



Sustainable Fashion Design: Oxymoron No More?

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At the Forefront of a Slow-Moving Shift

Slowly but surely the fashion industry is catching on to corporate social responsibility and sustainability. First came the anti-fur campaigns of the 1980s and 1990s. Many brands and retailers have since eliminated the use of fur in their products or taken measures to ensure good animal welfare conditions in their fur supply chains. Then, beginning in the late 1990s, numerous sweatshop scandals pressured fashion brands and retailers to implement factory compliance monitoring programs. Many now do so either independently or through collaborative initiatives such as Better Work or the Fair Labor Association.

In the past several years, the fashion industry has faced intensifying criticism about its environmental footprint and has once again reacted both on a brand level, with many brands establishing their own sustainability commitments and strategies, as well as on an industry-wide scale with initiatives such as the Sustainable Apparel Coalition or the Natural Resources Defense Council's Clean by Design campaign. More recently, however, sustainability leaders in the fashion industry have begun moving beyond their initial reactive response toward proactively addressing environmental concerns at the beginning of the value chain—when garments are designed.

Sustainable design in fashion has so far been largely focused on materials selection. Several brands have developed or are in the process of developing indices that will help their designers and product development teams choose materials based on environmental impacts throughout the clothing life cycle. Examples of such indices include NIKE Inc.'s Materials Sustainability Index and Timberland's Green Index, which inspired the broader-reaching Outdoor Industry Association's Eco-Index. Both NIKE's index and the Eco-Index have also been incorporated into the Sustainable Apparel Coalition's Higg Index, which is currently endorsed by almost 50 industry-leading brands, retailers, and suppliers.

This initial progress should be commended and further fostered, but there is one caveat. While materials selection can influence environmental impacts throughout the clothing life cycle and is therefore a priority, brands and retailers should be careful not to equate sustainable design with simply plugging materials information into a computerized tool. Sustainable design requires a more holistic perspective that takes into account not only how fashion is produced, but also how it is consumed. After all, sustainable materials will have limited impact if low-quality or poorly designed garments are worn only a few times before they end up in a landfill. In addition, laundering is an impact hot spot for water and energy use, though designers rarely consider the environmental effects of caring for garments.



Photos courtesy of Blessus

A few examples of this broader approach to sustainable design already exist. Polish-based brand Blessus designs garments with a modular approach. They use panels and zippers to create garments that can be reconfigured into multiple outfits, thus increasing product versatility and longevity. Timberland's Design for Disassembly shoes have been created with a few simple components in order to facilitate end-of-life disassembly and recycling. Other brands, such as Goodone, From Somewhere, and Junky Styling, close the loop by up-cycling pre-consumer waste or end-of-life castoffs into new garments.



Inside the Sustainable Design Process

An interview with Nin Castle, cofounder and creative director of sustainable fashion brand Goodone, reveals the challenges and rewards of sustainable fashion design from the designer's point of view. Goodone, a highly acclaimed brand on the London fashion scene, uses up-cycled fabrics combined with locally and sustainably sourced materials to create a bold, color-blocked, and fashion-forward aesthetic.

What first inspired you to launch Goodone back in 2006?

When I graduated, there were not many designers creating sustainable fashion, or at least not many design-focused, fashion-forward sustainable brands. While still a student, I designed my final collection using sustainable fabrics. At the time, I was unable to find sustainable fabrics in the U.K. I had to order some of my materials from Japan or from the United States. But with shipping costs and import taxes, it became far too expensive, and so I started to look into using recycled fabrics.

Photo courtesy of Goodone



Goodone claims to have developed a design method that is informed by the use of recycled fabrics, but not restrained by it. Could you describe your design process?

I think a lot of people who up-cycle sometimes find it difficult to be inspired by their fabrics. Designing by up-cycling creates an additional limitation of what you can use and not just what you want to use. For Goodone, it has always been important for us to keep design as the main focus. Every garment does not have to be 50 percent up-cycled materials, for example. Maybe a certain style will be only 20 percent recycled, and the rest will be sustainable and/or locally sourced materials, depending on the design. Ultimately, sustainability has to work around design—otherwise no one will want to wear your clothes!

Despite your philosophy, are there ever moments when you feel restrained by sustainability in your design process? How do you overcome these challenges?

Of course! Sustainable design is basically an absolute nightmare. The fashion industry is incredibly competitive; yet as a sustainable brand, we face additional constraints. Meanwhile, consumers expect to buy our products at the same price point as those of other nonsustainable brands. At Goodone, we persevere because of how immensely satisfying it is to make a product that people will buy based on its design, sometimes without even realizing that it is sustainable. Designing sustainably also gives us a lasting sense of purpose in an otherwise fickle industry.

What creative opportunities has sustainability brought to your design process?

Design is all about problem solving, reconciling what you want to do as a designer with what is realistically possible. Creative opportunities can come from the extra layer of problem solving in sustainable design. Sometimes your creative process is blocked by sustainability considerations, but then you take your design in a different direction and end up creating a much more interesting final product.

