



Photo by Holly Falconer

## SUSTAINABLE FUTURES

In conversation with Dilys Williams.

**Part of the London College of Fashion (University of the Arts London), the Centre for Sustainable Fashion has been run by Dilys Williams since it was founded in 2007. A designer herself, Dilys is fully aware of the hurdles confronting people working within the industry.**

We sat down with her to discuss some of the ways in which she feels those challenges are being met and the ways in which the Centre for Sustainable Fashion is helping facilitate change within the fashion industry.

*What kind of people are involved with the department within the university?*

We attract a whole variety of students, essentially people really wanting to challenge the current fashion system – people interested in climate change and social issues, for example. There are also people who have been in the industry for some time – went into the industry full of optimism, seen the negative sides of it and now want to find something that will continue that optimism. People who look at the fashion industry and think there's got to be a better way than this!

*Would you count yourself among those people?*

Yes, definitely. Working at Hamnett, I'd already become involved in projects and campaigns around ethical practice. One of the reasons I got more involved here was because I suddenly thought it isn't just all about organic cotton – organic cotton isn't the end of it. I started to think about the way that we approach our work and the way we work together, collaboratively. This seemed like an amazing opportunity to develop some of those ideas on a practical level.

*Isn't fashion, at its core, at odds with issues like sustainability and ethical practice?*

Not really. The basis of what fashion is about is absolutely in sync with sustainability and ethical practices or ecological issues because fashion is about constantly evolving and changing. The world is changing, our resources are changing and our understanding of what's going on in the world has changed too. And so business has to change. We can't just sit with the old business models and not adapt. The fast-fashion consumption-production model has been amazingly successful and it still is, but in the longer term everyone knows that it's not a model that can last.

*There's obviously a resistance to this – maybe a kind of denial even. Where does that come from?*

I think every one of us has an interest in seeing that change through, but because of the way economies are set out, unfortunately a lot of what we do is determined by short-term demands. So although people are aware of the fact that the system needs a complete review, a lot of people are just looking at simply making efficiencies within the system – trying to cut down on the amount of stuff we consume, the amount of stuff we waste – rather than looking at totally new approaches. In a way that's where we get a little bit of a language barrier.

*You say they need to make a change in their business behaviour; they say they are...*

Yes. But we've already had conversations with huge, mass-producing companies who are thinking about what happens when they can't produce stuff anymore. Ultimately there are very few people with their heads in the sand thinking we can just keep churning out more stuff.

*Is your focus on the big companies or are you also speaking with smaller ones?*

We have a dialogue with people across the board. If anything, we are more able to work with smaller businesses because our key activity as a university is working with students and graduates, some of whom are keen to start up their own businesses. But big established businesses have more resources for research and development and for developing things themselves. Some of the big businesses are doing quite interesting things and often our role there is to agitate at the edge, highlighting opportunities and considerations that are often missed by them.

*In what way does that pan out?*

There are a lot of companies doing some amazing things in their technical departments. But it's surprising to see that these companies – while doing a lot from a manufacturing point of view – are not actually doing much around the culture of design and design thinking.

*So your role can be helping these companies translate what they're learning into areas such as wearability and usability?*

Yes. When I trained as a designer I really did only think about getting it to the shop floor or the showroom and didn't really think about it beyond that. You did a drawing, you picked the fabric. You looked at the piece on a fit model. You thought it would work as an item for people you envisaged came into the store. But that was it. Now designers are increasingly thinking about that piece having a life and designing a product informed by what happens to it during that whole lifespan, even beyond the end of its initial purpose as a garment. And that's allowing for a whole new set of opportunities to emerge around design.

*The afterlife of a garment: doesn't that dent the aspirational, the romantic side of fashion design?*

I think it's the complete opposite. If you design something, put your ideas, time and creativity into it, you don't want it to just be discarded. It's incredibly rewarding if you see someone wearing a piece you designed ten years before and it still looks great. If you think about how a piece is going to look after ten years, then maybe you'll design it better, differently. I read an interview with a designer the other day who said, "I'd love to design things that will outlive me." That's not the norm – yet.

