

Design Materials and Making for Social Change

The contributors in this book explore how practical knowledge of materials and making has evolved into new design methods and approaches for enabling material and social change.

With the challenges of resource scarcity, pollution and wastefulness – the material impacts of unsustainable behaviour - textile designers have found themselves in a unique position to engage, innovate and build new knowledge with industries, the sciences and citizens. The book presents two main themes that flow into and between one another: the materials we explore – to reduce impacts, to enhance experience and support innovation - to the materials we wear – as a way of enabling access to the materiality of the everyday and reinvigorating curiosity and value in the physical ‘stuff’ we wrap around ourselves. Contributors span these two interconnected worlds of the material and the social, at different scales and in different contexts, and explore the value of the knowledge, skills and methods which emerges when design researchers work directly with materials and hold making central to their practice. The book celebrates the role of materials and making in design research by demonstrating the diverse and complex interplay between disciplines and cultures it enables, when in search of alternative futures.

The book will be of interest to scholars working in materials design, product design, fashion design, maker culture, design for sustainability, and textile design.

Making for Our Time: A journey told through the dress as catalyst for change

Professor Helen Storey interviewed by Professor Sandy Black, Centre for Sustainable Fashion, UAL

Sandy Black and Helen Storey

Abstract

Helen Storey’s artworks use the power of fashion to communicate and act on some of the most complex issues of our age, exemplified most recently by *Dress for Our Time* (2015). This symbolic dress, created from a decommissioned UNHCR¹ refugee tent, articulated and embodied ideas around displacement and migration. Following Helen’s visit to the Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan in 2016 (where the tent came from) in her capacity as a researcher and knowledge exchanger, conversations led to the co-creation of a series of projects with NGO’s and those living in the camp. These projects responded to the residents’ direct needs, addressing educational, livelihood, and enterprise creation opportunities, with a focus on women and girls. During 2019, Helen became the first UNHCR Designer in Residence at the Zaatari Refugee Camp, Jordan. Based on an in-depth interview, this chapter presents the development and social impact of Helen Storey’s unique form of activism and empowerment through fashion, design and making, within the context of NGO partnerships and Zaatari Refugee Camp.

Key words: fashion design, fashion activism, social innovation, social design, co-creation, designer-in-residence, evolution of practice

¹ United Nations High Commission on Refugees, the UN’s refugee agency.

Preface by Sandy Black

I first encountered Helen Storey's work in the 1980s as a contemporary fashion designer making waves in the industry. I was a designer-maker myself, running an international business creating fashion knitwear and knitting kits. Our paths converged in the late 1990s, when I was a lecturer at University of Brighton, and became aware of Helen and Kate Storey's ground-breaking work in their Primitive Streak Science/Art project. Being a mathematics graduate turned knitwear designer, I was interested in inter-disciplinary research and ideas, and produced the first film of their project with the support of the innovative science and arts organisation Interalia². Writing this chapter has provided an opportunity to reflect on both our journeys from industry design practitioners in fashion and textiles to educators in the university sector (both eventually at London College of Fashion's Centre for Sustainable Fashion), developing a research focus in the process, grounded in a deep knowledge of making. This has become known as practice-based research - a key topic of this volume - and the account that follows outlines Helen's unique trajectory using the power of making and the role of fashion design practitioner to communicate impactfully with diverse groups and effect positive social change through education, participatory action research, and fashion activism.

Introduction

The popular image of fashion is frivolous, often hedonistic and narcissistic, and it is of course a highly commercial global industry. How then does an award-winning fashion designer evolve their practice to become an artist-in-residence in one of the world's largest Syrian refugee camps situated in Jordan? This chapter, based on an in-depth interview and ongoing dialogue, recounts the extraordinary journey of designer, artist, researcher and activist Helen Storey through her role as Professor of Fashion and Science at London College of Fashion, University of the Arts London. This is a story initially narrated in dresses, not simply embodied as clothing, but over time becoming an increasingly powerful symbol and metaphor for some of the most complex challenges of our time. This work, covering a period of 6 years and several innovative projects, culminated in a unique position being created for Helen within Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan, working in a research and knowledge exchange capacity with the residents and NGOs, to co-create and develop life-improving projects. These have created a tangible legacy of social change within the refugee community, particularly for women, and demonstrated how collaborative processes of making and co-creation can be central to transforming lives and livelihoods.

