

# Life after plastic

FROM TABLETOPS MADE FROM CORN HUSKS TO LAMPSHADES BUILT FROM WASTE POLYSTYRENE, THE QUEST FOR SUSTAINABILITY IS UNITING THE DESIGN WORLD, WRITES MARIA CRAWFORD. ILLUSTRATION BY JAMESPOP

A gauntlet has been thrown down before the world's designers. We, the consumer, have consumed our way into a tight spot - and the consequences have been far-reaching. We've all seen the footage of wildlife choking on the unnecessary stuff we've bought, used for a few seconds or a few years, and discarded.

Our instinct should probably be to consume less. Less food and fewer disposables. In the search for more circular consumption, we could invest in the second-hand market, especially for high-end interiors and long-lauded "design classics". But for designers it's about coming up with more nuanced solutions. They still need us to buy new products. And they're not going to persuade us with dull, worthy pieces. So, from sketch pad to showroom, one word rings in the ears of designers and brands alike: sustainability.

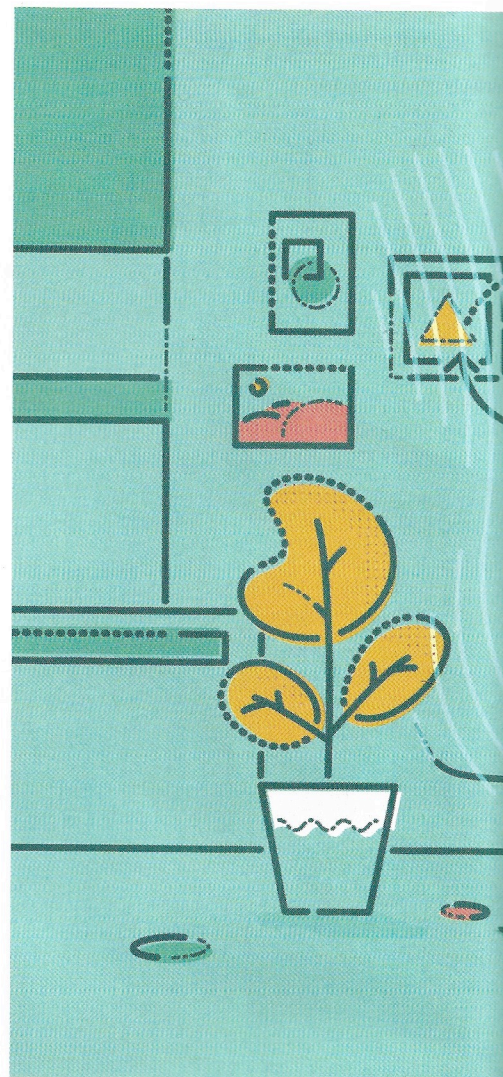
During London Design Festival, works on display at Brompton - the longest-established of the festival's "design districts", now joined by 10 others across the city - will revolve around the idea of "Material Consequences". It's a theme set by Jane Withers, a curator with a particular interest in how design can change consumers' impact on the environment. Her work includes Selfridges' "Project Ocean" as well as exhibitions at the V&A and the RA. At Brompton, exhibitors range from high-end brands with stores in the area - Kartell, Cassina, Skandium - to designers whose USP is rooted in eco-friendly materials and benevolent business practices.

There is a valid argument that all high-end furniture is kinder to the environment than its mass-produced counterparts. Yet the credentials of even the most durable designs are diminished if they demand the extraction of virgin materials, then to be transported long distances.

Withers sets a high bar for what defines true sustainability. "It has to be the whole thing," she says. Brompton will include a number of designers whose work tells "the whole story", she adds. By this, she means looking beyond the materials and substances used to make a piece. In addition, we need to ask further questions: where have they come from? How did they get here? How were they assembled? Even, how easy will it be, one day, to take them apart? There's a previous life and an afterlife: what were those materials before they were fashioned into a chair, lamp or rug? And what else can they become when their current form loses its purpose?

