



Industry consultant Federico Brugnoli at the podium at the Innovation Talks forum at Lineapelle London in January.

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Let designers share their dreams with tanners

A discussion forum at Lineapelle London in January gave designers and material experts the opportunity to tell the leather industry what hopes they have for putting leather to use in the imaginative collections of the future.

Following positive feedback from the Innovation Square, an event at Lineapelle in Milan last September to highlight new thinking that could make an impact on the leather industry, the event organisers announced follow-ups for the show's autumn 2019 and 2020 editions. In addition, Lineapelle said it would extend its focus on innovation to international editions of the fair.

An inaugural Innovation Talks forum took place at Lineapelle London in January. Trend analysts, influencers, innovators, designers and materials producers addressed London's design community on subjects including customisation, biofabrication, material functionality and circular fashion. Industry consultant Federico Brugnoli, the force behind the Innovation Square initiative, led the discussion in London and said sustainability is a primary focus of tanners' efforts to bring in new technology and ideas.

He told the audience he had been working on sustainability for customers in the leather industry for 21 years and still does not know exactly what sustainability means in this context. "The concept is 32 years old," he said. "It's no longer a child. We need to know the metrics for sustainability. We have been talking about this for years, but I think there has been some progress in the last few years." His consultancy, Spin360, has developed a patented

system to help tanners calculate accurately the cost and carbon footprint of manufacturing leather.

The system works by fitting sensor technology to a tanning drum and using the sensors to capture all data pertaining to processing hides, taking into account the chemicals in a particular recipe, the water and energy used during tanning and the burden on a wastewater treatment plant. The system uses software to model a tannery's wastewater set-up and also its particular machinery inventory. It uses this information, plus details of the carbon footprint of the chemicals in the recipe, to make its calculations. Mr Brugnoli hopes this idea will help tanners and brands to "design products for circularity".

Another speaker at the forum, Elisa Palomino Pérez, is a designer who has worked with Galliano, Fürstenberg and others, and is currently completing a PhD at Central St Martins, part of the University of the Arts in London. She has become, over time, a passionate exponent of fish leather and has worked closely with the world's most famous fish leather manufacturer, Iceland-based Atlantic Leather. She explained that Galliano first used fish leather from Atlantic Leather in 2004, but she said that records from the 1920s show that, even then, Salvatore Ferragamo was experimenting with the material in his shoes.



Ms Palomino secured and used a grant from the Worth Partnership Project, a European Union initiative to boost the fashion industry in Europe, to carry out research projects with Atlantic Leather. She has also travelled widely to visit communities in China and Japan that have long made products such as boots out of salmon skin. She has taken all these findings back to Central St Martins and run workshops there about fish leather and she continues to try to bring further innovations to fish skins.

More speakers from London's University of the Arts graced the panel. Another of the university's constituent colleges, the London College of Fashion, was represented by reader in material technology and design, Dr Veronika Kapsali. One of the reasons why this was particularly appropriate is that the London College of Fashion merged at the start of this century with Cordwainers College, which, in turn, started life in Bethnal Green in the East End of London in 1887 as the Leather Trade School.

Dr Kapsali's work has a particular focus on how fashion designers can learn from biology. Offering encouragement to the industry that is, at least partly, responsible for founding the academic institution she now works for, she said: "The leather industry must not forget that life on earth was quite circular until the [first] industrial revolution." Her point was that this departure from a circular economy came millennia after people had begun using animal skins to make shelter, clothing, footwear, a means of carrying things and a host of other products. In contrast, she added, all the plastic we have



Trends analyst, Orietta Pellizzari, shows samples to members of the London design community.

ever produced "is still present somewhere on the planet".

Designer and founder of experimental materials studio Muuna, Hannah Croft, rounded the discussion off, which was also appropriate because she provided a link to the Innovation Square event in Milan in September 2018. It was

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Gone are the days when tanners could simply hand over material they had produced and invite designers to work with it. Now, designers should be able to come and tell tanners about the material they want to use and invite tanners to make it for them.

at Innovation Square that she brought to the attention of the industry the collection of leathers with "cultured mineral surfaces" that Muuna has developed. Ms Croft grows crystals directly onto substrates, including leather, as an alternative to traditional decorative measures such as

embroidery and beading. "Crystal growing is not hard science," she told the audience at Lineapelle London. "You add seed crystals to a salt-based solution and the fibres of the material you place in the solution act as a basic substrate for the crystals to grow on securely."

She said some yarns work better than others and she made it clear that leather is not the easiest material to use because you have to submerge it in the solution. She is working on what she called "the control of this" and she has applied techniques such as oiling the back of a skin to make it float on top of the solution for crystals to grow on one side, while the other side stays dry. "The crystals are quite fragile," she said, "but not as fragile as you might think." Interest from major couture houses, sparked by her presentation in September, continues to grow, Ms Croft said.

Emeritus professor of leather science at the University of Northampton, Tony Covington, said his interest, as a leather scientist, is in improving the leather industry "to keep it sustainable". He welcomed these high levels of interaction between the design community and leather manufacturers. "The traditional way was for tanners to say to designers, 'here's a piece of leather, what can you do with it?'. That's the wrong way round. We need to have designers come to tanners to tell them what they, the designers, want to use, asking the tanners to make it for them. That's the way the supply chain should work. We can stick anything onto protein. Whatever you want leather to do, we can build it in." 🌐



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