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Essay

Threaded Together: Makers Camp "The Ghana Project" and the Networked Future of Fashion

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Abstract

This paper investigates the role of embodied experiential futures in reimagining the global fashion system. Using Makers Camp: "The Ghana Project" as a case study, it examines how practice-based research can function as a generative futures methodology within design education. Against a backdrop of textile overproduction, labour exploitation, and ecological degradation, the camp created a temporary laboratory where participants engaged materially with the consequences of the fashion industry. Drawing on futures studies frameworks alongside feminist perspectives, the paper analyses how camp participants reframed fashion as a networked system of relationships rather than a product-driven industry. The findings suggest that embodied approaches can generate deeper forms of systems awareness, collective agency, and imaginative capacity as well as produce positive practical examples of inclusive, equitable and cross-border collaboration. Such interventions offer a viable pathway toward a networked fashion system grounded in transparency, inclusivity, and equity.

Keywords

Embodied Futures, Fashion Futures, Inclusive Design, Textile Waste, Co-Creation

Introduction

In the years since the Covid-19 pandemic, the image of luxury fashion as an industry synonymous with prosperity has found itself at odds with reality (Danziger, 2025b). At the start of the decade, the sector's growth came in large part from price increases, largely unaccompanied by equivalent increases in product quality, innovation or desirability (Balchandani et al, 2025). Once luxury brands reached the upper threshold of consumer willingness to pay, their financial performance plateaued (Danziger, 2025b). In response, holding companies began to rotate creative directors in the belief that new names would revive interest and reignite growth (Bain & Company, 2025). This became a show in itself, with new hires dissected, memed and speculated over (Socha, 2025). Yet while headlines fixated on these talent transfers, the clothing itself became increasingly detached from meaning, memory and material responsibility.

The current global fashion system relies on extractive practices, churning out an unsustainable 92 million tonnes of textile waste per year (United Nations Environment Programme, 2025). The sheer pace and scale means young designers who are interested in imagining a less wasteful system struggle to gain a viable commercial foothold in an industry that is not set up to support them. Independent publishers like 1 Granary and BoringNotCom have found a wide readership by honestly charting the difficult experiences of emerging talent (Cochrane, 2025). From the challenge of finding paid work, to the competition for funding, the pressure to pay for runway shows and the challenge of competing for attention: ironically, there's little glamour left in fashion.

This paper explores an embodied, experimental intervention into the system outlined above that aims to help early career fashion designers begin to consider together an alternative approach to the current paradigm. While critiques of fashion's extractive structures are well established, few practice-based interventions exist that allow

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designers to materially explore different possibilities for their industry in a way that is creatively constructive, let alone develop a practice of systems-based imagination-building that they can carry through to subsequent interactions with future employers, employees and collaborators.

The intervention, Makers Camp "The Ghana Project" took the form of a three week knowledge exchange programme developed in collaboration with Central Saint Martins, a constituent college of the University of the Arts London. Drawing on feminist, decolonial and futures perspectives, the paper argues that the practical research displayed in the camp can function as a form of embodied futures methodology, one that enables a truly creative exploration of what a more conscious, equitable, transparent and inclusive fashion system might be. It begins with a discussion of fashion and feminism, followed by an explanation of the futures methodologies at play in the Makers Camp, before presenting the project outcomes and discussing the possibilities revealed therein for a networked and equitable future of fashion.

Fashion and Feminism

From a feminist perspective, the struggle to design, make, fund and scale consciously made clothing and accessories reflects the implicit devaluing of the garment trade in a patriarchal society. By feminist, this essay leans on the definition provided by Ivana Milojević in the monograph 'The Hesitant Feminist's Guide to the Future' (2024), where feminism imagines a truly inclusive system that welcomes all participants, men and women, with equal opportunity, regardless of background or identity, whether gender, race, class, nationality or otherwise. Clothing manufacture is a task that was historically considered feminine, part of an industry that continues to be powered by female workers, often women of colour, who work within a supply chain rife with exploitation (Vakharia, 2024).

