

Churchill Fellow finds stitching skills and agency are antidotes to fast fashion

Words by **Jane Milburn**

Images **Contributed**

Developing stitching skills and regenerating our own agency in the wardrobe are antidotes to fast fashion, according to Churchill Fellow Jane Milburn who spent two months earlier this year researching upcycling actions that help reduce textile waste and enhance wellbeing.

Jane's multidisciplinary project is 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.

It highlights citizens, educators, designers, influencers and practitioners who are independent from fast fashion because they have developed their own style, regenerated their own agency and empowered themselves through fit-for-purpose wardrobe solutions that offer diverse entry points.

Jane's 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.

There has been a global awakening about the environmental and social issues around what we wear. 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 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. 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," Jane said.

In the United Kingdom, Jane met with Professor Kate Fletcher, co-author of *Earth Logic*: fashion action research plan which calls for a profound rethink of fashion in the face of the climate crisis. Her fellowship fits with the *Earth Logic* model under the section of 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'.

Pushing aside fast fashion

Jane Milburn and Ros Studd in Aberdeen Scotland



Amy DuFault and Jane Milburn dyeing textiles on Cape Cod



Author of Earth Logic Professor Kate Fletcher and Jane Milburn in Bollington UK



Bea Lorimer upcycles wool jumpers to reduce waste



Sonya Philip in her San Francisco studio

In the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and New Zealand, Jane found many people learning and sharing skills for empowerment to create change and enhance health and wellbeing:

- **EMPOWERMENT:** Designer Cal Patch teaches people how to use their own body shape and aesthetic to make clothes to suit themselves. Learning from Cal enabled Sonya Philip to sew her way out of a clothing drought and author a how-to book *The Act of Sewing*.
- **SKILLS:** Teacher Ros Studd 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 gather and engage their community by sharing sewing skills.
- **HEALTH and WELLBEING:** Entrepreneur Geraldine Tew observed the lack of making causing un-wellness and created an upcycling workshop program engaging designers such as Bea Lorimer 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.

A summary of ways this Churchill Fellowship found 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

“My report is available on the Churchill Trust website and 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,” Jane said.

While 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. “

RECOMMENDATIONS from Jane’s 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

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.”

Cal Patch helps people make clothes that fit their shape



Pattern system helps people navigate sewing



Words by Jane Milburn Images Contributed



ModularME is a unique pattern system designed to enable creativity and versatility for those who dream of successfully sewing their own clothes.

This new ModularME system has been developed during the past five years by Julie and Maurice Hillier from Ministry of Handmade to take the wrinkles out of patterns to ensure clothes fit your body and aesthetic.

At the recent launch on the Queensland Museum Terrace, art gallery coordinator Leanne Kelly said people make clothes to have something beautiful to wear, to tell a story and be part of a like-minded community. “ModularME encourages people to have a go,” she said.

Julie has been sewing all her life and created ModularME as a way to help others to start their own sewing adventures beginning with one simple pattern, a very simple top or dress. This is customised through a series of simple steps to suit each person’s own individual measurements and is called the GO-TO Pattern. “It is designed to be used over and

over again as a base to make a wonderful array of different garments in different styles that suit each person perfectly,” Julie said.

The ModularME pattern system grows from there, with 17 modules available for destinations of choice. The modules can be used on their own or in a myriad of combinations to create uniquely styled garments. Each module teaches new skills, and with skills comes confidence!

The pattern system includes over 40 teaching videos as well as detailed written instructions and illustrations to guide makers through every step of the sewing process. And, as it is an online system, it is accessible for everyone, no matter where they live.

To cater for all shapes and bodies, the ModularME Sewing System pattern is available in two size ranges: A to G and E to K (approximately 6-18 and 14-26).

After teaching sewing for 10 years, Julie knows where people



sometimes hit road blocks with their sewing. Consequently there are no buttons, no zips, and pieces of fabric can be joined to achieve unique and resourceful outcomes.

“It has the power to enable more sewing, less buying, less textile waste, to influence choices, to feel great in your clothes and discover the joy of sustainable dressing. It’s the perfect antidote for fast fashion,” Julie said.

“This is good for you, the country and the planet. We are teaching people to sew for themselves, to experiment, and to modify clothes they already have. Sewing enables people to choose plant-based, renewable sustainable fabrics and avoid oil-based ones.”

Maurice said their driver is seeing people grow, learning new skills and making it easier to get the next skill. It is a game changer. ModularME is the first iteration ... Modular Mini, Modular Men, and Modular Mutt are all in the pipeline.

We regenerate our agency in the wardrobe when we have sewing skills to make our own choices and be independent of fashion. I learned on my Churchill Fellowship from Cal Patch in Upstate New York Hodge that the pattern is the biggest obstacle to successful DIY sewing and ModularME helps with that.

Find out more from www.modulareme.com or Ministry of Handmade.