

LET LUXURY TAKE THE LEAD IN SUSTAINABLE DESIGN

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Today we are overwhelmed with messages like 'buy less stuff, shrink your carbon footprint, stop eating meat ...' Sustainability is key. It is all about austerity, subduing, lessening: all about harsh measures and methods. It is as if we must punish and sacrifice ourselves in order to be sustainable. Giving up all of life's extras seems to be the only solution.

On top of that, most of the products that are labelled 'green' look bare and grey, have dirty colours or are made of unrefined materials to invoke the idea of being 'organic'.

It seems that manufacturers abhor matching sustainable products with dazzling appearances, abundance, splurge, glamour or visual seduction. Luxury simply does not come to mind when one thinks of 'sustainability'. But the tide is turning!

Meanwhile, the luxury industry is waking up. In 2017, two major brands at Fuorisalone Milano, Italian textile producer Bonotto and Taiwanese circular technology company Miniwiz, collaborated on the exhibition Gardening the Trash. The dazzling presentation, a fantasy show in which waste and digital technology coalesced, was aimed at guiding luxury fashion into the circular economy.

At the Dutch lifestyle fair Masters of LXRY (formerly known as the Millionaire Fair), sustainability was declared one of the most important trends for 2018, with the Tesla car touted as its proud flagship. In a recent talk design and architecture critic Aaron Betsky gave five reasons to label the Tesla as modern luxury: the car is expensive, the design is very sexy, the car is big, one is not aware of how it works because everything works for you, and last but not least; driving the Tesla makes you think that you are helping the world become a better place. The first four reasons fit our traditional notion of luxury. But the fifth, being related to the alleged sustainable qualities of the car, really turns its luxury into a modern need.

Sustainability has become a trend, just like a 'healthy lifestyle' has become increasingly popular. According to trendwatcher David Mattin, luxury consumerism has always been inextricably linked to the search for status. 'But today, mass affluence has driven that search away from what I have and towards who I am: namely, more creative, ethical, connected, healthy—the list goes

on!—than the masses' (Mattin, September 2016). In other words, our new luxury tends to be more and more characterized by sustainability.

This may sound good, but in my opinion, it is also exactly the problem. In this vision, luxury remains connected to status. Sustainability should be integrated into modern luxury. However, we should never treat sustainability itself as a luxury, as something to distinguish oneself through, or as a marketing tool. Sustainability should simply be the norm. What should make it so special is not the quality of sustainability, but the fact that sustainability is beautiful and seductive in a contemporary way. Sustainability should not ask for our pain and sacrifice but appeal to our need for pleasure and indulgence.

Let's look at the notion of luxury in a different way. Let's disconnect luxury from status and distinction, from the world of private jets, high-end branded goods and anything else that shows off that you belong to the wealthy class. Instead, let us enjoy luxury as a pleasure, as something nice to indulge in: the fun of dressing up for a party, buying a beautiful product that is a little bit too expensive, or the simple delight of just doing nothing. In this sense, luxury becomes a basic human need. Modern luxury is to enjoy these pleasures without a feeling of guilt. After all, modern luxury is good for you and good for the world.

When I look back at the products that Droog presented during the early nineties, I remember that many people equated these with 'green design' and with sustainability. I refer to products such as the Rag Chair (1991) and the Chest of Drawers (1991) by Tejo Remy, the Scrapwood Cupboard (1990) by Piet Hein Eek, the Folding Bookcase (1991) made of paper and plywood by Konings and Bey. It was the re-use of waste, the simplicity, the everyday aesthetic and the imperfection that triggered people to think of these products as sustainable.

Of course, Remy's work could be seen as a comment on the overproduction and overconsumption present in our society. However, above all his quest was to make products out of the things he stumbled upon, improvising all the way just like Robinson Crusoe on his island.

In much the same way, Piet Hein Eek openly declared that his objective was not to be green, but to show the world that even with the dirtiest materials one could make a beautiful product.

All of these designers were primarily interested in a new approach to design practice and a different view on beauty. The products that they presented were different from what was previously called 'Design'. No high style, but simplicity and an everyday aesthetic; no refinement, but rough edges and imperfection; no new materials, but the re-use of old stuff. This practice was first and foremost based on aesthetic choices. At the same time, the products were indeed full of references



Image selection courtesy of Renny Ramakers.