Luxury labels are also complicit in creating and sustaining these problems of ethics and access. To maintain historic statements of quality and artisanry like "Made In Italy" the now-globalised rag trade deliberately renders whole communities of workers invisible, cutting, sewing and assembling luxury garments in ghost factories in Asia (Ellis, n.d). When even the highest status brands like Loro Piana are investigated for serious violations of the labour rights of their hidden garment workers (Danziger, 2025a) it becomes urgent to question the status quo, and imagine a feminist future fashion system.

Even where there are examples of brands behaving differently, like slow fashion label Gabriele Kim, whose founder works with knitting circles in Lithuania and knows her makers by name (1 Granary, 2025) these labels remain on the fringe. Their slower, more considered making practices are not considered easily scalable by larger retailers that through e-commerce have adopted fast-fashion innovations like same-day delivery (Cunningham, 2019). At the same time, although ecommerce now means businesses can reach customers around the world, designer fashion labels outside of Europe and the US struggle to reach beyond their markets. UNESCO cites poor infrastructure, lack of investment and limited education and training systems as key factors inhibiting the growth of other "Made in…" brands such as "Made in Africa" (Benissan, 2023).

Moving towards a more feminist, decolonial future fashion system could redress the imbalances outlined above, creating opportunity for talented labels and their founders to reach their full potential and connect with their customer base, no matter where they were situated in the world. Such a transparent, consciously networked system might deliver equity to a revitalised global peer network of fashion designers, makers and wearers. It could welcome a diversity of perspectives from across the network as a source of enrichment, rather than the opportunity for patriarchal exploitation, defined by Milojević as a neocolonialist power imbalance of superiority and inferiority, that is currently seen (2024, p46). Lastly, it could even resolve the value exchange dilemma for now-sceptical customers, who feel that they have been 'duped into buying over-priced, industrially-produced goods, wrongly believing these goods were handcrafted' (Mihailovich cited in Danziger, 2025b) and are increasingly staying away from designer brands.

The Makers Camp

In March 2025, in response to the gap between the current fashion system and the future I long to bring about, I worked in collaboration with Berni Yates, Fashion Knowledge Exchange Lead at Central Saint Martins and others

from the Central Saint Martins Fashion programme to launch an intervention into the current system: Makers Camp "The Ghana Project." The camp was conceived as a temporary, collaborative laboratory that brought together a constellation of stakeholders: MA Fashion and BA Textile Weave students, London-based textile artists and jewellery makers, Ghanaian designers like Kojo Kusi and Yayra Agbofah, researchers from Kew Gardens and the African Centre for Migration and Society and Ghana's Nubuke Foundation, plus manufacturers from across the British Isles and tutors from University Arts London.

Over three weeks, we cohabited a creative space within North London's historic Spring Studios, engaging directly with the physical consequences of the industry. Together, we collectively imagined a more hopeful, feminist and decolonised, creative and collaborative future for fashion design. Turning to hands-on experience as a space to generate possibility and foresight, we created a laboratory populated with artefacts and experts for students to participate deeply in the process of ethnographic experiential futures making (Candy & Kornet, 2019). We fed participants the cultural context and economic impacts of the current fashion industry, and presented positive case studies from across the globe: stories and examples of other ways that different actors might work together. The goal was to inspire a state of curiosity, and prompt young designers to consider and shape the fashion future they might collectively bring into the world.

To create this environment of understanding, play and exploration, we brought material detritus from the rag trade into the camp as artefacts: bales of discarded, unsellable, surplus and counterfeit goods like knockoff sneakers and fake watches, sourced from Central Saint Martins partners Reskinned and Lighthouse Securities. These objects functioned as both curiosities and evidences of a system defined by overproduction, short-termism, fast fashion practices, neo-colonialism and deep global inequities. Many of the materials would have travelled from factories in former British colonies to be sold in the UK, and were destined to return there again, tracing an arc of extraction, consumption and cast-off behaviour with its roots in imperial trade systems. In places like Kantamanto market in Accra, Ghana, nearly 70% of imported secondhand garments, the majority from the UK, become textile waste, polluting rivers, land, and sea (Jordan & Anane, 2025).

