

TO DO THINGS RIGHT OR DO THE RIGHT THING? THAT IS THE QUESTION...



PROFESSOR DR. MICHAEL BRAUNGART IS FOUNDER AND SCIENTIFIC CEO OF EPEA INTERNATIONALE UMWELTFORSCHUNG GMBH IN HAMBURG. HE IS ALSO CO-FOUNDER AND SCIENTIFIC HEAD OF MCDONOUGH BRAUNGART DESIGN CHEMISTRY, LLC (MBDC) IN CHARLOTTESVILLE, VIRGINIA (USA), AND FOUNDER AND SCIENTIFIC HEAD OF THE HAMBURGER UMWELTINSTITUT (HUI). THESE INSTITUTES SHARE VALUES EMBRACING INTELLIGENT, AESTHETIC AND ECO-EFFECTIVE DESIGN.

As environmental awareness began to increase in the 1980s, one of the more interesting concepts of the broader environmental debate was that of Cradle to Cradle®. So what is Cradle to Cradle? According to Wikipedia, it is 'a holistic economic, industrial and social framework that seeks to create systems that are not only efficient but also waste free'. Essentially, it aims to keep all materials used and reused within a cycle so they never end up as waste. Thinking holistically then, this model can be applied not only to industrial design and manufacturing – including packaging – but can be extended to entire systems, whether social or economic. As a play on the term 'cradle to grave' – a phrase coined to describe more wasteful systems – the Cradle to Cradle concept differs as it considers the well-being of future generations and the environment.

The concept asks us to go beyond traditional thinking that environmental protection is just about producing less.

Professor Michael Braungart, who first introduced Cradle to Cradle along with William McDonough, points out 'we were all focused on the idea that using less water, energy and material is all it takes. But it is so much more.'

The most important element of the concept is the idea of effectiveness, not efficiency. Braungart explains that 'efficiency is the traditional thing a company does. For example, they produce more eco-efficient products by minimizing the use of water and energy. However, Cradle to Cradle talks about effectiveness, asking what is the right thing to do, not how do we do things right.' Being effective is 'all about capturing creativity in innovation, quality and beauty', Braungart says.

AN OPTIMISTIC AGENDA IN PRACTICE

Cradle to Cradle is clearly an optimistic agenda but one can certainly see its importance. A critical step prior to a company adopting and implementing this philosophy is the level of understanding – from purchasing to manufacturing and production. For companies to fully grasp this concept and apply it, they must acknowledge a change of mind-set at the top in order to start 'thinking in cycles'. Braungart highlights that 'once leadership understands the long-term potential of Cradle to Cradle, the rest happens naturally.'

There are three fundamental principles of Cradle to Cradle that support this change of mind-set: first, understanding that 'waste equals food' and that 'every material can become a nutrient that lasts forever'; second, the importance of using renewable energy; and third, the need to celebrate diversity. Fundamental to the concept is recognizing that each industry, country and culture has a different approach and attitude towards effective production.

Cradle to Cradle identifies and recognizes the potential of progressive 'cycle' opportunities for the environment. 'All other species support the environment: why are we the only ones trying to minimize damage?' Braungart asks. 'There are far too many

people on this planet for us to succeed in our efforts of being less bad, that is why we all traditionally think in terms of 'cradle to grave'. When something is wrong, do not try to make it perfect, otherwise you just make it perfectly wrong.'

PACKAGING IN THE SPOTLIGHT

According to Braungart, the packaging industry has been, somewhat paradoxically, the most advanced in both Cradle to Cradle and cradle to grave thinking. 'The industry has optimized packaging to a great degree, but in a lot of cases it has optimized the wrong things', Braungart asserts. But he also maintains that the packaging industry is one that must be celebrated. 'We must remember that packaging has contributed enormously to saving lives by protecting our food. While there are still things to do, the packaging industry has evolved tremendously, first and foremost, and we need to recognize that.'

LEARN FROM THE PAST AND MOVE TOWARDS THE FUTURE

All stakeholders in civil society – consumers, companies, government, academia and NGOs – need to move forward together, but to do so will require a fundamental shift in the collective mind-set of companies that will trigger change and initiate innovation sparked by the creativity of scientists and engineers.

For Braungart, the future of Cradle to Cradle is bright. To do things right, he believes we can achieve more if we 'partner with – not romanticize – nature' otherwise leading us to do the right things. As more people acknowledge this, Braungart believes that Cradle to Cradle will continue to be implemented across more industries, more products and more practices.

Whether an individual, a country or a company, to do the right thing requires society to stop focusing on being more efficient by using less water or resources. Rather, society must focus on reusing products more effectively within a cycle. 'It's a question of how and when will more people start thinking in terms of Cradle to Cradle, and not cradle to grave.'

