

Sustainable design - window dressing or ingenuity?

What motivates sustainable product development?

Sustainability has a chameleon-like quality in the product development and marketing world. Unfortunately, it's used mainly as a marketing buzzword to sell unsustainable products to consumers with a conscience. Superficial seems to trump substance.

Many products are made of sustainable materials - such as recycled plastic which, apart from their ideological and ornamental value, do not offer any real solutions to sustainability and, arguably, compound the problem.

This is a challenge Industrial Designers have faced for decades. We understand that rampant consumerism is a major threat to the world's resources. We cannot stop people seeking out and buying new things - but we can influence their buying behaviour by producing products based on usage patterns rather than just brand value alone.

How is ...XYZ addressing the issue of sustainable design?

Our first step is to understand how consumer usage patterns and knowledge bases are constantly changing and then apply appropriate technology ...XYZ's interpretation of sustainability is one where a product provides a quantifiable benefit to reducing environmental impact. This could either be applied directly to the product or the method of manufacturing. We have applied this methodology to the following products:

Computer Desk One:

Research noted that a computer is not a stand-alone product. It is a small part of an evolving office system ...XYZ's Computer Desk One is an upmarket product made using appropriate materials from sustainable or recycled sources.

The computer, wiring, docking stations and speakers are concealed within the thickness of the desktop giving a whole new meaning to computer jargon. It has been designed for longevity, so components can easily be swapped out as technology advances.



Ceramic Kettle:

Clay, the most basic of sustainable materials, earns its place in the modern kitchen ...XYZ's cordless kettle houses the heating element and the ceramic construction simulates a tea pot. The user can heat water and take the kettle directly to the dinner table without having to decanter it into a more visually please vessel. Individual bespoke designs can be made to suit specific contexts, such as the interior design criteria and colours of a kitchen or coffee tables. Ceramic studios or co-operatives can produce limited runs to order or make one-off specials.

The ceramic manufacturing process facilitates ergonomic opportunities to be incorporated into the design which cannot be done with mass-production processes. As long as the kettle conforms to basic design rules, such as material strength, topple tests and other ergonomic criteria, ceramic artists can produce a steady stream of unique kettles to meet market needs.

What is the product development trend in SA?

Post -1994 there was an enthusiasm for sending into the world products fashioned from traditional craft methods - such as pottery, weaving, carving - but these tended to be decorative items of little practical lasting value. Both ...XYZ Design's Computer Desk and Ceramic Kettle suggest a new home grown 'model' for mass production in South Africa, creating jobs outside of the traditional mass-production facilities.

Combining technology and craft in this manner requires diverse and flexible skills, which mass- production facilities in developed countries may lack. This is to our advantage. If we are serious about sustainability, not just of materials and the environment, but economic sustainability as well, South African industrial designers must put ingenuity on the factory floor. It doesn't belong only in their designs.

