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Designing for and with Garment Repair: an Exploration of Future Possibilities

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Abstract: Over the years, the increasingly domineering heavy hand of the fashion industry’s ‘take-make-waste’ production paradigm has contributed to the creation of systems that support fast production, easy purchases and frequent disposal of inexpensive, poorly designed and often low-quality garments. Prior research has slowly but steadily been working towards highlighting the fundamental role that garment mending can play in supporting product longevity. While addressing clothing breakages through mending has been considerably explored as a user practice, how it can inform the process of garment design has remained under-researched. Therefore, this paper takes its theoretical inspiration from ‘broken-world thinking’ with a repair-centred sensibility as its point of departure. Here we take malfunction, as opposed to innovation or design, as the starting point of change and garment design. Through this paper we then explore the opportunities to introduce and weave a repair ethos into every stage of the garment design process. In this way, we highlight the inseparability of repair from design and the importance that basic design decisions can have for facilitating cultures of mending. We also identify the challenges and opportunities that such an approach entails. This paper presents findings from three student workshops in three design universities in different geographical locations. By exploring the preliminary results of this work we open up a discussion on re-evaluating present-day fashion design approaches by initiating a move towards a design sensibility for repair which is fundamental to the process of fashion design, particularly in the context of sustainability.

Introduction

“Repair is about space and function – the extension or safeguarding of capabilities in danger of decay” (Jackson, 2014).

Over the years, the increasingly domineering heavy hand of the fashion industry’s ‘take-make-waste’ production paradigm has contributed to the creation of systems that support fast production, easy purchases and frequent disposal of inexpensive, poorly designed and often low-quality garments. The alarming and ever-increasing rates at which textiles are disposed of has therefore ushered academic research to explore various ways of encouraging and extending the use-time of garments (Fletcher, 2008; Birtwistle & Moore, 2007; WRAP, 2012). Prior research has slowly but steadily been working towards highlighting the fundamental role that garment mending can play in supporting this endeavour (McLaren et al., 2015; WRAP, 2012; Fletcher, 2015; Durrani, 2018a; Laitala and Klepp, 2018). While mending is acknowledged as crucial for saving garments destined for the bin, research also notes that a lack of awareness, time and mending skills stand as barriers to garment repair in Western countries (Laitala, 2015; Fletcher, 2015; Twigger, 2016; McLaren et al., 2015; Lapolla and Sanders, 2015; Norum, 2013; Gwilt, 2014). In order to overcome these issues, various recommendations have been proposed, such as ‘educating’ users in how to mend by introducing sewing classes at schools, launching media campaigns on the benefits of laundering less and maintaining garments through mending, or offering repair services as part of fashion designers’ businesses (Laitala, 2015; Norum, 2013; Gwilt, 2014). Alternatively, design-led solutions such as modular garments (Gwilt, 2014) or the use of robust materials for future garment production (Fletcher, 2008) have also been suggested as means to ensure the long-term use of clothing.

However, these recommendations have primarily been presented through a focus on
only user perspectives of mending (see Norum, 2013; Gwilt, 2014; Mc Laren et al., 2015; WRAP, 2012). Such an emphasis has led to overlooking and under-researching existing users’ mending practices (Durrani, 2018a-b) and how garment breakdown could inform the fashion design process. Therefore, this paper takes its theoretical inspiration from ‘broken-world thinking’ with a repair-centred sensibility as its point of departure. Here we take malfunction, as opposed to innovation or design, as the starting point of change and garment design (Jackson, 2014). In order to do so, we go back to the designers’ drawing boards and begin by asking the following question:

What happens when fashion designers take breakdown as their point of creative departure?

Through this paper we then explore the opportunities to introduce and weave a repair ethos into every stage of the garment design process. In this way, we highlight the inseparability of repair from design and the importance that basic design decisions can have for facilitating cultures of mending. We also identify the challenges and opportunities that such an approach entail. This paper presents findings from three student workshops in three design universities in different geographical locations. By exploring the preliminary results of this work we open up a discussion on re-evaluating present-day fashion design approaches by initiating a move towards a design sensibility for repair which is fundamental to the process of fashion design, particularly in the context of sustainability. However, before providing details of the research methods and findings, the following section presents an overview of the theoretical framework within which the present work is grounded.

