



Deconstruct then Reconstruct: A Sustainable Fashion Design Project for Graduate Students

Lu Ann Lafrenz, Ryerson University, Canada

Design, Sustainability, Deconstruct, Reconstruct

Sustainability and ethical practice is one of the mandates of our fashion school. When facing the challenge of incorporating sustainability content into the curriculum an opportunity was identified to develop sustainability content through the graduate program in the required Masters studio course. The studio course was organized around the theme of sustainability and ethical practices in fashion. The course project requirements included the combined use of critical inquiry and studio practice to further explore and refine solutions to design problems or research areas. Prior to taking this course many graduate students were interested in sustainable practices. Among the challenges when developing the course project was addressing the needs of the students without studio backgrounds.

The decision was made to introduce students to one of the creative design techniques, deconstructing vintage or used garments and reconstructing the garments into other usable designs. The following were the learning outcomes of the project. As a result of successfully completing the *Deconstruct/Reconstruct Garment Project*, students will: (1) Continue to develop creative problem solving skills, (2) Conduct primary and secondary research of creative design approaches to sustainable fashion, (3) Identify deconstruction and reconstruction techniques through the examination of retail garments and written materials, (4) Incorporate a variety of techniques in the design and construction of their final reconstructed garment, (5) Design reconstructed garments from deconstructed garments, (6) Document their creative journey, and (7) Demonstrate their ability to articulate and critique creative ideas and reconstructed garments.

The requirements for the *Deconstruct/Reconstruct Garment Project* included researching possible deconstruction/reconstruction techniques and acquire vintage or used garments for this project. Students were to design a garment for a man, woman, or child. Reflection was a necessary component of the project; students were to document their creative journey including photographs and written documentation of the acquired vintage or used garments during all stages of the process, such as inspiration, sketching/design creation, the original garments before deconstruction, the garments deconstructed, the process of reconstructing the garments, and the final garments.

More specifically the students deconstructed the vintage or used garment and reconstructed the original garment into a different garment using fabrics and findings from the acquired vintage or used garments. Students utilized as much of the original garments and findings as possible into the reconstructed garments. A minimal amount fabrics, trims, and findings could be added. Garments were weighed on a postal scale before deconstruction and after reconstruction. The unused fabric and findings were weighed and turned in with the final reconstructed garment. All deconstruction/reconstruction techniques were documented. Since a number of the students did not know how to sew, sewing garments was not a requirement. The

garments could be 'constructed' by sewing, pinning, taping, gluing, or any method that would hold the garment together. In addition, the students could also use sewing contractors. A number of special sessions were held outside of class in the sewing lab for students wanting to learn or practice on machines. Ultimately all students chose to sew their garments, and the garments were not evaluated on the quality or finishing techniques of the reconstructed garments, rather the design process and the student's creative journey. The goal was to push their creativity and have students strive to cleverly create a reconstructed garment using as much of the deconstructed garments as possible. The final garments were presented in a class critique with input from the course instructor, their classmates, faculty members, and industry professionals.

An evaluation rubric was developed for the four general assessment areas (1) Process, (2) Creativity, (3) No Waste, and (4) Critique. The following describes A+ work. *Process* work was the detailed documentation of the student's creative journey including all steps from the beginning to the end as well as photographs, sketching (if appropriate), and written research (35%). *Creativity* included the creativity of the actual design and the creative usage of the deconstructed garments. The student utilized the original garments in new and interesting ways creating garments that were different than the original. Examples would be deconstructing jackets to make skirts, or combining different fabrics such as sweater knits and woven trousers. And 4+ deconstruction techniques were used (35%). The third assessment area was *No Waste* of the deconstructed garments and findings. Note, several students utilized every bit of fabric and every trim and finding when they created accessory items to complement their garments. One student even reused some of the thread (20%). *Critique* feedback included the 'wow' factor from the critics. The A+ student received positive feedback from all classmates, faculty, and industry professionals during the critique process including the additional written comments. In some cases the feedback included the possible marketability of the student's garment (10%).

The following are a few examples of the 19 reconstructed garments. One student cut what she called 'Bill Cosby' sweaters into narrow strips, then serged all of the strips, and she knitted the strips into a vest; however, she had left over strips therefore she expanded the project to include a matching mini skirt to utilize more sweater strips. In addition, she created the knitting directions for this project and posted her vest and skirt directions online. Another student bought silk wedding dresses for ten dollars each and created 'princess' dresses for little girls to play dress up. She expanded the princess dress project in the Functional Design course where she designed ways the dresses could 'grow' with the girls and she has created her own business from this project. Inspired by a child's Mickey Mouse rain slicker another student created a bustier with accessories including chaps and mouse ears. A trip to a thrift store resulted in a pair of leather shorts that one of the students turned into a long tunic or short dress utilizing all of the leather.

The students stepped up to the challenge and the projects exceeded all expectations. The *Deconstruct/Reconstruct Garment Project* proved to be a successful vehicle to introduce students to one of the creative ways to incorporate sustainability into garment design. The end result was beneficial to the graduate students and this was a creative way to contribute to the sustainability mandate of the fashion school.