

9 Fashion activism and design for social change – the Making for Change: Waltham Forest project

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Introduction

In this chapter, I reflect on the Making for Change: Waltham Forest project which I delivered in partnership between a Higher Education Institution (London College of Fashion – LCF) and a local government department (London Borough of Waltham Forest – LBWF) for the London Borough of Culture 2019 (LBOC) and the Great Place scheme. With my project team, I engaged, through fashion and making, local schools, businesses, residents, and hard-to-reach communities in order to develop and retain creative talent in the borough and address socio-economic issues affecting the community, such as deprived youth, skills shortage, and high unemployment rates. With these challenges in mind, I initiated the Making for Change: Waltham Forest project, which aimed at exploring ways in which fashion activism, design and making can be used to catalyse positive social change and activate long-term legacies within the local community. To address this aim, the following questions drove my research project:

- 1 In what ways can design research be used to embed sustainability and innovation within heritage fashion manufacturing businesses?
- 2 What cross-sector collaborations can enable the activation of positive social change and the creation of tangible legacies in order to make the borough a better place to live and work in?

Adopting a participatory action research methodology, I developed a range of fashion activism interventions in relation to education, manufacturing, and community engagement, which resulted in the creation of a number of artefacts or ‘provocations’ for social change. As a result, this fashion activism project contributed to raising people’s awareness of sustainability issues, developing making skills, opening up career pathways, and building cross-sector partnerships. In the conclusions of the chapter, I discuss the challenges experienced throughout this participatory action research project and outline recommendations for future work.

The context of the fashion activism intervention

The project focused on Waltham Forest, a North-East London borough, which is ethnically diverse. In 2015, Waltham Forest was ranked 35th in England for multiple deprivations out of 326 local authorities (London Borough of Waltham Forest, 2020), and several neighbourhoods in Waltham Forest are in the top 10% of the most

deprived in England (William Morris Big Local Plan, 2015). Income in Waltham Forest is lower than the London average and inequality is evident in employment and pay across minority ethnic groups. Nevertheless, recent employment figures show a sharp growth rate of new businesses and of self-employed; the number of new businesses and start-ups has increased by around 47% in recent years (A New Direction, 2019).

Within the borough is located the William Morris Gallery, a museum dedicated to the life and works of William Morris, a world-renowned designer (of fabrics, wallpaper, furniture, and glass), craftsman, writer, and socialist activist from the 19th century who was a major contributor to the British Arts and Crafts movement. Heritage craftsmanship underpins the growing creative industry and grassroots 'making' initiatives of Waltham Forest and its fashion industry; at the same time, we are witnessing an increased interest in preserving and innovating the traditional practices that are essential to the material culture of this place. Within this textile and fashion context, craftsmanship can be defined as the human-centred economic activity of giving form and meaning to locally sourced fibres; through skilled handwork or by directly controlling mechanised and digital tools, textile artisans manage the process of making small batches of quality textiles, clothes, and accessories (Mazzarella et al., 2021). Besides well-established businesses and start-ups, there is also a growing number of creative initiatives led by local residents, revealing more untapped talent which deserves surfacing. In East London, the fashion industry has created 36,000 jobs in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) focused on advertising, retail, design, manufacturing, and distribution (Fashion District, 2019). These fashion businesses comprise of clothing retail or fabric merchants followed by designers, manufacturers, and specialised crafts such as embroidery, beadwork, and leatherwork. Furthermore, Walthamstow is in the top 8% of all UK Parliamentary Constituencies, when it comes to the number of people employed in the fashion industry.

The challenges faced by the local fashion industry are highlighted by a study conducted by non-profit organisation A New Direction (2019) based on the review of grey literature, interviews, a focus group, and a series of workshops with local stakeholders and project partners (i.e. LCF and LBWF). The report provides the evidence base for a local partnership plan setting the vision for making Waltham Forest a place where fashion businesses and people can thrive. As highlighted in an interview conducted by A New Direction, there is 'a growing consciousness of waste and ethics in fashion, particularly amongst young people' (ibid., p. 24). The local community adopts a 'make do and mend' or 'reduce, reuse and recycle' approach to sustainability, which is primarily driven by economic necessity and only secondarily by environmental, social, and cultural concerns (ibid.). In terms of the local fashion sector, the borough is rich in local heritage and specialised craftsmanship. However, there is a lack of connectivity across the local fashion industry which is made up of small businesses and discrete initiatives, leaving the makers and manufacturers feeling isolated. In this regard, some businesses argue for the need for the local Council to support communication and networks and 'create an infrastructure to support collaborations between designers and makers' (A New Direction, 2019, p. 21). A growing attraction to fast fashion over craftsmanship has led to the disappearance of specialist technical skills and a shortage of a skilled workforce. Therefore, there is a need to retain and protect the remaining existing skilled workforce and to upskill new potential employees to maintain the rich cultural fabric of the borough. Finally, the demand for workspaces

outstrips the supply. Since rent is sharply increasing, several creative businesses are moving out of the borough or are fearing the prospect of having to do so. Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic and related financial crisis have contributed to making the local fashion industry even more fragile.

