

Making Ripples

The Plastic Debate

by Amanda Bancroft

In a world of rapidly changing technology, innovative recycling ventures, and a giant Garbage Patch in the middle of the ocean, we've never had a more complicated relationship with plastic products. Are they pure evil? Are they stepping stones to progress?

Entrepreneurs and eco-minded home builders have some pretty cool ideas for the future of plastic decomposition and new ways to keep it out of landfills and oceans. Earthbag building is offered as both a solution to the overabundance of plastic, and criticized as part of the plastic problem because of polypropylene. (Learn more about polypropylene at Plastipedia, the Encyclopedia of Plastics: www.bpf.co.uk/Plastipedia/Default.aspx)

In my own humble opinion, I think recycling polypropylene bags headed to a landfill can only be a good thing unless it negatively affects indoor air quality, which has not yet been measured over years while the bags are covered in plaster. We're recycling our bags from a local brewery to use in an earthbag home. But if we didn't have that waste stream, I wouldn't say plastic (or concrete) is sustainable just because it lasts a very long time. Nuclear waste lasts a long time, too! I'd use a more natural material if we weren't recycling bags.

New kinds of plastics that cause less harm are better than more harmful kinds, consumer goods that last a long time are better than goods which are planned for obsolescence (or disposability), and materials that don't cause harm in their production or lifespan AND last a long time are the best. I think of longevity as an aspect of sustainability, not the whole packaged deal. And I see sustainability as a spectrum. If a material isn't perfectly sustainable, it still might be a good choice if it at least falls somewhere on the spectrum. An awareness that better choices exist is a healthier stance than saying "my house lasts a long time, so it's good enough." I like striving for better choices while simultaneously making the best choice for my project somewhere on that spectrum, even if it isn't perfect.

Acknowledging where I'm at with my house, instead of emphasizing only one aspect like longevity, might enable someone else to go even farther towards sustainability with their future house by avoiding my mistakes. And the future of plastics is going farther, too – for example, how about Oxo-biodegradable plastic, AirCarbon, ZeroForm and other biodegradable and alternatively-produced plastics being developed? Some of these new plastics don't need oil byproducts for their manufacture and rely instead on methane gas, from ironic sources such as landfills (which are full of lots of unsustainable plastic waste). New plastic products are becoming biodegradable, and even some of the earth's lingering plastic wastes and microplastic bits floating around in the ocean can be decomposed by plastic-eating microbes (is that good, or bad, news?).

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