Lecture in Luxury and Sustainability

Sustainable Luxury: Oxymoron?

When I first began advocating “Sustainable Luxury” seven years ago, the concept was truly an oxymoron. Sustainable luxury stood proudly beside its cohorts, military intelligence, a fine mess and shabby chic. On the one hand, luxury, regardless of the cost to society or the planet, was considered by many to be, quite simply, a natural birth right. Social issues and natural disasters were an unpleasant fact of life, considered “most unfortunate” and dealt with through charity events. On the other hand, “green” advocates were militantly against consumption and as such, the luxury world. Things are changing and the strength of both worlds is being harnessed to make change come about without stigmatization of one lifestyle or another. Consumption is going from “conspicuous” to “conscientious”. We can live an enhanced luxury lifestyle through making a difference.

Luxury and Sustainability share common ideals. Both have respect for rarity, the notion of time and the importance of heritage. Both can be about creation, education, about pleasure and emotion.

Luxury, in its truest sense, celebrates authentic craftsmanship, noble materials and a society’s cultural heritage. Traditional knowledge, handed down through generations, is protected and nurtured and the intrinsic qualities of noble raw materials is protected and respected as well. The art and the artisan are one. Without this reverence by the luxury world, these craftsmen would no longer exist.

Similarly, sustainability has, at its core, a reverence for natural resources and a respect for the human being behind the creation.

Both Luxury and Sustainability are becoming the guardians of heritage. Now it is the role of the luxury world- consumer and brand – to see the world from the artisan’s point of view and with appreciation for what has been given by Mother Earth.

In terms of sustainable living, many luxury consumers fear that they are going to have to significantly alter their entire lifestyle. This is absolutely not the case. The disadvantage of past discourses on sustainability is the underlying finger-pointing
and condemning of certain lifestyles. After hearing about sustainable measures to be taken, many high-end consumers come away with negative feelings of guilt, frustration and dismissal. Luxury brand on the other hand only see unhappy stockholders when they are told that sustainable measures will be expensive. They also have felt that communicating on improved processes or reduced waste are not issues which the consumer can relate to or feel glamorous about.

The reality is that we cannot go on depleting earth’s resources at the rate we are doing and allowing the increase of poverty among the planet’s population.

With the increased global awareness of this situation and a call for transparency, luxury companies have an interesting dilemma: How do we continue to serve our demanding marketplace while simultaneously protecting natural resources, preserving human rights and honouring Fair Trade practices? Not too many years ago, those questions would have been met with rolling eyes, a sigh, perhaps an occasional raised eyebrow or two and a shaking of heads. The issues would have fallen on deaf ears, casually brushed aside as one might wave off an annoying housefly. Not so today.

The good news is that the concept of “sustainable luxury,” which not only helps our planet, but also, much to the surprise of many old-line thinkers, has a good deal of marketing value can be exciting, glamorous and creative beyond simple luxury. There are stories to tell and each product and service becomes multi-faceted as the process of its creation becomes a human story and not just a production formula.

As luxury providers become more environmentally conscious, they are able to appeal to their consumer’s newfound global awareness without compromising the luxury experience. Many companies that cannot adopt 100% sustainable business practices are donating a portion of their earnings to the communities who support their production facilities. Profits that may have decreased as greener methods were initially employed can now be offset by increased market share, as consumers buy products that combine a love of luxury with a sense of fair play. The world has made great strides in finding alternative energy solutions and companies are turning more and more toward using sustainable materials.

The luxury consumer is unique. He is able to make his purchasing decisions based on desire rather than need, comfort over cost, and pleasure over, well,
everything. Since his purchasing decisions are based on very different criteria than the non-luxury buyer, he is able to make choices based on a broader worldview.

Only a luxury budget can afford some of the latest green technologies and best sustainably designed products, and through such purchases it will stimulate the research for further and less expensive solutions.

Only a luxury budget will not look twice at a price tag if the cherished item has been found. And yet, a tiny percentage of this final cost could make a world of a difference to the life of the local artisan involved in its production.

As luxury consumers grow in global awareness and demand greener business practices, they are able to redefine the way in which luxury companies operate. The sustainable luxury marketplace offers companies and individuals the opportunity to indulge in the best life has to offer, while simultaneously supporting the preservation of craftsmanship and contributing to the well-being of underdeveloped communities across the globe. Via the luxury milieu we begin to celebrate the artisan rather than the brand and take an interest as much in the craftsmen and women as in the end consumer. At the same time we can teach these craftsmen the importance of the respect for natural resources and their own environment. **We end up with a healthy cycle of actions and reactions.**

This trend is an exciting new angle in the luxury arena. Even now there are some exquisite products out there which rival the finest know luxury items yet change the lives of local communities and respect the environment. One or two are already on my “absolutely fabulous, have to have” list. You might be surprised how many will end up on yours once you begin exploring.

As the world becomes more conscious of the responsibility we all have to the earth and to each other, Sustainable Luxury will move to the forefront. Sustainable Luxury is not an oxymoron, but rather an exciting opportunity to discover new horizons.

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