To what extent do you think about the consumer phase (wear, care, and disposal) when designing?

The cradle-to-cradle discussion is common at Goodone. Because Goodone is an up-cycling brand, we already use an end-of-life product in our designs. We also try to make clothes that last, clothes that are fashion-forward yet not so trend-driven that they can only be worn for one season. Closing the loop by reusing our own garments at end of life is an interesting possibility, but not one we have explored yet. As I said before, we have to pick our battles.

It is unfortunate that the fashion industry as a whole does not give more consideration to the consumer phase. The biggest problem with the fashion industry today is the way we consume. Materials selection would be much less important if we were to consume less, better, and more sustainably. If consumers demanded well-made, sustainable fashion and were willing to pay for it, sustainability would suddenly become a priority for every fashion brand. It always comes back to the consumer!



Photos courtesy of Goodone

The World's Most Sustainable Suit: Fashion's Concept Car

While niche-market sustainable brands such as Goodone are already well-versed in sustainable design, mass market retailers are beginning to explore this new territory. The "world's most sustainable suit," launched by leading British retailer Marks and Spencer (M&S) in September 2012, is one of the most advanced examples of sustainable design in mainstream fashion. Several years in the making, the suit was designed collaboratively by a team of product development and sustainability experts to be as stylish as it is sustainable. Touted by M&S as "one of the greenest garments ever made," the suit is comprised of organic wool, a lining made of recycled plastic bottles and canvas, and labels made of recycled polyester, as well as reclaimed buttons and reclaimed fabric for the pockets and waistband.

Mark Sumner, M&S sustainable raw material expert, equates the sustainable suit to a concept car. "Like a concept car," he says, "the sustainable suit represents our vision for the future of fashion." As part of its long-term sustainability strategy, known as Plan A, M&S has committed to incorporating at least one sustainable attribute into every single one of its products by 2020. The sustainable suit therefore acts as a limited edition test-run of an opportunity to learn about the possibilities (and current limitations) of sustainable fashion. The first of several such sustainable garments to be released over the coming year, the suit has already yielded some valuable lessons that can eventually be applied to all M&S fashion products as well as to the industry more generally.

COMPROMISE IN MATERIALS SELECTION

Because of its many components and exact tailoring, a well-made suit is one of the most difficult garments to master under normal circumstances, let alone with the additional constraints of sustainability concerns. Despite a positive synergy between the product development team and sustainability experts, Sumner describes how the challenge of designing a sustainable suit brought to light certain contradictions inherent to sustainable design.

The choice of materials was particularly problematic. While a suit made entirely of polyester would be the easiest to recycle at end of life, it would be less marketable to the target customer who prefers wool. A machine-washable 50/50-blend of polyester and wool would forego the need for dry cleaning, but it would increase water use by machine washing and would be more difficult to recycle at end of life. Similarly, recycled polyester thread, the most sustainable option for stitching, did not provide the strength and stretch required in a high-quality suit, thus jeopardizing the garment's longevity. Materials selection therefore required compromise and a delicate balance among different impacts across the suit's life cycle.

Some elements of construction were also considered as part of the sustainable design process. Fusible interfacing (a stiffer material that is bound to the inside of fabric to give a garment its form) makes end-of-life recycling more difficult, for example, but it was ultimately allowed because it is essential to the tailored structure and proper fit of a suit. In fact, aside from materials selection, the sustainable suit was designed, in terms of cut and construction, as a traditional suit would be. As Sumner points out, the suit was never meant to be marketed on its environmental credentials, but rather it was developed first and foremost according to typical considerations such as style and price.

THE CONSUMER ROLE IN SUSTAINABLE DESIGN

M&S regularly engages with its customers in order to understand consumer perceptions of sustainability. "The U.K. consumer is very much in the process of evolving his knowledge and view of sustainability," Sumner observes. "Consumer feedback is constantly taken into account in our design process as we try to



Photo courtesy of M&S

address those sustainability concerns which our customers have expressed, through focus groups, for example, to be most important.”

While M&S was designing the sustainable suit, consumer perceptions were sometimes surprising. At first, customers reacted negatively to lining the suit with recycled polyester because they intuitively—and falsely—believed that recycled polyester was of a poorer feel and quality than more conventional choices. This misconception indicates that the sustainable suit and other forthcoming concept garments may offer learning opportunities for both M&S and its customers. Each suit sold in stores will have a QR code (Quick Response code) that customers can use to search the M&S website for further information about the product’s environmental impacts.

While Sumner feels that it is still too early to draw any conclusions about the sustainable suit, his initial impressions are optimistic. “We hoped and, I think, were able to show both internal teams and the industry that it is possible and rewarding to engage designers in conceiving more sustainable products,” he says. “One key lesson from this process is already becoming clear: Sustainability can be done in a stylish way and in a commercial way.”