The push and pull of these different factors affecting the current global supply system can be mapped onto a Futures Triangle (Figure 1).

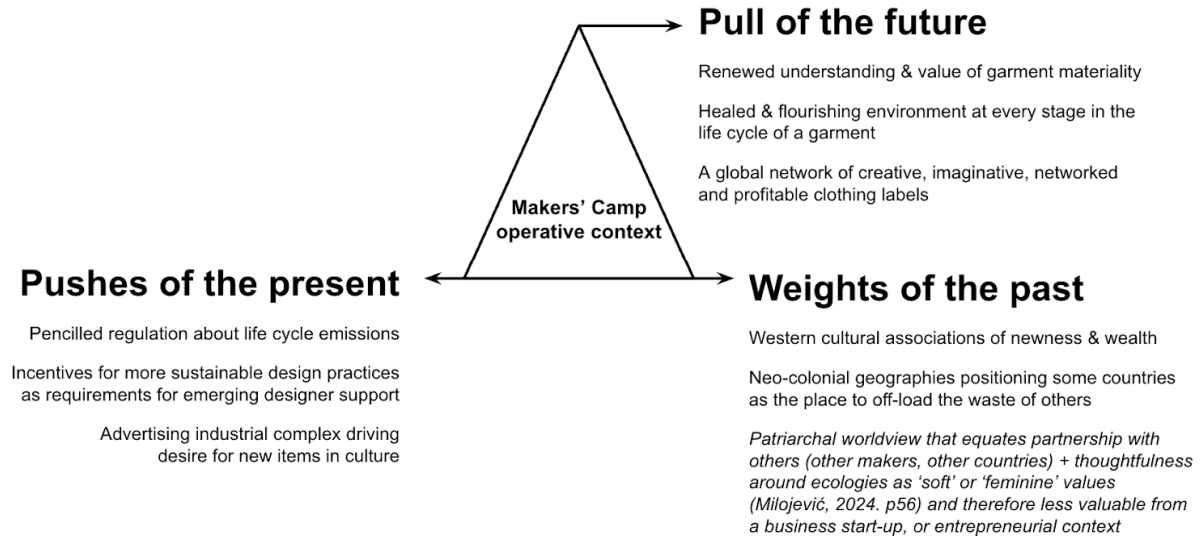

Fig. 1: Futures triangle, adapted from Inayatullah (2008)

Digging deeper into the theme of temporality, camp participants were confronted with the sight of different clothes from various life stages, from baby clothes to teenage festival wear and old 90s vinyl records. There were different traces of power on display too, including lace lingerie, and sheets and tablecloths from the hospitality trade, alongside the aforementioned counterfeit watches, twentieth century patriarchal symbols of success, and fake Nike Air Max or Gucci trainers, the twenty-first century equivalent. The objects provoked an encounter with our physical impact as we grow as humans and move through time, acquiring, wearing and shedding status signifiers as we go. Examined through the lens of cyclical time (Sardar, 2021), the bags of items created a moment of encounter with our past selves, provoking a reflection over newness versus heritage, and making tangible the long time it takes castoff clothing fibres to degrade.

The lens of cyclical time over linear time also echoed through our explorations of a linear versus circular fashion economy. By discarding fabrics and offloading our used items to other countries, we are giving others the task of working through our pasts. Our mindset reaches towards linear pathways of progression, looking forwards towards new outfits, trends, and using objects as markers of achievement and fulfilment, not realising that this disposal of our previous selves is impossible. The past will come back to haunt us, in our ecologies, polluting our habitats at a global systemic level, if we do not work through and process the fabrics and feelings in front of us. Efforts to move from a linear supply chain to a circular one underscores participants' responsibilities both to our ancestors, conserving memory in fabrics, alongside keeping fabric waste out of the environment, preserving our ecology on behalf of those not yet born.