Background

Having trained in fashion design at Kingston University, and worked as a designer in the luxury fashion sector in Italy, Helen Storey ran her eponymous fashion label for 11 years between 1984-1995, winning several accolades including Royal Designer for Industry. Her work often challenged the norms, such as the infamous grunge collection in 1990 made with black bin bags, and her '2nd Life' ranges, long before recycling was a recognised practice. Helen's first venture into working with the notion of the dress as metaphor, and her first collaboration with a scientist (sister Professor Kate Storey, a developmental biologist) was the highly successful Primitive Streak project, inspired and funded through a novel Wellcome Trust SciArt award in 1997 to engage the public more deeply with science, through art. This innovative body of work, comprising a series of 27 dresses and a millinery work by Philip Treacy, was designed and made to communicate and physically materialise the universal process of human embryonic development over the first 1000 hours of life (Fig 1). The

² Interalia convened innovative conferences bringing together world class scientists and artists. It now exists as a magazine, edited by its founder, physicist and painter Richard Bright – see <https://www.interaliomag.org>

exhibition subsequently toured to eight different countries over a period of 15 years, indicating how powerful fashion can be as a means of science communication³. This was to become the founding concept on which Helen's academic research career and material practice developed, far from its industry base. By establishing key scientific collaborations rooted in a material practice, expressed through a maker's avid curiosity and willingness to engage with new ideas, processes and materials, Helen has continued to develop ground-breaking projects harnessing fashion practices. She developed a co-creative practice and approach to communicating ideas through the medium of fashion that is able to powerfully engage many different audiences. Her work with specific communities (from school children to refugees) empowers participants with creative agency through the shared activity of making.

Fashion and Science Collaboration

A long-standing collaboration with Professor Tony Ryan of Sheffield University, an expert in polymer chemistry, was established in 2005 through a serendipitous act of 'cold calling' – making contact to ask basic questions through an almost childlike curiosity. This, Helen says, has served her in good stead whenever she feels her practice becoming 'stuck'. Having been tasked by Unilever to challenge them about the future of packaging, and subsequently hearing Tony Ryan on the radio speaking about plastics ('buried sunshine' in his description), Helen made a follow-up call. This conversation generated their first research collaboration to explore the 'behavioural' qualities of plastic and culminated in the co-creation of a plastic bottle which could dissolve into a harmless gel, providing an alternative substrate for growing plants; thereby potentially eliminating a problem of single use plastic and pollution, to create, instead, new and useful life. This concept became the Wonderland project that "created beauty out of difficulty" as a means of communicating this science⁴. In its prototype form the bottle itself would not have drawn much attention, but by using the same chemistry in materials for a body of fashion pieces, something with great public appeal was created. Helen designed and developed a group of 27 Disappearing Dresses, collaboratively produced with chemists and textile designer and printer Trish Belford. These beautiful pieces took three years to develop and create, but each polymer dress was then destroyed in days, by gradually dissolving it in water during Wonderland exhibitions in 2008 in London and Sheffield and later in Europe (Fig 2). This poetic expression of a potential new relationship with plastic materials, raised awareness of the endemic problem of plastics that modern society has created, together with the impact of clothing waste from the fashion industry. It was a call for imaginative change in society and industry through the powerful agency of creating and then purposefully and publicly destroying beautiful garments, proposing instead that "plastics are precious" as materials to be regenerated. Unilever explored the potential for manufacturing the 'Dissolving bottle' but finally dropped it as a concept, as it would have challenged existing systems for recycling.

As concerns for environmental action became more and more prominent in the public and political discourse, Helen and Tony continued to respond to global challenges and to develop new research projects to tackle other major aspects of sustainability. Their next project, disseminated in 2011, was Catalytic Clothing – an experimental and ambitious proposal to utilise the clothes we wear as catalysts to purify the air from particulate pollutants, so "we can be the most effective tool to

³ Primitive Streak was shown between 1997 and 2011 at 42 different venues, including 32 across the UK in galleries, universities and other institutions. Overseas exhibitions included venues in China, the USA, The Netherlands, Spain, Denmark and Germany. Two dresses have been acquired as part of permanent collections of the Wellcome Trust and the National Museum of Scotland and the archive is to be gifted to a University during 2022.

