Across the world, the debate about climate change probably reached a peak in the early part of 2007 before the 'Sub Prime' scandal and ensuing credit crunch turned attentions back to money.

Points for 'sustainable' designers to bear in mind

This is certainly the view of the managing director of the German Design Council (whose aim is to help companies and their design partners communicate effectively), Andrej Kupetz. But he, for one, would like to recapture some of the idealism that was circulating in the design community during the debate and the commitment to sustainability that grew out of it.

He fears that, for all the focus global warming has received in the second half of this decade, designers, garment producers and consumers probably changed very little. He says, however, that it is time to change, time to bring "a new ethic" into design. "A lot of the time, designers are not innovating, they are just differentiating products to make money, and that's not sustainable," he continues.

Most in the industry would accept that one important way of making design more sustainable is to incorporate a greater proportion of sustainable materials. According to Professor Ursula Tischner—also from Germany, but currently teaching a sustainable design course at the Design Academy in Eindhoven in the Netherlands, as well as running her own eco-design consultancy, econcept—there is certainly a wealth of sustainable materials, natural and synthetic, out there for designer to choose from.

On the synthetic side, she thinks there are strong design possibilities for the bioplastics that companies such as Eco Golf have begun to use to make products like biodegradable golf tees. Tees today could maybe lead to biodegradable T-shirts tomorrow.

From the natural world, Professor Tischner has been impressed by some early work a student of hers has done with barkcloth, made in Africa from the inner bark of the mutuba tree (see box). The fibre it produces can be treated and coloured by hand to make a fabric that is sustainable and fair trade, she explains.

She is another advocate of biomimicry, suggesting that sportswear in particular should imitate nature. "You are out there in nature



Judges inspect sustainably designed apparel at the 2008 Volvo SportsDesign Awards in Munich.

Volvo SportsDesign Forum/ispo





Andrej Kupetz, managing director of the German Design Council, (far left) and Professor Ursula Tischner from the Design Academy in Eindhoven speaking at the Volvo SportsDesign Forum.

Volvo Sports Design Forum/ispo

doing sport, so look and see what nature does," she says. "You can create your own energy by doing sport, enough to power a torch or a radio." Shoes from Camper and Wabi are also very much on her approved list; she likes the fact that they use "intelligent design to eliminate waste", for example by having reusable outer shells and washable inner material.

Nevertheless, she believes that fabric producers and apparel brands still need to do more "to make sustainable products more sexy". This is all part of the need for designers to know and understand the consumers who will use their products, and of the need to give consumers as wide a choice as possible. This, she insists, is what companies have to do to sell sustainable design.

If you are going to sell anything, it's best to have a clear idea of what it is and, back at the German Design Council, Andrej Kupetz has developed a series of seven criteria to help define sustainable design, although he points out immediately that this is a work in progress, so the list is not complete.

The first point is that sustainable design is ethical; companies that aspire to it have to treat their suppliers and employees with justice and they have to pay their taxes. It is also complex. "Back to nature, back to simplicity, is not possible in the digital age," Mr Kupetz says, "so the issue becomes one of being able to manage the complexity."

Next, he says sustainable design must be innovative, which means designers have to keep carrying out research into better products. The focus here is not only on production; he urges the design community to shake off that mind-set.

It may be impossible to have clothes or shoes that have zero impact on the environment, but companies that sign up for sustainable design must work hard to make as little negative impact as possible—"keeping the damage to a minimum" is how he puts it.

He also wants sustainable designs to be aesthetic, although he accepts that we all have different ideas about what is beautiful, and also authentic. He explains: "An authentic product is socially acceptable. It stands for value and identity and has the ability to affect the user emotionally." His final criterion is that sustainable designs should also be "compatible with the future", meaning that this is a good route for designers to go down, not just for today, but for tomorrow as well.

Bark bonanza

Barkcloth making is an ancient craft of the Baganda people who live in the Buganda kingdom in southern Uganda. Traditionally, craftsmen of the Ngonge clan, headed by a kaboggoza, the hereditary chief craftsman, have manufactured bark cloth for the Baganda royal family and the rest of the community. Its preparation involves one of humankind's oldest examples of savoir-faire, a prehistoric technique that predates the invention of weaving.

The inner bark of the mutuba tree (Ficus natalensis) is harvested during the wet season and then, in a long and strenuous process, beaten with different types of wooden mallets to give it a soft and fine texture and an even terracotta colour. Craftsmen work in an open shed to protect the bark from drying out too quickly. Barkcloth is worn like a toga by both sexes, but women place a sash around the waist. While common barkcloth is terracotta in colour, barkcloth of kings and chiefs is dyed white or black and worn in a different style to underline their status. The cloth is mainly worn at coronation and healing ceremonies, funerals and cultural gatherings but is also used for curtains, mosquito screens, bedding and storage.

There are workshops in almost every village in the Buganda kingdom. With the introduction of cotton cloth by Arab caravan traders in the nineteenth century, production slowed and eventually faded out, limiting the use of barkcloth to cultural and spiritual functions. Nevertheless, barkcloth is still recognised among the Baganda community as a marker of specific social and cultural traditions. In recent years, the production of barkcloth has become greatly encouraged and promoted again.

Besides this example, barkcloth is produced from some 40 different trees and was also once widely used in the Pacific Islands and Indonesia.

Unesco has included the craft in its Intangible Cultural Heritage programme.

Source: Unesco