
**PRACTICE
RESEARCH IN
SOCIAL DESIGN:
DEFINITIONS
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FUTURES**

Case Study #1

ReGo

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Overview

ReGo is a practice research project led by Dr Francesco Mazzarella at the UAL Centre for Sustainable Fashion, which leverages the power of fashion activism, social design, and storytelling. 'ReGo' means to rethink our ego and go again and again through a continuous process of change both in oneself and in society. The aim of the project is to shift the prevailing narratives around youth violence and respond positively to this systemic problem by providing educational and employment opportunities for young people in fashion. Working with communities and industry partners in East London, including Catalyst for Communities, and funded by Foundation for Future London, ReGo co-created knowledge as well as products with young people, and provided opportunities for the young people involved to gain new skills and build employability. In doing so, it expands the idea of what fashion is and can do to address social justice and nurture sustainability and prosperity for all.

Case study methodology

This case study series is intended to represent the diversity of design practice research in social and sustainable design across UAL, and to articulate its contribution to both real-world challenges and academic research. It uses the conceptualisation of practice research in design, developed in 'Practice research in design: Towards a novel definition'.¹ Each case study is based upon a semi-structured interview with a researcher, as well as reviewing related literature and documentation from the project.

¹ Kaszynska, P., Kimbell, L., & Bailey, J. (2022) Social Design Institute Working Paper. Practice research in design: Towards a novel definition. London: UAL Social Design Institute.

Project context

Levels of serious violence between young people in London are persistently high. Research shows that a set of systemic social, cultural, and economic conditions (such as racism, housing speculation, poverty, the drugs market, etc.) has produced a contemporary form of youth violence as a kind of social practice. Colloquially known as ‘knife crime’, it has been subject to much debate and concern in the media, amongst politicians and policymakers, and among young people and their communities. Young people, and their experiences, are at the heart of this issue, of which the causes are complex and multifaceted. Understanding this systemically, and as a public health challenge, means not simply addressing the symptoms, but finding ways to create new pathways in that system: for example, by providing opportunities, removing barriers and channelling the creative energy of young people. A systems-led approach also means working collaboratively with multiple partners, including young people in local activities so that they can shape more meaningful lives for themselves.

Research context

ReGo draws upon recent research in relation to knife crime, including UAL’s ‘Redesign Youth Futures’ project literature review and systems map (produced by the Social Design Institute and Design Against Crime Research Centre), as well as research in design and fashion activism. Design activism was defined by Alastair Fuad-Luke as “design thinking, imagination and practice applied knowingly or unknowingly to create a counter-narrative aimed at generating and balancing positive social, institutional, environmental and/or economic change”.² Adopting a design activist approach in this context means becoming ‘agents of appropriate change’ or ‘catalysts for systematic transformation’;³ this implies going beyond the well-recognised role of the designer facilitator (supporting on-going initiatives) and expanding the role of the designer to become an activist (aimed at making things happen) to contribute to social innovation and sustainability.⁴ In this case, fashion was the medium engaged with for a specific form of design activism. Fashion activism manifests itself both in consumer wearing clothes to express their own values and in the values-led actions taken by fashion designers and brands to fight social injustice, and advocate for environmental stewardship, economic prosperity and cultural regeneration.⁵ Building on Otto von Busch’s ideas (2012), a design-led intervention was activated by a community of people who developed a bespoke fashion collection.⁶ In particular, fashion activism was used to challenge the status

² Fuad-Luke, A. (2009). *Design Activism: Beautiful Strangeness for a Sustainable World*. London, UK: Earthscan, p.27.

³ Banerjee, B. (2008). “Designer as Agent of Change: A Vision for Catalysing Rapid Change”. Paper presented at the Changing the Change Conference, Turin, July 10-12.

⁴ Manzini, E. (2014). “Making Things Happen: Social Innovation and Design”. *Design Issues*, 30: 57-66.

⁵ Burns, L. (2019). *Sustainability and Social Change in Fashion*. New York: Fairchild Books.

⁶ Von Busch, O. (2012). *Just Fashion – Critical Cases on social Justice in Fashion*. London: SelfPassage.

quo – the situations leading to violence, as well as unsustainable fashion production and meaningless consumption – and activate positive social change. This builds on an understanding of design as operating within a cultural context, and able to strategically contribute to changing that context. The project also speaks to research and thinking on place-making, and the civic role of universities driving social innovation processes within their local contexts.⁷

Core research questions

- How can fashion activism be used to shift the prevailing narrative around youth violence?
 - What new designs can be co-created to shift the meaning of charged materials and objects and catalyse positive social change?
 - What collaborations can designers activate to sustain ongoing educational and employment opportunities for young people in fashion?