⁴ The Wonderland project was funded by the UK's Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council.

catalyse pollution clean-up on the planet”⁵. This innovative concept takes inspiration from architecture, where surface cleaning nano-technologies are applied to exterior glass and concrete surfaces of buildings and other urban environments. Capitalising on the fact that fibres have a much greater surface area than such urban surfaces, the Catalytic Clothing concept involves depositing titanium dioxide (TiO₂), a nano-scale catalyst, onto the surface of our clothes via the standard machine-washing laundry process, and in so doing, radicalising the clothes we already own and wear. The catalysed clothing neutralises the nitrogen oxides (NOx) in the atmosphere⁶, providing clean air for those around the walking wearer. Installations of treated denim jeans – the most common form of everyday clothing worldwide – were presented as provocations in large city locations around the UK in a ‘Field of Jeans’ (Fig 3). In tandem, a hybrid dress sculpture ‘Herself’ was created and exhibited with an evocative film to present the concept⁷. Despite strong public interest being demonstrated globally, commercial investment and development has not been forthcoming. This is not altogether surprising to Helen, who sees her projects and her role very much to inspire behaviour change, to imagine what large corporations can’t and to ask the questions they dare not ask themselves; questions that can also present commercial challenges to existing business models through innovations that require social change.

The complex practical and commercial issues identified with the implementation of concepts developed in both the Wonderland and Catalytic Clothing projects, demonstrate the huge barriers to be overcome when aiming to scale innovation and shift industry and consumer practices and paradigms.

In 2013 Helen’s practice of elucidating science through fashion found expression and form in a new material, glass, as she developed a piece for the *Glasstress: White Heat/White Light* group show at the Venice Biennale. The Dress of Glass and Flame, with its living flame poised inside a glass bodice, and skirt made from pieces of waste glass, took the alchemy of glass and its creation through the medium of fire to exemplify its process and the material ambiguity between solid and liquid (Fig 4). In the making of this unique and unwearable dress, Helen had of necessity to entrust the material process to the glass masters and communicate as creative director, rather than directly as a maker through tacit knowledge of the material itself. This dress stands independently within Helen’s body of work as an experimental material expression and highly contemplative artwork, the flame mesmerically drawing attention to the constant present, rather than provoking ideas of uncertain futures. In many ways it is a piece that also allowed Helen ‘a pause’ and a moment of artistic reflection of what next and why.

Helen’s collaborative approach to making and utilizing a wide range of materials and fashion artefacts to communicate concepts has, over the years of her practice, been harnessed to engage audiences emotionally and viscerally, to illuminate complex major issues within sustainability, climate change, and social justice. All of these crucial areas fused together once more in her recent and current work, using the power of fashion as a universal language and experience, and fashion thinking as an approach to participatory research in action.

⁵ Catalytic Clothing project was funded by the UK’s Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council.

⁶ See <http://www.catalytic-clothing.org/faq.html> for an explanation of NOx particulates and other information about the chemical process.

⁷ See film at: <http://www.catalytic-clothing.org/>

Dress for Our Time – linking the refugee crisis and climate change

The most recent dress, and arguably the most symbolic to feature in Helen Storey's body of work is Dress for Our Time, a dress that catalysed a series of events leading her to the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan and two years later, to front line action. The journey began in 2014, in the run up to the crucial Paris UN Climate Conference of the Parties COP21, scheduled for the following year⁸. The London Meteorological Office (the UK's national weather service known as the MET) was starting to engage with different industries to explore how climate change would impact them. Having identified the sectors, such as music and fashion as ones with mass followings that could provide the MET Office with a way to scale fast what climate change means for us all, they consequently contacted London College of Fashion. This was the first time Helen had engaged in conversations with climate scientists and she subsequently brought them together with different stakeholders (including, industry, business people, NGOs and psychologists) to share how they saw the world's future through their knowledge and experience. In what became a new and defining moment for Helen, ideas began to germinate for an intervention to raise awareness of climate change, its impact on migration and in particular, the refugee crisis, in relation to COP21.

