

Title	Centre for Sustainable Fashion: Inspiring a new way of thinking
Type	Article
URL	http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/8487/
Date	2013
Citation	Williams, Dilys and Earley, Katharine (2013) Centre for Sustainable Fashion: Inspiring a new way of thinking. Source Intelligence.
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Centre for Sustainable Fashion: inspiring a new way of thinking

The Centre for Sustainable Fashion at the London College of Fashion is celebrating five years as a versatile academic force linking research, education and business in the pursuit of innovation in sustainable fashion. SOURCE contributor Katharine Earley speaks to Centre director and ethical fashion pioneer, Dilys Williams, about the elements of success that have combined to create a world-first Masters course and dynamic partnerships with high profile brands and government, as well as her vision for the CSF's future.

With sustainability conversations increasingly focusing on cross-sector collaboration, the Centre for Sustainable Fashion (CSF) is a shining example of an institution that successfully forges partnerships with the business and public sector spheres. Founded in 2008 by Dilys Williams and Nina Stevenson, the CSF focuses on inspiring and creating innovative approaches to sustainable fashion by connecting research, education and business. Williams has been Centre Director from the start, infusing its activities with her creativity, passion and visionary thinking.

Now, five years on, what does Williams believe have been the chief contributors to the CSF's success in promoting fashion as a catalyst for change?

“The Centre for Sustainable Fashion has seen a number of voices coming together to talk openly and engage in critical and realistic dialogue about the future of fashion,” says Williams. “Researchers, designers and students alike have debated how the fashion industry can move towards a new way of thinking, based on sound ecological principles and social equality, with great energy and enthusiasm.”

Forging a new direction

Having approached the London College of Fashion with a ‘Creating Better Lives’ proposal in 2008, Williams’ first step was to hold an engaging summit with politicians, students, journalists and fashion industry professionals to discuss a collaborative way forward. This helped to outline the challenges the CSF would tackle: helping designers to work within ecological limits, honouring the lives of those involved in the fashion supply chain, and investigating how to achieve transformational change by seeking ways to dissolve fashion’s complex social and environmental problems, rather than finding fixes for them.

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“We’re focused on changing the approach itself and introducing a new way of thinking,” says Williams. “This is particularly relevant to the academic curriculum. It’s not just about teaching sustainable ways of doing things, it’s about different ways of teaching, and encouraging a mindful, empathetic approach – mindfulness sits at the heart of catalysing sustainable change.”

Three-pronged approach

Devised in partnership with Ursula Hudson, the CSF’s strategy would be to identify challenging and radical ways of creating change on the journey towards sustainable fashion. It would do this through three branches of activity: business consultancy, research and academic teaching. Throughout the CSF’s five-year history, these areas have combined to complement and reinforce each other, and underpin everything the Centre does.

Pathways to success

- **Inspiring tomorrow’s fashion professionals**

The CSF created the first ever Masters course in sustainable fashion, the ‘MA in Fashion and the Environment’, with a progressive, forward-looking curriculum.

Despite the ‘risk’ of opting for the new course, given that job prospects in the fashion industry were largely of the ‘business as usual’ variety, five years of successful post-graduates bears testament to the value of this ‘unconventional’ Masters degree. Some have gone on to forge brand new sustainability roles at Levi’s, Stella McCartney and Alexander McQueen. Others are applying what they’ve learnt in more traditional fashion roles.

Among the many bright and interesting projects that CSF students go on to undertake, the [‘Here today, here tomorrow’](#) ethical fashion collective in East London is a great example of post-graduates uniting to apply their learning in a very hands-on way.

The CSF’s ‘MA in Fashion and the Environment’ won the SOURCE ‘Education’ Award in 2012.

- **Helping small businesses thrive with ‘London Style’**

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With help from the European Regional Development Fund, the CSF worked in partnership with Newham College of Further Education, East London Design Show and Holts Jewellery Academy to create 'London Style' in 2009, a not-for-profit initiative that aimed to help businesses embed sustainability in their design and business thinking. The CSF and its partners provided training and support to 100 London-based fashion businesses over two years. The Centre also developed partnerships with shows such as Estethica at London Fashion Week and Ecoluxe London to promote some of the most exciting new companies involved in the project.