The role of fashion activism in social change and place-making

Within this context, the Making for Change: Waltham Forest project adopted a design activism approach to catalyse change in the local fashion industry towards sustainability. Design activism has been defined 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’ (Fuad-Luke, 2009). Adopting a design activist approach in this project meant that I played the role of an ‘agent of appropriate change’ or ‘catalyst for systematic transformation’ (Banerjee, 2008). This implied 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) (Manzini, 2014). Furthermore, we are witnessing a trend in which universities are increasingly playing an ‘anchoring’ and place-making role in driving social innovation within the local urban contexts in which they are based (Birch, Perry & Taylor, 2013; Fassi et al., 2019). In fact, alongside the entrepreneurial university model of universities (Pineiro & Stensaker, 2013), the civic university model is gaining momentum, driven by a mission oriented towards community engagement, social service, and local regeneration (Goddard et al., 2014).

For example, London College of Fashion’s (LCF) civic role and social purpose as a University interacting with and influencing the local community is embodied in the ‘Better Lives’ agenda, which means using fashion to drive change, building a sustainable future, and improving the way we live. In particular, the Social Responsibility team at LCF has extensive experience in working with women in prison to aid their rehabilitative journeys, by giving them professional skills and qualifications in fashion and textiles and supporting them upon release. Furthermore, in light of its upcoming move to East London, the College has developed a programme of public and community engagement activities, driving transformation, regeneration, innovation and place-making. Adopting a Quadruple Helix Model (Carayannis & Campbell, 2009), the University has activated collaborations with industry, (local and central) government and civil society across East London. This has opened strategic opportunities to take place ahead of the College’s move, rather than ‘parachuting’ into a new area without any engagement with, or relevance for, the local community.

Methodology

Although the overall Making for Change: Waltham Forest project comprised also a range of educational and community engagement activities, in this chapter I will focus on three research residencies undertaken with fashion manufacturing businesses as exemplar of design researchers who hold materials and making at the heart of their approaches to activating positive social change. As illustrated in Figure 9.1, using Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a methodology, a collaboration with the project participants was created to explore social, cultural, economic, and



Figure 9.1 The researcher (right), a young participant in the project (middle) and a craftsman (left) in the making. Photograph by Julia Sabiniarz.

environmental issues within a specific research context and enable the development of interventions or innovative fashion practices to address the very same issues (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2003). Throughout the process, my role as a researcher entailed listening and responding to the needs and aspirations of the participating businesses, setting up the briefs for the residencies, activating the collaborations and mentoring the researchers in their practice. In this, my knowledge and experience of working with materials and handling making processes was essential in leading the threads of the residencies, underpinned by stories of making and collaborative practices to enable positive social change. Using materials as ‘boundary objects’ (Star, 2010), the researchers in residence and I engaged in an in-depth investigation of qualitative data collected from purposively selected groups of people participating in the research.

Based on these premises, the project was developed in two phases:

- 1 The first phase was a residency which I undertook at Waltham Forest Town Hall with the aim of identifying a suitable scope for the project, detailing its outputs and expected outcomes, as well as defining the project timeline and budget. In order to do this, I adopted ethnographic methods (i.e. participant observations and contextual interviews) in consultation with people from diverse departments within LBWF (i.e. Culture, Education, Business Growth, and Regeneration). These initial consultations contributed to establishing partnerships with local organisations (schools, fashion manufacturing businesses, social enterprises) to deliver the project. Adopting an ethnographic approach as per Malinowski (1987), I immersed myself in the local context in order to observe people in their

natural environment for an extended period of time and discover the perspectives of local community members on a series of social, cultural, economic, and environmental issues. Throughout the ethnographic investigation, I took field notes, capturing comments and insights from the interaction with the project participants, paying particular attention to contextual elements.

- 2 The submission and review of a detailed project proposal were then followed by the second and main phase of the project, funded by different departments at LBWF (i.e. the Great Place scheme, Business Growth, Regeneration, and Culture). This consisted of a range of participatory action research interventions, grounded in the themes of makers, fellows and radicals. Given the word limitations of this chapter, I will focus only on the research through making activities undertaken for this project. The researchers in residence and I adopted multiple data collection methods to address the project’s aim, as summarised in Table 9.1.