Approach and methods

In the first phase of the project, a participatory action research approach was used to bring young people, fashion brands and youth workers together, to generate ideas for bespoke garments. Building on the central idea of re-manufacturing confiscated or collected knives into buttons and rivets for jeans, a brand and communication campaign were created to raise awareness around knife crime. In the second phase, the project expanded to taking 30 young people through a 12-month programme, which involved training in fashion design, media and entrepreneurship delivered by London College of Fashion, transformational mindset coaching led by Catalyst in Communities, alongside hands-on work experience with local fashion brands. The project also involved London College of Fashion MA students, working in multidisciplinary teams to respond to a Collaborative Challenge brief, using fashion activism to create new designs, new narratives, and a social enterprise model for ReGo. The project team also collaborated with other London College of Fashion students to develop and deliver a photoshoot, where the ReGo participants were modelling the products made. To conclude the project, an exhibition was curated and delivered, as an opportunity to showcase the people, stories, collaborations, and the journey that brought the project to life. The whole project was documented and communicated through photography, a short film, a billboard campaign and an exhibition.

⁷ Fassi, D. et al. (2019). Universities as Drivers of Social Innovation – Theoretical Overview and Lessons from the “campus” Research. New York, NY: Springer.

Outcomes: what did the practice research produce?

For the site...

ReGo made multiple diverse contributions to the locality, and to the situated issue of violence between young people. As a result of their participation in the project, the young people have strengthened their voice and gained agency through the learning of new skills in fashion design, media, and entrepreneurship. Some of them have adopted an activist stance and ambition themselves. The evaluation of the first phase of the project showed that the young people had learned in three different areas: they had expanded their understanding of the meaning of fashion and its potential; they had learned about materials, sustainability, and the impact and value of garments; and they had developed diverse new competencies as well as insights into potential careers. Following Phase 2, some of the young people on the programme gained both technical and soft skills, and received concrete offers of employment. Moreover, the mindset coaching contributed to empowering the participants to feel connected with a community of support and build confidence to work on their goals.

The project also produced prototypes and a fashion collection using re-manufactured knives, which is now available for rent through the 'Loanhood' platform. This is an app offering a sustainable and accessible way to refresh wardrobes and wear unique high-end items. Proceeds raised will go towards supporting on-going educational and employment opportunities for young people in fashion. The project also therefore contributes to the university's place-making activities and civic role and responsibilities, helping to realise the vision of the Fashion District to make East London a place where people and businesses can thrive through fashion, sustainability, and innovation.

Finally, through the activist messaging incorporated in the objects (clothing and accessories) and the communications around the project, ReGo contributes to the ongoing reframing of narratives around knife crime. Significant benefits to society can be generated when we trust, nurture and support young people, and involve them in local activities; in fact, young people are never the problem itself, but must be part of the solution. Overall, although such a project can be considered as a micro-site of activism, it contributes to fostering macro-changes in society and people's perceptions of the fashion system.

For design practice...

At the macro level of strategic design, ReGo shows how fashion, making and collaboration can play a crucial part in tackling some of the most challenging issues facing society. Putting young people at the heart of the creative process enables them to influence the shape of a project, leading to meaningful connections and lasting impacts. Moreover, working collaboratively within a multidisciplinary team is

essential to prevent and tackle the systemic issue of young value. The project offers a generalizable framework – grounded in design activist approaches – that can be applied across different settings and produces outputs and outcomes that are valuable for young people, community stakeholders, local councils, educators, researchers and practitioners in fashion and social design. At the level of detailed design process, the project created a space for the application of new remanufacturing techniques using innovative waterjet technology. Such a design activist project challenges the designer's ego and encourages a co-creation process so that the most meaningful solution can emerge from within communities.

For research...

ReGo contributes to research around youth violence and knife crime, by demonstrating a potential model for responding to this systemic issue by building and amplifying relational networks. Significantly, the model is not grounded in the traditional techniques of the criminal justice or social welfare system, but rather in the aspirations and creative energies of young people themselves, and the potential offered by the creative industries.

For the field of fashion activism, it evidences how fashion can be used as a tool to bring people together and catalyse collective action, responding to the experiences and aspirations of young people, determined to activate positive social change. Fashion is not only about one specific aspect but is interdisciplinary and connects people with diverse interests. Designing an item is not only about its aesthetics, but about rethinking fashion's purpose and personal meaning, and telling a story of change, through the garments which we wear. To this end, fashion activism manifests itself in garments that are part of solutions to larger societal, economic, environmental, cultural, and political problems.

Finally, the project highlights the therapeutic and transformative experience that collective making can constitute, and therefore the important connection between craft and wellbeing. This practice research demonstrates that, through the making itself, and through the pleasure and fun of working with their hands, young people can find a route to talk about complex issues, and stay engaged in the conversation as a function of making something meaningful together.

Further reading and resources

- [ReGo project website](#)

Researcher biography

[Dr Francesco Mazarella](#) is Senior Lecturer in Fashion and Design for Social Change at London College of Fashion, UAL. His work at Centre for Sustainable Fashion aims at exploring ways in which design activism can create counter-narratives towards sustainability in fashion. Previously, Francesco was AHRC Design Leadership Fellow Research Associate at Imagination, Lancaster University, with the aim to support design research for change. Francesco was awarded a PhD from Loughborough Design School, funded by the AHRC Design Star Centre for Doctoral Training. His doctoral research project explored how service design can be used to activate textile artisan communities to transition towards a sustainable future.