



Committing to Slow Fashion

By Megg Miller, Euroa, Vic.

Rather than heading to the shops when you need a new outfit, it's greener to remake something you have, or redesign an op shop number.

'Every day we eat and dress. We are now more conscious of our food and it is time to become conscious of our clothing and its footprint on the world. A global rethink about the way we dress is beginning as people question where clothing is made and what from: is it ethical and sustainable and does it exploit people or the planet?'

Jane Milburn penned these words last year after completing a unique 365-day project restyling second-hand and op shop clothing so the garments could be utilised for additional years of use.

We may use the words preloved or recycled, but Jane prefers upcycling to describe the work she is passionate about. It better describes her creative and unconventional approach and use of simple sewing skills. The underlying message is renew rather than buy new.

AN ECLECTIC BACKGROUND

Jane's career experience and achievements don't superficially appear to be congruent with her deep commitment to upcycling and refashioning clothes. She trained as an agricultural scientist, but initial employment was in the field of rural reporting for radio and television in Victoria and Queensland and more recently she has worked as a communication consultant.

In 2009 Jane received a Fairfax Agricultural Media Scholarship which enabled her to participate in the Australian Rural Leadership Program and in 2010 she was the Queensland runner up in the RIDIC Rural Women's Award.

Postgraduate study along with personal changes initiated reflection on

ways to bring her rich array of skills and studies together in a creative and meaningful way.

'I've been out there and now I'm coming back to base. I'm applying everything I've learned through various career roles and professional development opportunities to create a homespun campaign to shift our thinking about what we wear', Jane said.

HOME BASE

'My values, skills and approach to life came from what my mother taught us, even though she died when I was only 21. Mum was a home economics teacher who co-authored a textbook called *Focus on Living* in the mid 1970s. It was a popular high school textbook for decades', Jane recalled.

She has since realised that many life skills that are essential today were sensitively highlighted in the different chapters of the book, and that self-image and consumerism in particular were discussed. The insight of the book's authors has touched a chord – these are big issues today, but clearly were recognised back in the 1970s by enlightened educators.

Sew it Again, Jane's 365-day eco-clothing project, was the novel culmination of Jane's upbringing and home life, and successful career experiences.

PROJECT WITH A DIFFERENCE

Sewing and upcycling may be the medium, the message is starkly clear: we need to reuse what we have in creative ways to conserve and revive existing resources.

'The greenest clothing is that which already exists. The slow fashion movement is opening our eyes about clothing in the same way the food movement raises awareness about food miles, waste and production ethics as well as the negative impact of processed food', Jane said.

Every day in 2014 she devoted time to restyling cast-off clothing or involved others at a practical level in refashioning items donated by friends or obtained from op shops. A gallery of all the creations by Jane and the other participants is online on Pinterest. Natural fibres like linen, cotton, silk and wool were the preferred materials.

'Clothes have stories. Reusing garments that have been languishing in cupboards or are due to be dumped is an exciting way to create something unique and wearable. It can be endlessly patched, mended or adapted further, adding even more character to the story of how it came to be.

'Refashioning existing clothing, as previous generations have done, appeals to those concerned about textile waste and prepared to be creatively resourceful in how they dress instead of following the crowd.

'For example, during Sew it Again, projects were undertaken with friends. One friend, Liz, decided to upcycle a black and white knit dress that was in my stash of op shop finds as a tunic. She cut off the sleeves just beyond the join and opened out the front neckline before stitching cut edges roughly with zigzag stitch.

'Another example is my favourite history skirt. It was made from textile waste including lace scraps left-over



Batik shorts become a knitting bag – hand-sew legs closed and turn waist tie into a strap by sewing on either side.

from my mother’s sewing projects in earlier times’, Jane said.

RADICAL CHANGES NEEDED

It became apparent to Jane during Sew it Again that as a society we’ve lost the interest and ability to repair and reuse clothes. And with so much chain store clothing as cheap as chips there is little incentive for people to bother about mending or sewing.

But two worrying scenarios emerged that have encouraged Jane to speak out. The first concerns waste.

Textile consumption is escalating; in fact it’s rising at three times the rate of population growth. That means lots of clothing hanging up in wardrobes, shuffled off to op shops or tossed out as waste. ‘About one-third of clothing in the UK ends up prematurely in landfill’, Jane found.

As well as this, around 70 million kilograms of cast-off clothes from Australians are sent to developing nations annually, where they end up being burned or buried.

