

Decolonising Fashion and Textiles

Design for Cultural Sustainability with Refugee Communities



The Context

With the mass displacement of people on the rise, it is clear that we need to rethink and address the needs and aspirations of **refugee** communities and find ways to honour their diverse cultures.

Until now, the textile heritage of minorities has often been the object of abusive **cultural appropriation** practices undertaken by fashion brands or has been systematically undervalued as ‘non-fashion’ produced by ‘the other’.

Moreover, besides the three commonly recognised pillars of sustainability (i.e. environmental, economic, and social), there is a need to consider also a **cultural** dimension as an essential component of a sustainability agenda.

We need to challenge dominant practices of designers being ‘**parachuted**’ into marginalised or disadvantaged communities with the assumption that they can bring their own knowledge and expertise to solve their problems.

There is growing recognition of the need to ‘**decolonise**’ such dominant design approaches, challenging colonial systems of oppression and exploitation, and leveraging the values of equality, diversity, inclusivity, and sustainability of cultures.



YOUR FUTURE

Approach

- 1) Ethnographic research with London-based refugees and asylum seekers to understand their reality and lived experience of resilience and inform a process of **reciprocal learning and making** through textile heritage.
- 2) Gathering **refugees' stories** of migration, cultural heritage, and community resilience and collectively outlining **visions for a sustainable future**.
- 3) Co-creating culturally meaningful **fashion and textile artefacts**, as well as a **social enterprise model** intended to enhance the resilience of refugees.
- 4) Outlining **recommendations for policy change** to overcome some of the barriers that UK-based refugees face.
- 5) **Dissemination activities** to amplify the impacts.







Implications for Design

- Safe space to reflect and share stories – broadening understanding and learning about the self and others.
- Trajectory of trauma of refugees and asylum seekers – building empathy with vulnerable people, having safeguarding processes in place, engaging in collective making activities to enhance refugees' wellbeing.
- Building a sense of equality, and a reciprocal learning process – facilitators are also participants and learners, challenging power imbalances, privilege and prejudices.
- Using appropriate and relatable language.
- Mapping local connections to foster a sense of belonging and build community resilience.
- Collaborating with grassroots organisations as community providers.
- Having everything well planned, but also being flexible and adapting plans as needed.
- Negotiating benefits and expectations, pointing out to other opportunities available, building legacies.
- Role of the designer – challenging own design practice and crafting a research process that best matches the participants' gifts as a way of decolonising design.









WE ARE A DIVERSE

WE ARE POWERFUL & PEACE

BELIEVE IN OURSELVES & LOVE

WE HOPE FOR A BETTER FUTURE

we rule the world

Discussion

- What can fashion and textile designers learn from refugees about community resilience and cultural sustainability?
- In what ways can designers activate equitable collaborations with refugees to co-create culturally significant fashion and textiles?
- What social enterprise models and recommendations for policy change can be co-designed to enhance the resilience of refugee communities?
- What value can 'design for cultural sustainability' bring to decolonising fashion and textile practices?

Thank you !

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