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METROPOLIS

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THE LAST WORD

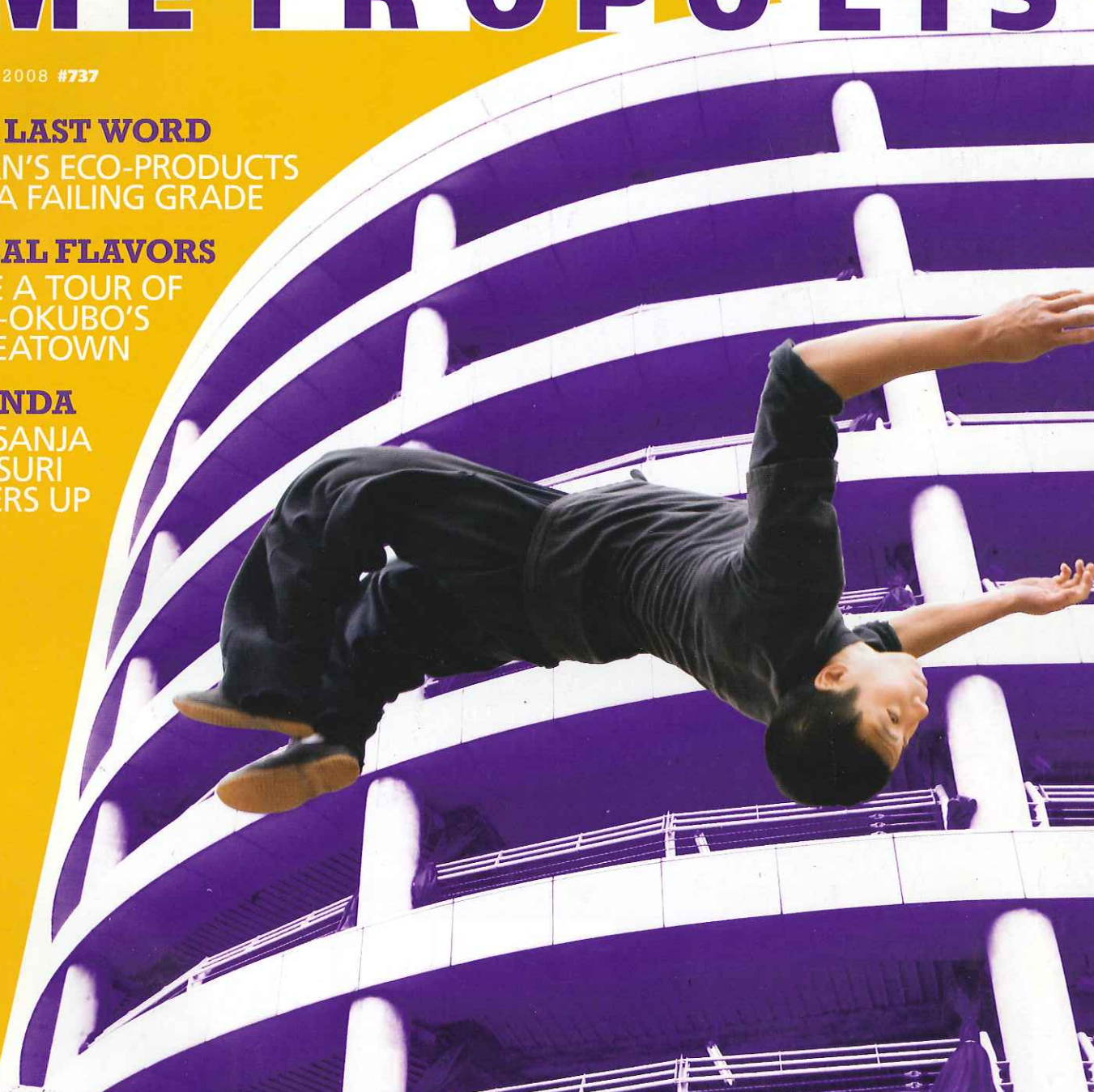
JAPAN'S ECO-PRODUCTS
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JAPAN'S ECO-PRODUCTS EXHIBITION MISSES THE MARK

BY DANIELLE RIPPINGALE



Danielle Rippingale is a yoga teacher and environmental educator

AS SOMEONE WHO IS PASSIONATE ABOUT the environment, I was excited to attend the Eco-Products Exhibition in Ariake last December. The annual event, hosted by the Japan Environmental Management Association for Industry, is considered one of the largest of its kind, with over 600 companies and organizations on display and more than 160,000 visitors. Its aim was to accelerate the expansion of green markets by exhibiting environmentally friendly products and services, and I looked forward to seeing the technology Japan was pioneering in

the areas of clean energy production, waste management and self-sufficiency in food and water.