Data analysis

Over the course of the research project, large amounts of qualitative data were collected, in a range of formats, such as field notes, post-it notes, audio recordings, photographs and videos. I thematically analysed the data through a manual and iterative process to synthesise data in relation to emerging codes, make comparisons between identified themes, and draw conclusions from the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I used ATLAS.ti software for coding so that raw data (such as audio transcripts, research reports, and feedback questionnaires collected through the project activities) were imported for analysis. In the thematic analysis, codes emerged from the data through an inductive process (Sadler, 1981); I then clustered frequently recurring codes into themes, and I used software-generated word clouds to validate the themes. The process of analysis was guided by the impact evaluation framework developed by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO, 2018). Such a framework is mostly aimed at third-sector organisations to measure the (social) impacts of their programmes. I adopted this framework to demonstrate the outputs and outcomes of this project (funded by a local government department and led by a Higher Education Institution) as evidence base to inform a theory of change. As a result of the impact evaluation process, I outlined the outputs (i.e. the goods, services

Table 9.1 Multiple data collection methods adopted throughout the project.

<i>Project activities</i>	<i>Research methods</i>
Research residency at Cactus Leather	Desk research Exhibition Co-creation workshops Semi-structured interviews
Research residency at Blackhorse Lane Ateliers	Desk research Prototyping Scenario building Focus group Semi-structured interviews
Research residency at Wagland Textiles	Desk research Semi-structured interviews

or products being delivered) and outcomes (i.e. single, measurable changes) produced through the research project.

Project participants

The qualitative nature of the research project led me to use a purposive sampling strategy (Mays & Pope, 1995) to explore how fashion activism, design and making can be used to catalyse positive social change and activate long-term legacies within a specific community. In collaboration with the Business Growth department at LBWF, I visited thirteen textile and fashion manufacturing businesses based in Waltham Forest in order to understand their needs and aspirations. Through this initial scoping activity, it emerged that, although the overall decline of heritage textile manufacturing in the East End of London, a high number (over 40) of fashion businesses were operating in the borough at the time of my investigation and that fashion designers are increasingly returning to produce their own collections locally. In consultation with different members of staff at LCF and LBWF, I selected three – micro, small, and medium – textile and fashion manufacturing businesses for hosting researchers in residence to address issues of economic, environmental, cultural, and social sustainability. The decision was based on the businesses’ openness to collaborate, and especially on the potential large-scale and long-term impact of their visions, benefitting not only the businesses themselves, but having also positive impacts on the local community and the fashion industry at large. After I set up three project briefs tailored to the businesses’ needs and aspirations, three members of staff at LCF were selected to undertake three research residencies for the duration of approximately three months each.

Results

In this section, I discuss the results of three research residencies undertaken within fashion manufacturing businesses (i.e. Cactus Leather, Blackhorse Lane Ateliers, and Wagland Textiles) and their contribution to making change – respectively – towards cultural sustainability, sustainable production, and policy change.

Making change towards cultural sustainability

Based in Leyton, Cactus Leather is a micro-business led by Stephen Jones, who has worked for fifty years with brands such as Ally Capellino, Jimmy Choo, and Clark’s Shoes. He is now the last remaining clicking press tool maker in London, bending by hand and welding metal tools which are used to cut leather for manufacturing bags and accessories (Figure 9.2). Traditionally, the East End of London was at the centre of fashion manufacturing, but skill-based businesses like Cactus Leather are becoming a rarity in the UK capital. As part of the Making for Change: Waltham Forest project, Xandra Drepaal (Lecturer in 3D Realisation at LCF) undertook a research residency at Cactus Leather, collaborating with Stephen with the aim of retaining this craft know-how and developing a sustainable future for the business.

Through her residency, Xandra learned and documented the process of making clicking press tools. As an outcome of her residency, Xandra curated ‘Crafting



Figure 9.2 Stephen Jones at the Cactus Leather workshop. Photograph by Julia Sabiniarz.

Leather and Steel', a week-long exhibition to celebrate the unique skillset and creative process of Stephen and showcase how a piece of steel can be transformed into a leather cutting tool. As stated by one visitor, 'the exhibition showed the simple process and tools to achieve beauty in the craft'. Alongside the exhibition, Xandra and Stephen facilitated two workshops. Each workshop began with an introduction to the craft process, the materials, tools, and machines used, followed by a demonstration by Stephen. Afterwards, Xandra facilitated a brainstorming session in groups, and the co-creation workshops concluded with the actual making of steel shapes and keychains. Based on feedback received by one participant:

The workshop made me think that my skills can be developed further. The workshop helped me better understand the craft.

The first workshop was targeted at people without craft experience and interested in learning the skill of steel bending in order to create their own clicking press tools. The steel bending workshop, lasting four hours, was attended by seven people from the arts and crafts industry, ranging from a print designer, a saddle maker, a ceramist through to fashion students. Four out of seven participants had previous experience working with leather. In this regard, one workshop participant stated:

I like how there were so many different types of people from different trades! It made way for some fun and interesting conversations.

The second workshop was targeted to children for them to create custom keychains or unique artworks using offcut pieces of leather cut into different shapes using various clicking press tools. This three-hour-long workshop was attended by eight adults with their children from the ages of three to ten. Participants in the workshops included several local mothers, Waltham Forest residents, and three people who were visiting the street market.

