

Creativity for conservation

- [SUDHA UMASHANKER](#)

ENVIRONMENT Sustainability should be the aim of product design, if we are to prevent depletion of natural resources, says design expert Prof. Helmut Langer



SUGGESTING ECO-FRIENDLY DESIGN OPTIONS Prof. Helmut Langer

“What we suffer from is not an economic crisis but a crisis of imagination,” said Prof. Helmut Langer, former president of the International Council of Graphic Design Associations and a specialist in cultural and sustainable design projects, during his talk on “Global Challenge for Sustainable Design”.

Prof. Langer has created multicultural and global communication projects of international significance for several UN organisations such as UNESCO, the UNEP and the Climate Change Panel.

The event was organised by the D J Academy of Design, Coimbatore, a premier design institute and a unit of the GKD Charity Trust, at Amethyst this week.

With heavy demands being made on the Earth's natural resources resulting in the depletion of fresh water, sea water, forests, air, arable land and open spaces, if developing countries such as Brazil, China, and India lived the same way as the West, then we would need six more planets, cautioned Prof. Langer.

Role of designers

So what role do designers have to play in this scenario?

“Humanity must learn that we live in a closed system. We cannot add new planets. Sustainability is, therefore, a new way of thinking for all of us.”

Prof. Langer compared two bottle tops — one in which colour pigments were used and the other made of plain metal, saying when the coloured bottle top was junked the colour pigments would go into the waterways, poisoning them.

The plain bottle top had several advantages — it was less polluting and offered the possibility of embossing the information at one go.

“Graphic designers must learn to think anew and hone their creativity, keeping in mind sustainability.”

In the field of communication, a plethora of catalogues and booklets is being produced with a “the luxury touch” – glossy paint, metallic inks and special embossing. “Designers must think of other ways of achieving such a look,” he said.

Pointing to a double spread, colour ad in a local paper with a lot of blank space he asked, “Can we design with such a lot of free space? It's a waste of paper. A colour ad means a lot of printing ink which is toxic. When the paper decomposes, the toxic pigments of the ink poison the waterways. If the paper is recycled, it needs more chemicals for the de-inking process.”

According to Prof. Langer, designers can help halt rapid climate change through inventive product design. “The designer is the creative talent between the producer of goods and services and the consumer. He thinks of how goods look and what material is used. He must educate the entrepreneur and the consumer, and always stay ahead. While the more conservative among designers focus only on how a product looks, today there is greater concern about what happens not just during the lifetime of a product but what happens afterwards – whether you can recycle and reuse it.”

Which is why plastic is another cause of concern for Prof Langer, who believes we should switch to natural material instead.

“Stop designing plastic bags. It is a time bomb. There are so many plastic bags that one can cover our planet six times with them. We can't any more say that we didn't know. We don't have an information problem, we have an orientation problem.” he observed.

Alternative solutions are available right here in our own backyard. Prof. Langer had a word of praise for Ooty (a plastic-free town) and where he spotted some recycled cotton bags.

Small vs. big cars

He also plumps for the Tata Nano.

“It is a great invention but a wrong car in the wrong country at the wrong time. Indians like luxury cars. In Europe, we have begun to switch to sophisticated small cars. In Japan, it is a status symbol to have a small car and not a big one. They consume less petrol; emit less carbon and boast more sophisticated technical equipment than a luxury car.”

Are environment-friendly designs costlier initially? Pat comes the answer.

“Bad material is costlier in the long run.”

Finally, urging designers to be aware of cultural diversity as much as biological diversity if they wanted to remain faithful to sustainable design, Prof. Langer concluded, “Coca Colonisation, a synonym for commercialisation and Western cultural imperialism, is a force that may in fact be a greater threat than wars to our global, cultural and environmental heritage. Being uniform is terrible. Cultural diversity is a great resource for creativity. Designers should look to their roots. Only looking at Western symbols is not a good idea.”

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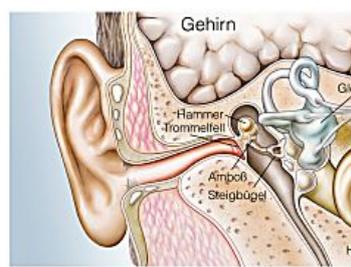
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