Cumulus Conference Proceedings
The Design After
Bogota, Colombia
Oct 30 – Nov 1/2019
https://www.cumulusbogota2019.org/

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School of Architecture and Design
Bogota, Colombia
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ISBN 978-958-774-912-0
ISSN 2490-046X

Cumulus Conference Proceedings Series
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www.cumulusassociation.org

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Universidad de los Andes | Vigilada Mineducación.
Reconocimiento como universidad: Decreto 1297 del 30 de mayo de 1964.
Reconocimiento de personería jurídica: Resolución 28 del 23 de febrero de 1949, Minjusticia.
Acreditación institucional de alta calidad, 10 años: Resolución 582 del 9 de enero del 2015, Mineducación

Cumulus Conference Proceedings Bogota 2019
Cumulus Association of Universities and Colleges of Art, Design and Media
Bogota 2019
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DESIGNING FASHION FICTIONS: SPECULATIVE SCENARIOS FOR SUSTAINABLE FASHION WORLDS

The globalised fashion and textile industry is deeply implicated in the devastation of Earth’s life-supporting systems. Industry-led sustainability initiatives have been incremental and inadequate; fundamental change is required to develop an approach to fashion that works within the means of the planet. Potential for transformation is limited by a collective inability to contemplate alternatives to the status quo. A newly established research project, Fashion Fictions, responds to this challenge. It will imagine, prototype and analyse enticing alternative fashion worlds through a playful and collaborative design process in order to research people’s attitudes to the future.

A literature review demonstrates that this project is a work of design fiction: an emerging field which takes design from its commercial context to explore political, social and cultural issues via speculative ‘what-if’ scenarios. Yet much design fiction divides the ‘expert’ designer from a passive, voiceless audience. The related fields of interventional anthropology and experiential futures offer critical and methodological guidance for a much more participatory approach, in which designer and participants become co-researchers, learning together about visions of the future. Drawing on these influences, a three-stage process for the research is outlined.

A reflective analysis offers an insider view of the first stages of the design fiction project. It discusses the complexities of developing a detailed design brief, which involves the construction of parallel presents, rather than future scenarios; specifies three key parameters that shape the fictions being devised (possible; sustainable and satisfying; based on diverse economies); and identifies various potential sources of inspiration.

Keywords: fashion, design fiction, speculative design, participation, futures

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INTRODUCTION

The globalised fashion and textile industry is deeply implicated in the devastation of Earth’s life-supporting systems, with negative environmental and social impacts generated at every stage of a garment’s lifecycle (Fletcher, 2014). These challenges have been exacerbated by a dramatic growth in production: the number of items sold worldwide doubled between 2000 and 2015 (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). To date, initiatives in the fashion field have been driven almost exclusively by reformist strategies: approaches which modify, rather than fundamentally rethink, the status quo. These incremental changes do little to shift clothing consumption practices within affluent countries and fail to develop an approach to fashion that works within the means of the planet.

As Fletcher (2010, p. 263) argues, ‘prevailing ways of thinking lock us into particular ideas about the shape and practices of the fashion sector.’ Thus, the potential for future systemic change in fashion is limited by the dominant practices within today’s globalised industry. Perhaps most fundamentally, we are locked in to the growth-based structures of capitalism: unable to imagine alternative economic systems, whether in fashion or other spheres (Fisher, 2009). In essence, the future feels foreclosed; change seems impossible. This is of crucial importance if we are to tackle global challenges, for ‘the actual limits of what is achievable depend in part on the beliefs people hold about what sorts of alternatives are viable’ (Wright, 2010, p. 23). Or, as Lockton and Candy (2018, p. 3) state, ‘imaginaries of futures can affect people’s actions in the present’.

How might this attitude be transformed? Transition activist Rob Hopkins (2018) highlights ‘the need to fire the imagination about the future it is still possible to create.’ Taking inspiration from Hopkins’ call, my newly established research project, Fashion Fictions, will imagine, prototype and analyse enticing alternative fashion worlds through a playful and collaborative design process. The project aims to investigate whether people living within consumption-intensive fashion systems can be supported to contemplate the possibility of fundamental change. This work builds on my fashion design practice and prior design-based research into slow fashion, homemade clothes and the domestic reworking of knitted garments (Twigger Holroyd, 2013).

The project is guided by three research questions:

- How can alternative fashion systems be designed and prototyped?
- How are alternative fashion systems experienced?
- How does engagement with alternative fashion systems change people’s ability to imagine change in this context?