The key moment came (ironically) whilst Helen was waiting in a departure lounge at an airport to visit her textile collaborator, Trish Belford, to explore the cloth for the dress inspired by climate. She found herself watching thousands of people on the move on all the surrounding TV screens – Syrian refugees fleeing their homeland and the war for Jordan, and the myriad of tents that were to shelter them on arrival. Deeply affected by what she saw and inspired by the symbolism of the tent, Helen realised she did not need to source or create new materials for the project – these tents held “humanity in their threads already”. In another cold calling instance, Helen immediately emailed the head of communications at the UN in Geneva with an enquiry, and remarkably, received an answer by the time her plane touched down. At the time, the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan was in the process of transitioning from tents to “caravans” (customised shipping containers). Since the camp never threw anything away, there were many surplus tents available that had previously housed refugee families. Helen set about the task of getting hold of one, a process fraught with bureaucracy. Eventually a tent was delivered and Helen, together with her pattern cutter collaborator Mark Tarbard, created the Dress for Our Time from it at London College of Fashion over the summer. With the further collaboration of digital agency Holition, the symbolic dress also became a canvas to display scientific climate data, showing the impact of climate change and subsequently, war on the planet. This was done by taking the number of those who fled for their lives in that year from the annual UNHCR report and mapping their movement across continents with pixels of light. Each pixel of light represented 100 human beings on the move from 7 points around the hem of the piece, these representing the 7 most frequently fled-from countries. The lights moved in a 2-minute sequence to the countries of final destination – a previously unseen map, in effect, a map of Governmental kindness and hospitality by those open to receive refugees in large numbers.

In November 2015, the Dress for Our Time installation was strategically positioned alongside the Eurostar terminal at St Pancras Station London, the gateway to Paris and COP21. To enhance its symbolic power, the dress was evocatively filmed being worn moving gracefully through strategic city locations. The dress was further exhibited in several other locations including the Science

⁸ COP21 was the 21st Conference of the Parties, convened annually by UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), held in Paris in 2015, resulting in the Paris Agreement on Climate Change.

Museum in London, and later, the dress opened on the Pyramid stage at Glastonbury Festival in 2016 and appeared at the UN in Geneva, as the backdrop to a TED-X talk on lives in transition (Fig 5).

Over a twenty-year period, through her extensive body of work, Helen has demonstrated the power of fashion and dress to communicate and raise awareness, on issues such as climate change. Such powerful imagery using fashion can draw people in and facilitate having the difficult conversations, where other methods might cause a defensive reaction and close the conversation down. As she says, “no-one is afraid of a frock”.

The human connections and conversations instigated by the Dress’s first appearance at St Pancras Station also resulted in questions from children, that Helen was unable to answer, so she went back to UNHCR in the UK to seek the replies. This resulted in an invitation to visit Zaatari Refugee Camp and the first of a series of seven visits made by Helen and Tony Ryan between 2016 and 2019. As Helen notes, the camp is a place where impossibilities become possibilities. On their first visit in March 2016, the Syrians they met recounted their great longing for the colour green, having been farmers back home and now, in this desert, felt the unbearable deprivation of being unable to grow anything. On that first visit, the seeds of several future projects were sown. Tony noticed the many used but redundant foam mattresses, previously stained with the urine of the traumatised young. He realised, in a light-bulb moment, that this nitrate source, and the earth substitute that the sponge material provided, could be hijacked for hydroponic cultivation. Helen notes: “Now in 2021 there are 5,000 new kinds of farmers, now convinced and trained in hydroponics and teaching us the best methods to scale up this initiative”, as hydroponics with used mattresses spreads to other UNHCR camps around the world. For her part, Helen met women and girls who had brought their craft and culture with them to the camp, making crochet dolls, soap, and perfume contained in industry-rejected lopsided bottles. A further moment of serendipity came when meeting Ahlam, a refugee community leader for the women with whom Helen made an immediate connection. Together, along with many other women and inspired by their existing making skills and ideas, they co-created a series of interventions and workshops to better the residents’ futures. Funding was secured from Unilever, who had generously funded Dress for Our Time over six years, and with the support of LCF and Sheffield University, amongst others, further trips to the camp were made, each resulting in new projects. By 2019, Helen’s direct, hands-on way of collaborating and her unique role as designer, artist, connector and facilitator was recognised, and UNHCR created a new and pioneering position for her as UNHCR Designer in Residence in the camp.

