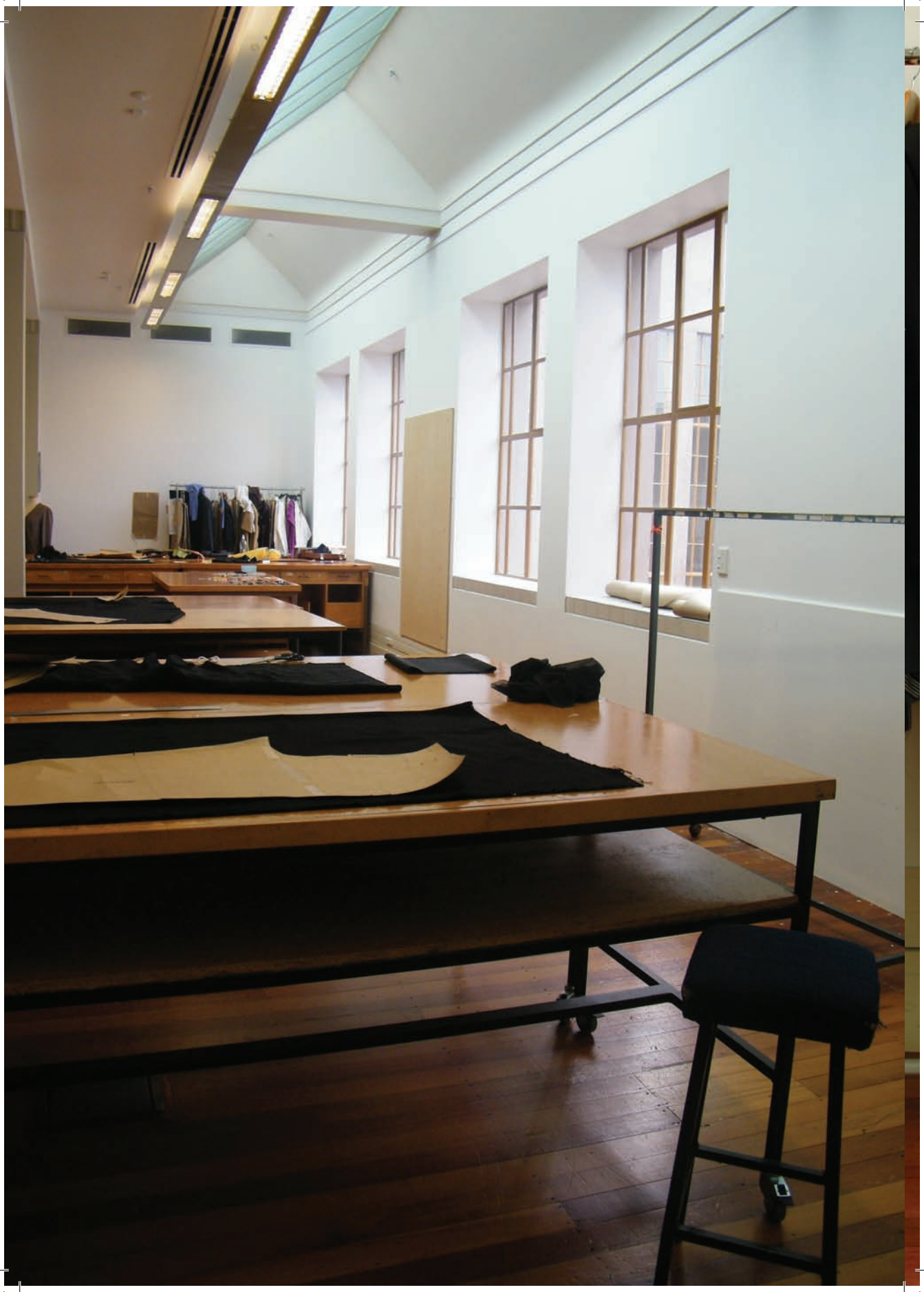
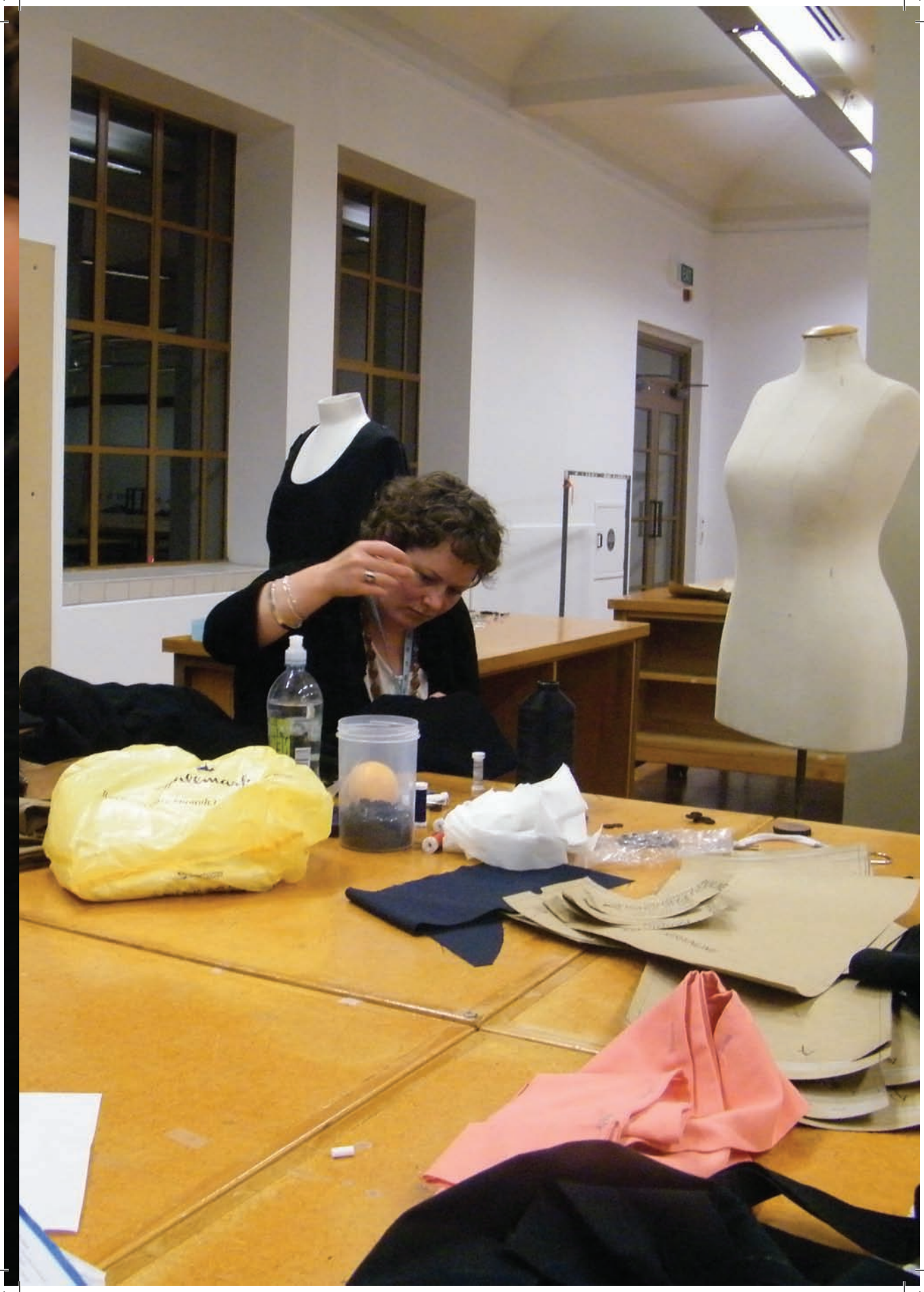
# Timely/Timeless: The New Bespoke