Findings from the research – as outlined in the residency report (Drepaul, 2019) – evidenced that delivering the workshops also contributed to activating change in Stephen himself, and opened up new opportunities for his business, expanding it from merely delivering commercial products to also training other people, especially the youth. Based on this successful experience, Xandra and Stephen planned further workshops to be delivered every second Saturday. Through Xandra's research residency, some local people showed interest in future workshops and visited the factory to find out more about the process of making clicking press tools. Xandra created a mailing list, which would help Stephen connect with people who could be involved in future collaborative projects or workshops. Xandra and Stephen also planned the delivery of an eight-hour-long workshop including steel bending to make clicking press tools, leather cutting, and producing bags and accessories. Another business expansion idea generated through the residency was to organise open days in which the public could join guided tours of the factory or use the facilities and tools upon payment of a small fee. Furthermore, plans were made to connect Stephen with LCF students who might be interested in leather cutting and use the clicking press tools as an alternative to laser cutting. Stephen stated that:

The residency has not yet improved my business, but it is going to. I realised that I like teaching people. The aim of this residency was not about growing my business financially but teaching people.

Overall, the residency – through a holistic exhibition of the craft process – had a positive impact on the local community as it raised people's awareness of Stephen's business, his craft, and tools (Figure 9.3). The residency also made a positive impact on Stephen, who currently works in isolation but, through this project, got in touch with many people and realised that there is a growing interest in learning his craft, so that this heritage know-how can be preserved and transmitted to future generations, as he stated:

This project will activate positive change within the Waltham Forest community when I start delivering workshops and will pass my craft to others. [...] Many people showed interest; before, I thought it was just me. I was surprised by all the people who came looking for me. [...] Even my grandson – who generally thinks that my craft is boring – took photos in the workshop; he got inspired and he cut some leather.

The workshops have not been delivered as yet, due to personal circumstances and lack of time for Xandra, who works almost full-time at LCF, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has put on hold any plans for community engagement activities. Another issue that has emerged is the fact that Stephen may be losing his workspace



Figure 9.3 Visitors of the ‘Crafting Leather and Steel’ exhibition. Photograph by Julia Sabiniarz.

due to rent increase and is looking for another space where to move and from where to deliver workshops and other activities:

My main issue is to find a place that suits all the things we want to do. I don’t want to move out of the borough after sixteen years which I have been based in Waltham Forest.

Making change towards sustainable production

Blackhorse Lane Ateliers is London’s only craft jeans making business producing raw, selvedge and organic denim, right in the heart of Walthamstow. As part of Making for Change: Waltham Forest, the Ateliers hosted a research residency with Anna Schuster, LCF graduate, and independent designer and researcher. For the purpose of this residency, Anna investigated sustainability issues related to denim, one of the most water-intensive materials used in fashion and focused on garment finishing processes. Crucially, this was informed by the fact that the production of a pair of jeans requires up to 7,000 litres of water (Levi Strauss & Co, 2015) and every year 1.7 million tons of chemicals are used to produce 2 billion pairs of jeans (Webber, 2018).

Anna explored and experimented with sustainable and innovative textile and garment finishing processes that would reduce water and chemical consumption, as well

as manual labour. In order to understand how the technology works, how it can be integrated into the design process, and what impact it can create in the denim industry, Anna spent three days in Valencia, at the headquarters of Jeanologia – the world leader in sustainable and efficient finishing technologies for textiles and other industrial applications. As illustrated in Figure 9.4, at Jeanologia Anna used laser technologies to understand their function within mass production and customisation of jeans and show the potential of such processes to develop new denim wash aesthetics in the UK, especially important, at the time, in the face of the uncertainties facing the country due to Brexit (the UK leaving the European Union):

Using technologies does not mean to be sustainable *per se*, but we need to use technologies to improve processes and develop innovative ways to design and make.

[Researcher]

Blackhorse Lane Ateliers is a socially oriented business, focused on quality and craftsmanship. Jeanologia's vision is not only to develop and market their technologies but also to make innovation accessible by educating their business customers and helping them improve every step of the textile finishing process. During her residency, Anna was inspired by the two companies' visions to create an ethical, sustainable, and innovative textile and fashion industry.

