The Lucky People Forecast approach – How can education support engagement with systemic sustainable fashion futures?

Introduction
In December 2009 over five hundred fashion professionals rallied for a Fashion Summit in Copenhagen, organised by NICE (Nordic Initiative, Clean and Ethical) and timed to coincide with the UN Climate Change Conference. The interest from the industry in socio-environmental issues that this evidences is a clear indicator of how far fashion has come in integrating sustainable thought and action. We have had ten years of CSR; Walmart and H&M are leading in pushing the supply of organic cotton; London, as well as New York, Paris and Stockholm have hosted events or weeks dedicated to ethically and environmentally friendlier fashion; and just in the last couple of years there has been a real tipping point, as companies are understanding that engaging with sustainability is not only a necessity but also an opportunity.

Again, in Copenhagen at the UN Climate Change Conference, the picture science provided shows that we are alarmingly close to exceeding dangerous tipping points in the natural systems, and in the case of biodiversity loss and climate change we may already have done so. (Rockström et al. 2009) The message is clear: human activity is pushing natural thresholds to beyond which damage will be irrevocable; “human design overpowers nature’s design”. (Thorpe, 2007) Current measures do not constitute the systemic approaches needed to reverse the alarming effects of a consumerist and producerist society. In Donella Meadow’s terms, we are still “diddling with details, arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.” (Meadows, 1997)

Clothing and textiles account for 5-10% of environmental impact within the EU. (European Commission, 2006) While all the emerging environmental strategies in fashion (such as cleaning up in the process stages and specifying organic cotton instead of cotton conventionally farmed), must be viewed as highly positive developments, they are still, in the main, addressing the product level of fashion. Moderate environmental improvements are easily eaten up by the astounding scale and speed of fashion. In the main, strategies fail to engage with the full lifecycle of our garments by, for example, excluding considerations for the user phase where the impact can be utmost. (Allwood et al. 2006) More importantly, strategies still fail to fully engage with the huge potential of design: “80% of a product, service or system’s environmental cost is determined at the design stage.” (Design Council, 2002: 17) Making good choices already in the design stage make cleaning up further along the line redundant. Moreover, drawing on the creativity of design offers the potential of imaginative sustainable scenarios at both product and systems levels.

Systemic, holistic and design led approaches to sustainability exist in pockets of the fashion scene. Yet, the promise of niche fashion practitioners, and cutting edge researchers working with lifecycle approaches and user-centred methods (see e.g.
Fletcher, 2008, von Busch, 2009), and of product service systems being explored in other design fields (see. e.g Manzini, 2003) remains to be fulfilled in the mass-market segment of the fashion industry.

We are so to speak, in the main, relying on a first generation of approaches to the sustainability imperative. These product level responses to the environmental challenge can be described as ‘design (almost) as usual’. In contrast, addressing systems, which may entail the design of a process or a mode of participating instead of a tangible and physical product, constitutes a paradigmatic shift for the fashion designer – and for fashion education. This paper explores what the next generation of sustainable envisioning, strategies and practices may entail, and proposes how education might set up conditions for fashion designers to attune their knowledge, skills, and interests to the needs of sustainable futures. It draws upon a recent PhD project Lucky People Forecast (Tham, 2008), which developed, tested and evaluated a methodological approach to inviting designers into more strategic and systemic design practice. It proposes the emerging field of metadesign as a route to understanding the complexity and emergent qualities of fashion’s task ahead, and what our shared learning experience might involve. It should be noted that while sustainability always entails the complex interrelationships between social, environmental and economic factors here it is, in the main, exemplified by the environmental dimension.

Systemic approaches to sustainability in fashion

Systems theory teaches us about the interdependence, and co-evolution of all parts of a system, about feedback and that a small intervention can have a seemingly disproportionately large effect. (See e.g. Meadows, 1997)

Fashion can be described as a complex dynamic system, with many subsystems, and with an elaborate web of feedback loops¹. This system is constantly in flux, sometimes entering the edge of chaos, after which it either returns to the previous configurations (‘normal science’), or morphs itself into a new order of organisation. Fashion is built on the intricate interrelationships between a range of stakeholders. On a micro level: avant-garde, and mass-market designers, buyers, pattern-makers, marketers, PR people and CSR experts, fashion forecasters, producers, stylists, journalists, photographers, media, retailers, users, educators and students. On a macro level: economic, technological, social, cultural and ecological systems.

