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LONGEVITY IN THE DESIGN PROCESS:

A Talk Given at Fibershed's *Design Challenge* on April 23, 2023
Point Reyes, California

Speaker notes:

This talk is an explorative excerpt given in order to stimulate designers' minds to consider how psycho-sociological perspectives can lend to longevity in clothing design. It is adopted from a larger body of work by the speaker that seeks to identify three main frameworks that can help designers consider ways in which their work can contribute to longevity beyond sourcing, manufacturing, and human-relations processes. These three frameworks thus far are: empathic design, agentic-collaborative design between designer and user, and hyper-functional minimalism. The speaker only addresses empathic design, and by no means does so in an exhaustive manner.

If you would like to receive details on the work in progress, please inquire with the speaker. The speaker is also looking for research assistants and designers to help with a future study that this talk is based from.

This talk represents the ideas of the speaker, and not Fibershed.
Please send correspondences to the speaker at info@herderin.com

I was asked by Fibershed to provide the notes from the talk, and will keep the original format so that it remains true to the original version as listeners heard it.

Notes on Longevity in the Design Process

When we think about longevity, we often think about how the garment can be constructed to last a very long time, and in our community, when the garment has had a full life cycle, can be returned back to the Earth. The work that has been done in this respect has been remarkable, and there is still much work to be done. However, today, I am here to extend the concept of **longevity** to the design process.

How can we interrogate, as designers, the concept of longevity in our approach to design, so that people do not just throw away a garment when their interpretation of the life cycle is done?

This is a very challenging idea because it will have to concern the social and emotional scaffolding of how people in a capitalist (consumption-oriented) society relate to clothing, but also how people in an individualistic one, as well as a people who live in relative wealth where the concept of competition (Kohn, 1986) and comparisons [via social media and the structure of capitalism influencing our mental wiring (Polanyi, 1944), and so forth] shape how we perceive ourselves and others. To further complicate the issue, clothing is far more socio-emotional than we realize. What we wear signals to others our level of understanding of modernity, certain cultures, subcultures, aesthetics, and esoteric references (Simmel, 1957). For example, a person who goes to a job interview wearing a lapel that is not on trend may be seen as lacking an awareness that the interviewees find limiting to the scope of the job.

What this is all to say is that the purpose of the sustainability-oriented designer is actually a socio-emotional role rather than an aesthetic one if they want to concern the idea of longevity. Especially as we consider creating what is new, and not the repurposing of sentimental garments, which is a whole other conversation that deserves its own respects.

So, first let's have a working definition of longevity. This isn't a complicated definition. Longevity, thus far, relates to a long duration of any physical, theoretical, and otherwise 'thing' in existence. As designers of longevity, we want to consider the greatest life-cycle span–intergenerational, if you will–but also conceptions and themes in design that can be built upon intergenerationally for a new era of designers that will come after us. Like theory in any field, it must have enough substance "meat" to survive so that people can build upon our work and make it better.

Now, think about how design is taught. It often surrounds gathering inspiration, studying different eras of clothing, constructing "mood" boards, identifying cultural references, etc. It's my observation that design in clothing is aesthetic-focused, and therefore not treated with the

same integrity of grounded-theory as major fields like STEM, social sciences, and philosophy. When it does have greater substance, it often refers to a high-art focus, which we will get to shortly.

If this is how the process of design in fashion school is taught, how can we create design *approaches* with practices, tools, methods that derive from a space of, for example: intuitive data; empathic understanding of the wearer's socio-emotional needs as well as physical ones; inter-generational healing[1]. Some issues that get reproduced, are intersectional issues and ought to be considered as the responsibility for the designer to take part in alleviating:

- body image issues,
- social class distinction (Bourdieu, 1984),
- cultural relevance (power/knowledge) (Foucault, 1980; Simmel, 1957)[2],
- cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Simmel, 1957)
- Etc. (There are many more, so write them down for the sake of time!)

Now consider further observation: how clothing design — good clothing design— is projected in media (take a moment to reflect). Some words that come to mind for me:

- competitive,
- style focused,
- attention focused,
- being the best,
- standing out,
- speaking to a decade,
- a nostalgia etc,
- paying homage,
- being abundant,
- being glamorous,
- referencing issues within society in an art-focused articulation "high brow art in clothing aesthetic form",
- being future-focused/hyperrealism,
- shifting identity focus,

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[1] We know fashion is a culture that continúes to reproduce itself and we talk about it being harmful for the planet in terms of production and manufacturing, but what about in terms of design? Pierre Bourdieu, one of my favorite sociologists who was most active in the 20th century, was incredible to note that **cultural reproduction is a major quality of reproducing the issues we have in our society, and if you're interested more in this, please read the books *Distinction* and *The Field of Cultural Production.***

[2] Simmel (1957), another great sociologist, talked about fashion, and said it was the non-cumulative change in cultural features.

