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Moving up

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The HKDI is on course to become a pioneer in environmentally conscious design by embedding the concept of sustainability into fashion at the start of the creative process. **SUMMER CAO** reports.

MOVING UP

"WHEN PEOPLE USED TO HEAR ABOUT environmentally friendly fashion, the first thing they imagined was clothes made from newspapers and plastic bottles," says Jo Lau, a lecturer in the HKDI's Fashion and Image Department. "Those were for exhibitions or catwalk shows only, and consumers would not buy them."

Much has changed since then, and HKDI has been an important force creating prototype purses, wallets, card-holders, necklaces and pendants designed by students in a process called "upcycling", that is taking otherwise useless or discarded materials and giving them new life, often as objects that are more valuable than the original incarnations.

Lau is the team leader of the Fashion Sustainability Research Project initiated by HKDI last June, in collaboration with Hong Kong's Sustainable Fashion Business Consortium, local designers, shops, rehabilitation centres and leading sustainable-fashion designers in HK and the UK. To connect so many parties on such a large scale across the fashion chain is a first for Hong Kong and has made HKDI into a pioneer.

The research being done as part of HKDI's fashion

ABOVE HORSE-SHAPED SECRETAIRE MADE OUT OF SURPLUS OAKWOOD, NASTURTIUM, CALFSKIN, ALLIGATOR AND CROCODILE FROM THE HERMÈS 2012 *PETIT H* EXHIBITION COLLECTION IN HONG KONG; RIGHT A REPOSITORY OF SURPLUS MATERIAL AT THE HERMÈS WORKSHOP



sustainability project echoes a new wave of interest in upcycling that has drawn in some of fashion's biggest names. The French brand Hermès has been among the leaders and it recently unveiled its *petit h* series, which uses leftover and rejected materials to create limited edition or one of a kind luxury products.

The term "up-cycle" was originally coined by Michael Brungard, in his book *Cradle to Cradle*, published in 2002, the point at which the phenomenon started to be important in Europe. It has since spread like wildfire.

"In London it is the hottest thing right now," says Orsola de Castro, the co-curator of Esthetica, founded by the London Fashion Council six years ago to showcase cutting-edge sustainable fashion design. "At this year's Esthetica exhibition, upcycling is where you find the most talented and directional young designers. It's also happening in Italy, but in Italy small brands are less visible as they are competing with the big guys, so there is less information about them. But it's absolutely huge in Germany."

The iconoclastic British designer Vivienne Westwood released her ethical and sustainable accessories line *Handmade With Love In Nairobi* earlier this year to give African craftsmen resources and skills, and to provide income for one of the least developed areas in the world. The handbags in this series are made from recycled materials such as electrical wiring, aluminum, plastic bags, offcuts and safari tents.

Westwood agreed in October to be a judge in the fourth annual Red Carpet Green Dress competition, founded by the *Avatar* director James Cameron's wife Suzy Amis, which aims to encourage designers to create red carpet worthy gowns made entirely from previously used or discarded materials.

At this year's Copenhagen Fashion Summit, the world's largest and most important conference on sustainable fashion and corporate social responsibility, brands such as H&M, Gucci, Hugo Boss showed they were enthusiastic about sharing their latest examples of sustainable design.

And this year's London Fashion Week gave unprecedented opportunities to De Castro and Esthetica to show off new work.

"While recycling involves generally turning textile waste into a fibre of inferior quality, up-cycling actually increases the value of the surplus through a creative process which requires minimal intervention," she says. De Castro was the first designer in London to start up a fashion brand based on sustainable principles. Called *from somewhere*, it opened in 1997 and now uses waste materials from the manufacturers in Turkey and Italy



to create clothes that are based exclusively on upcycling principles.

The desire to introduce sustainability into the design process takes into account the fact that the earth's resources are limited and sustainability is not something that can be achieved by manufacturers alone. In Hong Kong 234 tons of textiles go to the landfills everyday, according to Hong Kong Environmental Protection Department.

