

Seven Green Gates: Eco-Friendly Fashion Design  
Karl Aspelund, Assistant Professor, TMD  
February 20, 2013

Summary by Camryn Rabideau

Dr. Karl Aspelund refers to his 7-step eco-friendly design process as the “Seven Green Gates.” He believes that sustainable design is an urgent matter in the fashion industry, and if it is to be incorporated into mass markets, society needs to be educated now. Dr. Aspelund’s seminar discussed the various aspects of sustainable fashion design and the choices designers need to make for it to succeed.

A person or a country’s ecological footprint measures how much land and resources he/it consumes. Dr. Aspelund believes that we will reach a crisis point soon, where there are not enough resources to support the human race; as is, we are depleting the earth’s resources by consuming more per person than is available. For this reason, he is working to educate designers and other fashion professionals on sustainable design and sustainable development.

Dr. Aspelund outlined the choices that need to be made at each step in the design process. The overarching concern should be sustainability as a need and constraint. This cannot be a forced decision; anyone involved must want to make the change.

In a truly “green” design process, designers and manufacturers will aim toward minimizing the ecological footprint of their products. One important way to do this is to examine a product’s life cycle. In the new trend of “up-cycling,” waste products, products no longer desired, become the raw material for new products. A choice to use recycled material can reduce a manufacturer’s ecological footprint by reducing the “waste” they contribute to the environment.

Another possible method of “green” design and production is to embrace craft traditions. Craftspeople traditionally worked in smaller, more efficient markets. Smaller markets have potential to make industries more energy efficient by reducing the overseas shipment of goods. In the craft tradition, low-impact materials were used. Although there are new innovations in raw materials that society cannot “do away” with, a shift to focus on non-toxic, local, low-energy production materials would be beneficial. An increased quality and durability of clothing would greatly reduce waste, because there would be less frequent replacement. However, this would mean that “fast-fashion” would have to be abolished. This type of fashion makes huge profits for corporations, who, as a result, would resist the change. Finally, the idea of repairing, recycling, and “up-cycling” would further reduce waste produced from the apparel industry. Dr. Aspelund believes that if haute couture were to be reintroduced using predominantly up-cycled materials, it has potential to launch recycling as a fashionable trend to the mass-market.

While these steps towards sustainable apparel are possible, they need to be introduced into society through education. Manufacturers and consumers need to think long-term and question consumerism. A new definition of “local” needs to be developed and implemented. The industry needs to use new communication technologies efficiently to evolve these practices and put them in to practice globally.

This seminar is a prime example of how scientific problems influence the fashion industry. The concerns of forest clearing, waste management, and global warming have an effect on the apparel design and manufacturing process. This issue will prove to be critical for the upcoming generations, and education needs to begin now.