

The Ultra Loop Bootie. In Galahad Clark's Loop model, a floating foot-bed functions as both heel and upper.

CREDIT: UNITED NUDE



Shoes fall short in lifecycle management

The footwear industry has made too little progress in managing the lifecycle of its components and finished products, shoe designer Galahad Clark has said.

Speaking at the recent Beast to Beauty conference in London, Mr Clark, from the prominent footwear dynasty, said that industries such as mobile phones and electrical goods have gone much further in making sure they can reuse or recycle their products and the raw materials that go into them. Footwear, however, has an ongoing fight on its hands; women's high-heels that have metal shanks are just one reason why the lifecycle of a shoe and all its components can be long and challenging.

Focusing now on two brands, Terra Plana and United Nude, Mr Clark places great emphasis on sustainable design, adapting the mantra of the three Rs: reduce, reuse and recycle. Examples include using no glue in some of his designs and instead stitching a sole straight onto a chrome-free leather upper.

"Every design, every product is part of the eco-system and needs to be balanced," he observes. "If not, it won't fit into the world of today and it will become extinct."

Prominent footwear designer Galahad Clark believes the industry has to pay much more attention to product lifecycle management if it wants its sustainability credentials to be taken seriously.

Tonnes of shoes end up in landfill. This is the eco-disaster of the shoe industry. We are part of a group that is studying ways to re-use or recycle shoes."

Shoe repairs

As well as giving shoes away, to people in the developing world, for example, you can re-use your own shoes by repairing them. In fact, repairability is going to be an increasingly important quality for shoes to have in the years ahead, so much so that Galahad Clark adds it as a fourth R.

Leather as a construction material can lend itself particularly well to this, he believes, because of its durability. However, he adds that where shoes are



Footwear designer Galahad Clark speaking at the *Beast to Beauty 2010* conference, organised by *Leather Wise* and *World Leather magazine*. CREDIT: WTP

concerned we have a huge cultural challenge because, at the moment, repairs cost more than some new shoes. Credit where it's due—he gives low-cost retail chains praise for creating decent products that are “right on trend” at cheap prices.

For his own part, Mr Clark is keen on “emotionally durable design” and compares the lasting appeal good shoes can have to that of a pair of blue jeans. “People grow to love them,” he says. “Everyone has a favourite pair or jeans, and lots of things, such as the way you sit or where you keep your wallet, will affect their look.”

Reflecting his enthusiasm for all four Rs, Terra Plana and United Nude have developed their own eco-matrix (the lack of a genuine set of industry-wide guidelines is a recurring theme in footwear) with a commitment to reduce waste at the heart of everything. In fact, the designer is so keen on reducing the amount of material his shoes consume, some of his creations, such as the Terra Plana Dopie (sandals, but in a “pure form”), are decidedly minimalist.

A dilemma

This represents something of a dilemma for Galahad Clark, considering his job and his family background; he thinks that shoes are “a poor second to feet”. Parts of the world in which many people still go barefoot record the best foot health and fewest injuries, he says. One of his designs, the Vivo Barefoot, does its best to get back to nature with a very thin, puncture-proof sole. Thin soles are also a feature of some of the leather shoes for children in his collections.

He has drawn inspiration from Native American construction workers he has heard about. On receiving high-tech safety footwear to protect their feet at work, they took the boots home, sliced the soles off and stitched on soles they had made themselves from hide. “They wanted only natural leather between themselves and the earth, and I agree with them,” Mr Clark explains.

This design minimalism is going to become more and more popular, he predicts, to the extent that, in five or ten years, padded running shoes will be widely regarded as “an ancient anomaly”. Believing as he does that claims surrounding a shoe's ability to give us greater

shock absorption and motion control are “a pack of lies”, he thinks this is no bad thing.

He continues: “Modern materials and all these fandangos are leading us all down the garden path. If you run barefoot, you use your muscles more naturally and distribute the strain more evenly. If you watch children when they first learn to run, they stand upright, they take very short strides and bring the soles of their feet down first, almost directly under their bodies. This is right because all the elasticity and all the ligaments work naturally. Put some of these athletic shoes on them and children start heel-striking at a very early age.”

In spite of a shared conviction that some shoes can harm our health, he is no fan of the MBT or spin-offs such as the Reebok EasyTone, footwear with deliberately unstable soles. In truth, the sound of these products' names causes him some concern. They can do more harm than good, he insists. Yes, they can tone up the buttocks, but this happens, according to Mr Clark, at the expense of the rest of the body being constantly “in panic”, putting the neck and the back at particular risk of injury. “They're a bit of a menace,” he says. “I don't think they're healthy.”

Local production

In the brighter future he envisages, every pair of shoes will carry a list of ingredients, just like food products. Consumers will prefer locally made footwear and fair trade products will have a heyday. He acknowledges that Terra Plana and United Nude shoes are made in Asian factories at the moment, but a project to bring some Clark's production back to the United Kingdom, albeit on a small scale, is under way. Small runs made in local factories that are switched on to developments such as rapid prototyping, the use of smart materials and so on can happen and can be successful in today's market, he feels sure.

Anything more than small scale would be greatly ambitious for anyone in this still greatly labour-intensive industry. This is why Bangladesh has been the location of choice when the big manufacturing groups based in southern China have looked at expansion recently, he explains.

Sustainability is also a clear priority for the big footwear brands and the Asian manufacturers that are their key partners, but perhaps it's inevitable that, the larger the organisation, the harder it is to implement a radical idea quickly. Small brands such as United Nude and Terra Plana, therefore, have an important voice in the sustainability and product lifecycle debate—even if the name behind them is one of the biggest in the footwear world.

The United Nude Eamz is conceptually inspired by a furniture design classic; the Charles and Ray Eames chair.

CREDIT: UNITED NUDE