A systems approach implies the conscious inclusion of all these actors and associated factors and parameters. Two operational questions, and resulting definitions that may reflect the difference between a product or a systems approach to sustainability in fashion are:

¹ Negative and positive feedback loops serve to regulate a system, the former going against the direction of a development in the system (the less the more, or the more the less), and the latter with it (the more the more, the less the less). (See e.g. Meadows, 2008)
**Product level**
How can we make this product less harmful?
Treating the symptom.
Initiatives within the current paradigm of design.

**Systems level**
How can we best meet a need, or even change the world?
Addressing underlying causes, (and treating symptoms).
Initiatives beyond the current paradigm of design.

In practice, a systems approach to sustainability in fashion would therefore include the consideration of the entire fashion product lifecycle – cradle-to-cradle (see e.g., Braungart and McDonough, 2002), and the interdependence between the stages of the lifecycle. It would seek to address both the symbolic and material dimension of fashion and resulting range of motivations behind purchase and use – from practical functionality to the more ephemeral rationales, such as creation of identity and mental stimulation. (See e.g. Shove and Warde, 2002) It would need to understand actual patterns of use, and the diversity of engagement that users display, including notions of time, and context. It would need to intervene in between the employment opportunities that fashion offers in, for example, India and Africa, the environmental cost of transportation, and interest in very local resilience and reskilling. (See e.g. Transition Towns) Systemic responses to fashion must cross-reference the experiential dimension of fashion, with its material properties, and engage with the range of stakeholders that influence, and is influenced by fashion.

An example of how a systemic approach to fashion may manifest itself is that of Product Service Systems. Product Service Systems offer a bridge to more sustainable producer and consumer practices, by proposing a shift from ownership to access. Aspects of such systems can be exemplified by public libraries, by Internet services that enable the streaming of music, and by car-pools. The environmental viability of a shift from ownership to access within the realm of fashion has been established in several studies. (Fletcher and Tham, 2004, Creehan, 2005, Allwood et al., 2006) Scenarios for what Product Service Systems might entail for the fashion industry was developed in the AHRC funded Lifetimes project (Fletcher and Tham, 2004). Here a continuum from ‘slow’ (such as a plain coat) to ‘fast’ (such as a party top) fashion was devised with strategies that took into account both the material dimension of functionality and the symbolic dimension of fashion consumption. For example, while slower fashion would probably still warrant ownership, the garment’s life could be prolonged by the company offering users repair and restyling services. Faster fashion would motivate rental services; after the user had worn a top for a night out or two, she would return it to the shop unwashed. Garments could therefore be bulk washed, saving on energy and water, and the desire for fast fashion could be fulfilled with less material in circulation.

**Implications of engaging with systemic approaches to sustainability in fashion**
The integration of eco-literacy\(^2\) as regards the product level, in itself proposes a challenge to fashion education. Holistic and systemic approaches ask even deeper questions of our processes, practices, and even how we define the scope of our creativity, and where we draw the boundaries of what constitutes an output of fashion design.

The Lucky People Forecast project (Tham, 2008) explored how designers may embrace more systemic approaches to sustainability. The foundation of this research

\(^2\) The term ecological literacy was first introduced by David Orr and refers, in brief, to the ability to understand and design for healthy ecological and human systems. (Orr, 1992)
consisted of a case study with H&M, and additional interviews with designers, buyers and CSR staff in Sweden and the UK. It constituted a comprehensive mapping of fashion professionals’ attitudes to sustainability and environmental improvement by design, and the current rationales behind, organisation and practice of sustainability work in the fashion industry’s mass-market segment. From the study a series of themes emerged presenting anticipated structural, cultural, normative and ontological challenges to, and opportunities for, design-led systemic engagement with sustainability.

