

‘Residencies’: mixed methods design research investigating fashion through place

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Abstract

In this paper we describe ‘Residencies’, a new suite of creative, ethnographic and cooperative methods for swiftly gathering the ‘lie of the land’ of fashion behaviours in specific geographic locations. These methods act as a barometer, to identify emergent practices linked to sustainability and resilience, as points for future research and interventions for change. We describe a pilot of ‘Residencies’ in May 2018 in two different urban contexts, in London and Leeds, asking the research question, ‘What dynamics of clothing behaviours are present in places of extreme demographic diversity?’

Art and design practices are increasingly used to address societal challenges, and therefore need to contend with questions of system-level societal change (Sangiorgi & Scott, 2015). However, fashion and sustainability discourse tends to focus on developing technical fixes for individual concerns of production or consumption, rather than addressing the underlying socio-economic issues supporting the status quo (Fletcher, 2015). ‘Residencies’ draws on a new wave of fashion and sustainability discourse and design-aligned methods looking to everyday practices for the seeds of change (Fletcher & Grimstad Klepp, 2017; Glanville, 2015; Ehrenfeld, 2008; Thorpe, 2012).

We believe the most useful new understanding in this field will come from hybrid research methods drawn from social sciences and the arts; disciplines adept at studying complex organic systems and building empathic understanding of them (Sangiorgi & Scott, 2015). From fashion, ‘Residencies’ is based on Fashion Ecologies and Wardrobe Audit methodologies (Fletcher, 2018; Fletcher & Grimstad Klepp, 2017), with additional explicitly art-led and cooperative forms of research inquiry. This is done both as a strategy for building knowledge and to communicate with non-scholarly audiences.

The ‘residencies’ pilot takes place in two urban areas characterised by extremes. Firstly Shoreditch, London: a place where fashion reflects both the intense gentrification of recent years (inspiring the phrase

'Shoreditchification') as well as high levels of poverty (London Borough of Hackney, 2015). The second is two retail 'zones' in Leeds city centre which sit side-by-side: Leeds Kirkgate Market, established in 1875 and the largest covered market in Europe; and Victoria Gate, a £165 million luxury shopping development completed in 2016.

This paper shares insights into a novel approach to building initial holistic knowledge of clothing behaviours and of the cooperative enquiry research process used to develop these methods. It will be of interest to those seeking new methods for more useful understanding of clothing systems, transformational change and cross-disciplinary, creative and participative practice.

Keywords: Sustainable Fashion, Design Research, Participatory Research Methods, Mixed Methods Research, Poetic Inquiry

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