




CLOSE TO HOME

IN 2010, REBECCA BURGESS SET HERSELF THE CHALLENGE TO CREATE AND WEAR A WARDROBE MADE FROM FIBRES AND LABOUR SOURCED WITHIN A 150-MILE RADIUS OF HER FRONT DOOR IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA. *Through her project, Fibershed, she initiated a network of farmers, weavers, spinners, artists and designers, all united by the common quest to "give boundaries to a natural textile resource base."* Empowered by the knowledge she gained about her 'second skin,' Rebecca's project continues in new directions today, uniting garment producers and wearers. We spoke to her to learn more about the Fibershed journey.

INTERVIEW ELLIE BECK WORDS REBECCA BURGESS PHOTOS PAIGE GREEN



Fibershed begs the questions, where does my second skin come from? What land did it grow from? How do we as communities begin to make things again for ourselves, so we are not exploiting others?

Fibershed started as a one-year challenge to live in locally procured fibres, where all labour and such was sourced within 150 miles (240km) of my front door. How Fibershed works now is still emerging. The idea for Fibershed originated from my desire to create continuity between my values and my material culture. It's easy to say and think that you value your relationship with your home (the earth), and you'll do whatever you possibly can to keep it tidy, clean and habitable for others, but making those values a reality is where the 'rubber-hits-the-road'. To honour these values you must defy the current material culture. Everywhere you look, the food, clothes, fuel and building materials that we rely on are pretty much all dependent on non-renewable and highly toxic industries. So to say that you want to change the way you eat or dress or transport yourself is to pretty much say that you want to create another system, an alternative system (which is no small task!).

For me, answering the sustainable textile conversation had to happen first. The first question you have consider is 'how do I define sustainability?' We need a metric that takes this conversation and puts it under a wee bit more scrutiny than in the past. We constantly let the industry tell us what 'eco' and 'green' mean; we constantly let someone else define these things - usually someone whose profits depend on our complicity. It would be great to see textile corporations revising their 1% for the planet model, and giving that 1% straight back to the surrounding communities where the goods were purchased - straight into the fibre farms, botanic dye systems, and cooperatively managed mills. In ten years time corporations could be sourcing from a multiplicity of regional communities, allowing each community to thrive economically, socially and environmentally.

Fibershed came from a vision of how the indigenous population once lived on the land I now call home. They lived in intimate communities where they procured their material needs within a given geography. My county throws away 20,000 pounds of wool every year - wool that we continue to import from China and put pressure on the New Zealand market for our raw supply. This is just one of many examples of how we are failing to manage our local resources in my community. Fibershed begs the questions: where does my second skin come from? What land did it grow from? How do we as communities begin to make things again for ourselves, so we are not exploiting others? I do also believe in trade; I am looking wholeheartedly forward to the day where we have an international system of functioning Fibersheds that can trade on equal terms with one another.

The Fibershed wardrobe is all handmade, and with so little processing available, a lot of hand spinning, wet felting, knitting and crocheting had to take place. That was great, but it takes a long time to get a wardrobe finished. Often I'd be cold and without the clothes I needed. In the end the system proved to me that we have no lack of talent, farms or design skills. We just have a lack of infrastructure and a lack of belief in ourselves that we can in fact do this.

(FIRST PAGE) REBECCA BURGESS WALKING IN HER INDIGO PATCH WEARING AN INDIGO-DYED SALLY FOX COTTON HAND-KNIT DRESS, DESIGNED AND KNIT BY HEIDI IVERSON

(RIGHT PAGE) CLOCKWISE: 1) THREE YOUNG WOMEN INVOLVED IN THE PROJECT WEAR FIBERSHED GARMENTS AT A REGIONAL CELEBRATION. 2) A JACOB'S SHEEP, AN ANCIENT BREED RAISED IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA. 3) REBECCA WEARS A HAND-KNIT CARDIGAN DESIGNED AND MADE BY HEIDI IVERSON. 4) KATHERINE JOLDA ON HER BICYCLE-POWERED DRUM CARDER THAT SHE INVENTED AND CONSTRUCTED TO COMB WOOL 5) DYAN ASHBY MODELS HER OWN DESIGNED AND CONSTRUCTED JEWELLERY MADE FROM NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LOCAL ORGANIC COTTON YARN.







(LEFT PAGE) REBECCA HOLDING A MAP SHOWING ALL THE PEOPLE, PLANTS AND ANIMALS WHO MADE THE FIBERSHED PROJECT A REALITY (ABOVE) (L) REBECCA WEARING A DANIELLE CHRISTIANSON SWEATER WITH KUCHINA, THE ALPACA WHO PROVIDED THE FIBRE AT RENAISSANCE RIDGE RANCH. (R) LEGWARMERS HANDKNIT BY ALLISON ARNOLD MADE WITH MARY-PETTIS SARLEY'S WOOL FROM NAPA VALLEY

Making and wearing clothes is something we all take part in. It's now time to take part in a conscious way - with an appreciation and awareness for all that goes into making our second skins.

