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Growing Waste-lines

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Growing Waste-lines:

DESIGNING FOR OUR ETHICAL ENVIRONMENT

Today's consumers are openly moralising about diet, health and lifestyle. Price is just one factor. People will pay more for an ethical product. Brands must display their ethical credentials, not as some emotive 'tree hugging' statement but as an integral part of their whole product or service offering.

At present over 30 tonnes of waste are produced for every one tonne of product that reaches the consumer. 98% of those products are thrown away within six months. When you include this hidden impact of manufacturing, we each consume our own body weight in materials every two days.

The growing waste-lines in our society are the result of our incredible inventiveness and productivity in this century, which has made us forget that inextricably we belong to nature.

After a decade of bling, virtue is replacing excess. The signals that people are switching their consumption patterns are all around us, yet many branders and designers fail to recognise the speed with which this is taking place.

Concerns about obesity, fair trade and organic ingredients have been transforming eating from a social issue into a moral and civic one. What we choose to wear has long been an articulation of identity and the same is now true of food.

Carbon neutral commerce has become a hot topic at the supermarket. How many food miles have your Kiwifruit clocked up? HSBC is on its way to becoming the first carbon-neutral bank? BP has realigned its message to "beyond petroleum".

In a recent consumer attitudes audit in the UK, 45% agreed that brands should be ethically, socially and environmentally aware. In the US, 65% of consumers said they had been involved in at least five ethical activities relating to shopping and consumption.

Transparency is essential. If the brand has a dirty secret, it will blog across the cyber-gossip world in hours. We are on the brink of seeing products and services with these inherent qualities move from niche to mainstream, yet many marketers still cannot see it.

The challenge is squarely at the foot of the designer, the architect and the communicator. There are many pursuits worthy of their problem-solving skills. Unprecedented environmental, social and

cultural crises demand their attention. They need to challenge consumerism which has been running rampant and uncontested since the Second World War.

We ask them to address the ugliness of our ill-planned cities, products, spaces and services with a new kind of feeling for our well-being. We are jaded by the conformity of cookie-cutter retail environments, where each store is the replica of the next. We want things to be personalised for us, we want our store on the corner to be returned to us.

Sustainability is inevitable—it's now about who will be the first to gain a beachhead. A recent survey by Arthur D. Little revealed that 55% of senior executives in industry in Britain singled out design as the most important mechanism for big companies to tackle sustainability. **Design is the key intervention point for making radical improvements in the environmental performance of products.**

Most designers focus on improving form and function, but fabrication and how products are made is also important. Fabrication is where many of the environmental and social impacts lie, in the use of raw materials and the rising pollution from manufacturing processes.

Designers, manufacturers and consumers are only beginning to look beyond the way products are perceived and perform; to consider what goes on when products are made and what happens when they are eventually disposed of. While an award-winning chair may look beautiful, does it really represent the pinnacle of mankind's genius if it is made using polluting methods or exploiting workers?

Man is the only species capable of generating waste—things that no other life on earth wants to have. For designers helping brands gain traction in the 21st century, the writing is well and truly on the wall.