serve as a base for traditional treatments and carvings. This fusion can enhance the cultural identity of sustainable interior design in Libya.

Results and Discussion

This report provides a detailed analysis highlighting the viability and numerous benefits of using sustainable and biodegradable building materials, specifically bamboo and olive stone waste, in Libya's interior design. The historical context demonstrates a rich tradition of sustainable building practices that can inform modern solutions. Libya faces significant environmental challenges, such as deforestation and dependence on imported materials, emphasizing the urgent need for sustainable alternatives. The circular economy principles offer a solid framework for converting agricultural waste into valuable resources, supported by successful global case studies. Bamboo is identified as a promising material for Libya, known for its excellent mechanical properties, rapid renewability, and versatility in flooring, wall panels, furniture, and decorative elements. Its lower environmental footprint compared to traditional hardwood makes it a strong sustainable option. However, challenges related to pest susceptibility and the environmental impact of preservation methods must be addressed to ensure its long-term use. Olive stone waste, a byproduct of Libya's olive oil industry, is another viable alternative. It can be converted into particleboards and other building materials, exhibiting good moisture resistance and thermal insulation properties. Research indicates that olive stone particleboards can meet or exceed international performance standards, validating their practicality as sustainable materials.

The report emphasizes the strengths of both bamboo and olive stone in various applications, with both offering cost-effective alternatives to more expensive hardwoods and significantly lower carbon footprints. Promoting these materials could lead to job creation, economic diversification, and integration of local craftsmanship. Overcoming cultural acceptance barriers through awareness campaigns will be vital for widespread adoption. Additionally, examining policy frameworks from other countries can help Libya develop tailored strategies to encourage the use of these sustainable materials, fostering a resilient building sector. Libya can draw important lessons from the experiences of other countries to promote the use of bamboo and olive stone waste in its interior design and construction sectors. Strategic measures could include offering financial incentives like tax breaks or subsidies to businesses and individuals who adopt these sustainable materials, helping to offset initial costs and enhance their competitiveness against conventional options. It is essential to create comprehensive building codes that recognize and promote bamboo and olive stone materials, detailing their applications and performance standards. Investing in research and development to optimize processing techniques and explore innovative uses within Libya's context is also vital. Supporting local processing and manufacturing facilities through grants or technical assistance can generate jobs and boost the economy. Additionally, effective public awareness campaigns highlighting the environmental, economic, and aesthetic advantages of these materials can shift consumer preferences and increase demand. By learning from the successes and challenges of other nations with similar resources, Libya can develop tailored strategies to cultivate a robust market for sustainable building materials.

Conclusion

Embracing sustainable interior design is crucial due to increasing environmental degradation and the depletion of natural resources. This research highlights that biodegradable materials like bamboo and olive stone waste can effectively replace traditional, non-renewable resources such as hardwood in Libya. Both materials meet essential functional, aesthetic, and ecological needs while aligning with circular economy principles. Bamboo stands out for its rapid renewability and superior mechanical properties, offering high tensile strength and significant carbon sequestration. It has proven versatile in applications like flooring and furniture, potentially leading to cost savings while preserving local craftsmanship. However, challenges such as pest susceptibility and reliance on chemical treatments must be addressed for its sustainable use. Olive stone waste, a byproduct of Libya's olive oil industry, provides a local solution to material scarcity. Particleboards made from olive stones show strong performance and adaptability for cabinetry and wall cladding. Utilizing this waste can generate cost savings and job opportunities in rural areas. Adopting these materials offers profound socio-economic benefits, fostering economic diversification and job creation. Overcoming cultural barriers through education and successful project showcases is essential for widespread acceptance. By drawing on effective policies from other countries, Libya can encourage the adoption of these sustainable materials, leading to a more resilient and environmentally responsible future.

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