The Good Life – Designing for Sustainable Luxury

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Abstract

In collaboration with colleagues from Aalto University and Central Saint Martins College of Arts and Design the author of this paper initiated the “Sustainable Luxury” project, based around exploring new approaches to inheritable designs in response to an apparent growing demand for ‘luxury’ goods despite a worldwide recession.

The project brought together students from BA (Honours) Textile Design, MA Industrial Design at Central Saint Martins College and BA and MA Textile Design and Design students from Aalto University in Helsinki. Students were working on course specific projects briefs but shared crossover research sources, seminars and presentations and a mutual blog. Selected project outcomes were presented in an exhibition in Helsinki in May 2012.

The starting point was the contemporary perception of luxury in an ever-changing professional and cultural context. What would the ultimate textile luxury be perceived as? Could it possibly be an exclusive treat or perhaps become a democratic indulgence?

This paper aims to portray how students encountered different notions of local perception of luxury depending on the national context of consumer culture and the diverse understanding of what it means to lead a ‘good life’. Further research highlights synergies and contradictions of Luxury and Sustainability especially when applied to manufacturing textiles and luxury accessories.

The project has led participants to see Sustainable Luxury as an uplifting and engaging design experience in the widest sense. The presented work ranges from tailor-made signature keepsake scarves to user participation in material up-cycling.

Common ground for all project conclusions is the belief in the designer as an important driver to shape inheritable futures as well as the value of understanding and incorporating local consumer insights. The findings also put emphasis on the importance of embedding sustainable design concepts and processes into the design development as early as possible – steering behaviour patterns rather than functioning as a late add-on in the production line.

Key words:

Sustainable Futures, Luxury Market, Process-led Research, Cross-disciplinary Teaching, International Collaboration