

We need to reduce our dependency on plastics

Jane Atfield in conversation with Johanna Agerman Ross



156-1 Jane Atfield, recycled plastic furniture, 1995.



157-1 Jane Atfield in her London Studio, 1995.

At what point did you decide to pursue a career in design?

As a young teenager, I moved from Pembrokeshire to Bristol and lived with my grandparents for a year. My grandpa, Ralph Brentnall, was a retired architect who had helped redesign some of the university buildings that had been bombed in the war. He was my inspiration to study architecture when I later moved to London. After completing a mostly theoretical degree, I realized I needed to learn more about materials and hands-on construction, so I studied at the London College of Furniture and then applied to do an MA in Furniture Design at the Royal College of Art in 1990. I loved working at this smaller scale and decided to focus on the furniture and product world. I felt that I had found my niche.

Did any of the issues around the use of plastics ever make it into your education in the late 1980s and early '90s? Despite increased environmental awareness, it seems that the use of virgin plastics within the design industry was still on the rise.

I don't recall learning about environmental issues or the ethics of design as part of the teaching programme. And it was not always easy, pre-Internet, to uncover information; the study of materials seemed to be a do-it-yourself course. Plastics

were still being celebrated as a wonder material within the institutions and by furniture manufacturers in the early '90s, and design interest in the wider social or environmental context was limited. Instead, there was a cult of elevated designers, such as Philippe Starck who seemed to design by force of personality—designers as pop stars with endless performances.

Despite this, you started developing the idea for what would become *Made of Waste*. What made you look in the direction of recycling and reuse?

I felt alienated from the status- and style-driven designer furniture world. I was searching for another direction, casting a wider net. Luckily, during my second year at the RCA, I came across a book by Victor Papanek in the library—reading his *Design for the Real World* was a complete revelation. I loved the work of the radical and egalitarian Italian designers Enzo Mari and Bruno Munari too.

During that second year, I also came across an interestingly speckled, blue material sample on the desk of a fellow student studying sculpture. They had brought it back from a New York trade fair, but the manufacturer's name wasn't on it. Using material resource books, I eventually found out it was made by Yemm & Hart, a company in rural Missouri that recycled post-consumer



158-1 Detail of the RCP2 (1992-96) chair by Jane Atfield.

plastics such as shampoo and detergent bottles into sheet construction materials. I got in touch with them and was so excited by their approach. They were connecting new materials with a wider societal context, namely the problems of plastic waste, and using waste as a resource. I saw the potential for making furniture and everyday objects from it, and they shipped over some sheets for me to explore with.

Do you remember having a specific concern with throwaway culture and plastic waste in particular?

When I'd lived by the sea in Pembrokeshire as a child in the 1970s, I had seen plastic pollution on the beaches. Growing up in a family that had left the city for a rural, "alternative" lifestyle, I had not been seduced by consumer culture. Instead, there was an emphasis on experiences over possessions. Later at college, I remember hearing about the plastic-bottle tax in New York, which was introduced to combat rising waste levels in the 1970s, only to be defeated by industry lobbying and the US Supreme Court. I realized then that waste and plastics were political. Also, I had

read Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, with her devastating account of the ways humans were destroying the environment.

What was the reaction at the time from fellow students and teachers at the RCA?

My fellow students, especially the fine art and textile students whom I spent time with, were encouraging and curious. However, eco-design was marginalized at the time and often seen as an eccentricity or a leftover from the hippy movement. I loved being at the RCA, but the teaching staff had quite entrenched ideas of how things should be done. It was suggested that the work I made from recycled plastic be left out of my end-of-year show in 1992.

But you continued pursuing it...

Stumbling on the recycled plastic was a really exciting opportunity and effectively led to a decade-long research project that I felt totally committed to. I fell in love with everything the material represented!

So how did you go from importing to manufacturing your own board in the UK and setting up Made of Waste?

Well, it was not exactly environmentally friendly to ship the recycled plastic all the way across the Atlantic! I needed to find a way to fabricate the material here in the UK, using our own plastic waste. I set up Made of Waste to act as an agency for recycled materials, starting with plastics. I spent a long time searching for the right machinery and sourcing the HDPE [high-density polyethylene] post-consumer waste from community recycling schemes, but I was struggling to find investment and make the right contacts within the industry. Then I met a journalist called Sylvia Katz who introduced me to an industry insider, who also happened to be chairman of the British Plastics Federation Recycling Council. He later joined Made of Waste—which became a limited company—to develop and sell the recycled plastic to architects and designers, as well as for my own use in the furniture I designed. The material attracted a lot of interest, and over the next few years, we found new material sources, including the high-impact polystyrene range HIPS from used Marks & Spencer plastic coat hangers and yogurt pots... and another one using discarded clingfilm from the catering world.

So, at that point, there was clearly an awareness from industry that plastics needed to be considered from a point of view of circularity.

Yes, but my impression was that they embraced it under duress and in response to rising public awareness of the problems of plastic waste. The industry needed to show they were doing something. The remit of the British Plastics Federation Recycling Council was to encourage plastics manufacturers to recycle, but recycling was not widely implemented as it was often more expensive than producing virgin plastic. Most recycled plastic at that time was low-grade, as it was a random mix of different polymers and often ended up in agricultural settings.

What highlights do you remember from this time?

It was very inspiring collaborating with architects and seeing the recycled plastics incorporated into different interior projects. My favourites were the bathrooms in the Eco-Logic houses in Parc de la Villette in Paris and when the architect Ben Kelly used it in The Garden for children at the Science Museum. The graphic designer Peter Saville used

it in his kitchen, and it featured in the studio sets for LIVE TV with Janet Street-Porter. Early on, we took a stand at 100% Design in London, building a whole kaleidoscopic room and making all the furniture from the material. People thought it was hand-painted initially, but then they realized that the colours instead came from chipped up bottles from their local supermarkets—the blue from the Big Dom detergent bottles was particularly distinctive!

Did you feel a sense of success in achieving all of this?

Not so much at the time; it seemed such an intense period in my life. I was so busy trying to juggle everything, including my son Noah who was born in 1995. Looking back now, I'm really happy that I threw myself into recycling and had the opportunity to pioneer the use of recycled plastics in the UK. Both the design and plastics industries at that time were male-dominated, and it was strange and somewhat lonely to be a young woman amongst it, but maybe that counts as some sort of success.

Despite much public interest and publicity, Made of Waste ceased trading less than a decade after it was founded. What happened?

There were strains within the company by 1998. I favoured developing community production facilities, keeping the raw material sources and the production of the sheets as local as possible. This would enable useful things to be fabricated from local waste; a school could build new classroom furniture from the bottles they threw away, for example. I wanted the material to be accessible and inexpensive and to develop along a social-enterprise model. Gradually, I was pushed out. My business partner and the plastics factories closed ranks. Eventually, it proved too difficult to continue, and Made of Waste closed. For a long while, I felt haunted by Made of Waste and the reasons I ended up walking away. It was such a shame that it all went wrong, and I wish I had fought even harder to stay involved. The company continued trading under the name Smile Plastics, but essentially was run down. More recently, it was given to a young couple and is now thriving. So at least there is a happy ending for the material. However, the days of endlessly recycling plastics are probably numbered. Surely, we need to reduce our dependency on plastics and work towards a predominantly plastic-free world, leaving the oil in the ground.