

Green Thumbs Up

A new program gives sustainable products an official seal of approval.

..... BY ERNEST BECK

Awarding equal praise to a humble flushable diaper and a high-tech Herman Miller office chair, McDonough Braungart Design Chemistry (MBDC) has recently announced the second round of recipients for its Cradle to Cradle certification. What these seemingly disparate products have in common is their companies' commitment to the principles of sustainability and environmentally friendly manufacturing, a designation that makes the program a landmark in industrial design.

MBDC, a Charlottesville, Virginia, design consultancy started by architect William McDonough and chemist Michael Braungart, created the LEED-like certification to recognize products that reflect the founders' soup-to-nuts philosophy. This stipulates using materials that are safe and healthy for humans and the environment, eliminating waste, and creating a closed-loop system of recycling so that products don't end up in a landfill or harm the environment. "We do a deep dive into the chemistry of each product," says Jay Bolus, MBDC vice president for benchmarking and certification. To win a gold-, silver-, or platinum-level Cradle to Cradle certificate, products must pass muster on a range of 19 criteria, including components, recyclability, energy utilization, biodegradability, and water stewardship. Each company's ethical, social, and workplace policies are also considered. Once the system gets rolling, MBDC hopes to award up to 100 certificates annually.

Initial recipients included Steelcase's Think chair and a flannel fabric made by Pendleton Woolen Mills. New beneficiaries include Wet Women International, a Hawaii-based online community of women's sports fans that has developed a surf wax in which every single ingredient in both the product and packaging is all-natural and 100 percent biodegradable.



The newest recipients of MBDC's Cradle to Cradle certificates include flushable gDiapers and Steelcase's Leap office chair.

There's also IceStone, a small manufacturer in the Brooklyn Navy Yard that makes durable surfaces out of recycled glass and concrete; Cabot Corporation, the \$1.9-billion Wall Street giant that developed Nanogel, a translucent insulation material used in skylights and curtain walls; and Oregon-based gDiapers, a start-up by an Australian couple with the aforementioned line of flushable diapers. Steelcase scored again with its Leap chair and aspires to carry the label eventually on all of its goods. "Consumers want us to quantify things like a product's impact, raw materials, and disposability. Having a third party do this adds credibility," says Allan Smith, Steelcase's director of global environmental strategy.

Companies seeking certification pay a fee that ranges from \$10,000 for a relatively simple product to around \$70,000 for a complex one, such as an office chair, which may have hundreds of individual parts that must be dissected

and scrutinized by MBDC's team. Winners can display the Cradle to Cradle label to promote their green credentials, like a *Good Housekeeping* seal of approval. Though there are no federal guidelines or regulations regarding such a classification, as consumer awareness of green products grows and the market becomes crowded with claims of eco-friendliness, a Cradle to Cradle certificate will likely be a useful marketing tool.

"There are plenty of products out there that aren't green but promote themselves as green," says Miranda Magagnini, co-chief executive of the two-year-old IceStone, which operates a factory that recycles wastewater and composts lunchroom garbage. "We're constantly thinking, 'How can we make ourselves greener?' A Cradle certificate acknowledges that we do this."

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Ernest Beck writes for The New York Times, Art+Auction, and Worth.