Emmanuel House X NTU: Be Protected; Be Visible; Be Functional; Be Secure; Be Transformable

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Emmanuel House X NTU is a practice research collaboration between a homeless charity in Nottingham and Year One, Level 4 BA Fashion Design students from Nottingham Trent University. The resulting garments and film highlight and seek to mitigate the disparity between clothing waste and clothing poverty, through a participatory, human-centred, upcycled design approach.

Keywords: Fashion education; clothing waste; participatory research; human-centred; upcycled design

Introduction

Emmanuel House X NTU is a social design/innovation collaboration, between a homeless charity in Nottingham and Year One, Level 4 BA Fashion Design at students. Clothing and household items donated to the charity are sorted into three waste streams for: service users to wear/use; resale in the charity shop to raise funds and to sell by the kilo (as textile waste) to the ‘rag man’. The prevalence of fast fashion garments within donations has created issues relating to storing, sorting, reallocating and reselling second-hand clothing. This sustainable fashion project seeks to highlight and mitigate the disparity between clothing waste and clothing poverty, by adopting a circular design approach (Ellen Macarthur Foundation 2019).

This human centred empirical investigation was coordinated by the authors; a multidisciplinary team with expertise in fashion and textile design, marketing, fundraising and film making. The research practice was undertaken between February and May 2019 as Project 2, a mandatory module within the BA (Hons) Fashion Design curriculum, whereby students were asked to develop speculative garment solutions in response to nine ‘Be words’ that captured the clothing needs of the homeless and vulnerable, as expressed by service users of Emmanuel House:

• Be protected
• Be secure
• Be warm
• Be dry
• Be comfortable
• Be visible
• Be transformable
• Be detachable
• Be functional

The sourcing of textile waste as a new material to work on designs for an overlooked market sector, required the students to shift their mindset towards a more holistic view of
what constitutes the materials and wearers of fashion. The hands-on sorting of donated clothing was framed by the team as a contemporary form of ‘rag picking’, as practiced by various designers whose innovative work relies on repurposing existing fashion products (Townsend et al 2019). Using 80% of donated clothing/ found textiles the students created garments that were tested and worn by the service users and their peers in a community fashion event and celebration at Emmanuel House. Following the project, most of the 60 completed garments were donated to the charity for use and/ or sale.

The success of the Emmanuel House X NTU engagement in terms of student learning/outcomes and overwhelming positive feedback, from the users of the charity to the Vice Chancellor of NTU, has resulted in it being integrated as a core Level 4 module within the Fashion Design curriculum. The module provides students with invaluable tacit knowledge of how:

- donating unwanted clothing to charities creates problematic waste streams;
- clothing is designed, constructed and finished;
- there are differences in the quality of materials/ manufacture of established and ad hoc brands, particularly those producing fast fashion;
- homeless individuals with limited possessions/ wardrobes and transient lifestyles require functional and aesthetic clothing;
- user-centered design can enhance individual/ group agency and self-esteem.

Exhibits

The five ‘Be’ garments in this installation illustrate some of the different upcycled design strategies and outcomes adopted by the young designers. and communal impact created through this action-based initiative.

In this installation we showcase some of the students’ creative work in the form of five garments/ outfits (from 60 submissions), as described below, representing some of the nine different ‘Be’ design themes informed by the needs of the service users of Emmanuel House. These artefacts are further contextualised by a film made by Author 5 which captures snapshots of the research and development process and significantly, the communal impact of the initiative. This was made particularly evident at the Emmanuel House X NTU fashion event, where 34 outerwear looks were modelled by a group of 17 service users and student designers to an audience of over 150 members of the public.

The following five garments and supporting film are described in the makers own words:

Be Protected by Eloise Smart

This jumpsuit was inspired by Lucy Orta’s ‘Refuge wear’ (1992-98) exploring temporary shelters and architecture. The garment is designed to provide both protection and warmth with a high neck for comfort, added padding on the elbows and knees. A waterproof oversized hood with padded facing and fleece lining. The large hood enables the wearer to cover their face when sleeping. The faux fur-lined body with double-sided pockets have been integrated to hold (and hide) personal items. Hand covers with thumbholes help to keep the sleeves in place and to aid dressing and undressing in layers.

