



Beast to Beauty conference 2013

The fourth Beast to Beauty event had 'Eco and Creativity by Design' as its theme. It brought together representatives from the whole leather supply chain, from tanner to designer, and culminated in a debate on the topic of the moment: leather's carbon footprint.

The fourth Beast to Beauty conference, jointly organised by specialist training consultancy Leatherwise and *World Leather*, took place at Northampton University in June and brought together representatives of the whole leather supply chain, from raw materials to finished products. Around 60 delegates gathered to discuss pressing topics and hear speakers from a range of sectors. The audience included a large number of final-year fashion and design students with a special interest in leather, whose places were funded by the Leathersellers' Company.

In his opening address, Simon Yarwood, publisher of *World Leather*, spoke of leather's benefits and of the need for the industry to work cohesively to challenge negative stereotypes. "Campaign groups have said that, every year, the global leather industry slaughters more than one billion animals," he said. "That's pretty powerful nonsense: the leather industry doesn't slaughter any animals."

He spoke about how the Tannery of the Year programme was established to tell tanners' positive stories, and how the winners had had media coverage all over the world, passing the message to consumers. "In the past few years we've visited 29 tanneries in 20 countries," he added. "The stories we've been striving to tell have corporate social responsibility at their core. Most tanners care about their environment and look after their workers and take seriously the responsibility of sharing their resources with the community." He explained many stories had never been told before and that, as the initiative progresses, the hope is that more tanning companies will get the recognition they deserve, both within industry and in the wider market.

Industry opportunities

Kevin Sefton, co-founder of footwear company Govan Originals, explained how he had worked to spin off a high-fashion men's brand from a highly technical, bespoke footwear company based in Scotland. The brand was preparing to launch its second collection the following weekend at Italian menswear show Pitti Uomo. "One of the most exciting things is the great opportunities this industry can give to people," he said, revealing that he had hired one of his designers after a chance meeting at London Fashion Week.

He explained how although Govan, an industrial suburb of Glasgow, is not the most salubrious of areas, he wanted to capture the town's history as a shipbuilding hub, and even incorporates elements of marine design into the brand's shoes. He told young designers in the audience how important it is to find a niche and secure the brand and its trademark. "It's a long hard slog before you get to the point where you can launch in this market," he warned, but added it was a rewarding journey that he hopes they, one day, will make.

Colour trends expert Laura Perryman shed light on the complex process of predicting colour trends two or three years in advance. She explained that by studying news stories, looking at innovations across various industries and interpreting social



Victoria Spruce, who specialises in 3D printed heels with leather inserts, displayed her work at the conference alongside a number of other young designers and final-year students. CREDIT: VICTORIA SPUCE

moods, analysts begin to form a 'mood' or feeling that can later be interpreted into colour. At her company, London-based Global Color Research, colleagues from around the world gather to discuss their findings, the results of which are turned into a palette and published in in-house magazines that designers and companies can work with.

Rachel Garwood, director of the Leather Institute at Northampton University, explained how her students learn to make leather, working closely with the fashion and design department. "We are very keen that students are in touch with leather technologists and are industry-ready when they graduate," she said. She added that as well as the University being top in the UK for the employability of its graduates, the leather department has particularly good employability statistics.

Her colleague, Jane Mills, head of fashion and textiles at the University of Northampton, discussed how her students are able to combine leather knowledge with creativity, producing award-winning catwalk collections.



Sustainability plans

James Lang, marketing director of the Scottish Leather Group, gave a presentation on the work the group has done to reduce its carbon footprint, with the tannery's waste-to-energy treatment plant at its Bridge of Weir facility one of the best examples. "The environment is of utmost importance to us," he said, "not least because the Scottish government has ruled that there will be a new landfill tax after 2015. We have a number of things to our advantage. We have our own wastewater treatment plant and on-site energy generation and have implemented a zero-waste strategy."

He explained that, because hides are sourced locally, they spend less time on the road, so less fuel is expended. "Solid waste from our sites is transported to our thermal energy plant, which represents the first stage of our sustainability plan. It has been designed to convert waste. The plant provides heat for the tannery, and oil, which can be used to fund generators or used by other industries."