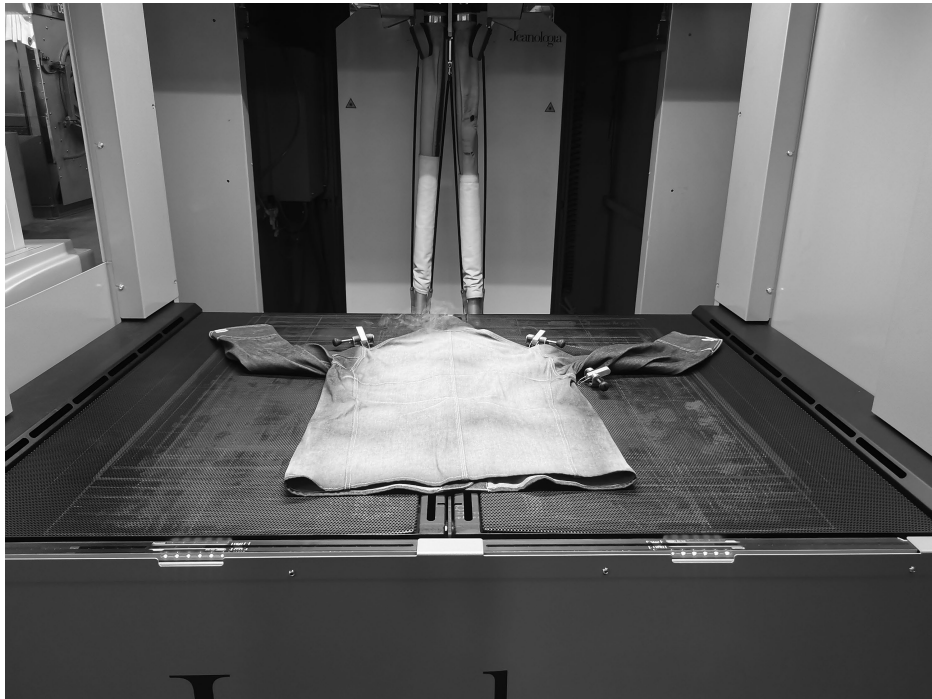


Figure 9.4 Laser customisation on denim at Jeanologia, Valencia. Photograph by Anna Schuster.

This residency was a chance for me to explore two very interesting companies which have disruptive business models and integrate their values and visions into the development of future scenarios for democratising technology.

[Researcher]

Inspired by the companies she worked with, Anna developed four scenarios for a Wash Lab to be established in East London, equipped with innovative wash machines and laser technology. Based on the scenarios developed by Anna, the Lab could be established either within the premises of Blackhorse Lane Ateliers, or in East London, or as an Innovation Hub within The Trampery Fish Island Village (London's new campus for fashion innovators, including studios, facilities and social spaces) or as a University research centre. The aim was to create a multi-disciplinary space where designers, artists, scientists, fashion manufacturers and students can undertake research and development, local prototyping, and production. This would also allow for the development of an innovative textile aesthetic specific to London, forward-thinking materials, and laundry techniques. In this vision, collaboration is key to flourish and activate sustainable change in the fashion industry, as highlighted by Anna:

The future needs spaces accessible to independent designers, local makers, small and medium fashion enterprises and especially students – the designers of tomorrow.

As an outcome of the residency, a feasibility study was developed, including an outline of the research undertaken, a discussion of a comparative analysis of the Wash Lab scenarios, and a detailed business case including financial data (Schuster, 2019). The scenarios – especially those of an Innovation Hub within a fashion ecosystem, or affiliated to a local University – contributed to amplifying Blackhorse Lane Ateliers' commercial vision to include also educational objectives in order to share the capital investment and sustain the Wash Lab. The scenarios opened up new opportunities for the business, as a provider of services to other designers; this, in turn, required different considerations in terms of logistics and infrastructure. The residency also contributed to increasing the business' network of contacts (such as LCF, LBWF, Jeanologia, The Trampery, Fashion District, the Greater London Authority) and made the business more widely known, as emphasised by Han Ates, founder of Blackhorse Lane Ateliers:

Before we focused on limited channels with the hope that someone would come and help us. Now we know that there are partners who can help us. [...] We have created valuable networks, beyond our commercial ones. We now understand the local Council better. Also, since we went to all these meetings at the University, now people know more about Blackhorse Lane Ateliers.

Based on feedback from the manufacturer hosting the research residency, the visual report produced by Anna proved to be very effective for the business to communicate their vision to other investors and fundraisers:

Having someone to put all the information together, and producing an amazing visual report was extremely valuable. The actual document is a tangible benefit

to the project. Now we can go to other investors and fundraisers and talk about our project in a more concrete way.

[Manufacturer]

Anna also helped the business in applying for a grant as part of an SME R&D support programme within the ‘Business of Fashion, Textiles and Technology’ (BFTT) project led by LCF, to sustain the legacy of this initial short-term research residency. The application for the SME R&D support programme was successful and Blackhorse Lane Ateliers was awarded a grant of £180,000 to undertake a 24-month-long period of R&D around the implementation of the Wash Lab, which will contribute to the economic growth of the business and the sustainable development of the local fashion industry.

Making change towards sustainable fashion policy

Founded in 1919, Wagland Textiles is one of the oldest textile manufacturing companies in London, having headquarters in Walthamstow and managing a global supply chain to produce 11 million metres of fabrics every year, mostly supplied to high-street fashion brands (Figure 9.5). As part of Making for Change: Waltham Forest, Anna Fitzpatrick (Project Coordinator and PhD Researcher at Centre for Sustainable Fashion, UAL) undertook a research residency at Wagland Textiles. The aim was to explore the role of legislation and public policy in fashion and sustainability.

