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australian design review

HOW GREEN

IS MY LABEL?



OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS THE ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN COMMUNITY HAVE BECOME INCREASINGLY AWARE OF THE IMPORTANCE OF SELECTING AND USING PRODUCTS DESIGNED AND PRODUCED IN AN ENVIRONMENTALLY RESPONSIBLE MANNER. THIS GROWING AWARENESS HAS RESULTED IN SOME CONFUSION WITH TERMS SUCH AS 'ECOFRIENDLY', 'ORGANIC' AND 'BIODEGRADABLE'. WHAT EXACTLY DO THEY MEAN? HOW DOES ONE NEGOTIATE THE ENVIRONMENTAL CLAIMS OF SUPPLIERS COMPETING IN AN EVER-AGGRESSIVE MARKETPLACE TO ENSURE THAT THE PRODUCTS ARE WHAT THEY CLAIM TO BE?

the leather case:

Since 1999 Sydney-based company Contemporary Leathers has been supplying chrome-free leathers in Australia. These hides were originally supplied by the Danish tannery Swewi, but they are now supplied by the Swedish tannery Elmo Leathers, who bought out Swewi a few years ago.

The term chrome-free is an understated environmental claim, given that Elmosoft meets the World's Best Practice in environmental responsibility. While the processing of Elmosoft shares many similarities with 'organic' processing principles, Contemporary Leathers has preferred to use the term chrome-free rather than 'organic'. Why is this?

David Gourlay of Contemporary Leathers explains, "To claim that leather is 'organic', the hides must come from fully organic animals. For example, the feedstock must be organic, there must be no use of pesticides etc. throughout the total production cycle and the whole system must be fully integrated and assessed. The processing must also comply with an official organic standard. This means that the 'organic' claim should also be independently verified by a certification body such as the National Association for Sustainable Agriculture Australia (NASAA)."

This move to maintain clarity in labelling is reinforced by Contemporary Leathers' environmental officer, Tracy Mak, who explains, "We want to ensure that our claims are accurate, as laid out in the International Environmental Labelling Standard (ISO 14021), and not misleading".

There is much more to 'organic' than merely the absence of toxic substances such as heavy metals, PCP, formaldehyde, solvents and the forbidden azo dyes. One important factor is that it requires a totally integrated Environmental Management System (EMS). Elmo operates such a system – EMS ISO 14001 that is internationally recognised.

Like many of the more (and often Northern European) progressive manufacturing entities, who strive to reach environmental performance goals for social as well as legal perspectives, Elmo is a strong example of a company with a policy of continual improvement. They have gone beyond the requirements to meet standards and the strict legislation imposed by Scandinavian Governments. For example, it will become the first tannery to reduce nitrogen emissions by 80 percent with the installation of a new treatment plant. The installation reinforces a commitment to maintaining a position as the world's most environmentally progressive tannery.

Elmo has long been recognised by the Lederinstitut Gerberschule Reutlingen in Germany, the world's leading leather training, testing and research institute. Their premium product Elmosoft has been certified with the organisation's Eco Label as being produced in an environmentally responsible way and tested for hazardous substances. Furthermore, the tannery is currently in the process of gaining Oeko Tex 100 certification for Elmosoft. All of the company's leathers are tested to ISO performance standards. The results are available on sample cards or upon request from their distributor Contemporary Leathers.

So, when selecting any product, there amongst the abundance of marketing material, is a suite of international labelling protocols in place for identifying the true environmental specifications of products. In the case of leather (or any product being marketed with a green feel), the savvy specifier will be sure to ask their supplier for independent clarification of environmental claims. In doing so, the industry, consumer and the environment will all benefit. EmcE

For more info contact Contemporary Leathers Tel: +61 2 9557 8755 or visit: www.contemporaryleathers.com.au
Other resources include:
United Nations Environment Program: www.unep.org
Responsible Interior Designers: www.green.net.au/srd
EcoSpecifier: www.ecospecifier.com.org