

Project Title: Investigate ways hands-on upcycling actions help reduce textile waste and enhance wellbeing.

In the 21st century, ways of sourcing clothes range on a continuum from thoughtless buying and tossing fast fashion at one end through to engaged hands-on redesigning and upcycling at the other. This Churchill Fellowship focused on the engaged end and explored the pathways to sustainable clothing culture through citizens proactively regenerating their own agency in the wardrobe.

This Fellowship is a multidisciplinary project at the intersection of culture, creativity, science, health and wellbeing in the way we dress. It aims to inspire social change and contribute to climate action and sustainable living across communities by shifting the culture of fast fashion consumption towards slow clothing philosophy and practice. The project is focused on wearers' discretionary choices and actions, rather than the industry or uniforms. The interviewees selected are educators, designers, influencers and practitioners engaged in their wardrobes and offer diverse entry points to enable and inspire others.

There has been a global awakening about the environmental and social issues around what we wear. You can google graphic images of clothing piles washed up on the beach in Ghana or dumped in the desert in Chile as inappropriate graveyards for clothing discards from Australia and other affluent Western countries like the ones I visited on this Fellowship. You can watch documentaries, read books, magazine and media stories carrying the message of deleterious impacts of excessive production and consumption.

Even during my Fellowship, *New Scientist* magazine's cover story, *right*, asked the question *Can Fashion Ever Be Green?* (June 4, 2022) and its editorial said "Make do and mend: The fashion world must change its environmentally destructive ways". It concluded with this comment: "*Here's to a make-do-and-mend mindset becoming mainstream – and even fashionable.*" These actions are the essence of my Churchill Fellowship which investigates wearers being hands-on and taking charge of their wardrobe to reduce waste and enhance wellbeing.

This report highlights citizens at the forefront of social change because they are independent from fast fashion. They have developed their own style, regenerated their own agency and empowered themselves through fit-for-purpose wardrobe solutions.

What we wear is integral to how we live. The need for this project has arisen because global supply chains are so efficient that consumers have lost touch with their source. Never in history has there



been so many clothes in the world. A new [Australian Fashion Council](#) Clothing Data Report¹ confirms Australians are amongst the highest consumers, buying nearly 15kg of new clothing or an average of 56 items per person in 2018-19, and the number of times clothes are worn before disposal is decreasing.

Fast fashion and ultra-fast fashion flows from large globalized businesses relying on ridiculous volume and churn, in a model considered by many to be unethical, unsatisfying and unsustainable. It overshadows small, local fashion businesses crafting beautiful clothes designed for longevity as well as the potential for engaged citizens to intervene in their own wardrobes.

This diagram, *right*, summaries the ethical issues which have motivated my work in this space during the past decade. The easy affordability of fast fashion means clothing consumption has risen 2-4 times what we actually need. The clothes are low-cost through the combination of an exploited workforce and synthetic fibres derived from fossil fuel resources. This creates waste and pollution, and a loss of skills and knowledge that previously enabled people to extend the lifespan of their clothes. These changes mean more discarded clothing is either becoming landfill or being exported to developing nations. It is a huge problem that two-thirds of clothes are made from synthetic fibres that shed microplastic particles when we wash and wear them, and creates the majority of microplastic pollution in oceans. This microplastic is entering the food chain and showing up in our bodies with as-yet-unknown health impacts.



The fashion industry recognises the need for more circular approaches. There is talk and greenwashing but, as yet, no significant clothing-to-clothing recycling because that is complex. Professor Kate Fletcher told me the circular economy model is *"almost being used as a fig leaf to distract attention from changing things"*. It circulates old-system values, ideas and priorities for furthering economic growth without fixing the broken underpinnings. It also pre-supposes we can control and close a loop when in reality fashion is a leaky open system.

Prof Fletcher is co-author of *Earth Logic: fashion action research plan*² for profoundly rethinking fashion in the face of the climate crisis. The more I read my copy of *Earth Logic* gifted by Kate and reflect on our conversation at her United Kingdom home in Bollington, the more I see where this Churchill Fellowship nestles within the *Earth Logic* model. It fits under *Learning: new knowledge, skills and mindsets for fashion*, and pertains to how we 'acquire, care for and mend clothing, how to share clothing, how to want the clothes we already have'.