The residency provided an unexpected opportunity for Anna to learn about textiles and also ‘the more hidden, often less glamorous, sides of the industry’, as she said at the final review meeting. She embedded herself into the business and discovered that relationships are key to many business endeavours, and these were cultivated in a



Figure 9.5 Andrew Wagland, managing director of Wagland Textiles.

particular way at Wagland Textiles and across the supply chain. Hosting a researcher in residence had a positive impact also on Andrew Wagland, managing director of Wagland Textiles. In fact, through the collaboration with a researcher committed to activating change in the fashion system, Andrew had the opportunity to share his frustrations about the exploitative nature of the industry and gain hope that things can be done differently, as he stated at the interview at the end of the residency:

The main thing for me has been to share some of my frustrations and annoyances about my trade, especially with people who are trying to make a difference. It is an industry full of exploitation, and this shouldn't happen. [...] There is momentum outside of our industry and pressure inside.

During the research residency, Anna engaged with twenty people (parliamentarians, lobbyists, and industry stakeholders) through email correspondence and interviews and interacted with seven employees at Wagland Textiles. In this way, she developed a scoping study into the public policy landscape with the aim of influencing sustainable fabric manufacturing. Given that around 60% of all garments are produced from virgin polyester, and this quantity has doubled since 2000 (Cobbing & Vicaire, 2016), this research residency focused on reducing the amount of virgin polyester in the fashion economy. In this regard, the study shed light on the difficulties for individual businesses like Wagland Textiles to break out of the prevalent model based on speed and volume, even if they would like to operate more sustainably. Nevertheless, the residency contributed to Wagland Textiles gaining a clearer idea of the unintended consequences of actions and the need for legislation to activate systemic change in the fashion industry, as stated by Anna:

Legislative change could bring about improvements in this area and, importantly, it would create opportunities for agile businesses to benefit from. They [Wagland Textiles] are obviously very keen for this to happen, but individually they don't have the lobbying power to effect such a change at a governmental level. [...] Anyway, the business now better identifies itself as a stakeholder with a voice which could and should be listened to.

Anna explored the possibilities for shifting public policy towards the increased use of recycled polyester, which could contribute significantly towards a more sustainable fashion industry. The report produced as an output of the research residency includes a set of recommendations, which could be of a regulatory, policy, incentivising, or social nature (Fitzpatrick, 2019). Each of these might work best for different businesses operating at different points in the supply chain, but some – such as trade policies – were deemed to have the most considerable potential.

Moreover, Anna curated an installation of the outputs of her research residency within the Making for Change: Waltham Forest showcase. Using the exhibition as a creative method for research, she displayed five PET bottles (whose material was crucial in her residency) with handwritten labels representing different recommendations (i.e. trade policies, regulations, economic incentives, communication/campaigning, and innovation policies), as illustrated in Figure 9.6. Hence, the exhibition visitors were invited to vote on which of the different policy recommendations would be the best way to encourage the use of recycled polyester and therefore contribute to shifting the fashion industry towards sustainability.

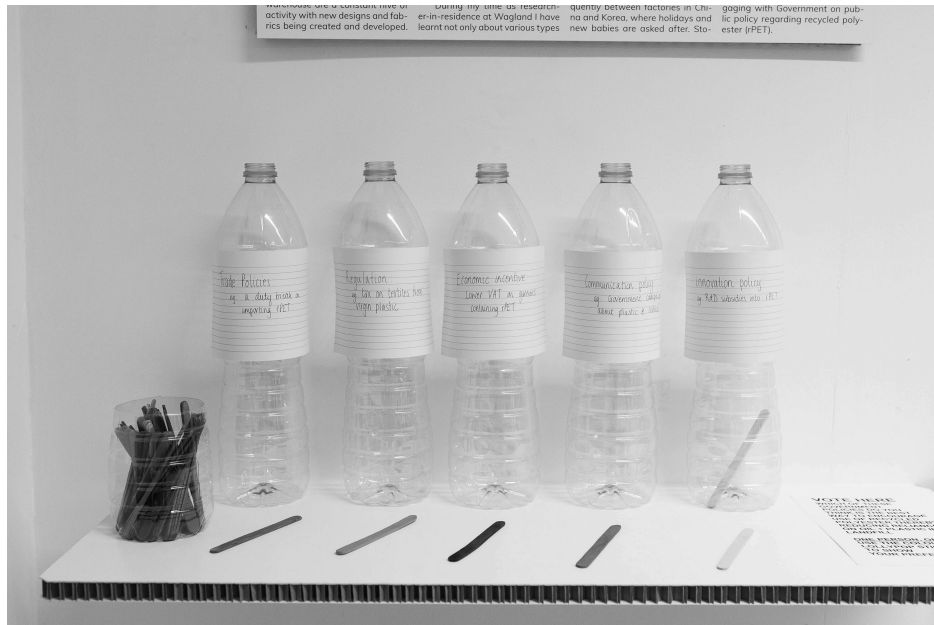


Figure 9.6 Interactive installation curated by Anna Fitzpatrick. Photograph by Adam Razvi.

