

Local Wisdom: post-growth fashion

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In order to bring about change, sustainability values and experiences have to be real to people. Yet we know very little about people's everyday encounters of fashion and sustainability. In this paper I explore the interconnections between real, live experiences of sustainability in fashion and what they suggest about the shape and structure of the industry that creates the fashion and clothes that we wear. The experiences, recorded as part of the on-going *Local Wisdom* project, convey some of the 'craft' of using garments of the British public. The project's aim is to recognize and honour culturally embedded sustainability activities in fashion that exist at the level of the user and give them a platform to flourish and inspire. It involves gathering images and stories from the general public about the way clothes are used with the hope of developing fresh understanding about more resourceful and satisfying use of garments. Together, images and tales of resourcefulness, thrift, emotional connection and social defiance express ways in which to improve quality of fashion experience within the physical limits of the clothes we already have. They offer a human scale, intimate and tentative glimpse of a new prosperity in fashion that exists outside the predominant economic and business model of growth that is so closely associated with fashion today.

Three tales of a user's 'craft'

It seems only appropriate that any exploration of the connections between the way people use clothes and sustainability should be grounded in real experience. Thus this paper begins with three stories recorded as part of the *Local Wisdom* project¹ that convey some of the garment-wearing ingenuity of the British public.

Edward: *"I call this my three stage jacket. It began about forty years ago as a very slim waistcoat that was given to me. I knitted a panel and put it into the back just to be able to fasten it together at the front, you see. And then about fifteen years ago I added sleeves and a collar and some trimmings. And then, only about five years ago, I became a bit too big to button it up so I added latchets across to the front so that I can fasten it."*

Yvonne: *"This is a dress that I've had for 25 years and share with my sister. We sort of have it for 5 years each and then post it back to each other and it's like fancy dress for me... almost like cross dressing... it brings out a different part of me. At the moment I just wear it for special occasions but I once met a woman who was in her 80s and who wore eveningwear all the time. She'd made a decision years before not to buy any new clothes and to wear everything until it wore out. She'd worn her way through her wardrobe and had got to her eveningwear. So when I'm in my 80s I'm going to wear this dress..."*

Andy: *"In 1978 my Mum gave me £10 to buy a jacket and jeans and this is the one I bought. Back then I was a punk and I sewed badges on the back... Sex Pistols, Sham 69, The Stranglers... and my Grandad's RAF stripes on the arm. I've still never washed it... why would I? and anyway it would wreck the badges."*

¹ www.localwisdom.info

These three tales of a user's 'craft' offer one starting point for understanding more deeply the potential of the actions of the wearers of clothes in shaping the sustainability of the fashion industry. Make no mistake such individual stories of resourcefulness, thrift, emotional connection and social defiance are far from earth shattering in nature. They are rarely dramatic, instead they impose a human scale and intimacy on the insight they afford. Yet, for me, their small size is key. For actions like making a change to a seam or never laundering a garment that is worn time and again are eminently do-able activities and within the reach and influence of us all.

Introduction to the Local Wisdom project

In 2009, I started the on-going 'Local Wisdom' project of which the tales above form a part, with the aim of recognizing and honouring culturally embedded sustainability activities in fashion that exist at the level of the user. It involves gathering images and stories from the general public about the way clothes are used with the hope of developing fresh understanding about more resourceful and satisfying use of garments.

The process of recording these widely distributed acts of inventiveness is very simple: a photo shoot is set up in various locations, in the first instance at three places in the UK. It is then widely advertised in the vicinity; signs are put up in newsagents' windows, in local libraries and sports centres. Advertisements are placed in local newspapers and interviews given on community radio networks. We network with local groups and so far have affiliated with Stitch and Bitch clubs, regional textile festivals, the climate change campaigning group Cape Farewell and the Transition Towns movement. We extend an open invitation to the public to attend the shoot with garments that fit into specific categories and then record the telling of the garment's 'story' in audio and photograph the volunteer participant in his/her piece. The emerging body of information is ad hoc, specific and often surprising. It is, by turns, interrogated and supported anew by the actual practices of clothes wearing captured at each additional Local Wisdom event.

The Local Wisdom project aims to tease out sustainability-supporting user-related activities, as distinct to producer-related ones. That is, to uncover the ingenuity and improvisation that goes on with and to clothes after the point of purchase. These are not necessarily done within the rubric of intellectualized concerns or commercial opportunities for sustainability, but instead emerge from the culturally embedded 'wisdoms' of thrift, domestic provisioning, care of community, freedom of creative expression and connectedness to nature, among other things. This explicit emphasis on the widespread practices of use, rather than the challenges of production, as a starting point for change towards sustainability signals a departure from what has gone before. Most work around sustainability themes in fashion to date is firmly focused on the manufacturing supply chain and lessening the (very considerable) impacts of agricultural practices, fibre mills, dye houses and cut-make-trim factories among others. Yet vital as it is, this work forms but a part of the sustainability challenge for the fashion sector. For what goes on *after* production processes are over and the garment has been sold – that is the personal, variable, myriad use patterns that occur in homes and wardrobes – is also a key factor influencing sustainability in fashion, yet is often overlooked.

