

Borrowed Cloth: a holistic design intervention for sustainable fashion and wellbeing

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Abstract

Purpose

This paper explores some of the ways in which fashion may consciously respond to our affiliation with nature through a holistic design process that promotes the values of craft, sustainability and wellbeing, using a tree-derived textile: Ugandan bark cloth.

Methodology

A review of the literature, field work in Uganda, observation, interviews, laboratory tests, practice: aesthetic experimentation and analysis – surface treatments and fabric manipulations, natural dye experimentation, shape making informed by bio-design and bio-mechanical requirements, test garments and propositional garments and accessories. This project uses a model that we call ‘borrowed cloth’, as we examine a textile that is part of the cultural heritage of others from multiple perspectives and will return it with interest in the form of new knowledge generated, which we hope will benefit its makers and their community.

Findings to date

Results to date show that bark cloth is a versatile, renewable textile that may successfully be used for sustainable fashion garments if treated in ways that improve its strength, for example fusing with interlinings, stitching and appliqué techniques and certain natural dye treatments such as indigo, logwood and glair. A review of the literature and interviews during fieldwork in Uganda have suggested that there may be additional benefits to wearing bark cloth, including benefits to health and wellbeing.

Research limitations

Further research is needed to confirm the potential benefits of health and wellbeing that wearing bark cloth may offer. Collaboration with scientists is sought for the next phase of the research, when we will aim to identify and define these benefits and consciously apply them in a design process.

Originality/Value

The research has particular relevance at this time, as part of the critical discourse on the fashion industry, its impact on individuals and on the earth. As such, it proposes an alternative and holistic approach to creating fashion garments that may promote the wellbeing of their wearers, their makers and the planet and that encourage lasting attachment, thus reducing waste. The project adopts a conceptual framework commonly associated with the disciplines of architecture and product design (biophilia), as well as ideas emanating from research from the sciences into nature, human health and wellbeing to inform our research and design strategy.

In addition, we assert that our 'borrowed cloth' model represents an ethical, non-exploitative approach to design interventions of this nature, when working with the cultural property of others.

This practice-led research reinforces the desirability of multi-disciplinary investigations in order to better uncover the full potential of bark cloth and its future significance.

Keywords: barkcloth, wellbeing, wood, biophilia, nature, cultural textile, sustainable fashion, holistic design, eco-couture, neocraft

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