

Designmuseum



design sense
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Geoff Hooker

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Making

Paul Thompson, the Design Museum’s director, Geoff Hooker, Director, Brand and Public Relations, Corus, Europe’s leading metal producer, and Guy Battle, a Design Sense advisor, from consulting engineers Battle McCarthy, met the design journalist Jane Hughes to discuss some of the challenges facing sustainable design and development.

Once the preserve of the ‘greens’, the concept of sustainability is gradually edging its way into mainstream culture. Along the way—as the criteria for Design Sense implies—it has become a notion that encompasses not only environmental and social concerns but also commercial and aesthetic ones.

For a ‘green product’ to have a major economic influence, goes the argument, it must be a generator of jobs. To do that in the twenty-first century, it must look good enough for people to really want it. Yet sustainability is still far from being something that can be taken as read in the design process.

It is encouraging to hear about a visually striking building or product that has been designed around eco-friendly principles,

but such designs tend to be newsworthy precisely because of their novelty value. For the most part, the everyday architecture we see around us is not yet in a position where it embraces sustainability as a core value and the same is true of products. We might conjure up fantasies of cars powered by electricity generated from renewable sources, but it is difficult to imagine them being either flash or ubiquitous.

To the extent that commercial innovation is driven by consumer demand and public pressure, the green lobby has played an important role in alerting people to the importance of sustainability and pressing for government to frame legislation that takes the concept on board. The argument that such policies would be cost prohibitive has been disproved. Sustainable design is about doing more with less: achieving better value by maximising the potential of component materials. According to Geoff Hooker of Corus, ‘We need to go beyond the traditional “recycling” and “energy” messages and ensure that the impact of a product or building is well thought out from conception to completion – and throughout its life cycle.’



Paul Thompson

‘Designers are often encouraged by their clients to offer short-term fixes.’

... countries have moved faster than others. Guy Battle considers the strength of public opinion on such issues in Germany and much of northern Europe has ensured that sustainability has become an integral part of many government policies. Companies – some of which are included on this year’s Design Sense shortlist – have been in no doubt about the economic benefits of wooing environmentally-conscious consumers, not just by responding to demand but by actively setting a new agenda for design. By showcasing an international shortlist of designs from both major corporations and well-known companies, the Design Sense award demonstrates that sustainability is not only becoming widespread but also desirable.

There are, however, three major problems to overcome. Firstly, ‘sustainable’ may be a useful term that incorporates the

environmental, commercial, social and aesthetic impact of a product. However it is not a sexy, media-friendly term. An old news editor of mine refused to keep it in a story I had written, insisting that it was meaningless and should be replaced by words with a more common currency. He had a point. ‘Sustainable’ is perilously close to becoming the kind of jargon that is a turn-off for the general reader. Designers must find a way of making it appeal to the less serious elements of human nature.

Secondly, as Paul Thompson acknowledges, there is still a huge amount of ignorance amongst product designers about sustainable issues and practices: ‘Designers are often encouraged by their clients to offer short-term fixes’.

Thirdly, the opportunities for making sustainable design an integral part of buildings and products is being missed because

designers and engineers are often failing to work together. ‘The responsibility for sustainable design is not the exclusive domain of the design community. The engineer has largely been forgotten in the innovation process’, says Geoff Hooker. He goes on to say, ‘Without the help of converters, tooling companies, engineers and material suppliers, even the greatest designs will have to remain on the drawing board for posterity.’

Our technical capabilities now stretch so far ahead of us that only a handful of companies have been able to keep up with the pace of change. However the Design Sense award shows what can be achieved when designers, engineers and industry work together. This is a starting point for radical change.

Jane Hughes is a freelance writer for the Independent and The Times newspapers, and the Times Higher Education Supplement.

Design Sense

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