Wearing my best eco-wear, I trekked out to Tokyo Big Sight to join one of the two free English-guided tours generously supported by Japan For Sustainability (JFS), a nonprofit environmental organization that has developed a solid reputation in Japan since its inception in 2002.

My tour mates and I were escorted by our English-speaking guide to five pre-selected booths. These included Dowa Eco-System, which featured mining technology that not only enables precious metals to be precisely extracted from the Earth, but also from discarded technology such as computers and cellphones; Sharp, which showcased flatscreen TV technology that adjusts to use less energy in a dim room; and Asahi Breweries, who touted their cultivation of an Asahi Forest so you can feel even better about drinking beer. These exhibits whetted my appetite, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I was going to leave the eco-exhibition hungry.

After the guided tour, I continued to explore the show on my own. I was inspired by the good work that some of the grassroots environmental organizations were doing, satiated by Be Good Café's locally-grown organic and vegetarian dishes, and charmed by the interactive booths where you could make a sheet of paper and your own bamboo chopsticks. Nevertheless, I was disheartened by the number of high-tech booths fronted by spokesmen wielding laser pointers and showing diagrams to an attentive audience that appeared awestruck by the ostensibly eco-

friendly products on show. Eco-tip #1: presentations that are as slick as an oil spill are probably likely to cause one.

To my chagrin, there were also many small companies touting not-so-eco products. When I saw a booth promoting German-made plastic garbage bags, my suspicions were immediately raised. I figured that the transport-related resource costs would be justified because the bags are made of recycled PET bottles. Wrong. These bags were "eco-friendly" because they have drawstring tops, so more rubbish could be packed inside.

Then there was the flooring company that mixed different colored wood to create beautiful patterns "naturally" rather than using stains. The problem is, they use non-sustainable wood.

ECO-TIP #1: PRESENTATIONS THAT ARE AS SLICK AS AN OIL SPILL ARE PROBABLY LIKELY TO CAUSE ONE

But the pièce de résistance was the baby clothing company that uses "real" lavender, strawberries, peaches and crystals to dye their baby clothes the most palette-perfect purple, pink, peach and white. Seriously?!? Did I have a big "Eco-Sucker" sticker on my back?

While not all exhibitors had such gumption, the resounding message from the exhibition was buy, buy, buy—even if you don't need to—because our products are "eco." Disingenuous companies that use eco-marketing to sell more of their stuff seriously irritate me. They undermine genuine eco-products and reduce the sustainable movement to a simple marketing ploy.

I had come to the exhibition with the hope of learning and seeing the pioneering products and technology that were created to restore balance and minimize impact on our floundering ecosystems, not add to our landfills. I wonder how many of the 30,000 schoolchildren who visited the show and filled their plastic bags with free stuff got the message of what environmental sustainability is and what they could personally do to help protect the environment.

Six hours later, I left the hall with more questions than answers. What exactly are the qualifying criteria for potential exhibitors and their products? Where's the educational

component? Fair-trade? Sweatshop free? Why aren't

exhibitors banned from giving away senseless, plastic whatchamacallits and forests of paper flyers? Why aren't there quantity and quality requirements for brochures and booths?

It is my feeling that this exhibition has both the responsibility and opportunity to have a significant impact on companies, governments and citizens, but not without consumer education and empowerment and rigorous selection of companies that are engineering effective solutions to end our global crisis.

Be critical and rethink your purchasing behavior and attitudes. Sustainability is not about buying more stuff; it is about reducing consumption and purchasing responsibly when we need to. See you at the Eco-Products Exhibition 2008. ☺



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