This page: Tableware by Studio Klorrenbeek & Dros. Photography by Antoine Roubé. Courtesy: LUMA.

to an environmentally-friendly aesthetic. They reminded and still remind us of the need for a circular economy, to do something ethical with our surplus. They tell a story, loud and clear.

Even after so many years, the aesthetics of these products stand out. But now it is time for the new normal: for beauty without emphasized reference to an ecological cause. It is time for a new, alluring beauty. It is time for real modern luxury. If we want green design to become effective, it should bring beauty, glamour and pleasure into our lives. When products inherently become attractive and are seen as something to indulge in, there is no need to label them as green.

Young designers are taking the lead. It is worth noting that many are passionately involved with social and sustainable design. They design for refugees, for the homeless and for other areas in which one could be socially active. Others devote their efforts to upcycling discarded materials or developing new items from everything the earth has to offer. They grow mushrooms into furniture, they force roots to become carpets and they experiment with seaweed and algae.

Some young designers have really created something that we could call 'The Dawn of Modern Beauty'. In 2011 Studio DeMakersVan designed a magnificent chandelier, made out of 500 butterflies cut from sapphire blue photovoltaic cells. The idea behind it was that they were concerned about the look of standard solar panels. Their work inspired Droog to approach them to do a collaborative project, Reality Tanks Solar (2013), on decorative solar panels to make the urban context more beautiful.

Other designers have used handicrafts to produce luxury products. For example, Stacked Lights (2014) by Sander Wassink and Ma'ayan Pesach, made out of discarded transparent glass stuck together with coloured resin. It is the colour of the resin that transforms the clear glass into soft glowing beauty.

In 2017, Ariëlle van der Vaart created a glamorous dress made out of old clothes that were ripped and transformed into endless cords, then knotted together to create new shapes.

Designers have become more interested in the art of repairing. In 2011 design studio Humade showed how beautiful a repaired object could be, inspired by the centuries-old Japanese 'Kintsugi' technique in which broken china is repaired with gold. Golden Joinery, a repair workshop developed by Saskia van Drimmelen and Margreet Sweets in 2015, is based on the same Japanese ideology. There, clothing is repaired with gold thread; worn-out garments are transformed into precious pieces.

In Dirk van der Kooij's work, new technologies are employed in order to achieve beauty are visible. Melting Pot Table (2015) is composed of crushed CD's. Its shiny, polished surface can easily compete with the most expensive luxury materials. Chubby Chairs (2012) do not

display any trace of the old refrigerators that are used as the base material, processed in a gigantic 3D printer that van der Kooij single-handedly assembled by modifying an old Chinese robot. The chairs look brand new and really stand out aesthetically.

The 3D printer is also key in the work of Eric Klarenbeek and Maartje Dros. They created hauntingly beautiful tableware made of algae on commission for atelier LUMA, Arles. The fact that the designers copied antique glass pieces enhances the mysterious quality of the objects.

Working together as Studio Formafantasma, Andrea Trimarchi and Simone Farresin have been experimenting for years with organic materials such as lava and charcoal, and with pre-industrial materials like bois durci, a composition of fine sawdust and animal blood. In collaboration with Droog and Wageningen University & Research for Reality Tanks Polymers (2013), the designers used a customized 3D printer to test new usage possibilities of shellac, a resin secreted by the female lac bug found in the forests of India and Thailand.

Studio Formafantasma's work is based on ongoing research. It is also extremely aesthetic. The designers recently re-used electronic waste, including computers, telephones and microwaves, for an office furniture concept commissioned by the National Gallery of Victoria as part of the 2017 NGV Triennial in Melbourne. Not only did the designers upcycle the casing of the items, they also scavenged the internal electronic circuits: 'mining' the waste for gold which was subsequently used to finish some items.

The elegant upcycling of trash, the smart search for new organic materials and the frivolous use and re-use of new technology may all lead the way to new luxury. You will not love these products because they are sustainable. You will love them because they are beautiful, seductive, or even glamorous. You will love them because they are the new luxury!

