

Let's cradle!

By Ruben Borge

Maastricht, Nov 1-2 2007, Congress lets cradle! took place. This is a synthesis report based on my observations during the attendance to the congress. I am a coordinator at Stichting RUraal Wageningen (RUW). RUW will organize activities in 2008 around cradle to cradle (C2C, agricultural production and landscape planning. This document collects the key element to make a mental switch towards the in C2C logic. It is written in English because the target group of RUW is formed by 45% of international students of Wageningen University.

Intro: Consumption and Guilt

It is not going well with our current system of production-consumption-waste. This is the message we have heard for years. Since the 70s, human beings have been raised under the pressure generated by two opposite forces. Consumption and guilt. The pressure on us is tremendous. On the one side we have to consume new things to be up to date, more trendy. More often we *need* to get a new phone, new shoes, clothes and so on to show the society how well we do. The market provides us with an immense variety of products and services. Publicity and media push us into the rollercoaster of the new trends tempting us again and again to buy more. The goal is to become exclusive. We must get the newest stuff on our skin and on our table.

On the other hand we have grown under the culture of the guilt. Guilt is that whispering voice that tells us that the more we consume, the more pollution we generate and the more we damage our planet. The question here is how big is my ecological footprint? How responsible am I as a consumer for the resource depletion and pollution of the planet? Creating awareness of our damage can orient us towards a more responsible consumption. We still harm, but now we know that we do that.

When confronting ourselves with guilt we can have two strategies. First, we can acknowledge the guilt and try to work on that. Mr. Braungart called guilt management. Guilt management strategies make us consume less products and/or being more efficient in our consumption. We can find examples of these strategies on the growth of the Green power "groene stroom" market. Guilt management can drive us to other death-end solutions like bio-fuels. A second way of managing our guilt is by establishing tolerance limits. Humans and ecosystems can now be exposed to a so called "acceptable" levels high toxic elements. Currently, regulations tell companies to pollute less. An example of this is the policy "who pollutes, pays" or in other words, if you have money, you can pollute. As a result we are surrounded by toxic products "weapons of mass destruction" as Mr. Braungart pointed out.

Under the pressure of the consumption force and the guilt force we can never be happy. To liberate us from these two forces we have to make our profit out of goods that do not harm the planet nor the people. Then it will make more sense to make money out of it and celebrate the benefit. The concept of sustainability was not perfect but raised in us awareness over the fact that we have to do something. We need to move from the logic based on the concept of sustainability to really study and work together with nature. We need a switch in our way of thinking.

The switch

Professionals are constantly working to design and redesign the environment where we live. The process of design has moved along the years from considering the idea that resources are unlimited, towards being more aware of the boundaries of these resources. When awareness raised it begun with guilt. In fact, there is no more need for “guilt management” when we consume truly renewable resources. The key is to design our world taking only renewable resources. Only at that moment, instead of saying sorry for living on this planet, human being can celebrate our intelligence with smart solutions that do not harm the people nor the planet and are business wise attractive.

Mr Braungart stated at the Let’s cradle congress that there is no overpopulation problem. Therefore we do not need to control the population growth. What happens is mismanagement of our resources. He pointed out the example of the ants. Ants on the planet have more biomass than humans, though we seldom notice their presence nor their pollution. All that they produce can be reused or biodegraded. The cradle to cradle (C2C) principle is to follow these natural models as an example for design of our human environment.

If traditional recycling approaches degrade the quality of the materials, we must work on the material level by finding materials that can be reused hundreds of times without losing characteristics. C2C finds inspiration by looking at the natural cycles. At the design level, by finding designs that allow easy recovery of the materials, designs that make use of 100% sun energy like a tree (not nuclear nor biomass). We can imitate nature at several levels. A house like a tree that uses the energy of the sun, fixes nitrogen and CO₂ and produces 100% bio degradable waste which is food for the environment. A city that acts like a forest supporting the life for complex ecosystems. Products after their use can be food for the biosphere when they are biodegradable. When products are not biodegradable, they still can be food for the techno-sphere when they can be easily disassembled into simple materials to get new shapes into other products.