London Style has since blossomed into a fully subsidised programme of support for SMEs, led by Alex McIntosh, the CSF's Enterprise and Consultancy Manager.

- **A rich cross-section of subject experts**

"All our experts bring significant experience from different areas of the fashion industry or academia," explains Williams. "Together, they represent a wealth of knowledge and a vast cross-section of expertise."

In addition to Williams and McIntosh, the many talented individuals who make up the CSF team include Dr Kate Fletcher, the respected author, designer and founder of the '[Local Wisdom](#)' project (which aims to encourage people to develop a lasting relationship with their clothes) and Helen Storey MBE, Professor of Fashion, who heads up the '[Catalytic Clothing](#)' project (which seeks to explore how clothing and textiles can be used as a catalytic service to purify air). Professor Sandy Black leads the CSF's '[Considerate Design](#)' project. This aims to help designers develop sustainable fashion products that cut fashion consumption while increasing consumer enjoyment.

- **Forging links with government**

Dilys Williams herself is playing an active role in the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Ethics and Sustainability in Fashion, chaired by Baroness Lola Young.

"I'm thrilled to be part of this movement and to be speaking openly about the sustainability challenges facing the fashion industry," she says. "I've been inspired by

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the passionate individuals I've met – their integrity and commitment confirms that there is a will within government to tackle these important issues.”

- **Partnering with major businesses**

The CSF worked closely with Nike to offer insights and feedback during the development of the sportswear giant's [newly launched MAKING app](#), which is set to help designers and product creators make informed decisions about the environmental impacts of the materials they choose.

“We've built an incredible relationship with the sustainability team at Nike,” says Williams. “Nike is very open, despite its size, about the challenges inherent in working towards a better world.”

The MAKING app ranks materials in apparel based on four key areas: water, chemistry, energy and waste. It is powered by data from the Nike Materials Sustainability Index (MSI).

The CSF also advised on the M&S and Oxfam Shwopping campaign, which has been a great success. Some 3.6m items of clothing worth £2.2m have been 'shwopped' and donated to Oxfam to date. This incredible response from the public shows the traction that can be achieved with these types of campaigns, Williams believes. Earlier this year, the CSF created three installations for the M&S Shwop Shop at its flagship store in Oxford Street, all designed to encourage a new culture of 'gifting away' rather than throwing away.

Moving forward

“We plan to focus our energy on five key areas in the future,” explains Williams. “These are all based on our commitment to creating diverse patterns of activity to innovate towards sustainable fashion, and are all areas we believe we can influence.”

The five areas are:

1. **Be a voice for change** – With fashion an emotive part of all our lives, the CSF wants to work with governments and other public-sector organisations to explore how

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humanity is affected by fashion and determine how these challenges can be addressed.

2. **Challenge conventional aesthetics** – The CSF believes clothing should help draw out people’s personalities, and designers would benefit from valuing the personality of the wearer, without forgetting the fantasy that makes fashion so exciting.
3. **Engage citizen action** – The CSF wants its research to be ‘open-sourced’ and to actively engage with others to achieve greater change.
4. **Radicalise practice** – In line with the CSF’s mindful, compassionate approach, those within the fashion industry should be encouraged to collaborate across their different silos.
5. **Dream with eyes wide open** – To create viable, feasible ideas that work ergonomically and economically – designers should keep their feet on the ground while not being constrained by the current status quo.

Challenges for sustainable fashion

“There’s lots of noise in the fashion industry about the business case for sustainability,” says Williams. “While the industry has changed a lot in the past five years, there’s still a huge job to be done. The damage being done by companies following the ‘business as usual’ model is significant. Meanwhile, CO₂ levels are rocketing worldwide and we’ve just witnessed the worst ever industrial accident in the history of the garment industry.

“We simply can’t wait for further industrial or climate change disasters,” concludes Williams. “Sustainable fashion must become ‘the’ way, not the alternative way, which is a steep challenge. Governments can help with this by making more long-term commitments, while GDP could be calculated differently to include measures that matter more to humanity.

“Ultimately, it will be the ingenious nature of people that carries us through – there are so many amazing people involved in sustainable fashion. Making their voices heard, sharing their mindset and applying their knowledge will help drive lasting change.”