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# Branch out: it's time to celebrate the wonders of wood – a natural, sustainable and easy-to-use building material

Warm, wonderful wood adds a mellow, sustainable edge to our city buildings. The annual Wood Awards celebrate its glories.

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**Oak, ash, beech, cherry wood and more: there is growing excitement around the glories of wood. In London next week the Wood Awards will celebrate building with all these wonderful different types of wood, adding a mellow, sustainable edge to our city.**

Another advantage is how fast timber buildings go up: a huge, six-lane competition swimming pool on the shortlist took just a year from sketch to completion.

Wood's versatility means that structures deploying it can range from the swooping curves of the Stirling Prize-winning Bloomberg London building's wooden Vortex atrium – an engineering triumph slap in the middle of the City – to a school swimming pool, interior fitouts and entire house frames. Whether painstakingly handcrafted, or using the latest cross-laminated timber (CLT) technology for strength, durability and speed, 20 shortlisted buildings are fighting to win next week's Wood Awards, on Tuesday, November 20.

Now nearing their 50th year, the awards showcase the growing excitement around wood, and the shortlist includes some spectacular buildings countrywide. Billed as the only truly sustainable building material, wood is branching out.

## NATIONAL PRIDE

In some of the timbers chosen, national pride is evident. Take the Bloomberg European HQ by Foster + Partners. The stunning Vortex lobby, looping up through the enormous stone building, is made of three curving wooden shells, each double-skinned.



**Bloomberg London:** the wooden Vortex lobby at the global financial giant's European HQ in the City

Its smooth surface uses 6,000 individual pieces of American Red Oak veneer, surely a nod to American Michael Bloomberg, former New York mayor. Each piece fits into a unique place, decided by a computer-generated pattern.

Then there's The Department Store, Brixton, by Squire and Partners. Now a new set of creative spaces plus a groovy restaurant, bar and lounge with a rooftop terrace, it started life in 1906 as an annexe to the Bon Marché department store, the earliest in London. Its big, bold timber roof with exposed joists and huge glazed top light is a million miles from svelte glassy boxes. With an almost barn-like feel, albeit a glamorous one, it's built from French oak, honouring the Bon Marché.

## SPEED AND SOUND

The City of London Freeman's School swimming pool by Hawkins/Brown is a joyful, striking structure of massive Austrian spruce portal frames in glulam (glue-laminated timber), set progressively skewed inside a CLT frame. Designed to replace a pool burned down in 2014, the new one went up in just three weeks.



**The City of London's Freeman's School swimming pool:** a structure of Austrian spruce portal frames, was built in just three weeks (Jack Hobhouse)

Schools are in the mix, too, including Streatham & Clapham High, by Cottrell and Vermeulen. Great curved and crossed timber supports, and a deep-joisted exposed roof in Austrian spruce, create new spaces including a sixth-form centre with a roof pavilion, plus a new dining hall. Airy and natural, by using CLT these were built superfast.

And there's a concert hall: a cute 100-seater recital hall in The Royal Academy of Music by Ian Ritchie Architects, elegantly pale in lime-washed oak. Because of wood's amazing acoustic properties, intimate recitals here will sound incredible.

## ON THE HOME FRONT

Domestic interiors are increasingly using a timber focus. The ongoing trend for plywood continues, displayed in the curiously named 61amr house by Widger architects, which has practically lined this little Walthamstow loft in birch ply for a fresh, smooth, modern feel and look, almost like a house within a house.

The idea of a box within a box continues in a Barbican triplex flat, where an ingenious, huge piece of oak-and-birch "furniture" has been inserted into the top floor by architects Francisco Sutherland, creating a mezzanine, shower room and wardrobes.

The idea of insertion also appears in Marie's Wardrobe, a whole-house revamp in Stoke Newington by Tsuruta Architects, named after a dressing-room at the top of the house. The big USP is a striking timber staircase with slatted treads. This highly complex structure was built on site with numbered pieces of Latvian birch ply.

Dewsbury Road by O'Sullivan Skoufoglou is a notable small project that's big on oak. A dark Seventies extension in Dollis Hill was replaced with an open sunny space, using the oak in visually dramatic internal divisions, echoed by exposed joists across the ceiling. It all harmonises with a solid ash table. It's a controlled, small-scale use of wood.



**Dewsbury Road, Dollis Hill:** oak extension by O'Sullivan Skoufoglou Architects

In complete contrast is Walker Bushe architects' new Blackheath House, using lots of different oak, with stone, too, for a low-lying, contemporary home. It's stunning, subtle and sustainable.

## A MODERN FOLLY

Wood can be fun, flirty and temporary – like the pavilion resembling a geometrically folded filo pastry parcel in an 18th-century garden at Berrington Hall near Leominster, Herefordshire. By Studio Morison, this enchanting yet practical modern folly is a frame of computer-cut plywood with fabric stretched over. What more could anyone want in the garden?

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**7/10 The Department Store, Brixton**

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