This Fellowship is about disrupting the fashion system through the power of consumer behaviour and choices because there is no better time for the citizenry to be activated and engaged through everyday practices. It is about taking charge of our clothes, divesting ourselves from dependency on destructive systems by becoming actively engaged in and caring for what we wear rather than passively choosing from the latest offerings. It is grounded in the practices, choices and actions that

reduce our material footprint: think, natural, quality, local, few, care, make, revive, adapt and salvage as outlined in The Slow Clothing Manifesto.

It is about regenerating our own agency and being empowered through skills, knowledge and desire to assemble a wardrobe of garments that we want to wear and keep in service for as long as possible. Agency is attained through simple skills to undertake acts of styling, mending, co-designing, and upcycling to appreciate and value the natural resources that go into clothes and manipulating them to fit our needs. Being more engaged with our clothes is a driver for systemic change as well as bringing with it financial, environmental, empowerment and wellbeing benefits. At its simplest, it is being resourceful and using commonsense; neither expensive nor particularly difficult.

Across the world, I found many individuals, academics, social enterprise and small business change agents envisaging and implementing small and slow solutions that can help people solve problems in their wardrobes. In the context of this project, 'hands-on upcycling actions' generically includes activities such as: thrifting, styling, mending, making, remaking, embellishing, adapting, tinkering, redesigning, restyling, refashioning and repurposing. Reducing textile waste and enhancing wellbeing are potential outcomes from being more involved in our wardrobes and my interviewees affirmed this approach.

A summary of ways people are undertaking actions that help in **REDUCING TEXTILE WASTE** include:

1. restyling and wearing what is already in the wardrobe
2. thrifting, mending and dyeing existing clothes
3. redesigning, co-designing using existing clothing and materials
4. making their own clothes, some hand-stitching to further slow the process
5. liberating and sharing dormant and waste textile resources within local supply chains
6. skill and knowledge sharing within communities
7. supporting local, regenerative natural fibre and design systems

A summary of ways people are **ENHANCING WELLBEING** from hands-on actions include:

1. a sense of empowerment and agency over what they wear
2. a sense of playfulness, joy and self-expression in having interesting clothes
3. feelings of calm, relaxation, self-soothing, distraction, resilience and meditation
4. comfort from slowing down, thinking through making, and being resourceful
5. a felt sense of meaning and mindful connection to self, clothes and community
6. a sense of contributing to broader solutions for fashion waste
7. feelings of interconnection to nature and the natural world

Here are three of many examples of people learning and sharing skills to create change:

- **EMPOWERMENT:** Designer **Cal Patch [25]** teaches people how to use their own body shape and aesthetic to make clothes to suit themselves. Learning from Cal enabled **Sonya Philip [5]** to sew her way out of a clothing drought and author a how-to book *The Act of Sewing*.
- **SKILLS:** Teacher **Ros Studd [38]** responded to the lack of mending skills traditionally learned through schools or families with a free learning platform, while groups such as **Sewing Café Lancaster [48]** gather and engage their community by sharing sewing skills.

- **HEALTH and WELLBEING:** Entrepreneur **Geraldine Tew [4]** observed the lack of making causing un-wellness and created an upcycling workshop program engaging designers such as **Bea Lorimer [3]** to share skills and experiences that can inspire more upcycling at home.

These actions, and this report, form part of what *Earth Logic* describes as an activist knowledge ecology, a platform for the parallel generation of knowledge, action, empowerment and change.

There is no recipe for bringing about behaviour change in the face of decades of fashion conditioning. Change is enabled at the intersection between awareness and motivation, change agents and exemplars, and availability of local resources and education.

The ‘making do’ in earlier times was born from lack of resources and most people did it. Nowadays ‘making do’ is more likely to be a response to excess and, ironically, it may be the privileged who are currently most engaged. Modern ‘making do’ is more about choices and actions to be resourceful and sustainable, more likely about saving the planet than specifically needing to save money.

The people I met have become more self-reliant in various ways by developing skills and insights to make themselves independent of the fashion supply chain. They are reclaiming control of their wardrobe by being more hands-on in creatively making, mending, redesigning or restyling clothes already around them to reduce waste and enhance wellbeing. They are empowered through what they wear and uninterested in slavishly following trends that provide fleeting satisfaction at best.

