A SUSTAINABLE DESIGN

The critical ecological issues facing our generation of designers, planners and thinkers require urgent measures. Caroline Pidcock, an architect and authority on sustainability, addresses the territory.

> 'Let us keep in mind that we are the generation for which previous generations committed themselves to save the environment. We are the generation for which the commitment was made to restore the balance. In 1972 the first global inter-governmental meeting on the environment was held in Stockholm, Sweden. Progress since then has been widely regarded as being insufficient. It is now our generation's responsibility to take on this challenge as a central motivating principle and use the lessons of the last 30 years to ensure the next 30 years are different ... In another 30 years, if things do not change, it will be too late: the impacts of global warming will be truly felt across the globe and the development paths of fast growing economies like China will be well and truly decided.'
>
> Karlson 'Charlie' Hargroves and Michael H. Smith[1]

Clearly the future must be sustainable. But what does this really mean, especially for the design industry? Contrary to the negative spin that many have put on the 'cost' of sustainability, there is much evidence that if we embrace the future with openness to new paradigms about how we think about and do things, there are many exciting opportunities to be realised.

In fact, recent studies show that the companies that will do well in the future are the ones looking at more than just their economic bottom line. As Michael Porter says, 'Environmental progress demands that companies innovate to raise resource productivity, precisely the new challenge of global competition'.[2]

The inequality of our environmental impact on the world compared with other nations was highlighted for me on a recent trip to India. While we share some similarities in policy and implementation issues, the vast gulf between our need to cut back on consuming too much water and power was put into contrast by their need to try to at least provide such services to their population – in a non-polluting way.

This brings up the difficult issue of the supposed need for consumption in order to maintain our global economy. Evidence is coming to light that calls this assumption into question. Case study after case study reveal that by redirecting our economies to produce goods that we need, which can feed and work with our ecosystems, rather than making unnecessary goods that detract from and pollute our ecosystems, we can maintain a healthy economy AND save the world.[3]

The design industry is absolutely integral to such a future, as we are well placed to take a fresh look at problems and to design possible solutions in a creative and desirable way. What an excellent opportunity for our industry to use its considerable skills to find a bright, positive and sustainable future.

Additionally, to assist this in happening, Australia must reconsider many policies currently in place and look to replace them with ones that recognise, reward and promote good practice. The Australian Sustainable Built Environment Council (ASBEC) is a new body that is looking at how to develop a strategic framework for sustainability in Australia for the built environment industry. As President, I look forward to helping Australia become a leader in ensuring that the changes required over the next 30 years can be made.

Caroline Pidcock is Director of Caroline Pidcock Architects, Sydney; President, ASBEC; Adjunct Professor, Faculty of the Built Environment, UNSW; and Past President, NSW Chapter, RAIA.

1. C.H. Hargroves and M.H. Smith, *The Natural Advantage of Nations*, Earthscan, London, 2005, p. xxxviii, visit www.earthscan.co.uk
2. M. Porter and C. van der Linde, 'Green and Competitive: Ending the stalemate', *Harvard Business Review*, September – October 1995, pp. 121–134.
3. See above references and William McDonough and Michael Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle – Remaking the Way We Make Things*, North Point Press, New York, 2002.

THE GREAT MATERIALS DOUBLE DIP

From the ordinary to the extraordinary – **Louise Martin-Chew** investigates the recycling phenomenon in the work of Mark Vaarwerk and other inventive Australian jewellers.

Photograph by Keith Saunders
Necklaces by Mark Vaarwerk, made from recycled plastic bags and sterling silver

Today, exploring an Australian jeweller's materials box may be a surprising experience. In the last 20 years, there have been many additions to the traditional gold, silver and precious stones. In a current sample, you might find:

Plastic shopping bags (Mark Vaarwerk)
Horse hair, buttons and spices (Bridie Lander)
Aluminium offcuts (Susan Cohn)
Old bits of Tupperware (Liana Kabel)
Bottle tops, magnets and ball bearings (Dan Scurry)
Acrylic offcuts from signwriters (Melinda Young)
PVC upholstery (Vicki Mason)
Old tins (Jason Wade)

Given the period over which this trend has developed, you could make the fairly natural assumption that jewellers had heeded the environmental message of sustainability preached by design schools in recent years. Grace Cochrane notes that: 'By the nineties most major design faculties were advocating "green design" or "integrated" design, where all aspects of design – interior, graphic, environmental and industrial – were considered in the context of social and environmental responsibility.'[1]

Susan Cohn notes that:

> 'When the contemporary jewellery movement started in the late 1960s, jewellers were questioning the commercialism of jewellery. Introduction of industrial materials was an obvious means to break with existing conventions ... the challenge of new materials, as well as advances in technology, were the catalyst for jewellery to pursue new directions. Influenced by modernism, materials became the means for expression of idea. An intention of the movement was to highlight value – jewellery is precious by association rather than intrinsic value.
>
> 'I started jewellery in the 1970s when this movement was in its most provocative stage and use of non-precious materials was making a statement. Politics in the movement were more about human rights (non-use of ivory, De Beers' stranglehold of the diamond market, the mining of gold in Africa) than ecology.'[2]

Around 30 years later, it is interesting to trace the trajectory of some of these ideas, and their absorption into the mainstream of contemporary jewellery practice through the work of individual jewellers who recycle materials. However, to view a concern for the environment as a major element in the selection of second-hand materials in the work

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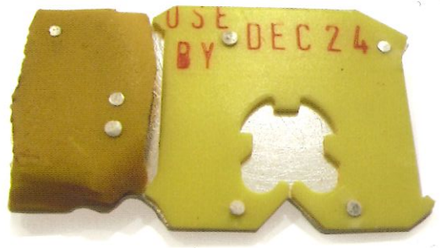


Jason Wade, *Caterpillar Rivet* brooch, *Caterpillar Bridge* brooch, 2002, recycled tins

Melinda Young, *Pieces from a Summer Holiday* – yellow brooch, 2004, found object and sterling silver

of these makers would seem to profoundly misunderstand their motivations.

In the new millennium, ecological principles are well understood and practised in the general community – there are few householders who do not separate, recycle and compost their rubbish and, I would suggest from my car park survey, that green enviro-bags are standard issue in most car boots.

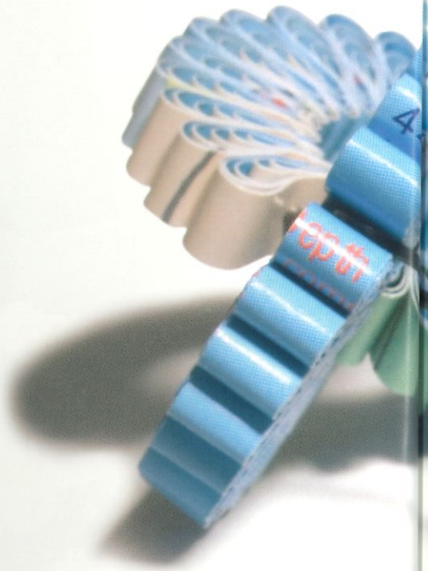
However, the selection of materials from the broader consumption has more to do with innovation for its own sake, tapping the everyday and easily accessible, and with building concepts or design onto objects that arrive with their own personal history or narrative.

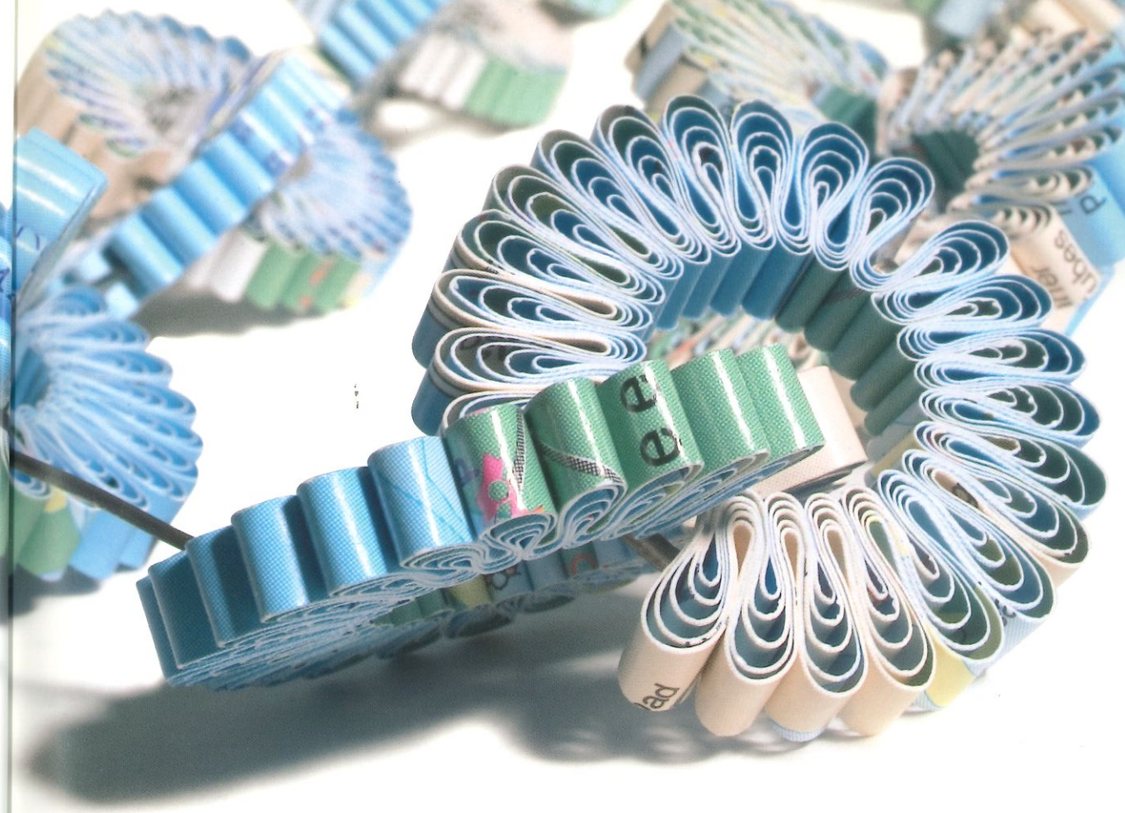
Kevin Murray, whose book *Making the Common Precious* (to be published in August 2005), sees this sort of sentiment as a relatively recent change in the Australian craftperson's landscape, albeit with roots in our colonial past. 'It's harking back to that tradition of bush craft, that "make do" mentality,' he says. In his introduction, he writes:

> 'A generation of radical Australian makers are ... bringing the profane world of consumption into the sacred halls of art. Theirs is not merely a conceptual exercise. There is no Duchamp-like cleverness about their use of found materials. These craftspersons express a renewal in the elemental energy of creation, reaching back to the mysteries of material transformation in alchemy. They are breaking through.'[3]

Jeweller Mark Vaarwerk's treatment of plastic bags from all corners of the globe, which are stacked like favoured objects in his studio, is both highly crafted and labour intensive. He has developed a spinning technique for plastic bags, which he has made his own since the inception of his practice as a jeweller in 1999. Each bag is worked into thread by hand. When it is fine and strong, the thread is strung or wrapped with other elements with meticulous process.

Vaarwerk's contemporary jewels seek to make overt the crucial role of string in traditional jewellery, threading tiny silver components in and among the strongly coloured string. In his *dumbbells necklace*, 1999, the dominant component is purple string, threaded through at regular intervals with silver rods and tiny balls visible on either side of the purple string. In his *Finger rings*, 2004, the plastic is wrapped around and around a gold or silver ring, and oven-baked. The plastic melts to become a multi-coloured confection when set. Vaarwerk maintains that pragmatism, and not saving the planet, is his motivation. His ethic is simple: 'Plastic is just a material that is useful. Why pay for something when you can get it for free?'





Emma Davies, *Cups*, polypropylene

Zoë Jay Veness, *New Life*, 2003, front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* (24/9/03), sterling silver, stainless steel cable

Karin Findeis, *phalanx (somePlace)*, 2005

Dan Scurry, who has worked with easy-to-assemble mass items since the 1980s, has similar sentiments:

> 'The holy grail of recycled materials is to find something that has no use, like bottletops. I make an approximation of my ideas with what I've got. I'm a better craftsman now than I ever was (through learning how to make jewellery function well with these materials).'[4]

Currently working with magnetic neck rings, Scurry describes the humble ball bearing as 'the pearl of the machine age'. He acknowledges that it is hard work to find materials 'dredged from the dross of the urban landscape', but remains committed to making jewellery with low labour and good ideas.

The layers of history and narrative in second-hand materials are a driving force for other makers. Liana Kabel, who has made highly coloured necklaces, brooches and bracelets from Tupperware and found domestic objects, suggests that her major interest is in the transformation of materials that have lived some other life. Tupperware is personally meaningful (and prolific!) in her life, given her mother's 20-year career in the business. Found objects – mementoes of journeys, objects found beachcombing – with a personal resonance are also of interest to Melinda Young. 'At the heart of it, anything can be precious,' she says. 'I use materials that are meaningful to me and to others. They bring their connections with them.'[5]

Jason Wade has adopted tins with significant histories. One that came from his grandmother's house became *Grandmother's Caterpillar Brooch*, 2002. This particular tin contained the coloured pencils that Wade would draw with when visiting his Gran as a child. The brooch is handcut from the old tin and folded. The finished brooch is then displayed with the original tin.