Engaging Consumers

Sustainable fashion extends beyond product design to systems of production and consumption. M&S recently launched a fashion initiative in partnership with Oxfam, which is fronted by Joanna Lumley, and which is designed to encourage customers to recycle unwanted clothing.



Photo courtesy of M&S

Slow Fashion Gains Momentum

Unfortunately, the potential positive impacts of selecting sustainable materials are limited by fast fashion business models, the current norm among mass market brands and retailers, which lead to rapid product turnover and high waste outputs. The rate at which fashion production cycles have accelerated in recent years is nothing short of shocking. Just a few decades ago, fashion designers presented only two collections a year: spring/summer and autumn/winter. Today's mass market brands rotate their in-store collections as often as every two or three weeks, a turnover that equates to roughly 20 collections per year!

Meanwhile, fashion consumption has risen steeply due to a penchant for cheap and quick fast fashion fixes. In 2006, a study by Cambridge University found that British consumers were purchasing more than one third more clothing than they had been just four years earlier. A study conducted in the same year by Kantar Worldpanel (formerly TNS Worldpanel) furthermore found that U.K. consumers were buying 40 percent of their clothing from value retailers with just 17 percent of their total clothing budget.

PRESSURE ON DESIGNERS

The increasing supply and demand for fast fashion has created a vicious cycle that is spiraling out of control, and designers are struggling to keep up. In 2010, renowned British and Turkish-Cypriot designer Hussein Chalayan bought back his brand from fashion conglomerate PPR in an attempt to relieve the pressure of constantly creating at ever-faster intervals. "Being in those houses is like running on a diamond-plated hamster wheel," he has been quoted as saying. "You have to go faster and faster and faster, and chances are still very high [that] you will fall off." Similarly, designer Tom Ford left Gucci in 2004 and has since relaunched his eponymous brand, which now shows only two collections per year.

For some designers, a slow fashion mindset is central to their design process and brand identity. Japanese designer Akira Minagawa, with his brand mina perhonen, is a particularly interesting example of slow fashion design. Rather than fluctuate from season to season according to the latest trends, his collections gradually evolve, reusing or reworking materials and silhouettes from previous seasons. For Hermes, a commitment to slow fashion has served to reinforce its brand identity of exceptional quality and exclusivity. In response to high demand for its handbags, the French fashion house refused to abandon its traditional manufacturing techniques or drastically increase production volumes. Rather than deterring frustrated clients, Hermes' slow fashion approach has resulted in years-long waiting lists for some of the brand's most popular models and Hermes handbags selling at auctions for more than US\$200,000!



mina perhonen
2011/2012 Autumn/Winter

mina perhonen
2012 Spring/Summer

mina perhonen
2012/2013 Autumn/Winter

Photos courtesy of mina perhonen

SHIFTING CONSUMER DEMAND

Ironically, slow fashion designers and brands may be ahead of their fast fashion competitors in responding to a shifting consumerist paradigm. For more and more consumers, the temporary high of buying into the latest of-the-minute fashion is increasingly fleeting and hollow. In an interview with EcoSalon, Elizabeth Kline, author of *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion*, describes the disillusion that she and other consumers are beginning to feel with fast fashion. “I think the pace of fashion has become maddening to a growing number of consumers,” she says. “The whole game of fashion feels arbitrary and pointless now.”

A recent *New York Times* article confirms Kline’s observation. In the article, trend experts and style leaders admit that trends are no longer the all-powerful dictum they once were. Thanks largely in part to the internet, consumers now have access to an unprecedented wealth of style information and are beginning to trust their own interpretation and personal taste rather than mimicking select trends diffused via fashion advertising and shop windows.

It can only be hoped that this disillusion with fast fashion and disinterest in passing trends will translate into greater consumer demand for higher quality, unique pieces that require more realistic production times. Brands and retailers would then have no choice but to adapt their products, and business models, to changing consumer tastes, thus initiating a more virtuous supply-and-demand cycle with a less maddening rhythm for designers and consumers alike.

Thinking Beyond the Index

Sustainable fashion design is a nascent concept at the forefront of the industry's decades-long progression toward sustainability. While niche-market sustainable brands, such as Goodone, have long made sustainable design a core element of their brand identity, mass market retailers such as Marks and Spencer are only just beginning to experiment with sustainably designed concept garments.

The cutting edge of sustainable design in the fashion industry is currently focused on selecting more sustainable materials. While materials selection is undoubtedly a priority, brands and retailers must eventually move beyond materials selection indices toward a broader definition of sustainable design. Responding to increasing consumer demand for more thoughtfully-designed, higher quality products will require a more systematic approach to sustainable design, one that takes into account not only how fashion is produced, but also how it is consumed.

The NICE* Consumer Vision: A Touchstone for Sustainable Fashion Design



* NICE stands for Nordic Initiative Clean & Ethical, which is a project under the Nordic Fashion Association. The NICE Consumer is a joint project between the Danish Fashion Institute (through NICE) and BSR to create a framework for engaging consumers on the sustainable consumption of fashion.

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