



TEXTILE DESIGN: Global & local politics

Kate Fletcher takes a close look at the wider implications of good environmental practice in the design of textiles

THERE are many examples of good environmental practice in the design of textiles from around the world. Organic cotton in Senegal, more environmentally responsible methods of dyeing in India, networks supporting textile designers in environmental issues which span Europe, the Americas and Australasia... Yet one element that can be lost in search of a global approach is the importance of local design, production and consumption to the very viability of ecodesign.

Local needs can be met and local environmental conditions respected by designing products which make use of resources and labour from the community. The local focus also builds up a job-rich community-based infrastructure for product repair and reuse.

This alternative system reduces resource use and pollution associated with transportation in an age where international trade accounts for one eighth of world oil consumption. What is more, the geographical closeness of the community to the product and the producer means that environmental standards are more likely to be upheld (no factory would get away with consistently polluting its community's water supply).

At the same time, the system supports the local economy and crucially for design, the emphasis on localness enhances product differentiation and design diversity.

From the perspective of the designer, the local approach requires a focus very

different to that of modern industrial practice, which creates global products for a global market, instead it creates products and practices whose design evolves to meet need within limits of price, available resources, cultural acceptance and environmental concerns.

The creation of such products with a discrete local identity (the Arran cardigan; Irish bed linen) adds momentum to the process of reducing environmental damage. But local textiles are few and far between – in a world of global interdependence, no industry is more broadly dispersed around the world than textiles and apparel. Just as the textile industry led the industrial revolution, textile and apparel has been among the first sectors to be part of today's international division of labour.

Thus it is to trade and issues of the global market that the ecodesign debate must turn. While designers who incorporate environmental considerations into their work are used to engaging in the politics of their design decisions, it is politics which entirely dominates the globalisation debate. The effect on the environment of the ultimate condition required for the global market – free trade – is much disputed.

Proponents of free trade argue that the global market is a friend to the environment – the increased flow of trade which it gen-

erates and the associated economic growth bring greater environmental protection and a more equitable distribution of wealth for the poor producer nations. In contrast, opponents complain that free trade's requirement of no environmental regulation means slipping environmental standards and the farming out of the 'dirtier' phases of production to nations with fewer restrictions (normally poorer countries). This counteracts any wealth generated by reducing quality of life.

So for the responsible textile designer, solutions which successfully incorporate issues such as sensitivity to place and trade are difficult to identify; it is in the intricacies of debates like 'local versus global' that difficulties occur in translating design intention to producer action. Yet above all exposure to such issues serves as an indication of a new maturity in the ecodesign debate and one which is beginning to test social, ethical and environmental boundaries in contemporary design practice. **ed**