Broken-World Thinking
The present commercial logic behind fashion design is based on linear models, whereby savings in production costs are often met with extremely fast material throughput to the system (Niinimäki, 2018). The businesses or companies for which designers work set guidelines for garment design that follow a fast production business logic (Diefenbacher, 2013, p. 209). Therefore, any creative approaches to fashion design become limited or constrained by current production-oriented and profit-driven economic thinking (Rissanen 2017, p.542). Fashion designers in the fashion system thus end up creating collections that are based on rapidly changing trends rather than users’ real needs, and certainly not on an environmental perspective (Niinimäki, 2011). This business logic is built on fast designing, fast manufacturing and maximising sales, resulting in short use time of garments, low quality and easy disposal. Mass-manufactured garments are not generally designed for long-term use nor are they conducive to mending (Niinimäki, 2011). Moreover, designers’ hands are often tied by limited room to propose alternative ways of designing garments (Ruppert-Stroescu, 2018; Niinimäki, 2011; Rissanen, 2017). However, despite such systemic challenges, if change is to be effectively addressed, alternatives need to be explored. It is for this purpose that in addressing product longevity, this paper takes garment breakdown as its point of departure. In other words, if garments continue to be designed in ways that do not leave much margin for being repaired, is it fair to fix our attention primarily on changing user practices? Although users do play a significant role in extending the use of their garments, they are not the only ones upon which the onus of longevity rests. In addition, repair itself is not usually considered in the design process (Graham and Thrift, 2007), even though the way in which a garment or product is designed can play a role in determining its eventual repair (Terzioğlu, 2017). Though the design of a garment might not entirely guarantee its repair, it can certainly ease the process of mending once the clothing is in use.

To enable this, Jackson (2014) proposes that designers take breakages or malfunction as the point of their creative departure. He states that by applying a broken-world thinking approach to the processes of design, creativity becomes situated within engagements with repair, which can inform the ultimate design of a given product or service. By focusing on repair, a designer’s gaze can shift from being production oriented to sustainability oriented, resulting in the shaping and creating of an ethic of care in the creation of products that can be extended to its’ use and up-keep (Jackson, 2014). This can further result in designers bringing value to mundane, invisible practices that carry rich histories and ways of doing, and often require high levels of dexterity on the part of the practitioner, yet remain under-stated and under-researched sites (Jackson, 2014; Durrani 2018 a). In moving
beyond Western productivists’ imaginations and learning from and through breakages and decay, Jackson (2014) claims that unsustainable economic and political systems can be challenged and addressed effectively. Moreover, dichotomies among ‘designers’, ‘users’, ‘producers’ and ‘consumers’ can be overcome through the creation of products or services that account for and enable acts of mending (Durrani, 2018a). In theoretically drawing inspiration from broken-world thinking, this paper sets out to test whether repair is in fact the prerogative of currently enrolled fashion design students. The following section reveals how this was undertaken.

Method
For the purpose of this research, the experimental design research method (Malpass, 2017) by means of generative analysis (Sanders & Stappers, 2008; Flick, 2014), was used. Workshops were arranged for masters’ students of the fashion and textile programme at three universities; the Edinburgh College of Art (United Kingdom, September 2018), Aalto University (Finland, April 2018) and Otago University (New Zealand, October 2017). A one-day workshop was conducted as part of the ‘Sustainable Fashion and Textile Design’ course at Aalto University that the first author was co-teaching. The other two workshops in the UK and New Zealand took place during the first authors’ time there as a visiting researcher.

Data collection and analysis
Each workshop began by the first author giving a 30-minute lecture on the problems within the fashion industry. After this, the students participating in the session were divided into groups of four and assigned one task per group (see Figure 1 and 2). These tasks were based on scenarios derived from the first author’s three years of ethnographic work on users’ garment repair practices (see Durrani, 2018a-b). The data from the first author’s ethnographic research – 67 user interviews coupled with participant observation in a total of 18 communal mending events – helped generate four common sites of garment breakdown. As identified by the users, four areas were listed where break-downs during the use phase of their garments would frequently occur. These were: broken buttons, holes and frays, ripped pockets and worn-out jeans.