# Timely/Timeless: The New Bespoke

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Design

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Charlotte Little

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# Abstract

Mass-production and consumption is causing mountains of waste, overwhelming our fragile world. Since the fast fashion industry is one of the major contributors of waste, it is vital we change the way we produce, consume and market clothing in order to address concerns such as global warming. We need to consider how we can make clothing within a closed cycle to minimise waste. The garments should either be biodegradable and become nutrients for the earth, or be able to go back into the technological cycle, i.e. to be stripped of components and reused, or else up-cycled with zero waste; a cradle-to-cradle life cycle (McDonough & Braungart, 2002).

This project explores how a more sustainable relationship can be created between the designer, consumer and their community, in an attempt to slow the fashion industry down. Drawing upon sustainability theories I apply a new system of design, production and consumption that fosters relationships and active participation in the garment manufacturing process, as well as making clothing that is tailored for an individual's lifestyle. In this project I have created bespoke clothing items *for* and *with* three people. The clothes are conceived as treasures that my clients can keep forever. Instead of simply being fashionable and of the time, the New Bespoke clothing is both timely and timeless. Through a series of consultations I develop an understanding of my clients personality and lifestyle, and through photographic explorations I develop a silhouette from their current wardrobe from which to design the garments. The transparency of this production system is aimed to educate my clients about environmental issues in the fashion industry, and to change their perception of the value of clothing.