This paper will focus on the first research question, considering the design and prototyping process via a literature review and reflective analysis of the first stages of the project. The literature review commenced with an initial ‘quick search’ (Hart, 2001) to establish key texts, using the Design and Applied Arts Index, university library catalogue and general web search; search terms included ‘critical design’ and ‘design anthropology’. References within these key texts identified further sources and specialised search terms, such as ‘experiential futures’.

CONTEXTUALISING THE RESEARCH

In order to situate the speculative and collaborative approach being developed for this project within critical and methodological debates, I will examine relevant approaches to practice and research in various design and design-related disciplines.

Design fiction, speculative design and critical design

The Fashion Fictions project will construct imaginary fashion worlds; as such, it can be framed as a work of design fiction. While the literature offers a range of definitions for this term, design fiction essentially encompasses any work that integrates fiction and design (Hales, 2013). Design is taken from its usual social or economic dimensions. The scenarios are materialised, usually be described according to a basic rule of fiction, an imaginary, sometimes even impossible “what if”-scenario.’ Without space to articulate the nuanced differences, in this paper I use ‘design fiction’ to refer to all such work. Knutz, Markussen and Christensen (2014, p. 8.2) explain that design fictions ‘can usually be described according to a basic rule of fiction, an imaginary, sometimes even impossible “what if”-scenario.’ While much existing practice is based on dystopian visions of technological change (Dunne and Raby, 2013; Revell, Pickard and Voss, 2018), fictions can equally be utopian and focus on cultural, social or economic dimensions. The scenarios are materialised, typically through models, prototypes, films and/or documents. There has been a surge of interest in recent years, including in design fiction as a form of research through design.

Design fiction projects aim to interrogate the contemporary status quo and open a discourse about the future. As Haylock (2019, p. 16) explains, they ‘[expose] something about the contingency of present situations or about the mutability of
possible futures.’ This capacity has much in common with science fiction and other utopian writing. Ursula K. Le Guin, for example, described her work as ‘offering an imagined but persuasive alternative reality, to dislodge my mind, and so the reader’s mind, from the lazy, timorous habit of thinking that the way we live now is the only way people can live’ (2004, p. 218). Through design, these fictions are made tangible: ‘real enough to be addressable’ (Lockton and Candy, 2018, p. 17). As the field matures, commentators are highlighting problematic aspects of many design fiction projects. De Oliveira and Prado (2018), for example, discuss the privileged understandings often exposed by dystopian scenarios and criticise the power dynamics embedded in the gallery presentation that is frequently used: ‘the designer, as the enlightened subject, speaks and exhibits; the silent spectators in the audience merely listen and observe’ (De Oliveira and Prado, 2018, p. 109). While some design fiction researchers adopt a somewhat more participatory approach (Bardzell, Bardzell, Forlizzi, Zimmerman and Antanitis, 2012), we must turn to related disciplines to find speculative work that more fully embraces participatory methods.

**Interventional anthropology and experiential futures**

The first design-related discipline I will consider is design anthropology, also known as interventional anthropology. Informed by participatory design techniques and methods, this hybrid approach enables anthropologists to engage more fully with social change and visions of the future (Otto and Smith, 2013). In contrast to the long-established mode of ethnography, in which the anthropologist develops an in-depth knowledge of an existing cultural system, interventional anthropology seeks to develop ‘ethnographies of the possible’ (Halse, 2013) through temporary interventions. Like design fiction, interventional anthropology uses material prototypes; however, social aspects are given much more importance and the two are integrated in what Pink, Akama and Fergusson (2017, p. 145) describe as ‘social and material assemblages’. Halse (2013, p. 182) explains that ‘this kind of design experiment works through a playful mode of trying out how everyday life might play out differently’. This ‘trying out’ might involve games, performances and enactments in various forms. Essentially, interventional anthropology seeks to sensitively examine the embodied experiences of the participants as they encounter fictional situations made real, working in a highly collaborative mode: ‘we learn about and with other people’s expertise, credit this expertise to them as collaborators in shared endeavours.’ (Pink and Salazar, 2017, p. 15).

A further area of activity which has relevance to the Fashion Fictions project is that of experiential futures. Experiential futures sit within the context of futures studies – an interdisciplinary field which explores possible, probable and preferable futures – but draws on design processes and has recently been connected with the sustainability-focused field of transition design (Lockton and Candy, 2018). Essentially, a future vision is made accessible in the here and now, using artefacts and immersive installations. As Lockton and Candy (2018, p. 12) explain, ‘An experiential scenario is a future brought to life. It’s a tangible “what if”, more textual than textual, and a way of thinking out loud, materially or performatively, or both.’ As with interventional anthropology, a focus is placed on the participant’s experience.