Zaatari designer in residence 2019

Being the first Zaatari designer in residence during 2019 was uniquely challenging, and Helen needed to “learn fast and listen deeply”. The camp itself is vast, established in 2012 and currently home to 78,000 refugees. Although the people remain deeply connected to Syria, the camp is now a semi-permanent city where 80 children are born each week. Zaatari exercises a wide range of life skills, a place where people have become highly adaptive in extreme circumstances. With limited access to resources, they are forced to live sustainably, and in this respect Helen remarks “they have a lot to teach us”. For cultural reasons, her work has focused on the women in the camp including working with some of the camp’s 10,000 adolescent girls (aged 9-18), whereas Tony worked on projects with men on his visits. On her first visit to Zaatari, Helen met a radical class of self-styled Tiger Girls, whose name stands for ‘These Inspiring Girls Enjoy Reading’. Several such pioneering groups of Tiger Girls across the 12 districts of Zaatari are receiving extra support and education, representing and encouraging alternative paths to the norm of early marriage. Over five years, a series of projects has been developed based on the women’s and girls’ needs and wishes with a focus on female

empowerment and livelihoods, although it can be noted that the Tigers now include boys too (These Inspiring Guys).

The first project, developed in 2017, became known as the “Love Coats”, it utilised and transformed the infamous grey UNHCR thermal blankets issued to each refugee on arrival. The Tiger Girls are glamorous, young and outspoken. This co-created project was born out of the girls’ expressed wishes; “a need to be warm in winter, a love of fashion and ‘bling’, their wish to learn new making skills and to have something to gift”, which is so culturally important to them. Helen went back to London with a shopping list for materials and returned with a wealth of donated fabrics and embellishments she had gathered together, plus a prototype and pattern for a simple coat. The girls then saw an opportunity to transform these basic blankets into something desirable and individual – the “Love Coats”. Helen and two colleagues from UAL worked with 29 Tiger Girls and their mentors, and by the end of the week’s project, the girls were so proud of their creations they wanted to present a fashion catwalk show to celebrate their achievements - the first such event to be held in a refugee camp⁹(Fig 6). Through this project Helen established a new participatory way of working within the Zaatari community, with clear and immediate benefits, a process through which they got to know each other which was then applied to further co-making projects. Helen remarks:

“Collaborating and co-making in Zaatari puts you in touch with all the tensions of life held there; how to balance patience with urgency, originality with tradition, modesty with bling, governance with unseen laws, owning nothing with domestic pride, trauma with celebration – and all, with your future in someone else’s hands”

From these beginnings Helen and Tony brought in many more partners with specific expertise from London College of Fashion, Sheffield University and externally (such as Givaudan, global makers of fragrance) to enable further projects. Tony and his Sheffield colleagues continued to work on developing hydroponic garden systems, so families could grow their own food, herbs and plants such as jasmine and thyme - a different type of successful making and creating. Helen’s projects with the women focused on developing new products that could be sold to visitors to the camp and to markets outside, specifically personal products including cosmetics, soap and perfume (with the assistance of Givaudan), and also co-creating new jewellery concepts. The women already loved making jewellery as a social activity, and Helen identified different skills they wanted and brought in specific expertise in order to help create new high quality hybrid jewellery pieces, such as earrings, necklaces, wristbands and hair pieces that would appeal to international markets and provide future income. These pieces were based on the women’s craft knowledge and existing practices, but with novel elements introduced combining eastern and western cultural aesthetics; in a five-day project they produced 200 pieces of jewellery. Further training in tambour embroidery was delivered by fashion designer Elie Saab, which was cascaded out to many other women, through their family networks. The aim of all this making activity was to support community self-care and provide people with sought-after income and therefore economic independence from reliance solely on the NGOs working within the camp – making to create the future.

In response to the evolving relationships and trust between Helen and the women makers of the camp and at a moment of change within the camp as a whole, a new co-developed initiative was realised: a Made in Zaatari Centre. Operating from five caravans around a central courtyard and opened in March 2019 on International Women’s Day, this was a first-of-its-kind community for the

⁹See the Love Coats film at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fr_fXZQy_Zs

camp, and a central place for making, friendship, motherhood and economic ambition. It comprised one outside space where plants could be grown, and four caravans to provide services - a beauty salon, a soap and perfume making Lab, a creche and a retail outlet for their 'Made in Zaatari' products. Since its opening, the Centre's kitchen has become the NGO's supplier for much catering and sharing of Syrian food heritage and cookery skills.