Each of these issues was used as a task for students to address conceptually. The students were given 40 minutes and were equipped with sticky labels markers, and flip chart pages, to brainstorm ideas and visualise their solutions two-dimensionally. Each group presented their solutions, which subsequently led to discussions with the class as a whole (see Figure 3). Pictures were used to document the brainstorming sessions and the produced outcomes. The data were analysed using thematic analysis by all authors, both individually and collectively, to provide rigor and validity (Flick, 2014).

Initially, we clustered the suggestions on the basis of their similarities and differences, to find patterns of possible solutions. Then, we categorised these patterns to find overarching themes that could assist in answering the
research question (Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Flick, 2014). The three themes generated are further discussed in the next section.

**Discussion on Findings**

After the data were analysed, the following themes arose from the findings of the workshop activities:

*Materials matter: Re-thinking design decisions*

The experience of participating in the workshops led the fashion students to question the entire design process of garment-making. They reflected upon the impact of basic design decisions, from material selection to providing extra fabric for garment seams, on the repair of garments. For example, when evaluating the problem of garment rips and tears, using better quality fabrics and cutting patterns in ways that account for flexibility and replacements was suggested. The use of sturdier materials and better-quality threads was proposed, especially in places such as pockets, elbows and knees, where rips frequently occur. The material dependency of garment mending was raised and the importance of choosing materials that boast durability became visible. The suggested solutions revealed rethinking future practices by learning from material qualities and the ways in which textiles are woven, and basing design technicalities and future decisions upon this.

*Beyond productivist ideologies*

As the students engaged in discussion, it became clear to them that a designer’s responsibility is not limited to designing a consumable product; longevity should also be a significant concern in the fashion design process. The students became mindful of the importance of applying repair-centred design practices to existing post-consumer textile waste as a means of effectively addressing product longevity and bringing existing garments back into use. Thus, collaboration between local recycling centres, crafters, designers and fashion students in hosting regular public events for mending, re-making and up-cycling activities was suggested as a way of creating opportunities to boost and extend the life of clothing. Such open-events could also offer increased community engagement (Durrani, 2018 b) and support sustainable practices in an enjoyable way. Creating future designed garments that use post-consumer textile waste as material sources to make clothing in ways that situate repair at its core were also suggested for addressing textile waste.

*Figure 3. Student presenting proposed solutions to assigned group task at Otago University, New Zealand, 10/10/2017. Source: Author.*

*Altering education systems*

During the workshop ideation sessions, the students also identified certain limitations to their knowledge and a lack of experience when dealing with the four garment breakages. They revealed not having studied real-life garment problems such as holes in pockets or worn-out jeans as part of their education. Limitations to exploring breakdowns in garments further created a barrier when trying to ideate ways of solving the given tasks. For this reason, many suggested a more exploratory approach to their current education. Voicing the need to embrace repair and garment breakages in the education system further highlighted a gap in the present system to which fashion designers are exposed, and led to identifying opportunities for furthering research in new and alternative arenas. By branching out in these directions, new opportunities could be created in current garment-making practices. An example that the students also quoted frequently was exploring the natural environment and how it repairs itself as potential inspiration and a starting point of reference.

**Conclusions**

Although garment mending might not currently be an obvious prerogative of fashion students, the existing education system has hardly made strides in directions supportive of this either. However, what became evident through the workshop sessions was not only an interest on the part of students in exploring alternative ways of designing garments, but also the dire
need to rethink the fashion design process, especially in terms of sustainability. Students became aware of the importance of basic design decisions for the maintenance and care of garments. In making breakdown and mending the point of their creative departure they were also able to identify with garments not merely as outcomes of a production line process, but also as materials that have lives and are lived in. The preliminary findings of this study thus highlight the need to explore mundane garment maintenance practices, such as mending, as sources of inspiration, through which to inform and refine future garment design practices that challenge mainstream productivist practices, and to create pathways for closing the loop on material waste.

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References