Through this Fellowship, I tapped into the citizenry swimming against the all-consuming tide. They are engaging in hands-on processes that enable a consumption pause, taking time for self-reflection and working with what is at hand before making considered decisions in any new purchases.

These citizens are showing that culture change is possible when we inform ourselves and learn skills of independence and resourcefulness, and invest time in the process.

This report includes ways that all citizens with a can-do, will-do, mindset can regenerate their agency when they allocate leisure time to resourceful creativity rather than shopping for quick fixes.

RECOMMENDATIONS from my Fellowship are:

- A. More education around hand-sewing skills for mending, tinkering and mindfulness
- B. More opportunities to engage and share clothing resources, skills and creativity
- C. Wellbeing services based around regenerating agency in the wardrobe
- D. Redesign services that enable engagement and co-design
- E. More engagement through opportunities to practice permaculture and citizen science
- F. More awareness-raising of unsustainable consumer culture and greenwashing
- G. Localisation to promote and enable place-based fibre systems and culture

There are no easy solutions to complex problems within the fashion sector which is [reportedly](#) responsible for up to 10 percent of annual global carbon emissions. However, the idea that we can keep consuming as usual is clearly unsustainable and all indications are that our survival depends on pushing back against consumerism.

This Fellowship is a step towards changing the consumer culture of dependence on global fast fashion supply chains to one of independent flourishing of local creativity, engagement and connection through what we choose to wear.

It brings focus to the concept of dressing for health and wellbeing rather than status and looks, and outlines how engaged citizens can gain wellbeing benefits by regenerating their own agency using what is around them and, in so doing, contribute to reducing the textile waste burden.

We can't change the world, but what we can do is change the way we live through our everyday practices. Those small decisions and choices for living simply are within our means, they are the steps to leading a modest yet fulfilling life in harmony with the natural world.

As anthropologist Margaret Mead said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

In *The Biology of Civilisation: understanding human culture as a force in nature*³ Australia's Professor Stephen Boyden said ecological sustainability and survival of human civilisation depended on three things: containing the population size; reducing the intensity of resource and energy use; and shifting to more ecologically sustainable technologies within a more biosensitive society. While this Fellowship cannot address the first issue, it can play a part in ameliorating the other two by pushing back against the dominant culture of consumption.

Producing new clothes requires inputs of fibre, labour, energy and water, and outputs of greenhouse gases and other pollutants. Actively extending the useful life of existing clothes by just nine months longer than average, reduces their carbon, water and waste footprints by 20-30 percent⁴.

This Fellowship found that when we extend the life of our clothes by becoming hands-on and actively engaged in our wardrobe, we regenerate our agency, gain health and wellbeing benefits, and reduce our material footprint.

Boyden identified the intangible psychosocial health needs (see Appendix 6) of humans and many align with this project. They include opportunities and incentives for: creative behaviour; learning and practising manual skills; co-operative small-group interactions as well as lifestyles conducive to a sense of personal involvement, purpose, responsibility, challenge, self-fulfilment and love.

These psychosocial health needs can be found in self-provisioning behaviours involved in making, doing and growing things for oneself. It contrasts with what has become the norm in recent decades of outsourcing to 'specialists' such as fast fashion supply chains. The consumer system of buying stuff does not meet our psychosocial needs. As Emma Friedlander-Collins said: "*We need to become generalists again, rather than specialists.*" When we become self-reliant and need to buy less, this means we need to earn less and therefore have more time to do the things we love.

Due to the global coronavirus pandemic, travel was by necessity deferred until April 2022. Countries of similar socio-economic standing to Australia were visited, and unfortunately planned visits to Japan and Europe were not realized due to scheduling changes.

This Fellowship addresses the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: 12 Sustainable Consumption and Production, 3 Good Health and Wellbeing and 13 Climate Action.

¹ Australian Fashion Council, Clothing Data Report, 2022

² Fletcher K, and Tham M (2019), *Earth Logic Fashion Action Research Plan*, London: The JJ Charitable Trust

³ Professor Stephen Boyden, (2004) *The Biology of Civilisation: understanding human culture as a force in nature*, UNSW Press, pgs 66, 138, 155.

⁴ <https://www.loveyourclothes.org.uk/about/why-love-your-clothes>