Although all companies that participated in the study had environmental staff in place, they had little or no contact with the designers. It was deemed likely that this highly specialised organisation did not enable a shared knowledge ecology, and that it did not foster a shared ownership of problems and solutions. Indeed, another theme constraint culture confirmed that the designers perceived sustainability as yet another limitation (alongside the budget), and the designers frequently spoke of environmental guidelines not ‘allowing them to specify this fabric, or use that factory.’ Designers’ knowledge of environmental issues was limited, and fragmented into isolated sample facts. The designers seemed to lack a cohesive framework in which to integrate new information encountered – with their own body of experience and with personal values. Indeed, designers spoke of environmental considerations primarily in technical terms, excluding conceptual or normative dimensions. Most of the participants of the study expressed a clear dichotomy: on the one hand fashion – ‘a creative, dynamic pursuit, where I can situate myself’, and on the other hand sustainability – ‘outside my professional realm and with value associations alien to fashion’.

The narratives about the history of engagement with sustainability in the respective organisations revealed that when the implementation of social and environmental considerations began, through the means of CSR and Codes of Conduct, environmental issues were, in the main, adopted by – or forced upon – those working with quality control. The chemical restriction lists epitomised the means of communicating sustainability in the organisation – a series of don’ts in the form of a checklist. In combination the findings suggest that, at least in the realm of mass-market, sustainability has not been claimed, and is not ‘owned’ by designers.

However the findings also included some themes and qualities deemed to offer opportunities for engagement with systemic approaches. The level of interest that fashion designers expressed in sustainability was higher than their knowledge level, but neither they – nor their CSR colleagues had considered them a priority for further education. Some fashion organisations were characterised by what in systems terms is called bounded instability – an auspicious combination of flexibility and stability, which indicated scope for fashion professionals to pursue individual interests and claim new territories, if they so wished. Although their actual practice often did not allow much space for it, the fashion designers declared their key interests to be in the realm of creativity and ‘the bigger picture’. They particularly enjoyed the prospective activity of trend research, they enjoyed the free brainstorming in the larger team – and they had confidence in their design-led reading of zeitgeist. Yet the boundaries fashion professionals – designers and their colleagues of other disciplines alike – implied in the descriptions of design suggested that the scope was limited to employing skills and creativity operationally rather than strategically, and with exclusively physical/product outputs. The study further brought to the surface how serious the fashion industry takes the pursuit of inspiration, and how sophisticated and significant, in process and outcome, its use of visual language is.
Channelling our skills for sustainable futures – towards a methodology

“Resilience provides a system with the ability to persist (absorb and resist shocks), adapt, and transform in the face of natural and human induced disturbances.” (Rockström et al., 2009)

In order to be resilient, an ecosystem – or a building, a wardrobe, a transport system or a city – needs to manifest a degree of adaptability, needs to display diversity, and requires collaboration between its parts. At the heart of a resilient design, or a resilient designer, therefore, ought to be openness, creativity, and imagination. The shift in fashion designers’ practices to a systemic engagement with sustainability asks for a courageous attunement or channelling of knowledge, skills, experiences and interests.

• How can we educate designers for the world – instead of, or as well as, for the industry?
• How can we inspire designers to address underlying causes – as well as treat symptoms?
• How can we support strong individuals to comfortably, and with open minds, explore, innovate, express and grow in trans-disciplinary teamwork?
• How can we harness the creativity, purposefulness, and zeitgeist-intuneness of fashion designers for empathetic solutions that transcend the short-term future?

The conclusion of the study exploring and mapping attitudes to, and practices of, sustainability in the fashion industry, was a series of recommendations or a working brief for an approach to inviting fashion professionals into engagement with sustainability at systemic level. It established a desired focus for information and knowledge transfer and generation, motivation/inspiration and futures-oriented thinking. This should aim primarily to build on the auspicious qualities that had been identified, inspiring designers to take ownership and claim sustainability. It should seek to offer an experience close to the ‘nerve’ of fashion – in the use of language, in the celebration of creativity, and by focusing on opportunities.

Literature on futures studies, and theories on change further informed the development of pedagogical approaches. Of particular importance was the understanding that we, through conceptualising, designing, producing and sending out objects into the world, also shape or cast perceptions, behaviours and even the world itself. From this insight followed the notion of the learning situation as an inclusive envisioning process – which should ideally include a diverse range of fashion stakeholders.