Local Wisdom offers a glimpse of these experience-based extant practices and is an exercise in empiricism; in gathering practical experience and ideas of many users in order to seed understanding about what type and form change towards sustainability may take in fashion, when the root of this change is the users of clothes, not their producers. The garment categories drawn up for the *Local Wisdom* photo shoots are informed by some of the key learning that has been made in sustainability issues in fashion over the last two decades. One such area is clothes' laundering, which has been shown to account for around 80% of the lifecycle energy consumption of frequently washed garments (Franklin Associates, 1993). Another is the multifaceted area of garment durability and the complex emotional and psychological issues associated with making a garment last, rather than just making a long-lasting garment and which have the potential to profoundly affect patterns of consumption and disposal (Chapman, 2005). Other more speculative categories are also included, based less on established data sets and energy calculations and more on a vision for how we might live in a sustainability-directed future. Eminent industrial ecologist John Ehrenfeld (2008) has suggested, for example, that products which foster a sense of connectedness with the natural world and with other humans are important in promoting sustainability – and the Local Wis-

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dom process provides an opportunity to see whether people already use garments in this way. The nine categories used in the Local Wisdom project to date are:

- Garments that are shared between people;
- Garments that have never been washed – and aren't leather;
- Garments that have the character of a particular place in them;
- Garments that link you with the natural world;
- Garments that catch your attention each time you wear them;
- Garments that tell the story of how they've been used;
- Garments that are made up of separate pieces that can be interchanged;
- Garments that make you feel part of a community (but not a uniform);
- Garments that are enjoying a third, fourth or fifth life.

The wisdom of users

The culturally embedded practices revealed by the *Local Wisdom* process is, to date, largely made up of a set of pragmatic, materially-frugal actions, often motivated by emotional triggers and frequently exemplified by old or second-hand (rather than new) clothes. This 'wisdom', in my view, adds quality and fine distinction to understanding the ways in which certain resourceful and satisfying practices work on the ground. For example, from the wide range of never-washed garments brought to the events, it became clear that a key influence in determining whether a piece can defy social pressure and never be laundered, is fear that the washing process itself causes something precious to be lost: a scent, a memory, the particular way a garment fits, the quality of handwork, and even a political stance. This evocation of emotion as a major influence in home laundering practices stands at odds even with leading industry approaches, which treat laundering as a technical and behavioural function of wash cycle efficiency but not an emotional one.

Other wisdom reveals nuanced insight into what motivates people to share garments (mainly, it appears, to reinforce connecting bonds with others and to forge new shared experiences) and how people manage this process practically (posting a garment back and forth through the mail every few years; telephoning around a family group to see, 'who has the dress'; etc). Other wisdom still uncloaks the very great extent some people will go to in order to rework garments (and resources more generally) to meet their changing needs and express creativity and the associated expertise, sense of pride and satisfaction this brings. Indeed much of the clothes-based ingenuity gathered in this project so far appears to be a combination of practical technique and emotional skill; that is, head and hand, jointly employed to negotiate the symbolic rules and roles fashion and clothes play in people's lives.

These culturally embedded practices offer a set of vastly different starting points for change towards sustainability than those adopted by industry to date, for they privilege sensitivity to people's lived experience rather than industrial or commercial ideas about what sustainability is or should be. Not only are such practices personal, variable and slow to enact; falling outside of (mass) commerce, and hence fashion, as we know it (which instead prefers standardised, global products that are quick to produce); they also fall outside many people's views about the intellectual scope of the sustainability challenge for industry and the 'proper' response to it (where it is often framed as a production-related issue to be solved by industry, technology and savvy resource management techniques). Yet it is my view that these sorts of user-initiated, culturally embedded practices hold potential to transform fashion sustainability in a new way. They offer an expanded view of the reality of sustainability practice on the ground; which exists outside the boundaries within which designers, manufacturers and retailers currently operate. In addition, they sketch out the possible shape of a new layer or type of fashion commerce based on broader values than profit and sales growth, geared instead towards increasing the quality of fashion experience rather than its quantitative scale.