Upcycled materials: waterproof trousers, car seat cover, duvet padding and an old jacket.

Be Visible by Nicole Kozlov

This jacket was designed as ‘a garment to treasure’ inspired by the service users at Emmanuel House who discussed their need ‘to look presentable, have good self-esteem and ultimately feel more positive while facing homelessness’. My aim was to create an outerwear garment that is practical, eye catching and stylish as shown in Figure 3.
Upcycled materials: three damaged coats, scrap fabrics of fleece and reflective trims.

Figure 1: Be Visible by Nicole Koslov

**Be Functional by May Illingworth**

Inspired by the design of RAF uniforms and military equipment the focus was to create a functional, warm garment. This outerwear piece has two layers (padded all-in-one and quilted sleeveless jacket) that can be worn together or separately; made detachable through long ribbon ties. The integration of decorative quilted details reflects the panelling found in RAF parachutes, as explored in the sketchbook pages in Figure 2. Upcycled materials: waterproof trousers, ski jumpsuit, a pair of shorts, a second-hand jacket and found military surplus.
Be Secure by Kirsty Lenihan

The jacket is influenced by British council estates: the behaviours and attitudes of the youth; the ‘spirit’ of community and sense of belonging. With a mixture of secure pockets keeping personal belongings safe. This jacket offers a lightweight durability and is easy to fold, carry and transport.
Upcycled materials: discarded tarpaulin, a fleece top, hi-vis and waterproof jacket, portfolio and gym bag.

Be Transformable by Liberty Green

Inspired by the concept of ‘Abode’ a place of residence, a house or home, I looked at how animals make and use shelter to create portable habitats. As illustrated in Figure 2, the transformable design allows the wearer comfort and protection from the elements day and night, when sleeping outdoors; this outerwear piece transforms into a shelter.
Upcycled materials: boat canvas, gazebo tent, backpack components and an old jacket.
Figure 4: Composite image of all five garments: Top (left to right) Be Protected by Eloise Smart; Be Transformable by Liberty Green; Be Functional (sleeveless jacket) by May Illingworth. Bottom: Be Protected/ Transformable; Be Visible by Nicol Koslov; Be Secure by Kirsty Leniham.

Emmanuel House X NTU film (20 mins) by Tim Bassford

Having the opportunity to film the Emmanuel House X NTU project provided a unique insight to the different stakeholders’ points of view; each party bringing their own personal understanding and appreciation of this collaborative project.

By capturing certain moments in the project's process, and with the subjects knowing they were being filmed, brought a sense of clarity for them and an opportunity to verbalise what they were experiencing. On camera, students admitted their previous ignorance on the subject of ‘homelessness’. Service users of Emmanuel House shared how encouraged they had been to be part of this creative endeavour. Lecturers also shared some of the wider impact this project has had within the academic/professional world, moreover the strength of community it has forged amongst and beyond the student group.

It was interesting to document the whole process from clothes sorting (rag picking) at Emmanuel House through to the deconstruction of the fabrics and the subsequent new garment creations. It was rewarding to hear such positivity from all students involved. This did not feel like an academic assignment, it was much more far-reaching. This project has clearly challenged and enlightened students in equal measure. I believe creating this short documentary helped crystallise the experience for all involved. This film also draws attention
to the project's success in raising awareness for supporting homeless charities, the importance of buying clothes from charity stores. Whilst also raising a worthy challenge to our fast-fashion, disposable clothes culture.