The image of the consumer needs also a switch. The consumer is no longer guilty but she/he has the power to choose the cradle to cradle products. The consumer is the one who will make the change. I will comment on this point later under questions to be addressed.

The opportunities

The C2C movement begins now and there are countless opportunities at all fields. There are few case studies of companies that started thinking in Cradle to cradle. At this early stage there are more questions than answers. Companies want to know how to make the change or whether it will be profitable or not. Governmental organizations want to know what strategies are wise to support, and who to make visible the project for the tax payer. Individuals from their very different fields ask what can they do within their organization to spread the idea, gain support and make a change. Students ask how can they know more about cradle to cradle, looking at universities that could offer the first MSc program on Cradle to cradle.

The Lets cradle! congress shows how much creativity and enthusiasm people have. At this stage it is important to create awareness of more people to make the mental switch. A book was the starting point and now our voice, our actions can be more powerful instruments. At the same time we need to create knowledge by publishing successful cases and sharing with the community. The message of cradle to cradle is still a vague vision of ideas and needs to be made more concrete so that action can take place.

Concrete Action

Currently a reduced group of the population is aware of this concept and its applications. There are several examples in products and companies that can be used as a basis for learning. Still we are at the beginning and there is more need for raising awareness, expand the message. This can be done by organising seminars and workshops specific for students, professionals and policy makers to make their role more concrete in the process.

Participants of the Let's cradle congress posed many questions related to where to begin, how to implement and how to address.



Together with the awareness there is more need for expertise. We need more research at all fields to mainstream the concept to all fields and at all levels. A good step is to have access to a Masters program Cradle to cradle

We need to collect and share experiences on the implementation of the cradle to cradle to be able to learn how to make the switch in our thinking and facilitate the process of change for other groups and companies. There is also skepticism to this idea. The Congress in Maastricht brought also critical questions, gaps and bottlenecks of the C2C concept.

Questions to be addressed

Until now in this report I addressed some of what I consider key issues as exposed in the congress. Now I will try to show some critical questions. My questions are related to the role of the different actors that make the change. The company the Governmental agencies and the consumer.

Old idea with a new name? A few times was pointed that is an old idea with other name. Could be. I see it more as a model for integration of old ideas with the common goal. We can use many names of the people who made interesting discoveries. We can discuss who is the most original and will give the name for the history books. But now it is not about heroes. It is about making a change and using our effort in the implementation of this idea.

More production costs? There are some lessons we can learn from the experience with the food bio industry. Biological products are less competitive in price than conventional products. However, the growth of this sector is explained because customer makes a choice based on quality and ethical principles. Still, there is an obstacle for the consumer to pay more

for something so difficult to perceive. Cradle to cradle products need to address production costs so that they are price competitive. Accepting more cost will not make a change. Hence C2C products will require new creative forms of design, production chain and supply chain.

Does it mean to go for more or less labeling? A label C2C will show the quality to the customer but will increase the production costs of the “Good products”. This will make these products less interesting in price against the “bad products”.

Does C2C need the end of the control culture or on the contrary will need more regulation? Our government uses systematically two type of tools. The subsidy and the taxation or the fine. These tools are known as the “carrot and the stick”. Mr. Braungart points to have less control and let the customer decide what is good and let him support the good practices and products. However, the consumer will have to make a choice. In order to make a good choice the customer needs to be informed. As the products are complex this can end in endless information that customers cannot handle. How can the customer know how good a producer is? Do we need a third party as a trustee to inform the customer about the right choices?



I left the congress satisfied. We did not get answers to all our questions but we started a process of dialogue and cooperation with many other organizations. The time has come for us to join this venture from all the fields. There is a lot of work to do. We are ready to make the switch and to construct a new future, growing in harmony with this planet and all living beings.