Jane’s second area of concern is the growing trend by manufacturers of using synthetic fabrics in clothing. Price and availability is the lure, allowing global supply chains to produce garments incredibly cheaply, but not necessarily ethically. It enables the ensuing clothing to be sold at prices far below those made from natural fibres.

The issue Jane believes we should all be aware of is the propensity of synthetics to shed microplastic fibres

during washing. One test that involved sampling waste water from household washing machines indicated that a sole garment could release around 1900 fibres each wash.

As nasty as this sounds, the tragedy is that the fibres can be carried in waste water and end up in the sea, thereby contaminating the food chain and ultimately the planet. ‘Ingested and inhaled fibres carry toxic material and one-third of the food we eat is contaminated with this material’, ecologist Mark Browne said in his Benign by Design presentation at the University of California.

NATURAL OPTIONS

‘I really like natural fibres and don’t like seeing them in landfill, clothing is worth something’, Jane said. She believes we need to raise the profile of fibres like cotton and wool because not only do they feel better to wear compared with synthetics, but their use validates the work farmers put into producing them.

Garments made from natural fibres can enjoy long lives, they can be refashioned and restyled numerous times and regardless of whether made from wool, cotton, silk or linen, the fabric is resilient enough to accommodate the reworking. The life of synthetic fabric is generally substantially shorter.

ABSENCE OF SEWING SKILLS

Not everyone can sew or has access to a sewing machine, but Jane believes non-sewers can still dress with conscience and make eco-ethical choices.

‘If upcycling is not your thing, you can dress with conscience in other ways; choose timeless styles, support local designers; buy ethical brands; prefer natural fibres; wear vintage; care for clothes and buy less of better quality. When we are individually more careful in our clothing choices, we can collectively reduce waste and excess which is wearing out the world,’ Jane urged.

Discover Jane’s upcycles online at website: www.sewitagain.com, or website: textilebeat.com. Check out the gallery of 365 garments on Pinterest: www.pinterest.com/jane1797/sew-it-again. ♻️



A bauble from waste – make a ball of T-shirt ribbon and colour with fabric paint.



Fillet an unworn silk shirt to contain pot-pourri and decorate cinnamon and cassia bark for Christmas decorations.



Christmas allsorts from offcuts – cut up woollen garments and layer the pieces in decreasing size order before securing with buttons and bells.

Blueprint for Upcycling

By Jane Milburn, Brisbane, Qld.

Reflecting on what I learnt by doing 365 days of Sew it Again, here are some thoughts of what upcycling means to all the individuals who chose to be engaged in the project.

Creative: Upcycling is creative problem solving, you need to envisage different ways of making cast-offs work and see mistakes as opportunities for experimental play.

Individual: It requires imagination, and the willingness to see and be individually creative rather than wanting sameness.

Unconventional: Upcycling involves risk-taking, it is a disruptive, non-conformist approach which challenges the status quo and conventional ways of dressing.

Limitless: Upcycling is an ongoing process in which clothing can be in a continual state of tweaking, adapting,

mending and restyling. It was commonplace for earlier generations.

Time-Consuming: It takes some time and effort to upcycle – not everyone has that luxury or wants to allocate their time to it.

Skills Required: You need a few home-sewing skills (which are being lost and under-valued) as well as basic equipment and a space to work in.

Attachment: When you upcycle, you create an emotional bond with the clothes you have invested energy in and can develop a real sense of ownership of your 'second skin'.

Own Style: Your clothes have a unique story when you create an original look with your own point of difference, and there is a certain beauty in any imperfections.

Own Fit: You can create clothing to suit yourself, that works with your

unique shape. And you can adapt to changing needs when your weight goes up and down.

Truly Green: Clothes that already exist are the greenest of all. When you upcycle, you are minimising your clothing footprint.

Natural: Wear and value a wide range of quality natural fibres – sometimes older clothing is of better quality.

Affordable and Ethical: You can dress well on a budget when you seek out best-value opportunity shops and often the clothing is near new. Buying preloved is ethical because you are reusing existing resources.

Connection: You build friendships and common points of understanding with others around a shared idea of refashioning. Your clothes can be a link to your own and others' stories and a bridge to a connected future. ♡



Clothing has no use-by date – natural fibres live on, even after long spells in the cupboard.



Adding sparkle to black – enliven a plain tiered skirt by adding trim and embellishment cut from op shop scarves.



Upside down cotton cardi skirt: turn cardigan so buttons are at the side and remains of raglan sleeves at front and back.