Figure 5: Two film stills from the Emmanuel House X NTU film 2019. See: https://vimeo.com/352901660/16e95ff7aa

The Design Problem

The Emmanuel House X NTU project explores the problems faced by charities and society in dealing with textile waste. While donating unwanted clothes to charity is viewed as preferable to sending them to landfill, according to Emmanuel House, mass produced high (fast) fashion garments now account for more than 80% of their donations. As stated in the Environmental Audit Committee’s ‘Fixing Fashion’: “We buy more clothes per person in the UK than any other country in Europe. A glut of second-hand clothing swamping the market is depressing prices for used textiles.” (Publications.parliament.uk. 2019) Emmanuel House uses second-hand clothing donations to support their service users and raise funds to run their services. Rough sleepers require warm, waterproof clothing, which form an increasingly small percentage of donations, which are sorted into clothing/accessories for: service users; resale in the charity shop; ‘rag’ or waste textiles, sold by the kilo. The problem was therefore
conceptualised as how to turn garments for re-sale, and particularly ‘textile waste’ into wearable (and desirable) garments for use by the charity’s users.

**Human-centred design**

Addressing the individual circumstances of the EH service users, required a sensitive, human centred approach, involving ethnographic research to inform the design of garment systems that were responsive to the physical and emotional needs of the users (Giacomin, 2014). As new undergraduates, this was the first time some had considered a consumer’s needs and aspirations directly. Whilst working through the brief students were supported with opportunities for reflective learning through encouragement question themselves about the processes they were undertaking, and how they might act upon this learning to inform their future practice. (Grace and Gravestock 2009) The project united students from all over the world with contrasting abilities and perceptions about sustainability. The project aims were aligned with NTU’s strategic research themes of Sustainable Futures and Creative Community and the United Nations Sustainable Development goals of:

1. No poverty,
8. Decent work and economic growth,
9. Repurposing old material,
11. Sustainable cities and communities,
12. Responsible consumption and production
13. Educate young people - climate action

Alternative, slow and craft-based models of practice by design practitioners were used to exemplify Goal 12, including: Christopher Raeburn’s (2019) RÆMADE brand ethos; involving Atelier and Repairs’ (2019) circular approach to “fostering each item’s existence at the highest value possible - for as long as possible” and Amy Twigger-Holroyd’s (2018) exploration of the “domestic circular economy” through the repair and reuse of damaged knitwear using a process of skilled unravelling and re-knitting.

**Developing the brief**

The needs of the service users formed the most significant aspect of the project brief. In a presentation at NTU, Author 4 provided a potted history of Emmanuel House (2019) explaining how the growing number of service users (making over 2000 visits a month) are supported by staff and volunteers and the paradox of the homeless having very few clothes amid the plethora of fast fashion donations. The core aim was to address both these challenges through a human-centred approach to fashion design. In a group discussion with EH service users who had, or were sleeping rough, they were asked about what they would want/need in an outer garment, expressed as:

- A onesie sleeping bag with fur inside of it/thermal in one colour e.g. red, blue, black
- A sleeping bag that you can walk in with pockets A panic button / alarm A light in the hood
- Inside pockets
- A specific logo – to be decided
- A long zip – to be able to go to the toilet! Packable
- Washable
- Can be turned inside out
These specific requirements were reflected upon by the research team articulated as the nine ‘Be words’ by Author 2, in the module briefing, illustrated through diverse clothing concepts. For example, ‘Be protected’, referenced: defence, shelter, preservation, safeguarding, sanctuary, refuge, visualised via Orta’s Refuge Wear (1992-98), Massimo Osti’s poncho for CP Company and the Kevlar ‘stab-proof’ vest.

To help them conceptualize their ideas, students met with a panel of service users at EH, where they learnt how changing circumstances had led them to destitution, and to further explain what kind of outer garments they needed or would like to own. Individuals disclosed their interests, hobbies, vulnerabilities and values associated with clothing and textiles – touching on emotional as well as product durability (Townsend and Sadkowska 2018). One ex-service user and volunteer mentioned how he had been a hairdresser and had continued to cut hair (when homeless and housed) to raise the self-esteem of the different people he met. He stated that the inclusion of discreet, lined pockets inside a jacket would be useful to carry (and hide) his scissors.