Tarek's story

The camp has many artists, makers, trades people and students both men and women (just like our own society). The story of the artist Tarek Hamden poignantly illustrates extreme resourcefulness, the valuing of materials around you, skills development and adaptation to extreme new circumstances. Helen first saw Tarek's extraordinary carved mini-sculptures on a visit to the camp's new art gallery in 2017- created from found pencils with their lead carved into minute clasped hands. (Fig 7). Nothing is ever thrown away in the camp, and Tarek explained how he "picked up what's around and scratched away at it" using a pin to carve the lead into physical manifestations of his emotional inner life. As a former construction worker in Syria, Tarek had suffered depression when arriving in the camp, and this creative activity helped to mediate it. Helen encouraged his work and brought in a jewellery expert from Paris, who helped Tarek transform his artwork into wearable pieces – necklaces and earrings. Once these started to sell, Tarek's work went on to sell widely at local Bazaars and for the first time, to an online platform called Soukfann¹⁰. Helen arranged an exhibition of his work in London's Hatton Garden in 2019, and by matching Tarek to a UK based designer, Blue Burnham, who works in silver and gold, they created jewellery pieces for sale in Paris stores and at Matches in London. The quality of this and other work started to attract store buyers from London and elsewhere to the camp, and a piece of Tarek's recent work (a carved broom handle depicting his life story) was exhibited at the Venice Design Biennale in May 2021. This creation of new markets beyond the camp is vital to the future of livelihoods, as is the work that is ongoing for how refugees can receive payments direct from international markets. Tarek has continued to make his unique work and has materially improved his circumstances from the income he has earned through his art, facilitated by UNHCR and Helen's mentoring and connections.

Reflections on 2019 and beyond

Through the initial series of visits to Zaatari, Helen made strong and potent relationships across cultures, faiths, languages and extremes in life conditions, learning from refugees and sharing ideas of what fashion, making and materials can mean in such different circumstances. As with all collaboration, part of the human bonding and sense of meaning came from tensions and misunderstandings too. For example, when developing the Love Coats project, the very meaning of what seems imaginative, or sustainable could be misjudged. When Helen initially looked for materials that would be sustainable after the initial project was over, she was drawn to the utility and ever present supply of blankets issued by the NGOs, but as seen from the girls' perspective, these blankets served as unwelcome reminders of the day they had first arrived in camp, and were issued with the obligatory "camp kit" with the very basics for living. For women, this comprised dignity kits, basic cooking utensils, sponge mattresses, a torch and thermal blankets. In an effort to bring to camp her own sense of sustainability, Helen had unwittingly stumbled into very difficult memories, and in so doing revealed associations that NGOs were also unaware of. Similarly, the intention to reuse materials from second-hand clothes sourced with the assistance of Oxfam caused some negative reactions, as such disused clothing was associated in the girls' minds with the discarded clothing of those that had passed away. Once revealed, these differences in perception

¹⁰ See <https://soukfann.com/>

were blown wide open and through empathy and dialogue and a sense of wanting the best for each other, the bonds between everyone involved only became stronger.

From the experience of the first trip, a new type of role emerged: on the one hand, Helen in close collaboration with her NGO partners, and on the other, evolving and held confidences of those who lived in camp, as unique kinds of social friendships began, simultaneously professional and personal. As Helen puts it:

“Zaatari asks for your soul, whether you like it or not, an extreme life commute had begun – the journey between London and Zaatari’s front gates changed my life for good”

The impact of working in Zaatari has been profound in many ways. Helen’s unique position – neither formally from an NGO, nor a citizen of the camp – kept her acting upon an increased sensitivity and a novel form of intimacy that developed, far from any recognisable, or previously named, social status. From this position, creativity was part of her own response to living alongside extreme life, and the need to intuitively experiment to find ways of co-creating and working together, primarily through making. She describes her situation in this way:

“There is only one place of equality in Zaatari, between me and my friends there and it happens when we are engaged in the process of making – somehow the brain focuses down, is momentarily released from the past and stops projecting into the future – and a necklace, or perfume later, it’s just us, just here, just now”.

In working in this highly responsive way, Helen speaks of several lessons learnt, such as knowing when she is needed to intervene, or contribute, and when she is not needed at all: “often, despite best plans it’s a good idea to not expect to control everything from beginning to end”. Being sensitive and responsive to “what the situation is telling you” is hugely important, including an awareness of the constant presence and legacy of trauma and war amongst the people in the camp - those still suspended, 10 years later, between Jordan and home. There is naturally a great sense of responsibility with many different perspectives to balance, a balance that comes from a form of service and attention to reality as it presents itself.

