

## Made in GB - manufacturing and fashion provenance

### Dilys Williams, Director, Centre for Sustainable Fashion

The UK fashion industry is distinctive for its idiosyncrasy, practicality, resourcefulness and voice from an eclectic nation. Its creative capital spans design, make, styling, journalism, showmanship, retail and entrepreneurship at scales large and small. This is manifest at two extremes – the crafting of cloth holding centuries of refinement and the honing of skills in bespoke tailoring through to the honing of the prevalent business model of production and consumption at a speed and volume that amazes the world and these connections to our cultural identities and our use of technology are vehicles for fashion as a social connector, offering each of us the ability to identify ourselves and get feedback from others. Fashion affects the attitude of most people towards themselves and others. This is a vital consideration to each of us as social animals, to the cohesion of our communities and to our collective state and governance.

It is how we act that determines our destiny.

It is what we value that determines how we act.

#### **We have a crisis of perception of value**

*We are locked into getting over holding; having over being, stuff over distinction*

We need new stories about prosperity and new means to achieve it. The existing models are becoming untenable at both ends of the spectrum, the pressure on resources, particularly water, land and energy will mean that costs will rise and already we are seeing evidence of that taking place, whether it be rising cotton prices and lack of availability in India, or rising labour costs in China, and some traditional weavers and makers are servicing a market that may no-longer 'see' the value of their offer.

I believe that new narratives can help us to honour our values in ways that are enterprising, relevant, viable and appropriate in our changing world. There is a new kind of radicalism, its not banner waving and its not loud, its considered, thought through, connected, planned, but not structured. It's about new value creation for a prosperous society, economy, environment, and citizens. It has a number of shapes; we are starting to see some of these through...

#### **Fast and Slow**

Fashion manifests itself in many ways and needs many simultaneous models. There's one model to consider for example in designing with the enduring delight of Harris Tweed, a trademark since 1910, that communicates originality and trust, this year producing over 1m metres, its largest order book for 15 years, all by hand, all location specific. It's quite another model when considering pieces whose delight may be in the moment, where design for disassembly, for multiple lives through exchange and reinterpretation of existing materials and resources can re-invent without waste.

**Connecting to time and place:** provenance comes from seeing connections. If we are to grow UK fashion manufacture, it has to be appropriate – just as Margaret Howell talks of the identity of British design and make as 'placed' in our landscape, we need to see what resources we have and to be ingenious with them – that's our heritage of resourcefulness

"Our heritage is a stimulating place to start, isn't it? I think it is British heritage that people like.... we have certain honesty or authenticity, a naturalness. Some of our manufacturing was very closely linked to the land, with the natural colours, the wool. There's something quite deep about that that attracts people. It certainly does me. I love the landscape and I love people who are close to that."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Margaret Howell interview with Alice Fisher Observer May 2011

Distinction of British Manufacturing is its location specific identity, lost in our homogenous world of mass produced identikit fashionability, which is at odds with the definition of fashion, something to identify us for who we are, what we stand for.

**Something to outlast me:** Do you want to 'Design for landfill' a phrase coined by Lucille Lewin when she joined the CSF Summit.

'I believe in what I do and I want to make something that will outlast me.'<sup>2</sup>

'I'd rather develop slowly, like a tree growing roots,' says designer Oliver Spencer

In this highly competitive market, Britain's advantage is its reputation for quality and innovation over price.

### **Do you have a particular favourite piece?**

I like the [blue and black zigzag suit jacket](#). I think this will be a piece that I will wear and love for years to come.<sup>3</sup>

**Bridging the gap:** marrying retail innovation and distinctive quirks and re-claiming authenticity from its commoditization. These are the beginnings of new models – we have to be careful that they are not isolated token gestures to shore up the rest of the existing model, but it is a bold statement for a retailer who has grown its business on volume, speed and price to start to talk about distinction through trust and integrity that is worn on its sleeve, rather than through the veneer of CSR reporting.

**Pioneering Design Values** the future lies in the hands of those coming up through the ranks and our education system has a pivotal role to play. Just as we need new manufacturing, design and retail models – we also need to radicalize curriculum. Critical thinking, challenging the status quo, interrogating fashion, in its artistic and business practices is what we encourage our students to do. And they are doing it in a variety of exciting ways....

### **Thriving Communities**

Anti-form. One of our masters graduates has developed a fashion ecosystem in the centre of Leeds, where the role of designer as facilitator offers participation across the community, creating connections, employment, pleasure and revitalizing local economies alongside using existing materials resources as the basis of their work.

**Dancing with the big and the small** Christopher Raeburn, Menswear designer of the year and part of our CSF programme of designers and also a mentor in our Nike project, a design incubation programme, where we are collaborating through shared ambitions for our future prosperity through the honoring of our natural capital through our expertise and the raw inventiveness of creative talent at undergraduate level. Chris has created his made and worn in the UK label using resourcefulness to provide distinction and a canvas to engage ingenuity. He also acts as consultant to large and well-established design houses across Europe, applying his skills across levels and scales. Design training in the UK creates these kinds of creatives; we neglect this at our peril.

**Give and Take** M&S have articulated their plans towards sustainability through a staged approach, making interventions at increasingly bold stages of the structure, firstly through efficiencies in their current business operations, now through a more circular approach to replenishing whilst taking from the system, re appropriating materials and pieces through the system, changing attitudes by encouraging an awareness of the impacts of our consumption whilst being resourceful with discarded materials.

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Spencer Observer interview with Alice Fisher 29/5/11

<sup>3</sup> Top shop designer

**Collaborative consumption** active participation by wearers, makers, and designers to collectively find ways to experience fashion could mean a more democratic access. One that rather than offering a myth of access through low prices points, only to be persuaded into more purchases – short termism on the part of both business and citizen, it offers an experience that includes the material dimensions of fashion and an experience that goes beyond the garments themselves.

Each of these offers a disruption to dominant business models, each is a business that is re defining itself both emotionally and operationally.

Each offers a step towards a prosperous future.

**Through our work, we find that the essential ingredients are open innovation, a sharing of knowledge and practices through collaboration,** Active participation by wearers, makers, and designers and the boldness to find greater prosperity through longer term considerations that could include new ways to live as a thriving nation, where individual and collective success go hand in hand.

We call on the government to support universities to enable longer-term visions to create prosperity through the creative industries that can be seen in both shorter and longer-term timescales. Our fashion industry supports our practical, emotional and societal needs in many tangible ways, shapes and forms.

Centre for Sustainable Fashion, where knowledge led thinking and application of ideas seek to contribute to greater human fulfilment and ecological thriving through fashion's possibility.

Benchmarking water, energy, waste, wellbeing, equality and biodiversity as the key considerations in its activities, it utilises the most appropriate tools to achieve its outcomes.

Baroness Young of Hornsey:

Thank you very much Dilys for what was a very instructive piece, well delivered and supported by images, and I think that issue of challenging existing business models is really important, challenging the ways in which a particular notion of profit, a particular notion of development, a particular notion of growth has been promoted, as it were, and it's not led us to a great place, actually, so we do need to challenge that on a number of levels. Many other points as well, which I hope we will be able to discuss shortly. We move on now to Victoria Stapleton who is the Founder and Creative Director of Brora.