Expanding the fashion industry's sustainability framework

In the last two decades, the intellectual framework that has most shaped sustainability work in the fashion industry (as in most other sectors) is lifecycle thinking. Yet by and large the practical 'on the ground' implementation of this intellectual framework is very far from the conceptual ideal. Evidence for this is widespread and found in policy, in the predisposition of companies to mainly change those processes which bring benefit to themselves, and in the industry-wide preference for technology-based solutions to sustainability problems. Favouring technological fixes over other approaches overlooks the power and agency that culturally embedded practices like low energy use, garment refashioning and novel ways of clothes' wearing, have in influencing sustainability. These practices, which reflect the reality of sustainability practice for the public, exist outside the boundaries within which designers, manufacturers and retailers currently operate. For these designers, producers and high street stores tend to work in ways that are familiar, in areas where they have most control and where they will feel the benefits directly. They focus on materials and their provenance, production practices and logistics efficiency. What happens with users falls outside of this. Yet for me, the stories and images of culturally embedded 'wisdoms' associated with use are the essential companion to fashion design and production. For designing and using form a single whole: the one shapes the other. The process of feeding back user innovations and improvisations to designers inescapably influences the evolution of fashion practice over time and space. In honouring live experience of the practices surrounding garment use, the broad and connective intellectual framework of lifecycle thinking is affirmed. New stakeholders (potentially all users) are brought into the process. Different ways of knowing, such as through experience or intuition, gain equal privilege to scientific rationalism.

Small acts of user creativity, resourcefulness, emotional significance or defiance have been called 'a user's craft' and are described by Philosopher Richard Sennett (2008) as 'live intelligence fallibly attuned to the actual circumstances of life'. This craft, displayed unassumingly by many of the *Local Wisdom* project participants, deals with the metamorphosing of the form, application and way of using material objects, like garments, over time. It holds a mirror up to the multiple interconnections between people, resources and products and shows the potential of experience on the ground and in wardrobes to influence the sustainability of a garment's design. Very practically, it also provides us with an array of starting points, ideas and pragmatic examples of a more satisfying use of fashion resources; though one that is studded with radically different expressions of material status, ways of behaving, emotional connections and power relations to the established norm. Using it as the basis of practice turns the design process out on itself, changing its goals and ideas. John Ehrenfeld (2004, 4) sees such change of process and thought as absolutely necessary for sustainability: 'Achieving positive results requires drastic action. We need to shift from our reductionist, problem-solving mode to one that is driven by a vision of a sustainable future we all share. We need to reflect carefully on our current state of affairs and replace ineffective ways of thinking and acting'.

Describing a new type of commerce

In fostering sustainability through effective thought and action, and capturing expressions of this (as in the *Local Wisdom* project), a set of changed economic opportunities begins to emerge. This contrasts sharply with the priorities of today's fashion industry that is structurally reliant on economic growth tied to expanding resource use: on making and selling increasingly more units to improve market share, increase profit and stay in business. The growth imperative that shapes daily decisions in fashion businesses (like the vast majority of others) is fundamentally at odds with the finite nature of the resource base and fragile ecosystems upon which we depend for survival. In the last 60 years the size of the global economy has increased by a factor of five (Jackson, 2009, 5) and the default assumption is that this will go on expanding indefinitely in both poor countries, where better quality of life is unquestionably needed, and rich nations, where it has been shown that material wealth – the goal of economic growth – adds little to happiness. At the same time, a slew of indicators reveal the implications of this economic structure on environmental and social quality: compared to just two generations ago, poverty is just as endemic – with two billion people still living on less than \$2 a day; social cohesion, particularly in the rich West, is weaker

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(Hamilton, 2003); atmospheric carbon concentrations are at far higher levels; natural environments are more degraded; and there are growing numbers of conflicts over land use and access to water (Stern, 2007).

For an increasingly vocal body of commentators, the great contradiction implicit in promoting growth based on a continually expanding scale of resource use, 'as the cure for all economic and social ills' (Daly, 1992, p180) is motivating the formulation of alternative economic structures and social practices designed to foster prosperity without growth (see for example Jackson, 2009 and Hamilton, 2003). The goal is to disassociate material throughput from commercial success; and to define and describe economic activity by ecological limits. One of the forerunners of this 'post-growth' economics is Herman Daly (1992 2nd Ed), who 30 years ago set out ideas for a balanced and bounded 'Steady State Economy' in a book of the same name. In Daly's Steady State Economy, there is a constant stock of physical capital which is capable of being maintained by a low rate of material throughput that is within the regenerative and assimilative capacities of ecosystems. Daly defines a steady state economy in physical terms – the resource creating and pollution-absorbing limits an ecosystem places on the economy – not as zero growth economic activity. In a steady state economy, commerce is alive and well, just operating in different places and layers; 'the end of physical accretion is not the end of progress. It is more a precondition for future progress, in the sense of qualitative improvement' (Daly, 1992, 182).

