



On Fertile Ground

It's not easy being green, but these three eco-innovators across Asia are reshaping their industries one upcycled garment or zero-waste restaurant at a time. **Diana Hubbell** talks to the visionaries about building a brighter, more sustainable future.

FROM TOP, CURATED BY THE SQUIRRELZ: Plaid "trashion" by Brutcake; recycled fish-feed bags and rice-bag clutches by Somos Design.



The Entrepreneur, Shanghai

Bunny Yan, founder of *The Squirrelz*, a startup that connects designers creating new products out of fashion waste.

What gave you the idea for this project?

I launched **The Squirrelz** because I saw so many designers that were already using upcycling methods to create awesome, fashionable products. Not only are these products colorful, but they also have high potential to be mass-produced, because a lot of that overstock is repetitive. If you make jewelry out of watches, you'll continue to find broken watch parts.

What normally happens to fashion waste and why is there so much of it?

A very interesting problem is that brands do not usually own their own factories. So when a factory makes a mistake or there's overstock, it's not the brand's problem. In manufacturing, you always have excess materials and defective products. A defect could be something very minor, like a button that's not quite the right color, but it might still be

burned. I want pre-consumption materials and mistakes that manufacturers can't use.

Describe some of the coolest designers working for you.

We have one who is making clutches out of misprinted packaging from candy wrappers, another making bags made from recycled wine corks, and one that's making furniture and décor out of vintage cookie tins. Recently, I met someone who's making backpacks out of used denim. She'll transform them for you, a cool way to give your favorite pair of jeans a new life.

What's your hope for the future?

For *The Squirrelz*, we're developing an app to help designers reduce waste while creating more stuff. I want to see if, in five years, we can prevent one percent of all industrial waste from ending up in landfills. To me, that would be amazing. thesquirrelz.com >>



FROM TOP: An upcycled shelving unit by Osisu; a new bag by Osisu, made of recycled paper; eating at fresco at Mana! Fast Slow Food; a canvas bag printed with the Mana! slogan. OPPOSITE: A Mana! salad box.



The Designer, Bangkok

Dr. Singh Intrachooto works with Osisu and Upcycle Carbon Footprint, two brands dedicated to creating products from waste materials.

Describe your work with Osisu and Upcycle Carbon Footprint.

Osisu upcycles all sorts of materials from construction sites, manufacturing facilities and waste dumps. We've been using these materials to produce furniture, home decorations and fashion accessories for a decade. In 2015, we helped set up an eco-label innovation called **Upcycle Carbon Footprint**, which aims at certifying products made from discarded materials with high-quality design and a low carbon footprint.

Give us an example of how you used a specific waste product.

In 2011, Starbucks Thailand wanted to build its shops in a more sustainable way. The company was already giving coffee-ground waste away for free for people to use as fertilizer, but I thought

we could do more. The Javacore material we made from coffee grounds has been upcycled into mosaics, tiles and solid surfaces with the help of Sonite Innovative Surfaces Company. Now, we produce coasters and trays from this material too. Hopefully, someday Javacore will be used in all Starbucks globally, not just in Asia.

What sustainability-oriented projects are you working on now?

My colleagues and I are developing new construction materials from oil palm fiber, since the industry produces millions of tonnes of waste annually. We also use oil palm fiber in a new melamine compound and turn it into tableware. At the moment, I'm also working with Architectkidd on an organic farm project, which will set a whole new standard in Thailand. *osisu.com*



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LEFT: COURTESY OF OSISU (3); COURTESY OF MANA (2)



The Restaurateur, Hong Kong

Bobsy Gaia, founder of *Mana! Fast Slow Food*, a citywide chain of zero-waste vegetarian restaurants and cafés..

What inspired you to launch Mana! Fast Slow Food?

The seeds of **Mana! Fast Slow Food** began 23 years ago when I realized the impact of eating meat on the environment and became a vegetarian. Did you know that to make one hamburger, we waste enough water to shower for two months? I felt that what Hong Kong really needed was a healthy, vegetarian eatery where the food was affordable as well as convenient for people on the go.

Describe some of the sustainability measures that set your restaurants apart.

From the beginning, we decided that we would aim for zero food waste. We collect the kitchen scraps and customer leftovers and save them to be composted in organic community farms here in Hong Kong. Currently, our three outlets save 2.5 tonnes of food waste per

month. Just imagine how much we could save from landfills if all 15,000-plus restaurants in Hong Kong did the same. We also source eco-friendly food packaging, using plant-based plastics for straws and cups, which decompose into soil after 12 weeks.

What's next?

We hope to open more outlets around the city, promoting healthy and plant-based eating in a zero-waste format. We want to encourage other restaurants to consider the impact on the environment when thinking about the sustainability of their business models. When the environment wins, we win. mana.hk 🌱