Wade, like Kabel, brings another context – the history and past of the source material – into the evolution of a jewel. And, like Vaarwerk, he rejects an ecological ethic as a premium concern. 'I like the idea of showing the internal structure and a sense of history, and using objects that have lived a life already.'[6]

Vicki Mason is driven by innovation in her choice of medium – 'I want to find materials that no-one else is using'[7] – like PVC upholstery and plastic rope. She takes these items, manufactured for one purpose, into another context, creating poetry from the mundane. 'I like the idea that we sit on upholstery, and now [when reworked as a jewel] it sits on us.'[8]

Susan Cohn admits to being motivated by an urge to recycle in the series of compressed brooches that she began to make in 1982, and continues to create. However, she recycles waste from her own artistic practice – anodised aluminium offcuts that had become an enormously colourful heap in her studio. She developed a tool to compress her scraps into long skinny bars (6 x 4 x 110 mm), two of which combine to form a brooch. These days, the brooches may have another layer, incorporating personal objects, often related to commissions: wedding rings crushed among Cohn's offcuts become divorce brooches, or amid grey aluminium scraps there might be a baby charm bracelet for a new mother and child (or other personally meaningful items brought to her by clients). The play across parameters is lively.

In a way, these jewellers seem to be double or even triple-dipping – they are recycling their own experiences, ideas and concepts, layered into and onto second-hand materials, which come ready made with their own baggage. While these objects, with their echo of the familiar, may be validly read by audiences as preaching the clean, green, sustainability mantra, any ecological claims can only be described, given the quantities involved, as symbolic. Materials attract contemporary jewellers for their own qualities – their ability to carry the ideas, concepts, shapes and layers that a jeweller wishes to portray.

Kevin Murray compares Australian makers choosing common materials to the contestants on

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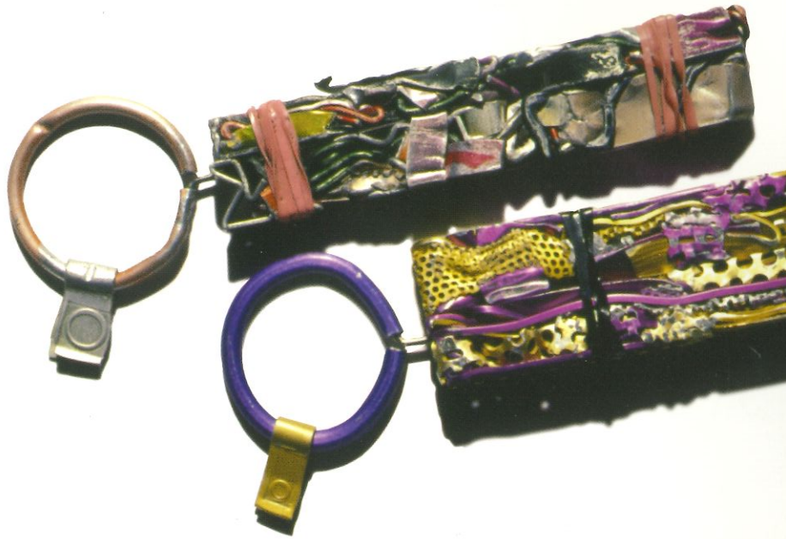
Survivor reality television (i.e. a group of individuals left in remote situations without resources and needing to rely on their own personal skills to survive), describing them as 'a craft version of the poor arts'. He writes:

> 'Makers are thrown back on their own craft to make works of beauty from what is at hand. And similar to Arte Povera, found materials offer resistance to the dominant economic system and allow for the spontaneous expression of identity. Ironically, both poor theatre and Arte Povera produced art movements that were inward focused and relatively unpopular. Poor craft seems different. In its reference to everyday life, it seems possible that poor craft will enjoy a broad audience, untutored in art theory. Time will tell.'[9]

Louise Martin-Chew is a freelance writer and researcher based in Brisbane. She has written on art for *The Australian* newspaper, art journals and popular magazines.

1. Grace Cochrane, *The Crafts Movement in Australia: A history*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1992, p. 323
2. Susan Cohn, interviewed by the author, April 2005.
3. Kevin Murray, introduction to forthcoming book, *Making the Common Precious*, to be published by Thames & Hudson, August 2005.
4. Dan Scurry, interviewed by the author, April 2005.
5. Melinda Young, interviewed by the author, April 2005.
6. Jason Wade, interviewed by the author, April 2005.
7. Vicki Mason, interviewed by the author, April 2005.
8. ibid.
9. Kevin Murray, op. cit., 2005.

Mark Vaarwerk is exhibiting in *The HAT Project: Here and There Australia/UK*, Object Gallery, 23 April – 6 June 2005.



Liana Kabel, from *I'm a Tupperware Lady*, 2005, recycled Tupperware, courtesy of the Museum of Brisbane. Photo: Tim Nemeth

Susan Cohn, *Compressed Brooches*, compressed aluminium scrap, 375 gold, nickel silver, rubber bands. Photo: John Golllings