Placing the Makers Camp in Spring Studios was another temporally weighted choice. The Kentish Town location was famous as the site of multiple luxury brand shoots in the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s. It was also, thanks to its creative agency function, a historic centre of commercial branding, manufacturing desire for luxury clothes and accessories. The contribution of those past actions to our current predicament was made manifest in said bag of counterfeit watches that dominated the centre of the making space (Figure 2). In the camp, past, present and future combined in a space of imaginative design possibility and an embodied understanding of the consequences of our actions.

Fig. 2: A scene from the Makers Camp. Spring Studios, March 2025. Photo credit: Jake Farmer.

Project Outcomes

Within this charged context, Makers Camp created space within the commercial fashion system, and outside the traditional academic context, for improvisational making, hand in hand with deep reflection. The twenty or so student participants were a self-nominated group interested in sustainability and fresh with desires to build their own labels. Yet in this camp, they were briefed against designing finished garments and instead instructed to collectively reimagine the place of fashion and garment design in a wholly interconnected world, one where it would be impossible to claim ignorance of a product's origins, or its final destination. The act of making became a speculative tool, allowing questions of authorship, value and temporality to emerge organically.

The camp also became a living dialogue for craft traditions, particularly different cultural weaving practices, with cross-border sharing encouraged. West African textile histories were placed in conversation with Asian Ikat weaving practices, and layered over the historic context of the natural textile dye and cloth trade in the British Isles. This historical context was provided via an encounter with the Kew Gardens Archive, with all participants able to view and discuss the weighted resonance of a collection of colonial-era goods, dyes and souvenirs from countries around the globe. This embodied knowledge, carried in stitches and patterns from yesterday to today, emerged as a legitimate form of foresight: thinking through making to question the fabrics of tomorrow. The sheer materiality, and the knowledge exchange around the different textile expertises within the camp, created a more inclusive, more transparent understanding of garment value.

Importantly, while the work did not shy away from complexity, the space also became a sandbox for participants to prototype new skills risk-free, free from the judgement of academic assessment, liberating their own inner critic. Designers could scour the room for a fun logo T-shirt, take part in deep and complex discussions around the politics of craft revival, learn new skills like indigo dyeing, team together for an art installation or simply pattern cut. Instead of lamenting the harm done through fashion, we asked students to imagine how a renewed consciousness of our textile impact might coexist with the ever-present human impulse to make and create. In this atmosphere of playful

creation, makers could engage to the extent they felt comfortable.

Participants in the camp reported a new awareness of their power as designers to shape the industry in different directions, and the effects that a design choice might bring. The participating designer from Ghana Kojo Kusi found the experience positive and thoughtful:

> "After the camp I've been more patient and cautious with the way I go about making clothes, it has always been that way but the program put more emphasis on it and it's more clear to me now. Also another important aspect is my thinking process now, I have a wider scope now when it comes to where I pull inspiration from when I'm designing currently. Finally there're some skills I picked during the camp eg. weaving. And I'm actually planning to incorporate them in my next collection."

Similar positive, future-oriented feedback came from Central Saint Martins participants:

> "It made me realise that I need to trust myself and my vision more. It made me look and use things that I wouldn't on a regular basis."

> "I definitely learnt a lot about making during this time and learnt a lot of techniques that I am using now in my pre collection and making sure to use materials I have at home or encouraging me to use materials around me rather than buying."

> "Working in a new way that wasn't focused on making garments but using pre-loved material was a good change and has allowed me to bring those thoughts into my current design work."

