

Unfolding Fashion – Reconsidering traditional patternmaking

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This presentation arises from my MA project called “Unfolding Fashion”, a work which draws on the idea that traditional patternmaking – and the cultural values on which it is grounded – is capable of being embedded in contemporary fashion design not only as a source of inspiration, but rather as a vehicle for addressing in a new way issues of sustainability and ethical integrity within the fashion system.

“Unfolding fashion” does not simply refer to the garments of the collection that can all be unfolded to a square piece of fabric: its broader significance is rather expressed by the metaphor “unfolding the fashion system” - namely, discovering how a designer can work differently with it yet being part of it.

The four themes that I will discuss throughout this presentation are the following:

- AIM AND CONCEPT OF UNFOLDING FASHION
- TRADITIONAL PATTERNMAKING/ CULTURAL VALUES AS INSPIRATION
- DEVELOPING UNFOLDED GARMENTS
- SUSTAINABILITY + CULTURE + FASHION

THE AIM AND CONCEPT OF UNFOLDING FASHION

My aim with the project was to create a commercial collection that would create none or as little waste as possible, yet being part of the running fashion system.

I had come to a point where I felt that I could not continue working with fashion and contribute to the devastating effects produced by fashion industry. So what could I do? I could say no to the fashion system and work outside it with niche products, local production and the local market. But how would this make the running fashion system a better and more sustainable industry? I had to stay within it and negotiate an acceptable way to change it from the inside.

My starting point was to use a strategy for sustainability: I therefore adopted the 10 point list from TED – Textile Environment and Design to minimize waste.



Fig 1

Given my strong interest in patternmaking, working with zero waste patternmaking was the base for the collection, but there was especially one point that I wanted to focus on and develop, particularly because I had noticed how poorly designers were considering it in their agenda – “Design for Recycling/Upcycling”. There are excellent contemporary zero waste patternmakers such as Timo Rissanen and Julian Roberts: however, since in their work all the garments are sewn together, they are not convenient for upcycling.

By the time of starting working on this collection I happened to be moving to a new apartment. One day, while packing all my things, the idea suddenly came to me that I wanted to make clothing that worked just like a cardboard box!

The cardboard box can be folded together to a 3D shape and unfolded to its flat 2D shape again. If I managed to apply these structural features to a garment, the fabric could be used again after the lifetime of the garment and given a second life as another clothing piece, or even a different object.

As mentioned above this was to be a commercial fashion collection placed in the running fashion industry, rather than a patternmaking experiment, therefore the conceptual coherence of the project was important.

The conceptual universe around the project can be described as follows: an androgynous women’s collection, where the western classic men’s garments such as white shirt and black suit are reshaped by using the Asian simplicity in the patternmaking and silhouettes – this being a feature that allows for big areas of the fabric uncut, and thus facilitates future upgrading of the garment.

TRADITIONAL PATTERNMAKING AS INSPIRATION

Besides Asian models - in particular the Japanese costume – I have been looking at models in history that illustrate the concept of zero waste patternmaking as relevant from a technological and cultural point of view. My aim with this was twofold: I wanted to try finding visual inspiration and ideas for cuts, but most of all I was interested in investigating the reasons and the values embedded in traditional zero waste patternmaking.

In my research I looked closer at Scandinavia – both the local history and traditions, and the way the Scandinavian shirts were made: here every centimetre of the fabric was used when placing the pattern pieces, and the whole width of the fabric, including the selvedge, was to become part of the finished shirt. The value associated with this practice was, as in many other cultures, that the fabric was expensive and laborious to produce - and thus every centimetre of it worth using. A partial downside of this model when applied to the concept of my collection was that the fabric was cut in parts and sewn together: therefore it could not be used for upcycling, neither for the cardboard box idea.

I continued looking at the Scandinavian models and eventually found an earlier shirt that was cut in just one piece of fabric, thus reducing the seams at the bare minimum - which was probably a heritage of how fur was cut. This was the kind of cultural value that I was looking for!

However, it was the Japanese costume tradition that provided me with most values and inspiration though. For example the kimono emphasizes the beauty of straight lines. The whole width of the fabric is used and all the sewing lines are horizontal, except the neckline. Being sewn along straight

lines makes it possible to take it apart and re-sew it into the shape of the single piece of material it originally was, as well as re-sew the kimono any given number of times. There existed even fine kimonos whose seam was opened before washing, so that it could be easily ironed and then sewn together again.

People have endeavoured to wear kimono and handle them with the utmost care. An example of this we can see by only studying the way in which the kimonos are folded together for storage, then, before use, opened up without ironing every time as the creases from the folds lie in a specific and correct way.

These were other cultural values I wanted to use – the value and respect for the fabric, together with the subtle relationship between the fabric and its wearer.

With this as background I will move on to explain how I developed the zero waste patternmaking for UNFOLDING fashion.

DEVELOPING UNFOLDED GARMENTS

We can compare my idea of the fabric and the garment with that of the fur. When creating the patterns it has been impossible to imagine the body as front and back and place the fabric over. I have instead imagined the body from the bird perspective, where a square piece of fabric need to fall over like a poncho or a fur, and then it follows the arms and drapes around the waste with as few cuts as possible – yet, with the aim to create garments that correspond to the idea of the western classic men's wear.

I first created three unfoldable base models: a white shirt, black trousers and a black jacket (See figure 2). I used these three models and manipulated them in illustrations (See figure 3) to create a variety of styles for the collection. Now I had my visual guideline – the illustrations and my base patternmaking technique and out of this I worked out the single zero waste foldable/unfoldable patterns for each piece (See figure 4-7).

3 miniatures of basic unfoldable garments



Figure 2: The three miniatures

Illustrations of the collection



Figure 3



Figure 4: Skirt and jacket from unfolded to folded

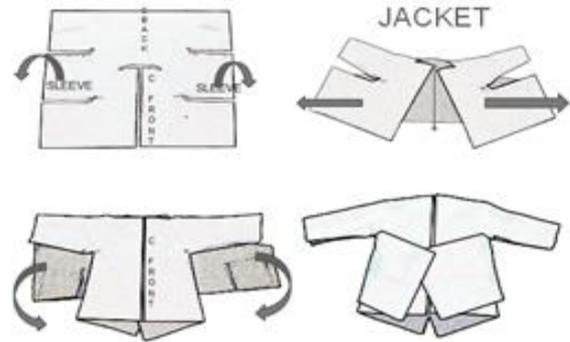


Figure 5: How to fold the jacket



Figure 6: Shirt 1 from unfolded to folded



Figure 7: Shirt 2 from unfolded to folded

SUSTAINABILITY, CULTURE AND FASHION

We have so far seen the aims and concepts of the “Unfolding Fashion” collection. Now I would like to share my view as a fashion designer on how traditions, culture, fashion and sustainability can work together.

I believe it is possible to make a fashion collection just inspired by traditional garments - it is indeed something that is being done all the time. I believe as well that it is possible to make a sustainable collection.

However, what marks a discontinuity with current fashion practice is to design a collection and base it upon cultural values: you can manage to include traditions, sustainability and culture in one collection – and this is what I have tried to do with my “Unfolding Fashion”. By working in this way, the winner will be not only Earth, not only designers and consumers, but rather the very fact that, by being re-negotiated as core concepts of contemporary fashion practice, our culture and traditions become more than just museum objects. When contemporary designers and artists use cultural values as inspiration and translate them into today’s society and needs these same values acquire new significance, and they give in turn meaning to designers’ work.