The formal UNHCR Residency was renewed to end of 2023 and Helen’s work was planned to continue in camp, but the arrival of COVID-19 prompted UNHCR to tell her to catch the last flight out of Jordan in March of 2020. Work at a distance began, but again, in partnership with Tony Ryan at Sheffield University a successful funding bid was made to the UK’s Global Challenges Research Fund to respond to the COVID crisis on the ground in Jordan; the project PPE4REFUGEES, to create personal protective equipment for camp residents and train 60 refugee researchers was delivered until March 2022, to “deal with a crisis by building livelihoods”. Using the women’s existing sewing skills The Mask House was set up, manufacturing 100,000 masks for camp residents in 3 months. The scientific and design input here (from Helen and Tony) was to provide technical support with mask designs, to work on specifications for testing mask efficacy and to explore potential new coatings to increase the effectiveness of the masks in preventing spread of disease. This facility demonstrated real potential for new livelihoods and is now looking for a new purpose, within the local textile/clothing industry outside the camp.

The nature of Helen’s work, reliant on direct human contact, was more difficult under the necessarily constrained and remote circumstances caused by COVID-19, but after nearly two years, Helen returned to Zaatari in November 2021. During the period of remote working, attention was

given to the legacy of Helen's and Tony's interventions, with the training of 60 refugee researchers undertaken. Their roles are to continue the participatory action research initiatives directly on the ground, via training in three main areas: social sciences (to be researchers working in camp), digital technologies (for research and livelihood creation), and technical skills (for textile developments, and design of new products). The reciprocal effect is the exchange of knowledge with the refugees about human resilience, innovation in a life of extreme circumstances, and cultural preservation, amongst other learnings. Discussing this recent work, Helen says the COVID-19 crisis has "shown us what the future requires from us".

Helen's most recent visit at the end of 2021 was focused on an embroidery project which had been on the wish list for the camp's women, to build on their existing making skills. Helen was accompanied by a designer and womenswear course leader from LCF, Syrian-born Nabil El-Nayal. Building on a long Syrian textile heritage, this pilot project engaged 28 women in creative embroidery sampling, telling their stories (Fig 8), to identify ten highly skilled women to take part in a second stage project during 2022. Here, ideas will be taken to product development with a view to commercialisation and scaling up to provide livelihoods.

Looking forwards to a time (perhaps not too far ahead) when NGOs will want to make the transition from aid givers, to enabling economic independence, the first series of co-created projects initiated through Helen's involvement were beginning to help those living in camp and outside in the urban areas, transitioning from dependency to economic freedom. Building on the success of these projects, continuing to both develop existing craft skills, and introduce new ones to create novel products, more external opportunities are now being sought, involving new partnerships with local industry. These partnerships will therefore impact livelihoods beyond the camp's refugees and into Jordan more widely, where there are competing social and economic problems. Developing local, national and international markets for the new products is therefore essential to the success of these initiatives, which was part of the work of the recent grant funding. Innovation may well stretch to the imagining and forming of new types of partnerships and alliances between governing systems, industry and local Universities in Jordan, as new future-fit models of business are co-created. To this end, at the beginning of 2022 a new making lab has been set up within a nearby university campus site outside Zaatari. This unit is working to make soap, perfume and other personal care products and aims to further professionalise the Made in Zaatari products to export standards. In addition, to achieve this, the unit is able to work with products and materials that are currently restricted within the camp.

Conclusions

Although the COVID-19 crisis has been globally brutal, and temporarily halted progress, this work is defining a new space for designers, artists and scientists to apply their creativity. The role taken on by Helen is still extremely hard to define – she is simultaneously designer, artist and broker of projects, people and collaborations – orchestrating, or choreographing many simultaneous activities with multiple agents. It is more than facilitation alone, it requires constant **listening, empathy and emotional investment**, and has culminated in her work being appreciated as activism. In Helen's words:

"It's all about being in relationship – the first person you meet in Zaatari is yourself, you, such are the questions that come to the surface within one's own sense of right and wrong; that response is then immediately connected to the people you meet there – quite quickly,

it's apparent that the most powerful teachers are heartbreak, emotional resilience and disappointment. The 'job' then, is highly relational, people-led first on all sides – it doesn't work unless all are heard, all involved, in what gets created”.