One of the main challenges encountered by Anna was the need for more time to engage in in-depth policy research, navigate a complex and ever-changing political landscape and outline timely policy recommendations. Another drawback was the proroguing of Parliament and subsequent election which made it more difficult to engage people who had previously expressed a willingness to be involved in the project. For example, at the beginning of the residency, Anna engaged both Members of Parliament Mary Creagh and Anne Main with the aim of bringing about change in the fashion industry, but both lost their seats in Parliament after the election.

Nevertheless, Anna and Andrew kept committed to presenting the policy recommendations developed through the residency to Baroness Lola Young OBE (Member of the House of Lords) as an outline of work for the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Ethics and Sustainability in Fashion. The ambition was also to share the white paper with the Environmental Audit Committee – once reconvened – to feed into furthering of the ‘Fixing Fashion’ report. Furthermore, the think-tank Fashion Roundtable expressed interest in furthering this research project through their lobbying work towards a more sustainable, inclusive, and fairer fashion industry. At the review meeting with LBWF at the end of the residency, Andrew Wagland stated:

As a Council, you cannot do the lobbying, but you have the right contacts. I would love to have a tunnel wave, with the Council at the front, and it leads to the next level. This is how we should get this through. It is about little ripples and putting them all together, we will have a big wave of change!

Some of the new ideas that were developed through the research residency at Wagland Textiles are being taken into consideration by Andrew and there is the need to keep the momentum going, both within the business and the whole supply chain. There is also scope for a potential working group on rPET (recycled polyester) to be founded by Andrew, and there is interest in developing a procurement policy at the Council level with Wagland Textiles supplying any rPET needed. However, since a single Council (such as LBWF) doesn't have huge demands for uniforms, there could possibly be room for a procurement policy at central government. In this regard, Wagland Textiles has started to develop a project on recycled fabrics for the uniforms of the Immigration Department, for which the business is producing 3,500 m of fabrics. Andrew also highlighted that:

As this is a new project, you can't lose momentum. This is the right thing to do. We need to take ownership to make this happen. [...] Now people are more interested; our recycled range is now more appealing.

Finally, whilst aiming at envisioning change in a business and across the fashion industry, through her research residency, Anna also experienced a process of change in herself. She acknowledged that the residency contributed to expanding her understanding of sustainability to consider, besides environmental issues, also the economic consequences of any possible change. In fact, given the price difference between virgin polyester and rPET, policy change is needed to influence the industry to adopt sustainable materials more widely. In this regard, Anna stated:

My academic background has tended to focus more on the social, cultural and environmental aspects of sustainability, and it's been really interesting to see some of these issues from the perspective of a small business owner. Whilst I think there is an environmental imperative to sustainability issues, this research has shown me how carefully we should consider the economic dimension to any possible change.

Discussion

In this section, I discuss the outcomes of the project as they emerged from the process of thematic analysis of the data collected throughout the research residencies within the three fashion manufacturing businesses. In particular, the outcomes were clustered into four key themes: sustainability awareness, empowerment and skills development, career pathways, as well as networking and partnership building.

The researchers in residence gained a deeper understanding of textile manufacturing and enhanced their awareness of sustainability issues, considering also the economic, cultural, social and environmental implications of any change. The designers in residence enhanced their research skills, developed craft know-how and learned to use innovative technologies. The manufacturers hosting the researchers in residence felt empowered as they gained a stronger voice in activating positive change in the fashion industry. For instance, Stephen Jones – the last remaining clicking press toolmaker in London – felt uplifted that other people are interested in his craft. The research residencies also provided further income for some of the hosting manufacturing businesses. In particular, Blackhorse Lane Ateliers received a grant as part of

an R&D support programme, which will in turn contribute to the economic growth of the company through the provision of innovative wash services to other designers and businesses. Moreover, Xandra paved new business opportunities for Cactus Leather through the delivery of paid-for skills development workshops or renting out the facilities and tools to other designers and makers. The project also contributed to piloting a model for long-lasting collaborations across departments at LBWF and LCF and building a network of partner organisations across the borough. For their part, LCF researchers and local fashion manufacturers expanded their networks of contacts in view of potential collaborations and business expansions. For instance, during the research residency at Cactus Leather, Xandra Drepaal and Stephen Jones developed a positive personal and professional relationship, which is likely to lead to further collaborations.