“forecasting is one of the major tools by which the future is colonised. No matter how sophisticated the technique... forecasting simply ends up by projecting (the selected) past and the (often-privileged) present on to a linear future.” (Sardar, 1999: 9)

Together the findings resulted in the following objectives to:
• Offer interdisciplinary and participatory processes;
• Focus on opportunities rather than constraints;
• Invite designers into strategic and visionary realms of design practice;
• Use creative and image led approaches; and
• Introduce fashion and sustainability as compatible instead of as polarities.

The methodological framework that resulted was threefold, drawing on:
Methods, processes and tools that were deemed to further sustainability literacy – e.g. on a practical level, the lifecycle concept; and on an epistemological level, the holistic engagement with learning and the inclusive stance to change that action oriented research proposes. Action oriented research is described as both informative and transformative, and because of its emphasis on an extended epistemology – including theoretical, experiential, practical and presentational knowing, was perceived as highly relevant for the field of design (see e.g. Heron and Reason, 2001);

b) Methods, processes and tools in design, such as mapping, drawing, making, visual and emotive language, and in design research, such as the cultural probes approach (see e.g. Gaver 2001), and the prototyping of concepts, products, services and experiences;

c) Methods, processes and tools in Futures Studies, such as futures stories and scenario work (see e.g. Slaughter 2001), and a discourse celebrating multiple perspectives on futures (see e.g. Sardar 1999).

The conceptual and pragmatic proposition of resilience has strong affinity with an understanding of what characterises lucky people. The psychologist Wiseman describes how people who perceive themselves as lucky, through what can be described as positive feedback, also become ‘luckier’ than those who term themselves unlucky. According to Wiseman luck “is not a magical ability or the result of random chance”, instead thoughts and behaviour define good or bad fortune. (Wiseman, 2003: 3) He proposes four principles, or characteristics of people that have what he terms ‘the luck factor’: they are skilled at generating and detecting opportunities; they have trust in intuition for decision making; they have positive expectations; and a “resilient attitude that transforms bad luck into good.” (Wiseman, 2003: 4)

It follows that there is an element of the self-fulfilling prophecy to luck, evocative of the circularity of forecasting. The ‘casting’ of fashion professionals as lucky, and of fashion and sustainability as compatible and synergistic is therefore a significant element to the methodological approach that was developed, proactively ‘casting’ fashion taking ownership of sustainability and indeed ‘casting’ that fashion can achieve sustainability – and that ‘sustainability’ itself can grow from and be enriched by fashion.

The Lucky People Forecast approach

The outcome of an extensive design process, brought the recommendations into approaches and concrete activities in a coherent workshop format. This considered the entire user journey, from initial contact with participants to follow-up interviews. In the resulting workshop, the overarching proposition ‘what if fashion and sustainability were compatible and even synergistic’ was divided into sub-propositions, which were in turn translated into a series of activities. (See figure 1) The workshops mixed informative, analytical and creative approaches, drawing on language, methods and processes from the fields of a) fashion/design/research; b) trend-forecasting and Futures Studies; and c) sustainability and eco-literacy. The workshops were set twenty years ahead in time, in order to provide an ‘uncontaminated’, relatively free space of exploration, and to draw upon fashion professionals’ stated interest in the future. Interdisciplinarity was intrinsic to the method, and the workshops, which took place eight times in Sweden and the UK, brought together fashion designers, buyers, environmental officers, trade body representatives, journalists, educators, students and users.
Figure 1 Propositions translated into workshops approaches and activities. (Tham, 2008)

It is important to note that the workshop was designed as one cohesive and holistic experience, with intended fluid and emergent learning outcomes. Yet, it is possible to draw out some qualities from its different parts. Here a sample of the workshop elements is described.