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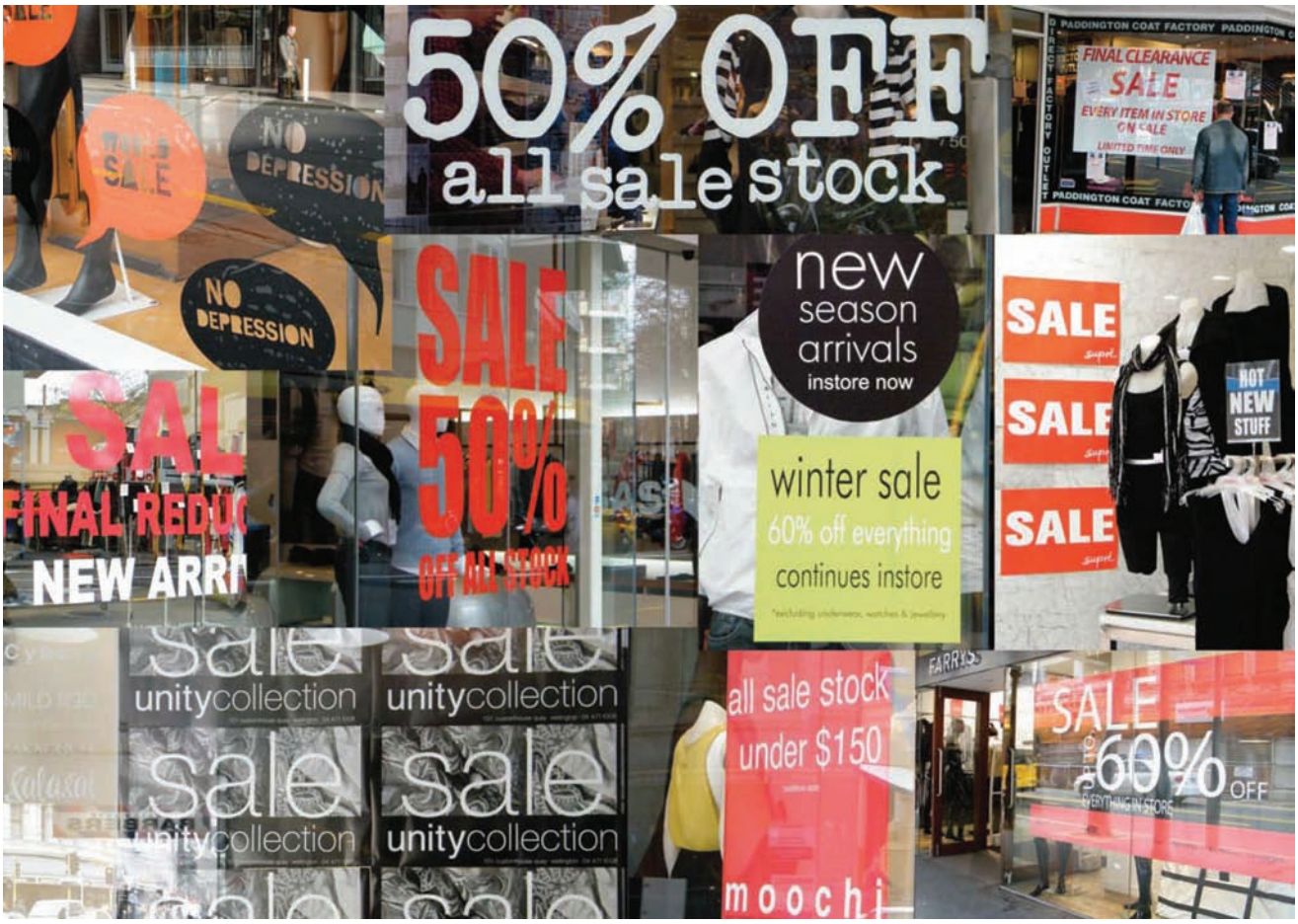


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# Introduction

*The voices of an eager shop assistant trying to make a sale to a customer looking for her season's pair of jeans.*

*Shop Assistant: No good?*

*Customer: No, no good.*

*The customer hands the shop assistant a mountain of denim, and in what seems like an embarrassed rush, she leaves the store.*

I witnessed this brief encounter while waiting for a friend in a local clothing store. There are many reasons for this failure at the 'point of sale'. As Kate Fletcher says,

> While mass-manufacturing and cheap high street stores have provided us with more products to choose from, these choices are more restricted (ask anyone who is different to the 'standard' body shape about the difficulty of finding clothes to fit). The products on sale in our high streets are becoming homogeneous and this lack of choice erodes our individuality and dulls our imagination, limiting our confidence about what clothes can be (Fletcher, 2008, p.186).

By homogeneous Fletcher means that clothing has become standardized and uniformed. Chain stores sell clothes that barely differ from each other leaving customers with limited variation in choice. This leads to consumers becoming bored and valuing what they purchase less. There is both a standardization of style and standardization of fit. My project tries to understand and explain why the customer is left in the disheartening position of either not being able to fit these jeans, or just not liking their style. The anecdote also illustrates how many tonnes of new clothes are wasted every year. This is becoming a major issue in the fashion industry. It also raises the question, where do all of these unsold new clothes go?

