

Cynthia Salcedo

As we arrived at the central plaza in my parents hometown in Mexico, I noticed a giant red metallic heart. Looking closely, I realized the vibrant speckles inside were actually made of numerous brightly colored bottle caps. I should have guessed that the medium of the art piece dealt with recycling as it was conveniently placed right next to the disposal bins, encouraging those nearby to think twice about the fate of their plastic bottles. I thought how brilliant this concept of forming what would have been trash into a beautiful community artwork was; but more importantly, the deep statement the piece expressed. While the sculpture garnered a sense of fear, clearly seeing the rapid accumulation of plastic use, it optimistically demonstrated how much plastic was able to stay off the streets, ocean, or landfill through joint effort. The different types of bottle caps also reflected the diversity of the population's taste and consumption, bringing to light the town's interests. I looked forward to seeing its progression and dreamed of my hometown or school implementing this concept or one similar to it.

The connection between recycling and art resurfaced my sophomore year of high school, where we were prompted to create plastic sculptures. One morning, I noticed a classmate taking a sip of their Dunkin' Donuts coffee through a straw and realized just how many coffee drinks I would see every morning sitting on top of teachers' or classmates' desks. I decided to base my sculpture on the long-lasting, damaging effects of plastic straws and their short term use. I recycle an old pack of straws by gluing them together in a grid structure to form the outline of a turtle in order to raise awareness of the harmful relationship between plastic straws and marine life. As I was putting the piece together in class, my teacher and classmates started to surround my table, admiring my work and digesting its message. The sculpture was displayed in the school's cafeteria and I realized it was actually getting noticed when my guidance counselor and old teachers would catch me in passing and resonate with the repurposed use of straws. It remains my favorite piece to this day because it was my first recycled art piece and it displayed the power in conveying sustainability while practicing sustainability.

Apart from appreciating this relationship between art and plastic, my first year of studying architecture helped present me with the idea of sustainability through design. After one of my studio classes, I stayed behind to listen to a guest lecture that would open my eyes to the outlet of design in material and construction sustainability. The lecture was led by architect Dillon Pranger, he took into account how the industry is designed for consumption, and makes materials hard to recycle, as well as how they will expire in our lifetime. Therefore, he thinks about the temporality of buildings and realizes that they will eventually be demolished; so viewing and building structures as a pit stop or place of storage for materials is beneficial in maintaining a cycle of reusing the materials. This idea was demonstrated in his project of viewing the pavilion as a temporary object, where he began to document what material is currently in use out in the world by imprinting them with QR codes. Structures will not last forever, even though one hopes they will, so this process retains the greatest value possible of materials by avoiding their demolition and exposure to landfill. Another project of his that stood out to me was one where a client wanted calcutta marble, but did not want to pay its expensive price. Pranger challenged our perception of material waste and its value; he raised the question of

why plastic could not become as beautiful as marble. He went with a conscious way of working by using plastic that was found in everyday objects with a low melting point to form a new marble-like design. The client was all for its sustainable aspects and how cheap, but beautiful it was. The lecture revealed design to me as an opportunity to address excessive consumption through thinking about materials beyond use of “reduce, reuse, recycle”, the challenge of working with found or new materials, and understanding permanence. His work inspires me to find new sustainable ways of designing and made me realize how necessary it is to maintain a mindset of reframing material value in order to combat the issue of waste.

Later in the semester, we began learning about garden types and it made me think more deeply about the relationship between humans and nature and what was considered hospitable vs. inhospitable. highlighted how a garden tends to become a way of organizing nature to be more natural than it really is. It made me realize why my architecture professors disliked symmetrical designs so much; since symmetry is a very powerful, almost utopian-like statement as it deals with human intervention of heightening natural features. I was also intrigued by the work of architect David Brown, who reimagines the use of Chicago’s vacant land to form collective spaces that specifically cater to the needs of underserved communities. One sustainable project of his that still stands is a market space made out of shipping containers. Lessons like these showed me the importance of enhancing nature through design rather than rationalizing it and the value in repurposing land and materials to create an impact.

When a student asked about green architecture, my professor explained how it was simply a way of marketing and how sustainable architecture alone will not be able to resolve even a small portion of the world’s environmental issues. While her answer was shocking, she had a point, and it made me realize that the sustainability movement involves a collaborative effort across all fields of work, which is why it is important that sustainable design, creativity, and art becomes and remains an equally critical part of this broad conversation.