Overall, the Making for Change: Waltham Forest project explored ways in which fashion activism can be used to listen and respond to locally experienced issues and trigger participation across a wide range of public and institutional organisations. When designing for social change, it is imperative to ensure that investments and interventions lead to real empowerment and capabilities building, so that communities become self-sustainable and resilient and not merely reliant on the designer leading the project. With this in mind, the ambition behind the project was to contribute to activating long-term legacies within the local community, beyond the funding and timeframe of LBOC 2019. Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that activating change from within the system – in partnership with LCF and LBWF as public institutions – implied facing significant institutional barriers. Perhaps another route could have been to activate change from outside the system, adopting a disruptive approach, but this would have been likely unsuccessful in this context, given that the project was funded by a local authority. Hence, I decided to adopt a ‘quiet’ form of activism, as an embedded and situated approach to co-designing meaningful innovations within the local community. As a design activist leading the project, my role implied encouraging people (i.e. the researchers in residence, the fashion manufacturers, members of the local Council, and the community members participating in the research activities) to think and do things differently by opening up strategic opportunities for collaboration and innovation to transition the local fashion industry towards a more sustainable future. In this regard, being an outsider to the local community, whilst at the same time having insider know-how (as I was a former resident of Waltham Forest) had perhaps a beneficial effect in activating positive change within the borough as it led to creating research outcomes that were deemed meaningful and sustainable by the local community. Furthermore, to enable the project to be conducted from an insider’s point of view, with a first-hand understanding of the participants’ day-to-day realities and their diverse social worlds, I put particular efforts into establishing inclusive relationships with the groups involved and gather rich insights and direct knowledge of their experiences. In this process, the relationships between me as the fashion activist, the researchers in residence, the industry and public stakeholders, and the materials and making activities involved in the project were crucial to activate change at personal, social, and organisational level. The project also contributed to demonstrating the true nature of working as a design activist within an academic institution. This implied having to complete numerous administrative tasks, handle several legal and financial issues, undertake evaluation procedures, and continuously report to many different stakeholders and audiences.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge that, as a design activist leading the project, whilst enabling change in others, I also undertook a process of change in myself and in my own way of engaging with materials and making practices within a social context. The project contributed to reinforcing my own values, which include rescuing cultural heritage, tackling social inequalities, making local economies flourish, and enhancing environmental stewardship.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I discussed the Making for Change: Waltham Forest project to demonstrate how fashion activism, design and making can be used to catalyse positive social change and activate long-term legacies within local communities. Adopting a design activism approach, with my project team, I engaged heritage manufacturing businesses in order to address issues of economic, environmental, cultural and social sustainability within the fashion industry. The project contributed to raising people's awareness of fashion sustainability and empowering them through gaining voice and agency. Even though the changes activated through the project are difficult to capture using quantitative measures, it is justifiable to say that the project has indeed built many legacies. In fact, it has evidenced itself as long-lasting through the skills developed by the researchers in residence and the knowledge generated, as well as the partnerships activated and the new business opportunities for the fashion manufacturers, such as the development of the Wash Lab in Waltham Forest. The research project also showed a wide array of formats in which fashion activism can manifest itself (from fashion artefacts to workshops, exhibitions, future scenarios, through to policy recommendations) in order to raise people's awareness of sustainability-related issues in the fashion system and co-create social, cultural, economic, and environmental value. A model for a Higher Education Institution to collaborate with a local government was piloted, and provides an opportunity to deepen the partnership, but could also be scaled out to other boroughs in order to further contribute to place-making. Finally, it is thanks to the aligned values, creative skills, and continued engagement of a network of makers and activists that we were able to create positive social change within the borough.

Limitations and recommendations for future work

Although the project enabled the gathering of interesting findings and created positive impacts, several challenges were experienced throughout the process. The short-term nature of the evaluation process meant that it was not possible to measure any longer-term impacts of the project; furthermore, the outcomes of the project are almost intangible and difficult to measure using quantitative metrics. It is important to highlight that this is a recurring issue in any social innovation projects; in fact, social impacts require a very long time to become manifest, often beyond the project's timeframe.

Moreover, although the research project discussed in this chapter was conducted in 2019, the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 compromised the development of some follow-on activities. For instance, the delivery of the workshops at Cactus Leather has been delayed due to the UK undergoing numerous periods of lockdown. Blackhorse Lane Ateliers is progressing the implementation of the Wash Lab but having to take into consideration social distancing and other requirements not envisaged

before. Perhaps the pandemic has also contributed to shifting government's priorities away from the policy recommendations outlined with Wagland Textiles towards other issues related to health and safety as well as economic austerity. Nevertheless, there is evidence of several long-lasting legacies being activated within the borough, as mentioned in the previous sections.

As the next steps, I envisage that the approach devised and implemented for the project could be further developed and tested in other contexts to build a transferable model of working that contributes to social change and place-making. I would like also to recommend that local governments and Higher Education Institutions collaborate and take joint actions in order to support businesses, strengthen existing networks and enable them to thrive. In such contexts, it is also important to map out and better understand all the different programmes existing across different departments and consider how they could be joined up or better developed through embedding some of the learning from this project. Finally, I hope that this chapter will inspire the readers in many ways to engage with fashion activism as a tool for social change and contributing to shaping a more sustainable future.

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