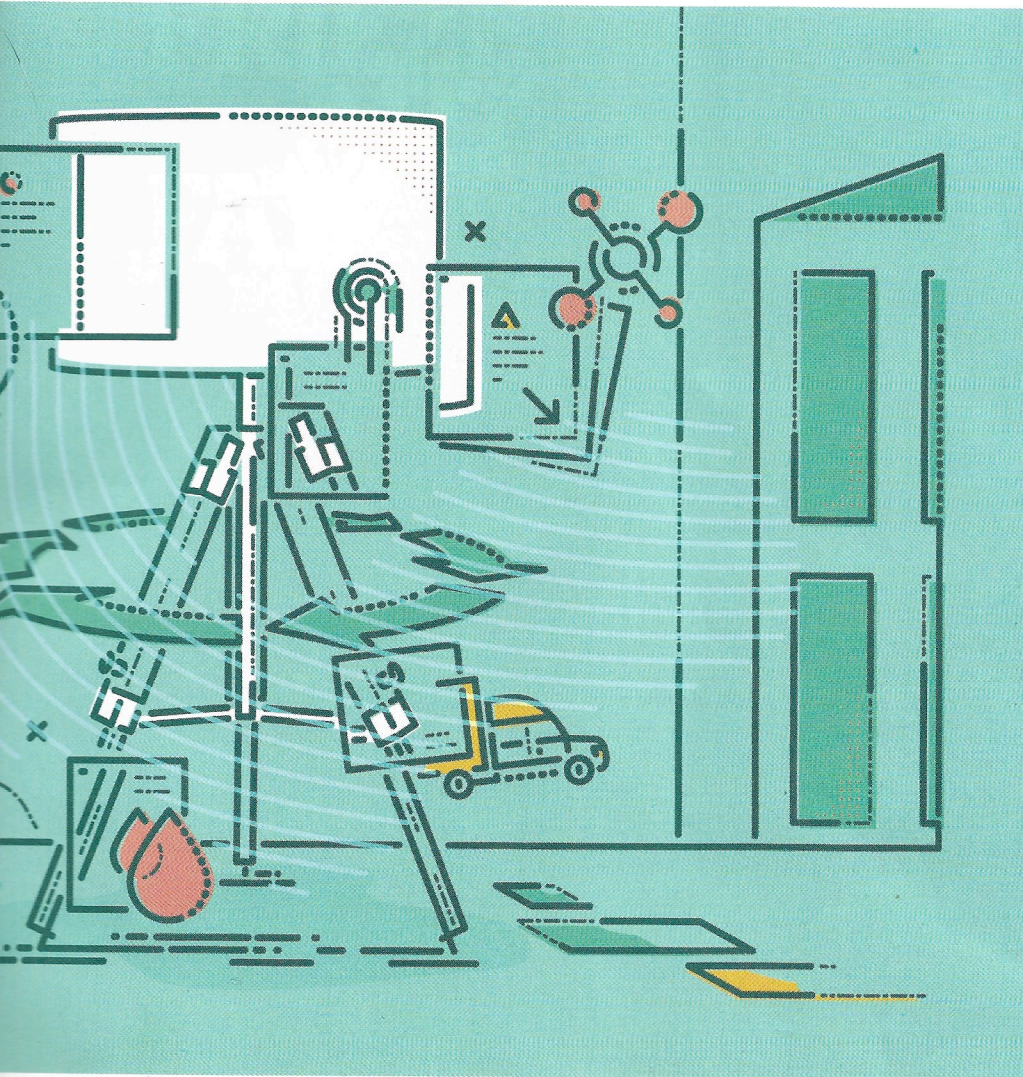
Fernando Laposse is a London-based Mexican designer and graduate of Central Saint Martins, whose previous projects have included Murano-influenced glassware made from 100 per cent melted sugar. He echoes Withers' insistence that designers need to look at the whole picture, not one single problem in isolation. "It's very rare to find someone who really looks at every aspect, every ramification," he says. "Most designers are designing in a completely urban context." Laposse was drawn to focus on sustainability in his work partly because while studying in London, he felt disconnected from the nature he had known in Mexico. The natural world, and older, slower ways of engaging with it, are his inspiration. "There are already a lot of solutions. If you look back at how things were made before, you realise we're going too fast."

