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Designed to last

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DESIGNED TO LAST

Issues of creativity and sustainability have usually been separated since the industrial revolution in the West over two hundred years ago. While most designers have thought about how to sell their products, rather than how to save the earth, an increasing number have begun to argue that this separation is untenable. The HKDI's **YAN YAN LAM** is one of them. As she explains to Daniel Jeffreys, a sustainable future for the planet is something that will only happen by design.

WHAT DO YOU do if you design washing machines, and one day you see one of your products floating in a stream? And how does your reaction get magnified if it is only a few years old?

Dr. Yan Yan Lam laughs at these questions. She knows them well, because they were faced by Professor Fumikazu Masuda, who spent the first half of his career designing electrical appliances before becoming a professor at Tokyo Zokei University.

"He was walking past a river and he saw a washer he had designed jammed under a bridge," she recalls. "He knew the machine was not old, which forced him to realise its design was not good enough. Otherwise, the washer wouldn't

have been cast out in that way."

The damascene conversion that followed transformed Masuda from a designer of disposable consumer "durables" into somebody who is committed to designing for the future of the planet. It is one that Lam has also experienced herself.

"When I began to learn about global warming, I thought I had to do something about it," she says. "I felt a responsibility, so I started to think about ways in which I could get other designers to buy in to sustainability. That's when I embarked on setting up a sustainable design task force."

The latest manifestation of Lam's "buy-in" process was the Green is Cool forum that took place in September 2011. Billed as "design for sustainable living" it featured

five global experts on sustainable design, including Professor Masuda.

"The forum was part of a process," says Lam. "We need to go back to basics and design for better living. Sustainability and design must go together, so the first question for a designer should always be 'Is it necessary?' Design lives in a world beyond function and it always has a greater impact on the world around it than pure product performance."

The example of Masuda's washing machine is extremely apt in this context. He designed it to sit in a home and process laundry. He did not design it as a bridge abutment, and yet that was the function it assumed after it was discarded. Had Masuda thought of the uses his product might perform

LEFT POND AND PINE -
LANDSCAPE BASIN &
FAUCET SET. A SHALLOW
WASH BASIN DESIGNED
TO ENCOURAGE WATER
CONSERVATION BY
HKDI STUDENT TSE YAN
LAMB. IT WON A SEAL OF
DISTINCTION, RED DOT
DESIGN AWARD 2011



«The first question for a designer should always be "Is it necessary?"»

DR. YAN YAN LAM



after it ceased to be a washer, he might have made very different choices during the design process. If the washer had been designed for easy recyclability, and had a built-in post-washer value for those who recycle such things, maybe it would not have been tossed into a stream.

"It's very important for design quality and sustainability to be in balance," says Lam. "We can make a lot of progress just by having design that makes people think about sustainability."

The green forum was promoted as an event of interest to professionals, business executives, tertiary students and members of the public who were interested in the latest thinking about sustainable living. The event branded green as "the new cool" and set three objectives: to establish how going green saves money and time and makes people



ABOVE A MAGAZINE RACK MADE FROM RECYCLED MATERIALS
TOP: HANDBAGS CRAFTED FROM RECYCLED BASKETBALLS

more stylish and healthy; to assess international design trends and market developments in sustainable living; and to begin the process of "co-creating" a greener Hong Kong.

"I know co-creating sounds a bit clumsy," says Lam. "But we have to work together on this, and it's a creative process. Too many people in the design world think sustainability and environmental protection are things that can be left to somebody else, but we all have to take responsibility."

Lam believes a key first step is for designers to think about their choices of materials and how those materials are used. Working with colleagues in other departments, she inspired students to begin designing everything from clothes and furniture to handbags using recycled materials. One of those involved with the project designed



LEFT: TEA TIME, A CLOCK MADE OF TEA LEAVES

to solve the problems threatening our future," he says. "Education is not just an end in itself. Rather, it is one of the most powerful instruments for bringing about the changes required to achieve sustainable development."

Lam built on her experience with the green forum to develop a curriculum framework for the HKDI. Its objectives are to study and understand the importance of sustainable development, learn and create in new ways, educate with new approaches, build partnerships with other sectors of the community, and foster a sustainability mindset. Of these five, Lam believes the second could have the greatest immediate impact.

"Design educators and designers should use their abilities to the utmost in creating design that helps to realise and promote sustainable cultures and societies," she says. "Designers must find ways to create designs with the lowest possible environmental impact."

Lam acknowledges that meeting these goals in Hong Kong will be difficult at a time when most people in this city want things to sparkle and shine, and property development occupies a dominant and often antagonistic role in the environment. However, she believes the alternative to building a more sustainable society is much worse.

"We don't want our entire planet to become like Professor Masuda's washing machine, discarded in some inter-galactic stream," she says. "If that happens, we will have to blame ourselves and realise, as the Professor did, that our design simply wasn't good enough." ☺

a product called "Tea Time", which is a large clock made from dried and recycled tealeaves collected from Hong Kong teahouses.

While such initiatives might be useful, a significant obstacle to increasing their impact is an issue of linguistic confusion. In the paper *Building Sustainability into Design Education*, co-authors Lam and Alex Fung wrote, "... sustainability has no single and agreed meaning, just like liberty, justice and democracy. Its meanings are contested, and a key function of education for sustainability is to help people reflect and act on these meanings."

In other words, designers must be encouraged to debate the meaning of sustainability before they can be expected to design in ways that will be regarded as sustainable by the rest of the design

community. That is an especially complex process when the world has such disparate levels of wealth and economic performance.

"In some countries, design will be focused on alleviating poverty," says Lam. "And that can often mean pushing issues of sustainability into a back-seat role. But, for the sake of the entire planet, all designers have to start making decisions that consider the long-term future of the economy, ecology and equity of all the world's communities."

Lam and her colleagues believe education has a key part to play in the process. Masuda sees teaching about sustainable design as both a first and last line of defence to protect the planet against environmental damage.

"The new vision of education for a sustainable future places education at the heart of the quest