**Cultural props**
Inspired by the cultural probes approach, the prop was designed to provide a bridge between personal and professional realities and value systems; between the known and less familiar; and between the individual and the collective understanding, by using artefacts to spur personal narratives on a particular theme. The participants were asked to bring into the session two objects respectively representing fashion and sustainability. In the workshop these were used to explore and map, in drawings and words, first the individuals’ and subsequently the group’s understanding and experience of fashion and sustainability, apart, and combined. The study showed that the situated story-telling approach the cultural prop affords, can facilitate the verbalisation of tacit knowledge and foster a shared language across disciplines, professional roles and cultures. The prop also offered a simple diagnostic framework of the groups’ interests and knowledge. It further facilitated the situating of abstract concepts and new information with the already familiar range of experiences and knowledge.
**Re-design**
The maps that the groups created (their self-professed understanding of fashion and sustainability expressed in key words organised in meaningful clusters), resulted in a series of prioritised qualities of fashion and sustainability. These were used as the starting point of a re-design task, transforming a fashion object from ‘design as usual’ to design inside a paradigm of sustainability. The redesign task sought to give participants an experience of re-attuning existing skills to new ends, an immediate and hands-on familiarity with how the qualities of sustainability keywords that they themselves had defined might relate to a practical fashion brief, and highlight the range of opportunities. It further allowed the group to practice working in interdisciplinary teams.

**Futures scenarios**
The workshop culminated in the creation of a scenario for mass-market fashion in twenty years' time, exploring aspects such as user experience, retail outlets, emerging technologies, innovative products and services – all from within a framework of sustainability. This task was designed to offer an experience of a more strategic designer role, and of design beyond product outcomes. Returning to the notion of the ‘cast’, the scenarios – a wide spectrum of ideas from the more grounded to the more fantastic – also served to generate new imagery or legends of the future of fashion and sustainability, co-authored by the participants, and therefore from the inside of fashion.

Both the re-design task and the scenarios were further designed from the premise that ideas brought into a coherent concept, and ‘owned’ by the originators are more likely to stick and in turn be passed on.

In the evaluation of the pedagogical approach to which the workshop represented a sample, both the transformative and generative potential of the proposition ‘What if fashion and sustainability were compatible and even synergistic?’ underpinning the inquiry were explored. The approach was evaluated drawing upon data generated in the sessions and in follow-up interviews with each participant. In order to capture the richness of the exploration and the complexity of the territory, a fourfold evaluative framework was developed comprising:

a) **Brand/perception** – The subjective experience of the compatibility of fashion and sustainability;

b) **Knowledge and awareness** – The level of knowledge and awareness of sustainability in the fashion industry context;

c) **Relationships** – The location of personal and professional self in the realm of sustainability, and engagement with the intricate relationships that sustainability implies; and

d) **Agency and activism** – The perceived power, and manifested inclination to act and effect change.
The workshops were very positively received. They succeeded to spur understanding of the value of interdisciplinary working groups. They encouraged designers and the rest of the workshop teams to use their imagination, strategic and creative skills beyond the product level of fashion design – at systemic level. They generated excitement for opportunities at a convergence of fashion and sustainability and a sense of ownership amongst the participants of this emerging area. They fostered empowerment in terms of fashion professionals’ ability to affect positive change. A key finding was how pivotal the experience of agency (d) is for engagement at the other three levels. With the tools to take theory to action today, albeit in a small way, such as washing your clothes at lower temperature, the door is open to knowledge, the understanding of relationships, new definitions of design or sustainability, and more actions.

**Metadesign**

"Metadesign can be described as a comprehensive design process that includes the design of itself. The benefits of this approach is that it transcends the limitations of individual design specialities and works systematically by integrating social, political, economical and emotional levels.” (Wood, 2007)

In the ‘Benchmarking Synergy Levels within Metadesign’ project\(^3\) we explored the potential of metadesign in theory and practice, and developed tools to prompt synergies in interdisciplinary teamwork. (See e.g. Tham and Jones, 2008) The emerging field of metadesign can be helpful in the understanding of how the notion of a resilient system – adaptable, diverse, and thriving on collaboration – can be translated to design, and therefore how fashion can take a systemic approach to sustainability – while celebrating creativity.

