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Educational aspects of sustainable design in textiles and fashion

Designskolen Kolding has taught sustainable design to textile and fashion students for over 10 years and has gained some experience concerning the method, level and angle of information in this field. The textile and fashion industries are some of the largest and most resource consuming industries; Textile production is global and most textiles have been transported over long distances before reaching the end consumer. The production is connected to several other industries such as the chemical industry, agriculture and machinery production. Certain knowledge of these connections and reciprocal influences are required in order to make sustainable design in either textiles or fashion. Fortunately sustainability is one of the driving forces behind new developments in textile technology, especially in the western industries, where water for example is expensive and cleaning of water is requested by laws and also is financially remunerating.

During the first years of teaching sustainable design we started out presenting all the negative results of the production of textiles, such as the pollution due to the growing of fibers, synthesizing dyes, fibers and finishing. The result was that the students were stunned thinking that this global industry was beyond their scope and influence.

Since then we have focused on the central role which the designer plays in the choice of materials, colors, in setting the trend and in the response to consumer needs and demands. By showing a space in which to act and have an influence the creativity and fantasy were activated. The presentation of new, better, more environmentally friendly methods and materials already in use or under development also contributes to the creativity and rethinking of products. It is also during the course pointed out that designers have an ethical responsibility when designing for mass consumption.

The students work together for approximately 3 weeks, mostly in groups of 3 or 4 persons each group including both textile and fashion students. The choice of design field is left entirely the choice of each group. It is however pointed out that a product which nobody wants to buy can not be sustainable. Any production however ecological consumes resources which will be wasted if the product is taken directly from production to disposal. The end consumer, cultural aspects, price etc. has to be taken into account as well as the functionality of the product and the fulfilling of consumer needs or demands.

During the course the students are asked to develop and compare several solution models for the object they are designing.

The comparison has to be done in tables giving relative notes for specific properties of the models. The choice of properties is left mostly to estimation of the students but should include cradle to grave properties, functionality and how well it hits the target consumer. The tables are then used as a basis for further decisions. This holistic way of working seems to give life to the creativity and also to prevent a loss of perspective in the overwhelming mass of information and problems.

The aim of the course is to create a consciousness of the environmental aspects in all students in order to make it a natural part of the design process. The main message is that good design is sustainable and that the sustainability is not necessarily visible in the end product. The design should be so attractive that the consumer will prefer this product even without knowing about its sustainability.