**Significant learning**

The students were asked to design a range of six garments in response to a body of personal research; to develop, pattern cut and manufacture an outerwear piece based on one of their designs, which could be menswear, womenswear (or both) and produce a final portfolio. The BA Fashion course acknowledges that active or ‘significant learning’ is more likely to take place when students are engaged experientially, supported by reflective dialogue, doing something besides listening. (Fink, 2013)

The project coincided with The Community Live in Nottingham, at Bonington Gallery (2019). One of the group, Tenant of Culture, described as a “rag-picker of mass-media or media-industrial production” (Pristauz 2018 online) invited the fashion students and service users to take part in a 3-day workshops (13-15 March), facilitating further collaboration and opportunities for experiential learning.

**The sorting/ sourcing process**

During the months leading up to the start of the project, EH staff selected clothes and fabric donations to put aside for the students to use. Additionally, a clothing/textile bank was set up in the School, where staff were encouraged to donate unwanted clothing and household textiles. Students were encouraged to volunteer regularly at the EH centre to help select premium pieces for the shop and their own future use, paying special attention to:

1. Warm, waterproof, comfortable garments suitable for outdoor conditions.
2. Good quality, fashionable and desirable items selected for re-sale in the charity shop.
3. Clothing suitable for its textile waste set aside for up-cycling with worn out, unfashionable, soiled items collated to be collected by the rag man.

By handling and categorizing the plethora of clothing waste hidden from public view in the cramped EH storeroom, students gained tacit knowledge of garment/textile design longevity. Staff and students were surprised by how many of the donations were classified as ‘rag’. This involves two categories of (good and bad) rag as Barker stated, “to avoid getting the lowest price (for shredding), items have to be wearable, as they are sold on to be shipped abroad”. The western practice of exporting unwanted clothing to other countries with emerging economies presents an unsustainable model of recycling resulting from “a linear model of ‘make, use, dispose’.” (Publications.parliament.uk., 2019). Experiencing these
consequences first-hand influenced the students to consider how they might design better quality, more long-lasting products.

**The deconstruction/reconstruction process**

The core aim of the brief was to use ‘up-cycling’ to create products that were of higher quality/value than the original. By sorting clothing waste students creatively analysed garment design, construction and details for future end-use. The copious pairs of jeans, too worn at the knees for re-use were set aside so that the less worn areas could be reused. Students were quick to capitalise on woven cotton denim’s durability and capacity to carry aesthetic narratives within the fabric; collating similar and contrasting indigo, ice blue, black and grey shades in various dyed and washed treatments, to re-assemble later.

Other identified groups of materials selected included: sportswear (fleece, sweatshirting) outdoor clothing (water/showerproof fabric); camping products (tents, sleeping bags); household textiles (shower/curtains, carrying bags) and traditional clothing (woven/wool). Students deconstructed their garments to use their constituent materials in various ways, including:

- Details and parts to re-use. e.g. zips, buttons, pockets
- Fabrics to patch together or use as panels.
- Over-dye, bleach or tie dye.
- Quilt and pad.
- Bond together and laser-cut
- Embellish - embroidered, appliqued, printed

![Figure 6: Students modelling outerwear garments, including Be Secure by Kirsty Lenihan (2nd from left) at the Emmanuel House fashion event on 30th May 2029.](image)

This idea of ‘working in reverse’ by starting with a garment/material is quite unique to this NTU project. Usually fabrics are sourced after a concept has been derived, not in tandem with its development. Students learnt how having fabrics already selected directs the design development process. Emphasis was placed on challenging and pushing their pattern cutting
and manufacturing skills, to make outer garments that were both comfortable, durable and ideally transformable, to allow for changing weather conditions. These were not occasion wear, but like the refuge-style wear made by organizations like Sheltersuit (2009) which may be worn repeatedly, or literally inhabited. Exhibiting and modelling the upcycled outerwear concepts alongside current and ex-service users at the Emmanuel House salon event provided the students with another valuable opportunity for accruing feedback and testing the designs themselves, as shown in Figure 6.

References


