



Michael Braungart: 'Cradle to Cradle is a marketing concept'

"Recycling sounds silly; people do not want to be lumbered with other people's old junk. 'Eternal life' sounds a bit better. It is really great if you offer a second-hand T-shirt as a relic and a way of forging a link with the hero who wore it before you." So says German chemist, Michael Braungart. With the Cradle to Cradle concept, Braungart has evoked worldwide enthusiasm about sustainability.

AUTHOR MARJAN SLOB

Michael Braungart became world famous in 2002 when he coined the sustainability concept Cradle to Cradle (C2C) (see box page 57) with the American architect, William McDonough. Ford, Volkswagen and Nike are already applying it. Governments from Taiwan to New Zealand, from China to the United States, are seeking advice on the subject. The Dutch Prime Minister Balkenende has spoken with him and Minister Cramer of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment embraces his concept, too. Braungart has become a conceptual entrepreneur.

How do you form a community around an idea, concept or an opinion? According to Michael Braungart, that is the crucial question. He has set a good example with

Cradle to Cradle. According to his philosophy, smartly-designed production cycles would mean that we no longer have to send residual products 'to the grave'. Everything that is left over from one cycle can form the beginning (the cradle) of a new one. Then waste is food. A lot of scientists see this as an excessively rosy view of the situation; some even speak of an 'ill-considered hype'. But his critics are missing the point, because C2C is very inspiring: it has released unbridled global enthusiasm which has resulted in the starting up of innovative projects. How did the innovator manage it?

Braungart: "It is all about the image you propagate. Cradle to Cradle is a marketing concept. Considered on its own merits, it is very similar to sus-

tainability: you want to use and reuse raw materials as much as possible. The objective is the same: a livable planet. But sustainability has Calvinistic ethics that are really hammered in: that your ecological footprint must be reduced, and reduced even more, preferably until you leave no tracks at all – or: that you have to feel guilty for having existed. Cradle to Cradle, on the other hand, tells you how great it is that you are around, because you can be a part of the solution. I travel all over the world and I have noticed everywhere that if you

'A good scientist has a broad outlook and an eye for beauty.'

approach people openly, say that you believe in them and that you share an objective with them, you release positive energy. Of course you can leave your footprint on this earth! You are welcome to do so. As long as it is a healthy footprint.”

Eye for beauty

According to Braungart, this success teaches us that it is not sensible to point ‘an ethical finger’ in the direction of technology manufacturers: ‘If you are not careful, things are going to go wrong before too long!’ Braungart goes on: “If you handle technologists as though they must be kept under restraint, ethically speaking, it will only lead to a guilty conscience. A good scientist has a broad outlook and an eye for beauty. He or she does not wear blinkers but realizes the implications of his or her work in the wider context. *Technology assessors* know that, too. They could help young people to improve the quality of their work in that sense. Ensure that there is a holistic *technology support system*. Do not start with ethics, but with quality. After all, everyone wants to deliver quality. Quality is always a solution.”

Braungart himself talks little about specific technologies. Not because that is where the problems can be found, as his critics say, but because, according to Braungart, you are then moving ‘on the wrong level’. “Start with existing technologies and before you know it you end up dis-

cussing efficiency. An example: the printer manufacturer, Océ, recently proudly showed me a new piece of equipment that produces less waste. I asked whether I could burn the pages that the machine prints out and compost them for my allotment. No, that was not possible. Or in other words: the machine is slightly less bad than it was previously. I want nothing to do with this sort of efficiency. I do not think in terms of minimizing the misery. It is not about efficiency, but effectiveness – to achieve what you want to achieve.

That requires vision – you have to know what you want and why. Within a vision like that you can design processes, utilize technology, change the logic around certain products.”

Alright then, Braungart is prepared to give us one example: “Nowadays you buy a pair of Nikes and throw them away when they are worn out. But why shouldn’t you buy the right from Nike to walk in their shoes for two years? You could also buy the right from Ford to drive in their car





> Cradle to Cradle

Design the technology to be smart and we will be able to consume endlessly and continually make profits – with a clear conscience. That is the message that architect, McDonough, and chemist, Braungart, propagate in their book *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* (2002). Consumption is not a problem; it is even a part of the solution. Provided the production cycle is designed such that the residues can always be fully recycled, or are a high-quality raw material for another production cycle. If this is the case, waste is food. C2C touches a nerve. Braungart and McDonough are called in worldwide to give advice on urban planning, the (re)development of factory sites and production processes and the design of new materials that are suitable for bio and techno-recycling. Companies such as Ford, Nike, Herman Miller Inc., BASF, DesignTex, Pendleton and Volvo have accepted the philosophy with open arms. Students at the design academies think the world of C2C.

There is also criticism of C2C, though. Space and raw materials are not infinite and therefore growth cannot be either, is the sceptic response. C2C talks of the reuse of materials but all those items have to be transported and reassembled causing the irrevocable loss of energy. Or: C2C promises a *'technological fix'* whilst a

true remedy implicates another, more sober lifestyle. For the critics that fact remains *'comfortably behind the scenes'*.

Braungart defends himself by saying that he doesn't have all the answers; he chiefly wants to provide inspiration. And he certainly succeeds in that. Ever since the *Tegenlicht* documentary *'Afval is Voedsel (Waste is Food)'* was shown on Dutch television in October 2006, C2C has been hot in the Netherlands. The municipality of Almere wants to build 60,000 houses in accordance with C2C principles and the Floriade (an international exhibition of flowers and gardening) to be held in Venlo in 2012 will be completely *'C2C proof'*. His ideas have caught on so successfully in the Netherlands that Braungart is going to concentrate his scientific and business activities in this country. "Akzo Nobel, AVR-Van Gansewinkel, Desso tapijt, DSM, Nike Europe, Philips and even Dutch ministries and municipalities want to get to work with Cradle to Cradle. I am going to give up all my obligations in Germany and America for this.", Braungart said in the spring 2008 edition of *Flow Journal*. This summer Braungart will be opening an auxiliary branch of his Hamburg company, the Environmental Protection Encouragement Agency (EPEA) in Venlo. He has also accepted a chair at Erasmus University Rotterdam.

for a hundred thousand kilometres, including petrol. If this was the case, the companies concerned would automatically make better products. They would then have an interest in their products being durable and in being able to reassemble them after the expiry of the agreed period." Braungart has actually had enough of giving lectures about Cradle to Cradle. "People need an image, I understand that, that is why I make these appearances. But in fact we should stop talking. It is time to do something, to learn by doing.

'Of course you can leave your footprint on this earth! You are welcome to do so. As long as it is a healthy footprint.'

Because if we go on like this, in a few years' time there will no longer be industry of any significance left in Europe. We cannot produce as cheaply as Asia. We must want to do it differently. Not more efficiently but more effectively. We must deliver quality, holistic quality."