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# CONSCIOUS CREATIVITY

*Interior designers aren't waiting around for their clients to become enlightened about sustainability. Instead, they are taking a more personal responsibility for what they specify – and making use of a raft of new products that are good for people and planet alike. Emily Brooks gets the lowdown*

Luxury and sustainability are not mutually exclusive – in many ways, they are synonymous, especially when it comes to valuing quality and longevity over poorly made, throwaway products. However, the luxury industry is under pressure to do better: a 2020 UN report found that the top 1% income group is responsible for 15% of global emissions.

Instead of waiting for their clients to drive change, interior designers are doing it themselves. They have become critical middlemen, using their purchasing power to encourage brands to make more sustainable products, and then putting those sustainable products under the gaze of their clients, to the exclusion of others. As interior designer Simone Suss of Studio Suss says, “for every buying decision we make, there is a sustainable choice, more or less. You don't necessarily need to be compromising on aesthetic or function, or anything else.”

The last year has seen a raft of sustainable collections arrive at the Design Centre's showrooms, particularly when it comes to fabric. These include five new designs from Rubelli, made from a polyamide

derived from castor beans – not just a natural material but a crop that uses less water than many; Pierre Frey's *Natecu* collection, which includes textile waste from repurposed cashmere; and Hodsoll McKenzie's *Utopia* collection (available at Zimmer + Rohde), which includes organic, European-grown fabrics such as linen and hemp. “Sometimes, the old ways of doing things are the best ways, and we are going back to them,” explained Fredericke Winkler, Hodsoll McKenzie's design director as she introduced *Utopia* at Focus/21. “Hemp is the oldest textile ever used and it is even more sustainable than linen, requiring no pesticides or irrigation. We are trying to make this industry grow again.”

Many other Design Centre brands have already blazed a trail. These include de Le Cuona and Kvadrat for fabrics; Jacaranda Carpets & Rugs for its use of Tencel, made from wood pulp using a system where more than 99% of the processing chemicals are repeatedly reused in a closed loop; Auping's 'Evolve' mattress from Rested, which is completely 'circular' in its design and can be endlessly recycled; and Edward

OPPOSITE: Hodsoll McKenzie's *Utopia* collection, available from Zimmer + Rohde, is its first to have a strong focus on sustainability. It includes 'Terra Nova', made from 100% hemp – the oldest fabric known to mankind and a highly undemanding plant when it comes to water and pesticide use; textured linens such as 'Antila'; and 'Bouvet', a sheer made from 50% recycled PET



Bulmer Natural Paints (available from Tissus d'Hélène) which go well beyond the standard promises of water-based, low-VOC products, using only plant-based materials and labelling all ingredients on the tin.

Simone Suss has influenced industry-wide change by sitting on the BIID's Professional Practice Committee and helping put its sustainability strategy in place. In autumn 2021 the BIID launched the *Sustainable Specifying Guide*. It covers everything from the best countries for animal welfare for wool, to which fabrics use more water to grow, breaking down into bite-size pieces what can be a daunting subject.

A lot of the BIID's guide is given over to the questions that designers should be asking their suppliers, so that they can make good choices. Are suppliers ready for those questions, though? "Some will have the information; others might give you a month's silence while they go off and ask head office," is the assessment of Winch Design's Alex Parkinson, the studio's in-house sustainability specialist. Both Parkinson and Suss say that lack of transparency, and not enough information on standard labelling, is a barrier to them making informed decisions. Parkinson was Winch's office manager before lockdown gave her time on her hands, which was wisely spent contacting suppliers and asking them to answer a standard sustainability questionnaire (sourced from Planet Mark), along with some follow-up questions. This is all fed into a spreadsheet, with a score for various categories – from carbon footprint to traceability and recyclability at end of life – so that products could be compared. Off the back of this, Winch Design developed two concept yacht schemes that show what a completely sustainable interior might look like, featuring next-generation materials like palm leather and Piñatex, made from pineapple leaves.

Labelling is improving to include elements such as the country of origin of both the raw materials and the manufacturing, so that a product's carbon footprint can be better ascertained. New showroom Visionnaire recently introduced a sample book called *Re-Generation* that contains all its eco-friendly fabrics in one place, with details about the composition, cultivation systems and the raw materials' traceability.

Designers are looking to work with suppliers that have a publicly available sustainability strategy in place, like Porta Romana. "Our statement is centred around three themes," explained the company's managing director Ali Milam at a Conversations in Design talk about the subject at Focus/21. "The product itself, so, explorations into different materials and

techniques; extending the life of our products through our upcycling club and part-exchange programme; and everything that sits around the products, from transportation to waste." A recent decision to bring lampshade-making in-house has saved Porta Romana 30,000 miles annually and "now that we control the making, we can control the waste as well – the fabric is made into smaller shades, or swatches, or if it's recycled we can follow that process," says Milam.

Parkinson knows that a large prestigious firm like Winch can flex its buying power: "If we start asking [suppliers], they will start asking their own supply chain. I feel like we have the power to say, I can invite you in to showcase your pieces – if you've filled in the sustainability form." And even if she says that labelling and transparency have a long way to go, she has good words to say about some of the showrooms at the Design Centre: "Kvadrat are really good – we've been using a lot of their 'Waterborn' faux suede in our projects – as are de Le Cuona. A lot of suppliers are using Econyl at the moment, which is a great story for us as it's durable, cleanable and made with waste plastic from the ocean."

A great story is more important than you might think. Designers are finding ways to communicate with the clients for whom sustainability isn't a priority – talking about 'innovative' or 'rare' materials may tap into their desires much better than talking about 'sustainable' ones. Parkinson says what they need most are the compelling stories that underpin many collections but that don't always surface

until you ask. "It's the storyline behind a material that excites a client. Some suppliers will send a PDF or a video showing how and where something is made, and that is the unique selling point we look for; people need that emotional connection."

Thankfully there are no shortage of great stories behind the products within the showrooms. Recently, there's been Porta Romana's 'Mushroom' family of lighting, inspired by the shape of oyster mushrooms and made from 3D-printed PLA (poly lactic acid), derived from cornstarch; and Topfloor by Esti's rugs made from abacá, a species of banana that's been identified by the UN as a 'future fabric'.

Suss's advice to other designers is not to get overwhelmed by the subject of sustainability, but to simply make a start, and think about how they can use their influence: "It's a journey more than a destination. We spend millions of pounds of clients' money and we need to be putting it towards things that are good for the planet. We'll vote with our feet, essentially."

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OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: As part of its sustainability strategy, Porta Romana is exploring new materials, such as the 3D-printed cornstarch used for its 'Mushroom' lights; Topfloor by Esti's 'Switch' rug made from abacá, a species of banana identified as a 'future fibre'; the *Natecru* collection by Pierre Frey includes fabrics made from recycled cashmere, organic cotton and locally produced wools and linens