Helen's unique position as Designer in Residence also involves a level of **vulnerability**, as she was not a formal UNHCR employee, whilst also being at a great distance from her home university. Helen believes that unlike more formal roles in NGOs, part of hers is to deliberately remain vulnerable, and not shut down the depth of emotional connections, even if this can come at a personal cost. She says:

“At times, last year did me in – things I witnessed that I couldn't process, moments that just don't leave you and the 'commute' between College and Zaatari – one day in relationship to the consequences of huge protracted loss and the noblest of continued fights to counter it, the next, doing your expenses receipts back at a London based desk – flying back, somewhere over Greece, something inside starts to prepare for the familiar – although now the familiar has changed forever.”

Helen has observed the effects of war and displacement, as much as is possible, and what it means to be a refugee - **how fear impacts creativity**, but also how true '**resilience**' presents itself. Helen's work has succeeded in finding ways of working together and co-creating, that can encourage and release the imagination, particularly through craft and the process of making things. The journey described here exemplifies not just the power of fashion to connect across cultures, communicating beyond words, but also how some of the **skills and aptitudes** of being a designer are now being asked to repurpose themselves, playing a different role in the world:

“To do this you need to make peace with **uncertainty - see self-doubt**, as intuition knocking.”

Helen has arrived at a new and yet to be named place, in which design and designers can explore what it means to **evolve** - a responsive, relational place that gives value to the measurable and immeasurable in equal form, the recognisable and the yet to be recognised. Her practice has morphed to become this evolution itself.

Through this work the role and importance of art and design in sustainability and wellbeing is vitally brought to life, linking to the changes we all need to make in our response to climate change, social and racial injustice and a pandemic, that will continue to affect our lives for years to come.

“The only habitat we have any control of, is our own minds and the ways in which we can nurture and shelter each other, humans in the arms of each other, by will and design”.

The unique journey, process and outcomes described above provide abundant evidence of the powerful social impact that can be achieved through a direct and empathetic engagement across cultures and across time, utilising both the innovative material practices and the participatory activities and methods of making. The universal experience of wearing and creating clothing and artefacts has enabled Helen Storey to reposition the dress not only as metaphor, but utilise dress, design, craft and fashion in its many forms as a **catalyst for vital conversations**, and **urgent action** in the face of current global challenges. A new role for the (fashion) designer has been demonstrated – using design thinking to facilitate working in a sustainable way: “more than simply making stuff” – but making for a purpose, leading to creating sustainable livelihoods and bettering lives.

The impact on policy of both the Made in Zaatarī Centre and the Hydroponics projects, catalysed by Helen Storey's and Tony Ryan's initiative, vision and co-creative approach, is now becoming clear. The Made in Zaatarī Centre is a sustainable hub for female creativity and economic empowerment - a direct impact of appointing the first Designer in Residence. The hydroponics work has enhanced survival and given farming back to farmers through the re-imagining of material purpose and practical empowerment. Both projects remain UNHCR flagship examples and as a direct consequence of this work, the UNHCR is looking at ways in which such projects can be replicated into the wider 135 UNHCR bases around the world.. At the end of 2021, Helen has been invited to expand her work next to Africa, across five countries including Zambia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi - a somewhat monumental task. This powerful impact is a direct result of Helen's individual open and collaborative approach, finding practical ways to catalyse the social changes required to meet the significant humanitarian challenges contemporary societies face – enabled by the imaginative power of making and materials.

Images and captions with credits

Fig 1: *Primitive Streak* Collection 1997: Anaphase dress. Image by Justine, model Korrina

Fig 2: *Wonderland* disappearing dresses installation at Royal Academy London 2008. Image by Helen Storey

Fig 3: *Field of Jeans* in Chelsea, London 2011. Image by DED Associates

Fig 4: *Dress of Glass and Flame* 2013. Image courtesy Berengo Studio

Fig 5: *Dress for Our Time* in Geneva 2016. Image by David Betteridge, model Louise Owen

Fig 6: *Love Coats* catwalk show 2017: Love Syria. Image by Helen Storey

Fig 7: Tarek's carved pencil: *Holding Hands* 2017. Image by Helen Storey

Fig 8: Embroidery samples from different women in the Syrian Stitch pilot project Nov 2021. Image by Helen Storey