It goes without saying that the building of an economic framework that cultivates qualitative improvement without ever increasing material throughput poses a profound challenge for the fashion sector. It raises numerous questions not least, for example, what 'quality' means beyond resource use and how that influences fashion's output and role which today is a fusion of both material and message. It queries what the physical limits of the fashion sector are, if bounded by a healthy ecosystem. It also asks about the scale of 'throughput' (i.e. consumption of new garments and disposal of old ones) that the ecosystem is able to regenerate and assimilate safely. While accurate answers to these questions are still to be developed; it is clear from ecological and social evidence as varied as climate change, growing waste mountains and persistent global poverty, that the physical scale of today's (fashion) economic system is unsustainable. While the numbers are still to be worked out, the truth is stark: in a post-growth economy, the fashion industry's trade in physical product would shrink dramatically from its current levels.

In an economic system geared to the optimum scale of total resource use relative to the ecosystem, rather than to growth, the quantity of physical fashion product is held at a steady level. What is not held steady and is free to expand is knowledge, creativity, ingenuity, the success of our relationships, the quality of our experiences, and how satisfied we are. Cultural capital can increase. Wealth can be redistributed and resources allocated differently. A post-growth economy is an economic system that 'develops qualitatively but not in quantitative scale' (Daly, 1992, 182). Its effect, according to Tim Jackson (2009) in his report for the UK Government, is to provide us with 'bounded capabilities' that help us prosper and live well within clearly defined limits.

It is into this context of 'bounded capabilities' and flourishing within limits that a user's 'craft' finds a natural home. For the craft of users needs little money, materials or physical capital to make it happen: it does not expand resource use. Instead it works to improve the real, live experience of using garments through the application of expertise, ingenuity and freethinking. The craft of users often results in garments being kept in service for longer, perhaps through repair and refashioning (such as in the case of Edward's three stage jacket mentioned in the introduction), or through the forming of powerful emotional connections (like in the case of Yvonne's shared dress). The effect is to delay disposal and, if keeping them in active service prevents a replacement being bought, reduces the throughput of physical goods through the economy. Other tales of ingenuity in use, such as Andy's never laundered jacket, influence the same agenda but through a different route. Rather than slowing the churn of garments through the economy, they improve the resourcefulness of each item as it is used.

More than that however, the stories and images of user inventiveness captured as part of *Local Wisdom* seem to infer an increase in *quality*. By this I don't mean better quality materials or more expert making techniques (though this too is possible); but rather an increase in the quality of engagement and connection that people have with their garments, and because of the self-improvement nature of much of this activity, also with themselves as human beings. This improved connection has been called 'true materialism' and contrasts with the sort of materialism prevalent today. Sociologist Juliet Schor (2002, 55) cites the cultural critic Raymond Williams when she says, 'we are not truly materialist because we fail to invest deep or sacred meanings in material goods. Instead our materialism connotes an unbounded desire to acquire, followed by a throwaway mentality'.

To be in a state of engagement and connection, people have to be active and able, to have access to skills, tools and opportunities to use them. They have to be recast in roles other than just as consumers but

also as competent individuals and suppliers of ideas and skills to the fashion system. Much has been written about the psychological and sustainability benefits of shifting away from ‘a life of consumption’ or one dominated by ‘having’, to what Ivan Illich (1975) calls, ‘a life of action’; or in Erich Fromm’s (1976) terms, life in the ‘being’ mode of existence. In a small way the practices unearthed in *Local Wisdom*, can be seen to be part of this shift and convey a seizing of initiative by users of clothes to actively change or improvise their patterns of use. As such they express one way to improve quality of fashion experience within the physical limits of the clothes we already have. They reflect, albeit tentatively, one set of activities that comprise fashion in a post-growth economy. They bring those wisdoms borne of using clothes as part of everyday life into direct contact with the future sustainability of the fashion industry. And with that they bring the prospect of trading cultural capital and users’ knowledge in a new layer of exchange or commerce that is measured in terms broader than growth and increasing use of resources and instead based on increasing the quality of the fashion experience.

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Kate Fletcher is a design activist, consultant, writer and key opinion leader in fashion, textiles and sustainability. Her work, in academia, with high-street retailers and NGOs, has been at the forefront of design for sustainability in fashion and textiles for the last fifteen years. It has roots in ingenuity, vitality, care and resourcefulness and is fed by design ideas and practical action. Kate holds a PhD from Chelsea College of Art and Design, is Reader in Sustainable Fashion at London College of Fashion and the author of *Sustainable Fashion and Textiles: Design Journeys*.

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