- costume-focused,
- Etc. (write your down for the sake of time)

Now, consider mitigating relativity in a culture that is highly comparative in an emotionally depriving way. People will buy things outside their means just to feel less deprived. How do we mitigate those feelings by making clothing that is …? How can we consider doing simply… something different? Something lasting? Carving our own sphere as a community that is designed in response to the climate? We have the resources now to gather the right materials, manufacturing, and practices, but now let's return to our purpose again as sustainable-oriented designers instead of continuing to succumb to the field of fashion design as our guide.

How can we put ourselves not just in the contemporary wearer's shoes, but also in the shoes of innate needs that are timeless? Not just in response to modernity, but a response to the needs of the body, the mind, the "soul,".... the emotional, full spectrum being? Big thing to accomplish, and perhaps worthy of our attention.

One way we can do this is to borrow from a field of empathic design (Grandin, 2022), which has mostly been used in some very small corner of industrial design. Think about your phones and computers. I am sure many of you know the famous designer, Jony Ive, who developed, with a team of unknown designers, a way for people to relate to highly advanced technology. A 3 year old and a 93 year old can both use an iPhone. That is proper empathic design, whether we agree with the implications of such use. I would also like to defer to the work of Temple Grandin who studied how cows felt in slaughterhouses, and how designing slaughterhouses in respect to their emotional needs was transformative not just to animal rights activists, but even to the companies who harvested the meat.

Can we also use empathic design for the purposes of clothing and further adopt it to develop a sustainability-oriented approach to longevity? If we use empathic design, perhaps we could put ourselves in the shoes (or clothes?) of the wearer to understand their needs. Our initative here is an outcome where the the wearer desires to feel connected to the pieces so that they do not seek to part ways with it when they believe the socio-emotional life cycle is complete. Garments that:

- say yes over no and continue to reinforce agency;
- feel good for the wearer both in social and personal settings;
- give the individual agency via movement theories (e.g., the yogic body);
- alleviate the individual from the need to perform. (Performance is transient and makes the wearer bored of the outfit with time. When clothing relates to identity and style, it inevitably will have less longevity due to the shifting identity amidst a consumption culture that is individualistic.)

- Etc. (Write them down!)

I come from this with my own lived experience, education, thoughts, perspectives, influences. Most of my influences come from sociology, critical theory, empathic design, my relationship to my own body, psychoanalysis, to name a few. This collection of inspiration and experiences allowed me to arrive at forms of wrap pants that supported the hip and reproductive regions of the woman's body. I made my first wrap pants for myself, and then later for my best friend after a tragedy that shook her family, and then for a friend who was diagnosed with breast cancer at 30 and subsequently was undergoing chemotherapy. I wanted my friends to experience easy comfort that only had "yes" statements in how they wore these garments, no limitation to size, and extra fabric and security around the aforementioned area of their bodies. These pants are still worn by myself and these friends to date, and to my friends and others who wear them, I was told it felt like a "hug" that they continue to experience each time they wear them. They tell me they wear them everywhere, and in fact my friend wore them internationally and I received orders from women in the Arab Emirates, Spain, and the Mediterranean. However, I am only one person and my pants were only one idea, and it's still one in progress. Nonetheless, this has allowed me to gain inspiration to how longevity can be taken a step further in the design process, and this is what I offer for you to consider here today.

Perhaps you can consider other areas of the body where humans hold emotions, or other ways that design can feel healing and and support. For example, what about the "heart space" area? Or how about the feet and sense of grounding? These are adaptations from the yogic body to design processes, and a mental exercise to stimulate our imagination. Or perhaps you want to consider the culture in which these designs live in: given that your designs are being made for an individualistic culture, how can you design so as not to play into identity (not lending to longevity) and instead towards an emotional connection? Again, simply an exercise, and you can do what you will. You may come up with your own ideas, and that is the point! Further considerations: how can we call upon our own intuition — sensual experiences of garment construction — and put sensuality first? How does a garment actually feel on the body as a second skin?

I want to emphasize that different interpretations from empathic design approaches to clothing is the goal. We don't really know what this will look like. It's a novel idea that is developing. It's starting from somewhere in healing and reorienting the field of clothing design… challenging it, if you will. We don't know the answers until more people are working towards this goal of longevity from the orientation of design ethos. We may begin to see similar themes in design emerge with time that seem to get closer to the answers we are searching for.

It is ambitious. but so is a couture gown. we are seeking to reorient the imagination of the designer and there isn't a better time and place than now. **It's a design challenge!**

FINAL EXERCISE

Together, can we think about 1 exercise, idea, method that we can add to our design process?

Can we also think of one we can minimize that perhaps takes up too much space in our design process?

There are no right or wrong answers… We are cultivating ideas together as a community and it's a slow process.

Citations

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