"The fashion industry has moved a lot of its operations to mainland China, so why is there still so much textile waste in Hong Kong?" asks Lau. "Most of the Hong Kong fashion brand manufacturers do think about how to reduce their consumption of energy, and water but they know that some of the designs they make have waste as an inevitable by-product. They can't recycle the waste by themselves without collaborating with designers and brands, because waste materials are generated by design. So they have to ask designers for help."

It thus becomes crucial for future designers to be made aware of their responsibility in terms of sustainability. And thus Lau and her colleagues are seeking ways to integrate the research results from the Fashion Sustainability Research Project into student coursework.

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« *Design is about finding solutions, and up-cycling is a design solution to an environmental challenge.* »

"It is really a great chance for students to explore things that are labeled waste or not usable, and find out solutions by themselves. The whole concept of sustainability can be too much for students, and the learning process should be step by step," Lau says. "We first put our focus on the pre-consumer textile waste, samples, left-overs that can be collected through local textile and garment manufacturers, and the designs are made in collaboration with rehabilitation centres such as the St. James' Settlement and the Salvation Army. Then we sold the pieces through local stores or social enterprises."

"You can't imagine the materials cost, it is really low. It also helps to create job opportunities and promote the idea that disadvantaged and disabled people have the ability to do great things. The students are happy to see their designs brought to life and I always tell the students that the project shows them how to communicate with the local community and to see how their designs can integrate with the skills that are available."

The student's projects have gained support from prominent brands such as Chocolate Rain, founded by Prudence Mak and Reclaim to Wear, founded by Orsola de Castro. The MTR began exhibiting HKDI's up-cycled fashion designs at Telford Plaza on November 11 with the help of Chocolate Rain and Reclaim to Wear. Telford Plaza is now applying for a Guinness World Record for the largest up-cycled dress, shown on a 3-metre tall dummy, and the largest up-cycling installation, featuring 12 dummies and a real model.

Students have also been encouraged to submit their designs to the EcoChic Design Awards and this year Angus Tsui from HKDI was the winner of the competition's People's Award while Kelvin Wan won the Most Promising Student Award.

"Sustainability consists of environmental, social and financial issues and the balance among these three elements," says Lau. "We call it triple-bottom-line. That's why we have engaged the local community in the up-cycling process and made it



STOOLS MADE OUT OF SURPLUS BEECHWOOD, CALFSKIN, NASTURTIUM, CALFSKIN, BULL CALF, ANTHRACITE, CROCODILE FROM THE HERMÈS 2012 PETIT H EXHIBITION COLLECTION IN HONG KONG

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ABOVE: ENVELOPE BAG, PURSE, NAME CARD AND PASSPORT HOLDER MADE FROM HEAD-ENDS (THE BEGINNING AND END OF A FABRIC BALE) AS PART OF A COLLABORATIVE PROJECT BETWEEN HKDI AND CIRBAF; MIDDLE: A WALLET, PENDENT AND NECKLACE DESIGNED BY HKDI STUDENT IP WAN HAN USING CLOTHING WASTE; BELOW: HERMÈS "SQUELETTE" BAG MADE OUT OF SURPLUS CALFSKIN AND WOOL FELT FROM THE 2012 PETIT H EXHIBITION

profitable. That must be the fundamental concept of all sustainable projects."

In the UK the public response to upcycling has been strong. "Up-cycling is about uniqueness, message, rarity and memory, so it actually shares a lot with the luxury sector," says De Castro. "In the UK there is more demand than availability for up-cycled collections, so it's not hard to persuade customers of the value of this principle."

Lau predicts Hong Kong will soon follow suit. "At the moment, brands in the UK and US are playing a leading role in sustainable fashion design, but we are starting to collaborate with industry, local designers, and our communities in implementing the concept," she says. "It is going to be popular in Hong Kong. The pioneers in the UK have shown that there is no need to highlight eco-fashion anymore, because it is a given. Fashion should always be fashion, no matter what materials it employs. People may have started to wear up-cycled products before they realise. If you always talk about eco-fashion, people will be afraid."

De Castro has important advice for young designers who want to be creative and ethical at the same time. "Don't compromise your creativity but don't be afraid to explore, innovate and break the rules," she says. "Design is about finding solutions, and up-cycling is a design solution to an environmental challenge." ©



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