10. Waste products from a garment factory in Dhaka. Mike Donenfeld. (n.d.) *Untitled.* Photograph.

Mass-production of what we desire and consume is causing mountains of waste to overwhelm our fragile world. The United Kingdom alone is accumulating 2.35 million tonnes of wasted clothes each year with only one quarter of this being reclaimed (Fletcher, 2008; Allwood, 2007). Since the fashion industry is one of the major contributors of waste, it is vital that we change the way we produce, consume and market clothing to address concerns such as global warming. With glaciers melting, animals being forced from their habitats and increasing severity of storms and droughts there is no doubt that we need to lower our levels of carbon emissions ("Climate Crisis," 2009). We need to consider how we can make clothes within a closed cycle, to minimise waste. The clothes should either be biodegradable by becoming nutrients for the earth, or be able to go back into the technological cycle, i.e. to be stripped of components to be either reused or up-cycled with zero waste. We need clothing to be designed for a cradle-to-cradle life cycle.

The designer and consumer need to become conscious of the products and waste that they are creating. This is not going to be an easy process but it is necessary and attainable. Ethical production, consumption, and use of clothing will not be possible unless dreamed of or imagined first. Without the dream the reality cannot become achievable. David Harvey explains, "Revolutions are not about sudden breaks. Revolutions mean a turning of the wheel. It means taking those things that exist in the present and reconfiguring them into something different" (Harvey, 2009). Environmental concerns cannot be addressed unless massive transformations occur. For the current fashion system to be transformed

to address environmental and ethical values we need social change, change in production systems and changes in consumerism (Harvey, 2009).

To address climate issues fashion needs to slow down. Clothes are designed with "built-in obsolescence," which in the fashion industry is only six months (McDonough & Braungart, 2002, p.28). Fast Fashion is the name that has been given to this process, a term that is derived from Fast Food (Claudio, Luz, 2007). Clothes are the cheapest they have ever been in the history of fashion (Allwood, 2007). Consumers are deprived of quality in the clothes that they buy. Nevertheless, in terms of price, at present a majority of consumers are satisfied with the clothes that they purchase (Fletcher, 2008). Even if the clothes do not fit perfectly, they are cheap and accessible enough for it not to seem to matter. In Aldous Huxley's Brave New World, written in 1931, a futuristic dystopia is introduced where people are brainwashed to consume and are obsessed with the 'new,' "But old clothes are beastly...we always throw away our old clothes. Ending is better than mending, ending is better than mending...the more stitches the less riches…I love new clothes, I love new clothes, I love new clothes..." (Huxley, 1952, p.50-53). It appears that Huxley's fiction has become fact. Consumers don't need to dwell on mending clothes because they are so cheap to buy, but mending also takes skills and tools that take time and can be unattainable or expensive. Mending clothes also has associations with "poverty and need" (Clark, 2008, p.435). "Second-hand clothing has historically been associated with low economic status and class; the second-hand clothes trade clothed the poor long before there was a ready-to-wear industry" (Evans, 1998, p.81). Systems can change so that the mending of clothes becomes part of a service provided by a fashion company. The mending of clothes can also be achieved in a way that adds to the aesthetic quality of the garment. This is apparent in Maison Martin Margiela's garments, in which:

> Implicit care for the material object and sartorial techniques…suggest the impossibility of a simple destruction or anarchy; for instance, the look of distressed or unfinished tacking around an arm hole is executed by the tailor's hand with, paradoxically, a quality "finish." In Margiela's guiding of the tailor's hand one can see a desire to leave a "trace" in an albeit reconceived, fashion tradition of techniques, patterns, and details (Gill, 1998, p.31).

Design houses need to restructure the way they make clothes so their products are of a higher personal value, yet can still compete financially within this current market. The clothes can be thought of as something that the customer treasures for a lifetime. Instead of being fashionable and of the time, they should be both timely and timeless. "…when the product is an investment, has longevity, and also remains 'in fashion', it retains its attraction for the particular consumer or user beyond the fashion season" (Clark, 2008, p.440). The relationship that a consumer creates with their clothing gives the designer an opportunity to make clothes that trigger memories and emotional attachments. Textile design educator Rebecca Early observed, during UK Crafts Council's 2006 exhibition Well Dressed: Eco Style in the U.K., that:

> Consumers often wear garments too little, wash them too often, and at too high a temperature. All bad news for the environment. Can designers help to change the situation? Can clothes be designed that help us develop an emotional attachment to them. That have stories and origins that make us want to cherish them and look after them (Clarke, 2008, p. 441)?

When the designer and consumer work together in a 'co-design' relationship, the consumer is allowed to generate a desire and an attachment to the piece of clothing. "For this to happen the subject-object relationship needs to be more substantial than that of the typical transitory, fashion item, which appeals largely through its visuality or image" (Clarke, 2008, p.440).