The final speaker before lunch, Reg Hankey, chief executive of the Pittards Group, focused his presentation on recent efforts in the global industry to counteract misleading anti-leather campaigns. "The vast majority of tanneries globally are very, very responsible people for their communities, they've been around a long time and are very committed," he said. He outlined the various industry initiatives – including Tannery of the Year, the Leather Working Group and Leather Naturally – that work to promote tanneries and the benefits of leather. "Unfortunately, the people talking to the consumers are the brands and the activist organisations," he added, "so there has traditionally been a disconnect in terms of the industry stepping back and not talking to the consumer. That's something we need to change."

The big debate

After lunch – during which time delegates able to observe a 3D cross-section of a hide 'suspended' in the facility's 3-D Active Cube – *World Leather* editor, Stephen Tierney, invited COTANCE secretary-general, Gustavo González-Quijano, and Dr Gerhard Wolf, the head of the leather technical competence centre at chemicals manufacturer BASF, to give their views on the subject of leather's carbon footprint.

Last year, Italian industry consultant Federico Brugnoli presented an argument that the carbon footprint for leather production should begin at the slaughterhouse and end at the tannery gate when the leather is shipped. The effect of this would be to exclude any of the agricultural footprint involved in animal rearing from attaching to the hide or skin in most situations. Tanners have found themselves pressed by large customers to apportion a percentage of the carbon footprint from raising the animal to the finished leather.

Mr González-Quijano thinks the value attributed to leather's upstream carbon footprint should be zero, as leather is a by-product of the food industry. He said we should not be calculating it in the conventional way, but in a way that focuses on the question: what is the determining product in this case? "The cow is not bred for the hide," he said, "the cow is bred for the meat. So the determining factor is the desire for meat, therefore it is only right that the burden on leather is zero."

Dr Wolf agreed and went on to say he thought the value should be "minus zero" because if the leather industry did not use the hides to make leather, the hides would cause greater environmental damage in landfill. "We are able to create an additional value from waste – there would be mountains of hides



Gustavo González-Quijano (left) and Dr Gerhard Wolf (right).

otherwise, this is what people forget – that is the reason my value would be minus zero," he said.

He suggested that if consumers were asked whether they thought leather had a high carbon footprint they would say no, or that they not think it was a problem. "The negative press comes not from the carbon footprint, but from the toxicity that people perceive. This is another aspect that needs to be discussed," he said.

It was pointed out that some tanners agree with a 7% figure, put forward originally by testing body SGS, because there is an economic value of the cow, and if tanners take some of that economic benefit, they should take some of the responsibility for the carbon footprint too.

"This 7% is the weight of the hide in proportion to the rest of the animal," explained Mr González-Quijano. "But a cow also produces milk over the course of its lifetime – where do we put this into the equation?"

Mr Wolf suggested it was a big shoe brand that first published the 7% figure and asked why something that adds value should take responsibility. A suggestion from the audience was that, if the tanners accept 7%, then those industries that use by-products of the tanning industry – such as collagen and fats – should also shoulder some of the 'burden'.

The panellists expressed hope that the global industry might soon agree on a framework for calculating the carbon footprint of leather and, from there, be able to communicate its position to brands and consumers "with one voice". "The leather industry should be standing up all together globally," added Dr Wolf.

Separately, Mr González-Quijano has also urged leather-sector companies in Europe to consider taking part in a new voluntary initiative to make identification of "green" products easier and more uniform. Several industry bodies have called for a global approach built on EU-wide science-based assessments and lifecycle analysis (LCA). Mr González-Quijano said this would help leather too because a scientific approach was likely to support COTANCE's position that 0% of the upstream carbon footprint of cattle, sheep and goats should be attributable to the carbon footprint of leather.

Since the conference, he issued an industry-wide call for tanners to take part in a consultation to help determine leather's footprint, which was met with an immediate and positive response from the global industry, and has now been sent to the European Commission for consideration [see *Leatherscene* in this issue].