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Change agents

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CHANGE AGENTS

Two recent visitors to HKDI helped students understand how design and a sustainable lifestyle can be good partners but as **SUMMER CAO** reports designers have to inspire consumers to adopt better habits before long term improvements in the environment will be possible.

“THE FUTURE OF human beings will be changed by either disaster or design,” says Professor Helmut Langer, a preeminent graphic designer and environmental protection activist, as he displayed “products of human civilisation” – over-packaged tea bags, over-printed labels and unrecyclable plastic-paper-aluminum drink containers at a recent seminar held within the HKDI.

Is Langer overstating the case? The HKDI has chosen not to bet against him, instead it has shouldered some of the social responsibility entailed in Langer’s critique by taking sustainable design into its curriculum, inviting prominent talents in the field such as Langer, a renowned international cultural communication designer, and Professor Fumi Masuda, from Tokyo Yokai University, to teach and inspire students.

“We have stolen too many resources from the earth and produced energy and materials that our bio system cannot sustain,” says Masuda. “Highly civilised cities like Tokyo or Hong Kong are not sustainable at all.”

Masuda is a world leader in sustainable design and the host of *Destination*, an international conference focused on “design for sustainability”. His work *Pile Chair*, which he created in collaboration with his student, Takayuki Umehara, has been given accolades around the globe for its embodiment of sustainable design values.

“Everything that has gone wrong on our planet has something to do with water or oil, with the unsustainable usage of raw materials,” says Langer. “For example, all the wars that have afflicted the Arab World have little to do with giving people freedom,

rather they are stimulated by the western world’s need to get control of oil and resources.”

The wars waged over oil are strong evidence for the view that humanity will be the author of its own destruction, but there is a glimmer of hope in the fervent search in some countries for new ways to achieve sustainability.

“Nowadays in Europe, all the big companies have a sustainability department,” says Langer. “They seek to improve the sustainability in their management techniques and products and aim to limit the use of resources. At the same time, people are also more aware of where products are coming from, and how they are manufactured. So it is a competitive decision for a company to follow this new trend, although it does encourage greenwashing (a form of spin in which green PR or green marketing is deceptively used) like the way McDonald’s has



PILE CHAIR BY FUMI MASUDA AND TAKAYUKI UMEHARA



FUMI MASUDA

« Highly civilised cities like Tokyo or Hong Kong are not sustainable at all. »

PROFESSOR FUMI MASUDA

changed its brand colour from red and yellow to green and yellow in Germany. But you don't have this kind of thinking yet in Hong Kong or Mainland China."

Masuda and Langer believe that Hong Kong is in the infancy of its green awareness, with little more to offer than some inconspicuous "save water, save power" posters in public toilets. Although the government is keen to promote a green image it has yet to do enough to deserve the reputation of being a green city.

"Hong Kong is one of the most consumption-focused cities in the world," says Masuda. "It's a place where one finds serious discussions about adopting sustainable practices difficult."

However, Masuda has found that HKDI is a place where the debate can be taken forward. "The HKDI is a very advanced school that has absorbed sustainable design into its curriculum, right from the beginning, which is a unique strong point. And HKDI students are eager to incorporate

rules for sustainability into their design practice."

In some of Langer and Masuda's workshops, students were inspired to use less color, less material, and less packaging than would be commonplace in design companies in the commercial world. However, this kind of utilitarianism is not what the workshops are aiming for. Instead, their aim is to keep students informed of practical changes they can make in the workplace that will contribute to sustainability.

"Through the workshops, students receive real-world information about how packaging companies produce packaging material," says Langer. "And what techniques a printing company uses. So they have concrete ideas about what is practical when it comes to sustainable design."

"Some of students' ideas for sustainability are too wild and unreal, but that's not bad because those ideas are an expression which shows that they understand the problem and can opt to use less

or different types of material. We also make students look responsibly at what they do, and thereby consider sustainability as another aspect of quality."

However, engendering the belief among designers that design should not be synonymous with appearance, but should also include a concern for the environment and social justice is only the first step. The values put upon the products by consumers should shift accordingly.

"A brand is a reflection of the market," says Masuda. "So we can't ask the brand to change in isolation. You have to change the marketplace first, and then the brands follow. It is the economy; it is a matter of money. So the market itself has to change."

But how? "Through better design," says Langer. "Designers can think about other materials, and cultivate a sustainable life style among their clients. The public's attitudes toward sustainability can be changed by new and better design." ©

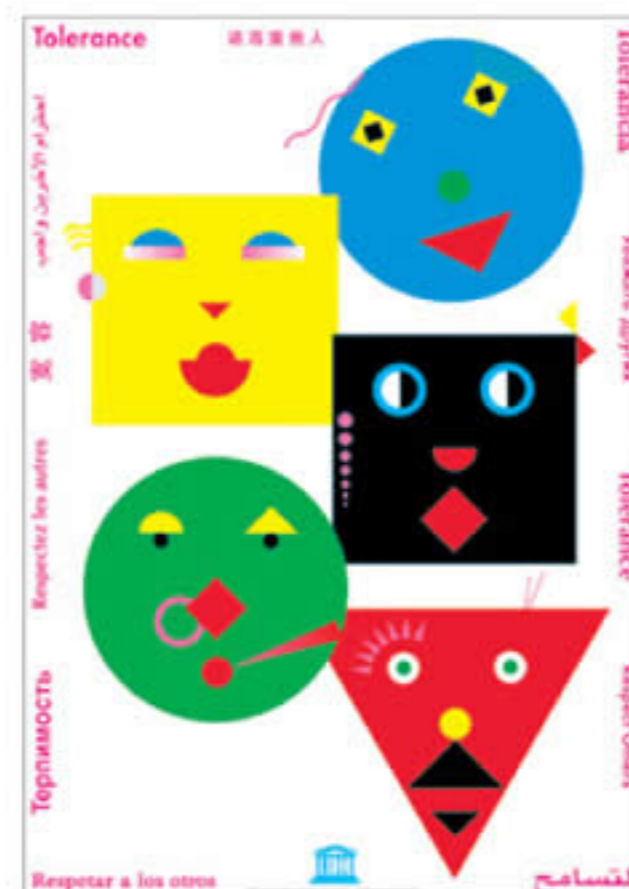


«The future of human beings will be changed by either disaster or design.»

PROFESSOR HELMUT LANGER



POSTERS BY LANGER, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: UNITED NATIONS DECADE OF EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (2005-2014), UNESCO WORLD TOLERANCE CAMPAIGN



ABOVE: GRAPHIC LOGOS DESIGNED BY HELMUT LANGER, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT CLOCKWISE: UN CLIMATE CHANGE CONFERENCE, DONELLA MEADOWS SUSTAINABILITY INSTITUTE, UN SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION PROGRAMME, UN INTERNATIONAL PANEL FOR SUSTAINABLE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT, THERMO CONTAINER GROUP TAIPEI, UNESCO EDUCATION FOR ALL BY 2015, UNESCO FREEDOM OF PRESS EXPRESSION, UN LIFE CYCLE INITIATIVE

HELMUT LANGER

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