

Returned from Africa: design for upcycling second-hand clothes in Ghana

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to assess the opportunities for the upcycling of waste clothing through design workshops held in Accra, Ghana. Research into longevity typically focuses on the re-use of clothing fibres at the end of a garment's usable life and how these can be used in new garment construction. However, an upcycling approach examines how used or surplus clothing from the fast fashion industry can be re-designed and used for resale in some new form. In contrast to recycling, upcycling adds value to materials as they are created into new forms. It has the potential to contribute to economic development, by employing people to make re-valued clothes and accessories, to sell to developed markets.

Significant amounts of surplus and second-hand clothing from the developed world but also from producer nations, for example China, are distributed to Africa to be sold in local markets at affordable prices. Ghana is one African country with a very well-developed trade in surplus fashion merchandise, where a wide range of clothing, shoes and accessories are bought and worn by local people. Commonly known as "Bend Down Boutique", consumers purchase clothing items laid out on the ground in markets across the country (Abimbola, 2015).

The design approach of 'knowing in action' was applied to the research project undertaken by five groups of third year fashion design students at Accra Technical University (ATU). The initial briefing to design groups confirmed the concept of upcycling and the design parameters. Each group defined a design theme and then made a selection of clothes and accessories in the Accra market and returned to the university to cut and re-create clothes and accessories. The project culminated in presentations of finished garments modelled by the students. It addressed the disposal stage of the circular economy model of clothing sustainability by providing new

knowledge of how waste clothing, readily available in a developing country's market can be sourced and creatively re-imagined into new garments and accessories.

Keywords: Africa, upcycling, design, re-use

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