> "I'm using more intuition with the materials that I already have, to try and make them work for what I want to communicate without buying new things, even if it's not always possible…I'm glad for the Makers Camp experience to get my thinking about my processes and ideas."

These camp participation feedback statements point to a spirit of curiosity and enquiry that was successfully created for designers regardless of background, and an egalitarian sense of equality of experience, skillset and purpose.They also demonstrate a positive reinforcement of existing progressive and innovative practices, and a development of the courage to try new techniques. From this feedback and the camp outcomes shared below (Figures 3–7), it appears that the camp successfully sparked confidence among participants to push back against the industry status quo: the courage to first dream of and then materially create, both in the camp and afterwards, an alternative future of fashion.

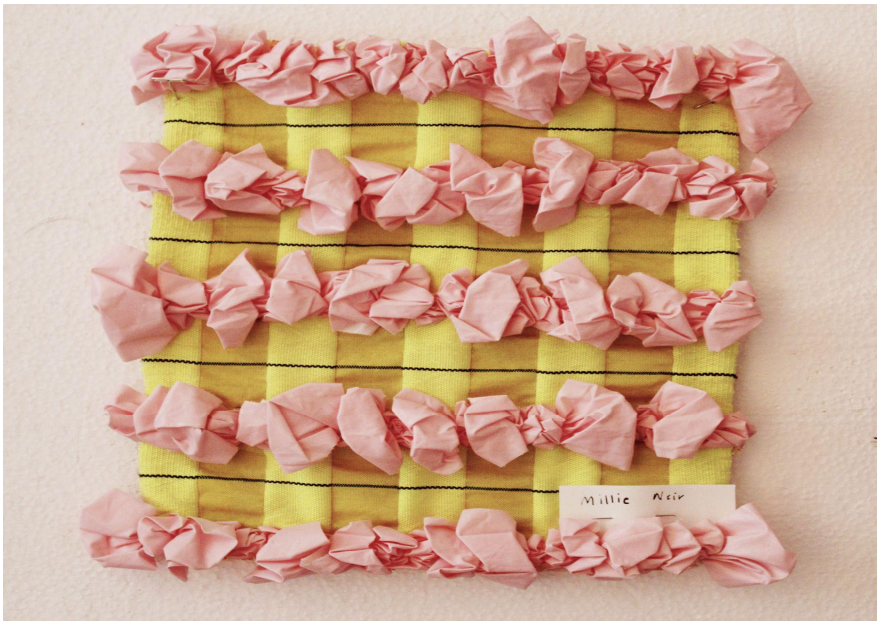

Fig. 3: An outcome from the Makers Camp. Spring Studios, March 2025. Photo credit: Jake Farmer.

Fig. 4: An outcome from the Makers Camp. Spring Studios, March 2025. Photo credit: Jake Farmer.

Fig. 5: An outcome from the Makers Camp. Spring Studios, March 2025. Photo credit: Jake Farmer

Fig. 6: An outcome from the Makers Camp. Spring Studios, March 2025. Photo credit: Jake Farmer

Fig. 7: An outcome from the Makers Camp. Spring Studios, March 2025. Photo credit: Jake Farmer

Towards a Networked Future of Fashion

Within this charged context, Makers Camp created space within the commercial fashion system, and outside the traditional academic context, for improvisational making, hand in hand with deep reflection. The twenty or so student participants were a self-nominated group interested in sustainability and fresh with desires to build their own labels. Yet in this camp, they were briefed against designing finished garments and instead instructed to collectively reimagine the place of fashion and garment design in a wholly interconnected world, one where it would be impossible to claim ignorance of a product's origins, or its final destination. The act of making became a speculative tool, allowing questions of authorship, value and temporality to emerge organically.

Makers Camp succeeded in creating a space of critical possibility, a site for prototyping, questioning, and imagining feminist and decolonial futures in fashion, a future moment where designers, waste and garment workers alike might be seen as individuals, with individual rights balanced with the rights of their wider networks and communities (Milojević, 1996).

