

Keeping it green

Miriam Hechtman meets some of Australia's most innovative green designers.





Bird Textile – Homewares

Creative Director and founder of Bird Textile, Rachel Bending, says the main inspirations for her fabric range are Japanese and Scandinavian design, the 1950s and mother nature, particularly the natural environment surrounding her in the Byron Bay area where she resides. “Byron is an extremely creative and eco-aware area, and there are many creative practitioners living and working here.”

Sustainability is an essential component at Bird Textile, from the choice of raw materials, the operations of the business and the construction of the products. “Ultimately, consumers will respond to beautiful products first and foremost, but I see my role as 50 per cent designer and 50 per cent educator, and being able to influence consumers who wouldn’t necessarily think about their purchases is a fantastic opportunity for me.”

Bird produces a range of fabrics that all start with a SKAL certified, organic cotton yarn. Water based dyes are then used to handprint designs on the fabric. This process uses a threefold wastage system that filters any of the run-off that comes off the screens during the printing process. “So basically the waste water that goes into the sewage system is not much different to the grey water that you would put into the system from your washing up or your bath.”

All Bird products are manufactured using solar power and the entire business is run on 100 per cent renewable energy. All paper waste is recycled in the studio and offices, and the packaging for sending out orders is also all recyclable. “We use for example, corn starch liners inside recycled content boxes rather than using plastic liners, so they’re fully biodegradable,” says Bending.

Wherever Bird cannot reduce emissions, Bending has chosen to offset by putting money into projects that slow global warming. “We’ve chosen to work specifically with solar and wind projects.” Bending, however, is very clear this is something that should only ever be used as a last resort. “The idea is not to just offset your guilt, without addressing reduced climate impact. One needs to look to where you can reduce, recycle or reuse and then whatever you have left, offset through a carbon scheme. Businesses and individuals alike can take this approach.”

Elliat Rich Design / Telegraph – Furniture/Objects

Educated in Canberra, designer Elliat Rich says the opportunity to do an internship at The Centre for Appropriate Technology enticed her to migrate to Alice Springs. “There is something quite unique about Alice. I guess its remoteness distinguishes it from a lot of other places, but also the kind of creative community that is here is incredibly active and very inspired,” she says.

Rich says her design process is about trying to remind people through objects and through their experience of objects about the simple pleasures in life. “So there’s certainly a balance between having nothing and having too much. My designs try to meet that balance by creating very special objects that are really about creating a connection either to the place that you are in or to another person.”

Having witnessed the arduous yet socially spirited ritual of digging up of the ipomoea plant, otherwise known as ‘bush potato’ or yala by Pintupi people, Rich says she was inspired to create a piece of furniture that reflected that quality of shared time and community space. “The Yala Sofa is about people coming together and the blossoming of that time.” To highlight this idea, the flowers on the sofa are made using a thermochromic ink, which is triggered by human body heat, so when the sofa is occupied, the flowers blossom. “So when you’re sitting there together the sofa comes alive.”

Rich says her approach to sustainability is non materials based. “It’s really about asking people what are the experiences and ideas that are valuable enough to really sustain into the future. Sustainability isn’t just about consuming ourselves into a sustainable state, it’s actually about an editing or a curating process and selecting things that are important enough now to justify sustaining them into the future.”

For objects planned to go into production, Rich says there’s definitely a lot more consideration taken for the process and the materials. “But in terms of producing the proof of concept pieces I don’t limit myself to a great degree in terms of materiality. I think the decision isn’t about just producing something in a sustainable way, it’s actually deciding what you should produce.”



Image courtesy of Steve Strike



Prebuilt is the perfect option for people in remote areas wanting to include some architectural flair to their home or office.



Pleysier Perkins/Prebuilt – Architecture

The Mod House is a prefabricated house designed by architectural firm Pleysier Perkins in conjunction with Prebuilt, a company that produces factory built housing. Designer Ramon Pleysier of Pleysier Perkins, says the inspiration behind the Mod House was to create something that had a timeless simplicity to it. “At the end of the day we wanted it to appeal to people that respond to modernist architecture.” He says clever design with flexibility was also important in their approach, “so it’s not just one solution for each site”.

Transportability is also part of this flexibility. Prebuilt is the perfect option for people in remote areas wanting to include some architectural flair to their home or office. “Often you can’t just get builders in remote areas, and a builder that wants to build architectural design,” says Prebuilt’s general manager Christiana Colquhoun.

All Prebuilt houses meet the Australian standard for ESD design and can incorporate environmental elements such as grey water, composting toilets and low-VOC finishes. Each site is inspected prior to building to maximise the orientation of the buildings for issues such as solar energy and airflow. “So we set the building up with the predesigned components and we have designed the Mod House as prebuilt, but what we do find is we’re heavily modifying the houses anyway because of certain pluses and minuses that each site’s climate will have,” says Pleysier.

Prebuilt houses also have a much lower embodied energy (energy expended in building the home). Houses can be built in as little as eight weeks and can be constructed in less than two weeks on site. “Speed is a huge thing in any building process so even thinking of a year’s worth of building condensed into usually two months is a massive saving as well, and that’s before you’ve even designed the house.”

The waste component of the materials is also greatly reduced as Prebuilt recycles its materials “so if there’s material that can be used on other projects it gets used immediately.” Energy savings are also substantial, says Pleysier, especially when considering the energy consumed in terms of travel to and from a regular building site compared to the compact operations within a factory. “It’s very contained and highly efficient and that’s why even the building process itself is reduced.” ■