**Developing a methodology**

I propose that Fashion Fictions should be framed as a design fiction project, though with an ethos of participation that draws on both interventional anthropology and experiential futures. A three-stage process will guide the project, which loosely follows the structure for design fiction research proposed by Bardzell et al. (2012). First, working solo, I will develop a range of fictional alternative fashion worlds, presented via short written summaries; second, a group of collaborators will ‘build’ the worlds, adding complexity via prototypes – fashion media, illustrations, social media posts and wardrobe mockups, for example; third, diverse groups of wearers will be invited to become co-researchers by inhabiting and ‘dressing in’ these worlds, “liv[ing]” the experience of the changes being discussed (Revell et al., 2018, p. 287). The participants will record and reflect on their experiences by ‘stepping in and out of [the] imagined story worlds, shifting between immersion and commentary’ (Halse, 2013, p. 192). This activity will take place over a period of weeks or months, allowing for meaningful relationships to develop (Bardzell et al., 2012). As proposed by De Oliveira and Prado (2018, p. 110), the collaborators (stage 2) and wearers (stage 3) will be encouraged to adapt the material they are given: ‘to untangle and weave them into any direction they see fit.’

**DESIGNING FICTIONAL FASHION WORLDS**

Having outlined the premise of the methodology, I will now discuss the first stage of the research, in which I am developing a collection of fictional fashion worlds. As Bardzell et al. (2012) argue, there is very little guidance on how to undertake a design fiction project, or how to evaluate work generated during the design process. This reflective analysis of the project to date is an effort to capture insider insights that shed light on this activity.
Alternative presents

Although this research focuses on the future of the fashion system, from the outset of the project I instinctively felt that the fictions I constructed should be those of alternative worlds – that is, alternative presents – rather than future scenarios... Dunne and Raby (2013, p. 82) discuss this approach to speculation, which is influenced by both alternate histories in literature and counterfactual histories in historiography: ‘A historical fact is changed to see what might have happened, if ...’. As Auger (2013) explains, such fictions re-imagine the present day, questioning cultural, political and technological norms. The construction of contemporary parallel worlds allows me to sidestep the challenges that arise when discussing the future in the context of fashion. In many ways, fashion is obsessed with the future: the industry thrives on anticipating emergent trends through a network of expert ‘cool-hunters’. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, that future looks incessantly familiar: the cyclical nature of trends means that styles from past decades reappear, minimally remixed and restyled for a new generation.

A focus on parallel presents is appropriate also because my aim is not to explore how fashion products might be transformed through future technological innovation; rather, I wish to explore how today’s consumption-intensive fashion system, and the practices embedded within it, might work differently. In essence, the fictions will be all about social and cultural factors. and not at all about technological change. This distinction is best served by reconceiving the present day, rather than speculating about the future. It should be noted that I am seeking to explore alternatives to a consumption-intensive fashion system, as dominates in the global North, and thus it is the history of this system from which I will construct the counterfactual fictions.

I commenced the project with a small pilot workshop, working with three colleagues from my university department of fashion, textile and knitwear design. Through discussion, we sought to identify a range of ‘junctures’; points in history that were decisive in generating the consumerist fashion system of today. It was remarkably challenging to identify pivotal moments to convincingly encapsulate gradual cultural shifts, and even harder to imagine how history might have unfolded differently. Somewhat ironically, we experienced intense ‘lock in’, finding it almost impossible to imagine otherwise. After a period of reflection, I realised that I needed to turn the process upside down by first imagining an alternative world, and then constructing an engaging, perhaps even fanciful, backstory to explain its development.

Parameters

The epiphany regarding my approach to creating parallel presents brought a further challenge into focus: just what sort of worlds should I be inventing? I realised that I needed to develop a set of parameters – and that this activity would be a crucial part of the design process. The first parameter instructs me that the worlds should be possible – ‘what may be’, to borrow from a categorisation used in futures studies (Haylock, 2019, p. 15, original emphasis). This rules out fantastical notions such as magic spells, time travel and alien inhabitants. Second, the worlds should offer an enticing vision of a sustainable and satisfying fashion experience. This relates to what Haylock (2019, p. 16) describes as utopian speculative design, which ‘renders thinkable a range of preferable futures that might reside on or beyond the limits of the probable or even the plausible’. I hesitate, however, to designate the visions I construct as utopian; this implies an all-encompassing, top-down vision of a perfect world. The idea of the micro-utopia – ‘more tentative, temporary, pluralised or truncated’ (Wood, 2007, p. 3) – feels more appropriate. Rissanan (2017) highlights the value of design for micro-utopias, as conceptualised by Wood, to bring about fundamental change in the fashion system.