The fashion industry employs 300 million people, most of whom are women (House of Commons, 2018). A networked future of fashion, based upon a collaborative, equitably managed community of fashion design and production, would allow existing marginalised garment workers to articulate their importance in the industry, and positively transform the lives of millions of women around the world. To incubate these ambitions, the camp foregrounded the UK's cast-off material culture as filled with potential: a speculative space where discarded garments and artefacts could build the future, thread by thread, thanks to a global network of creative minds.

To prototype this shared vision, the Makers Camp deployed embodied experiential futures practice to reimagine the act of garment making at both a creative and infrastructure level. We challenged the industry's dominant logic, disrupting the speed and scale of traditional design timelines. Instead of a top-down vision driven by logos, trends and seasonal strategies, the camp recognised the social and ecological interdependence of all those involved in a garment's life cycle, from field to factory, studio to street, wearer to waste handler, across to the animals and plants that encounter our plastic fabrics. Fashion, in this context, becomes a system of networked relationships, physically manifest in clothing and accessories design.

At the end of the project, a consensus emerged that, to demonstrate the potential of the textile industry for change, more groups must engage in similar acts of practice-based thinking: from legacy brands to school children, policymakers and supply chain managers. The outcomes should be displayed in more spaces and contexts, to show how the opportunity for creative exploration could become a motivation for change: a "carrot" of curiosity that could even smooth the path towards regulation.

We are also looking to share the creativity of the camp with our peers in Ghana, creating a genuine model of shared equity and possibility. From this initial pilot, we hope to develop a multi-year programme that delivers infrastructure, creative training, imagination, encouragement and technical support simultaneously for designers in Ghana and the UK. We believe that designers in both countries can learn side-by-side from participation in embodied futures experiences of this kind, and prototype new forms of networked, resilient entrepreneurialism. Ideally, this would result in new forms of creativity, and create the case studies necessary for other brands to believe, and follow suit.

Conclusion

To call the temporary laboratory that was Makers' Camp: "The Ghana Project" wholly successful would be to ignore the ongoing crises around fashion throughout the world, the continued exploitation of workers in the supply chain, and companies' continued recourse to star-power creative directors as a way of managing desire. The concept of 'success' in fashion continues to look very different to the system imagined in the camp. Yet Makers' Camp: "The Ghana Project" successfully demonstrated the benefit of creating space for a practice-based process of building a consensus around an alternative, collaborative and equitable fashion future. Invitations to cooperate with a network of peers remains unusual in the highly competitive industry that is fashion, and so, while the Makers Camp remains only a pilot and prototype of what could be, the value of such an experiment is situated within the methods of embodied experiential futuring, bringing participants together to create a network of makers, that can have priority over the individual designer-creator.

The prototyped fashion system modelled in the Makers' Camp demonstrates how collaborating with peers, working within the constraints of waste and discarded fabrics, can become a profound space of creative opportunity for designers, inviting new approaches to concepts of materiality, making extant harmful systems visible and therefore making new generative discussions around regulation more possible. In the future, a similar laboratory, held over a longer period of time, might also open up new connected ways of building commercially viable, inclusive and equitable fashion ventures, that would resolve many of the other concerns currently permeating the fashion industry.

In that sense, the camp and its outcomes offer a step towards a more consciously connected global fashion system, both decolonial and feminist. The physical outputs presented an embodied understanding of what such a system might feel like, reframing the need to work with the materials around us as a positive creative constraint, and reimagining the relationship between designer, supplier and audience as transparent and collaborative. For we are, in many ways, already threaded together, connected by fabrics and practices, histories and knowledge exchanges that move around the globe and across generations. Externalising these threads of connection, making them manifest within the partial laboratory of the Makers' Camp, was an opportunity, through making, to break with convention and think through the conditions for a new, non-extractive networked future: one where necessity might become the mother of thoughtful, collaborative invention.

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