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Fashion Design as a Means to Recognize and Build Communities-in-Place

Abstract This article explores how fashion design — an activity that fundamentally weaves together the practices, skills, and materials associated with clothing the body — can begin to weave together people in places. I reflect on collaborative encounters emerging from participatory design practice to consider how fashion-related activity might recognize and inspire deeper relational connections between people, and between people and their environment. I explore the role of the *designer as host*: one capable of creating conditions that lead to interactive movement among people and dialogue that expresses and explores intent. The designer as host activities of the action research project described here — *I Stood Up in Chrisp Street* — demonstrate fashion design's capacity to inform not only localized sustainability practices, but also Fashion and Design for Sustainability research, education, and business practice.

1 David Ormerod, "Faith and Fashion in Much Ado about Nothing," *Shakespeare Survey* 25, (1972): 93–106, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521085284.009.

2 OED Online, s.v. "fashion," accessed March 7, 2018, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/fashion.

3 Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000), 220.

4 Diana Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agenda: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 135.

5 Christopher Breward, *Fashion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 17.

6 Steven Faerm, "Towards a Future Pedagogy: The Evolution of Fashion Design Education," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 2, no. 23 (2012): 212, available at http://www.ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol_2_No_23_December_2012/24.pdf.

7 Agnès Rocamora, "New Fashion Times: Fashion and Digital Media," in *The Handbook of Fashion Studies*, ed. Sandy Black et al. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 68.

8 Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth B. Wilson, eds., *Body Dressing* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2001), 37.

9 Kate Fletcher, *Sustainable Fashion and Textiles: Design Journeys* (London: Earthscan, 2008), 117.

10 Sandy Black, *The Sustainable Fashion Handbook* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 11.

11 Ezio Manzini and Adam Thorpe, "Weaving People and Places: Art and Design for Resilient Communities," *She Ji: The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation* 4, no. 1 (2018): 1–9, DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2018.03.003.

12 Tom Corby, Dilys Williams, Vivek Sheth, and Virkein Dhar, "I Stood Up: Social Design in Practice," *Art and Design Review* 4, no.2 (2016): 30–36, DOI: https://doi.org/10.4236/adr.2016.42005.

Introduction

The domain of this research is in the emerging field of Fashion Design for Sustainability. Its purpose is to find ways that fashion-related activities can recognize communities-in-place and inspire relational connections between people and between people and their environment. Here I employ a broad definition of fashion derived from a variety of sources: the action or process of making[1] with reference to attire; a particular cut or style.[2] In a contemporary setting, fashion becomes the product of activities — "which are industrial, economic, cultural, and aesthetic"[3] — and represents the "tastes and concerns of all social groups."[4] Hence, fashion encompasses the design, making, marketing, buying, wearing, caring, and end of life of clothing — garments and other items worn on the body.

The field of fashion design research is relatively young.[5] Fashion education is a little older; one of its earliest institutions was the London College of Fashion, where this research is based. Established in 1906, early photographs of its skills-based teaching and learning feature men sitting crossed-legged on top of tables, intently engaged in the cutting and stitching together of pieces of material with needle and thread. This technique of garment construction is still fashion's most typical practice, albeit with the aid of cutting and sewing machines. However, fashion students are now predominantly female. Fashion design education has changed considerably in other respects. Educators also place emphasis on clothing construction and fitting, and teach commercial and technological elements of production and consumption, usually relating to fashion at industrial scale.[6] Meanwhile, the impacts of fashion's industrial activity have increased exponentially in economic, social, ecological, and cultural terms. Social scientists are making important contributions to fashion research that relate to some of these impacts in cultural studies, including Agnes Rocamora's discussion of fast fashion[7] and Joanne Entwhistle's situating of the dressed body in the social world.[8] Researchers such as Kate Fletcher[9] and Sandy Black[10] are expanding the study of fashion and sustainability in holistic terms and in relation to fashion technology and business, but there is a paucity of action research into the role and methods of fashion design for sustainability that can counteract these swelling impacts.

This research, as part of Cultures of Resilience[11] project, draws on methods applied in earlier participatory fashion design research carried out in Ahmedabad, India, where UK and India-based researchers, designers, and a photographer captured connections between place, self, and clothing in an increasingly socially divided and environmentally depleted urban location. Outcomes were exhibited at the Unbox Future Cities Festival, and the researchers' findings published.[12] I based the title of the exhibition on a simple and profound response to a question I had asked to an Ahmedabad resident about her attire: "I wear my culture." These four words simultaneously describe the personal and wider societal nature of fashion. Christopher Breward describes the practical and rational elements of garment making and wearing, and their representative messages, as "a site for the production of objects and beliefs, an event both spectacular and mundane, cyclical in its adherence to natural and the commercial seasons."[13] Fashion garments are born out of nature and community; they always and only exist via these elements.

Defining Fashion as Inside-Out and Outside-In

Fashion involves an active interplay between an expressive intent and all that goes into making clothes. This interplay is not always apparent. People often think of fashion pieces as inert, manufactured objects made of individual parts. While each component affects the world, people think of these parts as inactive. Fashion's value is often assessed only in relation to the market, while its contents,