At this year's festival, Laposse is showing Totomoxtle, a veneer made from husks of native Mexican corn. The plant's natural colours vary from pale yellow to deep purple, and the flattened husks can be laser-cut into small, leaf-like tiles or richly toned sheets for marquetry. So far the surface has been applied to tabletops, tiles, lighting and vases. The project is creating an obviously natural and beautiful finish, but it's also supporting farmers and craftspeople, as well



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Karen Sear Shimali, Stitch by Stitch



as preserving native species in an increasingly homogeneous agricultural industry.

Elsewhere in Brompton, London-based textile designer Stitch by Stitch will present "From Rain to Loom", a collection made with Kala, a species of cotton indigenous to India that, unlike most imported species, is rain-fed instead of irrigated. "It has so much more texture, movement and soul than industrialised, machine loom cotton," says the studio's co-director Karen Sear Shimali.

Like Totomoxtle, there are other food by-products too: Dundee-based French designer-maker Aymeric Renoud has created stools with Draff, a composite he developed from grains left over from brewing and distillation. They'll be on display, appropriately, in a bar on the Brompton Road.

**Plastic is the "Material of the Year" at this year's London Design Fair, where designers have been selected for the quality of their responses to the single-use plastic problem. Weez & Merl, for example, works with low-density polyethylene, encountered most often and infuriatingly in plastic bags and bubble wrap. The Brighton-based studio has developed a technique**

for recycling waste LDPE plastic into a luxuriant marble-like surface, and will unveil the first LDPE table at the fair.

In Kings Cross, PlasticScene is another showcase for designers working with waste plastic. Among them is Dutch designer Dirk Vander Kooij, whose chairs, made from piped recycled synthetics, take on an effect somewhere between glass and aluminium. All the works in PlasticScene will be presented in a gallery setting; they are statement pieces, a far cry from our preconceptions about how plastic can look in the home.

Now that the unsustainability of our plastic habit has been made so starkly visible, the shift in public awareness sets a challenge for designers. New materials are emerging: Crafting Plastics makes bioplastics with pearly finishes, and offers customised designs to clients. The studio has collaborated with the Slovak University of Technology to develop Nuatan - "100 per cent from renewable resources, 100 per cent biocompatible and 100 per cent biodegradable" - on show at Brompton. At 100% Design, Sam Lander will show lampshades, tables and stools made from waste polystyrene packaging; he takes an exceptionally problematic

form and use of plastic, and ends up with colourful, geological-looking pieces.

With all these developments, it's easy to think we should be counting down the days of virgin plastic as a feature in high-end design. Yet for every piece using recycled, upcycled or repurposed synthetics at LDF, there will be many more with first-use plastic. Experimental fabrics often make their debut in fashion before they appear in upholstery. But design is a slower industry, says Withers, using more complex methods. "There's still a large gap between experimenting with materials and scaling up use," she says. It can take four to five years to develop a new material into something that can be industrialised.

For strict aesthetes, there's a happy outcome: many of the post-plastics are far richer, less clinical and more interesting than their destructive forebear. The creativity, experimentation and holistic effort poured into them is paying dividends. Karen Sear Shimali of Stitch by Stitch is happy to join other designers in challenging humans' ruinous old habits. "If we wish to continue consuming and producing new products, it really is up to designers to lead the way in terms of showing it is possible to consume consciously and responsibly, whether it's about fair wages for weavers and farmers, or about using up less precious natural resources."

The race is on to see if any of the materials being unveiled at this year's festival will take the place of virgin plastic in mass production, and whether a designer rather than scientist or engineer will be crowned the hero of one of our biggest environmental crises. For now, the search is uncovering some unexpected treasures. **FT**

*"Material Consequences" takes place across the Brompton district, Kensington, September 15-23. Maria Crawford is a commissioning editor on FT House & Home*