This second parameter needs more detail: if the worlds are to be sustainable and satisfying, what does this mean? I am using the concept of ‘prosperity without growth’ (Jackson, 2009), also described as New Economics, as a guiding principle. Seyfang (2011, p. 23) explains that this approach ‘requires a realigning of development priorities away from the primary goal of economic growth’ – the central logic of capitalism – ‘towards wellbeing instead’. Essentially, the imperative is to create a system in which economic activity takes place within environmental limits (Fletcher, 2016). While there are many ways of defining wellbeing, I choose to use the approach proposed by Max-Neef (1992). He identifies nine basic human needs which constitute wellbeing: I have argued elsewhere (‘Twigger Holroyd, 2017) that fashion can meet our needs for identity, participation and creation. The fictional worlds should portray people satisfying these human needs by participating in fashion in ways which are resourceful, rather than resource-intensive, as described by Fletcher’s (2016) compelling vision of ‘post-growth fashion’. In practice, this will mean worlds in which the flow of new clothes into the wardrobe is slow; the number of unworn items in the wardrobe is minimal; useful lifetimes of clothes are long; and/or the resources used in laundering are limited.

A third parameter builds on the New Economics orientation, specifying that the fictions will explore ‘diverse economies’ as proposed by Gibson-Graham (2006). These diverse economies
involve practices of non-consumption and non-market consumption such as gifting, loaning, sharing and bartering. This parameter places a strategic focus on how clothes are worn, owned and exchanged, rather than how they are designed and made. While manufacturing conditions are of importance, in both social and environmental terms, I choose to place this issue in the background to avoid the project becoming dominated by discussions of business models and ethical consumerism, which do not challenge the consumerist paradigm.

Looking forward
My plan is to use the parameters described above – which operate as a design brief – to develop a collection of twelve fashion fictions. The fictions will vary in aspects such as aesthetic, participant behaviour and social organisation, in order to demonstrate that there is no single ‘perfect’ sustainable fashion system, but rather many potential sustainable approaches. Their backstories will vary too, with diverse types of events (from major technological inventions and cultural developments to seemingly frivolous pop-cultural moments) causing the juncture and processes of societal change including collapse and imposed discipline (Dator, 2009) unfolding alongside more idealistic sustainable transitions.

As with any design process, I need inspiration to support the generation of ideas for the alternative worlds. The first port of call is what Davies (2018) describes as ‘enclaves of anti-capitalism within capitalism’, such as the ‘Craft of Use’ stories of individual resourceful fashion practice collected by Fletcher (2016), and collective fashion initiatives such as clothes swaps and the contemporary mending movement. I will amplify these stories, transforming individual practices into coherent subcultures and marginal movements into core societal beliefs. I will also transpose principles of noncapitalist practice from other sectors into the fashion field; take inspiration from past ways of living and working (Tonkinwise, 2019); and seek to learn from contemporary fashion cultures from the majority world that are not dependent on high levels of consumption (Chang, 2018). These historical and cross-cultural stories will influence the construction of the fictions at stage 1, through desk research; at stage 2, through the expertise of the research collaborators; and at stage 3, through the lived experiences of the participant co-researchers.

CONCLUSION
This paper has discussed the development of a new research through design initiative, which seeks to construct and enact fictional alternative fashion worlds in order to challenge the seeming inevitability of consumer culture and change perceptions of the future. By reflecting on the early stages of the research, I have gained a nuanced understanding of the multiple factors which must be considered when commencing a project such as this, including the role of participation, the nature of the speculation, the creation of parameters to shape the fictions and potential sources of inspiration. Further reflection as the research develops will undoubtedly generate further transferable insights.

With little design fiction exploring the fertile ground of fashion, this research contributes to the development of a new context for fashion design, which redresses ‘the sociomaterial systems in which garments are produced, used, and discarded’ (Rissanen, 2017, p. 535). The project also makes a contribution to the emergent category of ‘economic design fiction’ (Revell et al., 2018; DiSalvo, 2019), which explores ways in which design can fully engage with, question and reimagine the economic forces to which it has long been supplicant.