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Prototyping a new tomorrow: crafting leadership in fashion and sustainability

For 15 years I have been active in the field of fashion and sustainability, seeking to contribute to the transformation of the fashion system. In a first phase of activity, I explored design for longevity through a micro-scale knitwear label. In the second – which formed the basis of my PhD research – I attempted to reframe domestic knitting practice to more directly contribute to a sustainable fashion system. In both cases, I attempted to offer leadership to others, in the sense of creating inspiring examples and an inclusive space to act.

As I commence a new phase of work, I am considering: how can I now help to progress thinking around fashion and sustainability? Despite recent excitement regarding the notion of the circular economy, action in this sphere remains largely incremental and fails to tackle disastrous levels of clothing consumption. While notable leaders have emerged, this is still a young field of inquiry and there is much scope for further development. Through recent experiences in teaching and research, I have identified two key issues to which I feel I can make a contribution.

The first issue relates to the problem of 'lock-in': the limiting of thinking about alternative lifestyles by the seemingly intractable nature of the status quo. At a recent conference on transitioning to a low-carbon future, multiple speakers argued that the lack of compelling and engaging narratives about the future exacerbates this problem. At present, visions of future sustainable fashion are vague, yet rather negative; they appear to represent a dowdy denial of the pleasures of consumption that we currently take for granted. Alternative visions – fleshed out, made real and visible – are needed to entice us to change.

The second issue is the disconnect between sustainability and the theoretical investigation of fashion. To date, research within the field has largely been driven by researchers in design and business; contributions from sociologists and cultural theorists, for example, have been few. Because fashion is such a socially and psychologically significant force, it is difficult to consider ways in which the system might change without a well-developed understanding of the needs we meet, and the challenges we arguably create, through our fashion experiences.

There is a productive connection between these two issues and I see the opportunity for leadership in developing activity in this area. I propose to explore possible alternative visions of fashion while seeking involvement from those whose theoretical knowledge could help us to dissect, understand and develop them.

This paper presents a pilot initiative that brings together theorists, designers and wearers to collaboratively generate, discuss and enact alternative fashion scenarios, using a workshop format inspired by fictional devices such as multiple worlds and counterfactual histories. It includes reflection on the skills and qualities that I, as a maker, bring to this endeavour – such as the ability to prototype big ideas on a human scale and to shift between different modes of design – and those that I may need to develop in order to fulfil this potential leadership role.