First conceptualised in the 1960s, metadesign has evolved at a convergence between science and the arts, informed and facilitated by new information technologies. Giaccardi (2005) offers a historical perspective of this emerging design field and contributes to its reading as a more general cultural development aimed at expanding human creativity and the notion of sociability. According to Giaccardi, metadesign offers a critical and reflexive perspective on the boundaries and scope of design, a mode of designing, and operational design methodologies. Metadesign invites end-users into design processes where the object of design is systems or conditions for continuous adaptation, innovation and emergence rather than static objects or content. Metadesign thus meets such challenges that design faces as the change in users’ needs and the inconsistency in users’ interaction with designed objects. (Giaccardi, 2005) Metadesign can be understood to draw from some key principles of ecological systems:

- **Biodiversity** – metadesign integrates a diversity of perspectives directly represented by arts, science and the new social spaces made possible by information technologies. Metadesign also purports to be an integrator of systems;
- **Co-creation and emergence** – metadesign aims to provide “relational settings that allow systems to be based on a mutual and open process of affecting and being affected” (Giaccardi, 2005: 344);
- **Evolutionary processes found in ecological systems** – metadesign constitutes “a shared design endeavour aimed at sustaining emergence, evolution and adaptation”, and “open-ended and infinite interactivity capable of accommodating always-new variables” (Giaccardi, 2005: 342).

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\(3\) This was a three-year long AHRC funded research project, hosted by the Department of Design, Goldsmiths, University of London.
For the purposes of the Lucky People Forecast approach, metadesign’s application of evolutionary processes to design is of particular interest. Soddu (as cited in Giaccardi, 2005: 344) conceptualises metadesign as design of “artificial DNA”; it designs a “species of design”, the designer generates an “executable idea” (or generative code – an idea open for evolution according to needs) and the user chooses from infinite possible realisations one that meets her or his needs, values and taste. In Ascott’s terms (as cited in Giaccardi, 2005) metadesign therefore constitutes a “seeding process”, as opposed to top-down planning. (Giaccardi, 2005: 347)

**Discussion**

While the workshops were a modest and finite intervention, the Lucky People Forecast approach has since been developed, explored and evaluated with students groups and fashion professionals. (Beckmans College of Design, Stockholm; BA Design and MA Design Futures, Goldsmiths, University of London, Sustainable Fashion Academy, Stockholm.)

In autumn 2009, we gathered every student and all members of staff at Beckmans College of Design, for a two-week shared intensive course in design and sustainability. It was particularly interesting to share the experiences of the first year BA fashion students, just starting their degree. On the first day in a breakout session, after being introduced to the natural scientific framework of sustainability, and some very alarming prospects, students voiced concerns. ‘Should I really become a fashion designer at all?’ ‘Will my personal expression be limited?’ Yet, a few days later, students were getting on with their briefs, working across design disciplines in teams, sometimes unsure, but mostly excited. We need to take these concerns, the anxiety, the stress, the questions – coming from individuals’ both personal and professional perspectives – very seriously, and really listen. Designers need to hear the truth about climate change, and about the imperative of a design beyond (almost) as usual. It is not helpful to shield ourselves and students from the reality that in order to survive, in the extreme as a species, but also as an industry, design and fashion must change. The methods and processes to inviting designers into systemic approaches to sustainability in fashion discussed here, must be understood to be subordinate to a certain empathy. There is real resilience to be found in design and in designers if sustainability can be introduced as a creative, possible proposition, and with enough space to reflect and to experiment, and enough flexibility for designers to claim and shape.

Much of the body of knowledge in fashion is tacit, and the theorisation of fashion fairly recent. The writing of fashion was long conducted by, for example, sociologists writing from the *outside*. (See e.g. Barthes, 1983, Blumer, 1969) It is gratifying that in recent years the verbalisation of fashion is also taking place from within, and the tacit knowledge acknowledged and celebrated. (See e.g. the publication Fashion Practice) It seems important that, at this auspicious point in time, when fashion faces its perhaps biggest challenge ever, we do not leave it to the outside to define how we ‘do sustainability’, but that we take ownership of this process. Complacency risks leaving us with strategies that are irreconcilable with the very nerve of fashion. For a truly successful range of strategies, it ought to, for example, be a requisite to engage seriously with the symbolic motivations behind fashion, instead of terming them inconvenient, or frivolous. Reinventing ourselves from *within* ought to be a stronger proposition than allowing others to reinvent us.
Bibliography