My favourite Fibershed outfit changes with the season. Currently I am loving my buffalo brown seed variety cotton denim pants, over-dyed in black oak and rusty objects, sewn by veteran denim guru Daniel DiSanto. I wear those pants, with a pokeberry and indigo dyed merino sweater, (designed and sewn by Sachi Henrietta) on cool foggy summer evenings; it is gorgeous, and comfortable. My wardrobe had some limitations because of the processing issue I mentioned (no mills), fine gauge yarns are impossible to create in a timely manner. Very few hand spinners have the skill required to make hair like fibres that you need for certain light weight clothes (summer cottons would have been greatly appreciated), the cotton I had was great, but fairly heavy.

The project has provided us with a sense that we are all in this as a team; where one person's skills lack, another's exist to pull up the slack. People are starting to come from all over the country to meet the Fibershed artisans and farmers, and it is amazing to see how appreciated they are by communities far and wide. The more appreciation we receive from those who live far away, the more strength and resolve we muster to keep doing what we do. I'm watching this grow in such a way that I think it is here to stay. We are going to have a wool and fine fibre symposium in November, so people can come and learn about what is being grown in greater backyard of the San Francisco Bay Area (we live in the top 25 most biologically diverse places on the planet), and we have so much

available to us here in this region that we want to share with the larger design community.

Limitations? In this area, really I haven't found them yet; we can grow everything here, linen, cotton, nettles, wool, alpaca, cashmere, angora - we have enough microclimates for it all. (We could use a silk project, but I expect when we are fully functioning it will make sense to either add that into the repertoire, or fairly trade for silk with other communities who raise it 'peacefully').

Cities will always depend on surrounding rural areas for their clothes, and a lot of their food. You can only do so much to get everything grown within city limits. In areas where they have no access to sheep or cotton, I would recommend they grow hemp, flax, or nettles. Those are the best fibres for human clothing by far, and much more adaptable to a range of climates. My outlook has become more discerning, yet also more bright and uplifted, but I still see there is so much work to do. I'm feeling positive because the solutions for sustainable textile creation are possible, now we need to build a movement to support economies that give people livelihoods, futures, and something to be proud of. Textile creation is so gratifying from the farming to the cut and sew; we must provide more communities access to owning these processes, and with such advanced technologies we can have small scale and efficiency. Those two concepts need not be oppositional.



(L) KATHERINE JOLDA HOLDING HER RAW BODEGA PASTURES WOOL (R) KATHERINE'S FELTING WORK SHOWN IN A FUNCTIONAL TOTE BAG

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A Fibershed is an offering, it's a handshake, a smile, a creative conversation

People make Fibersheds tick. So to invest yourself in a Fibershed is to invest in people and the natural systems from which we depend. At a time when there is so much division, fear of the future, and high levels of uncertainty around how we will survive the effects of climate change; a Fibershed is an offering, it's a handshake, a smile, a creative conversation, it's working shoulder to shoulder in the indigo fields; it is something we can agree on, something that a wide array of rich, poor, educated, uneducated, skilled and unskilled can begin to participate with. Making and wearing clothes is something we all take part in. It's now time to take part in a conscious way - with an appreciation and awareness for all that goes into making our second skins.

We have lots of raw materials and so far very few places to process them (no cotton mill, no fine gauge wool mill, and no bast fibre mill). We need to build a system that processes the material before we can truly offer clothing to more than the highly skilled, or well funded. We need enough technology to create fine gauges of yarn, so we can start actually creating clothes that are comparable to modern design and wearability concepts, and that people can wear in everyday settings.

Overcoming any challenge is achieved by remaining committed and seeing those challenges as opportunities. Our collective resolve gets stronger day by day. Many of the artisans and farmers involved in Fibershed see this as their future - a future where they work together to create things for the community at large. The more we commit ourselves to getting the infrastructure in place, the brighter this future becomes, and the more real it becomes for more people.

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FIBERSHED'S GOAL FOR THE FUTURE IS TO GROW THE MOVEMENT, IGNITING EVERYONE TO TAKE PART. REBECCA GIVES ADVICE ON GETTING INVOLVED.

It is imperative that those with wealth spike this movement with monetary energy. If you can buy it - do it. Support the handmade prices, invest in the mills and generate excitement for the natural alternative that Fibersheds offer. Those that can consume can act as change agents through their purchases.

If you are a textile corporation, consider investing in the farms, botanic dye processes and mill operations in the places where people are buying your clothes; help communities build the infrastructure they need so that they can grow and process the materials that are so much a part of their livelihood. Someday you will be able to rely on them as a series of regional textile hubs from which your raw materials can come.

We need fibre and dye farmers, young people to infuse their life energy into Fibershed movements. Innovate, create, and commit yourselves to taking ownership over the soil to skin processes.

If you can't afford it, and you don't have the skills to make it, just don't buy from the cheap mega brands. Every cheap item of clothing purchased undermines the global movement we need for living wage jobs and equitable resource distribution. Start clothing swaps, trade for it, or buy it used.