*I guess deep down most designers want some kind of Coco Chanel-type status, but that needs to be built into the design – it doesn't happen by accident. How does that figure with a commodity item like the cotton t-shirt?*

Of course, if you're designing cotton t-shirts, then you're going to have a different set of parameters from, say, a coat that only has to be washed twice a year. Considerations like its biodegradability – can you literally plant it? Can it become fertiliser when you've finished it? – come into play here. I think we have to accept that there are going to be some things that have long lifespans and some that are going to be shorter, and the parameters which you use to define good, well-made product are different for each.

*When people think of ethical product they often imagine taupe or green or some kind of fluffy, earthy image – anything that seems at odds with real forward-facing fashion.*

It's an important point. We've done a lot of work making sure that all our communication is visually strong and that it doesn't fit into that preconceived aesthetic around sustainability in fashion. I think that preconceived aesthetic has been somewhat detrimental over the years. It has a place, of course – because a lot of the pioneers in sustainability have come from social or environmental backgrounds. But you've also got to have an aesthetic that stands up on its own, one that is just drop-dead gorgeous and has an impact in its own right. Alex, one of our team, has been doing a project which features in i-D magazine every issue and it's really important to us in that not only is it underscored by a beautiful aesthetic but also that it relates to lots of other beautiful aesthetics. It should reflect the various designers' values and visions too. That's important to us and I hope that those things have had an influence over how people perceive us and maybe see ideas around sustainability as a whole. But who knows, maybe you ought to speak to someone else and find out!

*On a much more basic level, does, say, the rise in the current price of cotton have any impact on what you do, on your dialogue with businesses and designers?*

It does, because it's another example of the production-consumption model that's based on being able to sell huge amounts of stuff at a low cost. We know that resources are going to become less easy to find, whether it's oil or whether it's cotton and any number of other source materials, but people tend to think it's a long way off. Suddenly you have a situation where the cotton price has gone up; people stop and think: "Oh, it's happening now." Sure, they might tell themselves it's just a bad harvest and things will be OK in a couple of years, but the reality is they can't do their costings and get a t-shirt out at three pounds each and sell 5,000 of them. It's a reality-check which we argue should give you cause to look not simply at moving over to organic cotton, but to reviewing your whole strategy – question how your whole business model works.

*As a "developing area", do you see any opportunities for a new business model when it comes to, say, African fashion?*

In terms of Africa, one of the things I'm concerned about as part of my work is the hierarchical nature of the industry where you have, for example, the buyer going out and giving instructions without any consideration for the locality or the culture within which they're looking to operate. If you work collaboratively, have someone who has a particular skill sit down with a designer and a buyer, for example, and build from there, you have the opportunity to create something that's better made and more rewarding to all those involved. One of my research projects is called Shared Talent; it's based on the idea of bringing everyone together on an equal footing.

*I guess one example of that is the Inoue Brothers going off and sitting with craftspeople in Khayelitsha in Cape Town communities, even of Hiroki Nakamura from Visvim working with Navajo Indians in supposedly developed areas like the US.*

Yes, and that really is ethics in practice because you're not just giving someone good working conditions, you're actually giving them a prominence in the work which is equal to the prominence of the person whose name's on the label. I think that's really interesting and important and I think that's where we have some of the problems at the other end. If people are so defined by this traditional hierarchy it's harder to work collaboratively. It works best when that kind of exclusion doesn't happen, where everybody in the process is recognised for his or her contribution.

*Fashion is inherently contradictory, the minute people start accepting the logic of sustainability, fashion designers will go the other way. They'll celebrate glamour, indulgence and waste – just because we can.*

But I think they can't. I understand exactly what you're saying, but being extreme can't be at the expense of being relevant. And if you're not relevant as a designer, what are you? Relevance is the bottom line. **WM**

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