

## Once discarded, but not forgotten

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Introduction: The purpose of this design is to highlight the growing problem of clothing waste and demonstrate how discarded textiles and clothing of seemingly no value can be transformed into something new. The framework used for this creation is design activism. Design activism works to promote social change, raise awareness about an issue, counteract mass consumerism, and promote wider infrastructural change (Markussen, 2013; Mazzarella et al., 2019). While many previous ITAA designs have focused on upcycling and reducing textile waste (Ingram, 2022; Meta, 2018; Orhn-McDaniel, 2019), only one recent design has promoted design activism (Martindale, 2018). The inspiration for the design presented here originated from a series of articles that exposed the growing problem of clothing waste in Ghana and Chile (Besser, 2021; Glover, 2022). Poor practices in the second-hand clothing industry are resulting in mountains of clothing waste pollution in both countries. Some refer to this practice as “waste colonialism” (Kent, 2023). Although Ghana and Chile are not responsible for the increasing amounts of low-quality clothing that is being “dumped” in their countries, they are becoming responsible for developing solutions to the clothing waste problem (Bauk, 2023). For example, Ecocitex is a yarn spinning factory in Chile that was created to develop a circular approach to yarn manufacturing, where the yarn is produced from discarded clothing (Coombe, 2023). Several fashion designers in Ghana are creating innovative collections upcycled from discarded clothing (Holland, 2023). It is important to re-examine and redefine what constitutes waste with regard to textiles and apparel and begin managing our own waste problem through recycling and other efforts. The concept for this design is to make an artistic statement on the growing problem of clothing waste, follow circular practices by using post-consumer waste in the design, and generate discussion about the communities in Ghana and Chile that have been seriously impacted by the clothing waste issue.

Process: This design embraces circularity through upcycling materials from discarded student projects that were disassembled, including muslins, t-shirts, pajama pants, draping projects, textile testing fabrics, hand-dyed fabric, and fabric remnants (see Figure 1). The only items purchased for the project were two thrifted sheets (e.g. the light teal fabric) and thread for quilting. The colorful design is tied together by a multi-color printed fabric remnant containing teal, purple, and coral hues. The garment pattern was adapted from historic dress scholar Janet Arnold's “quilted jacket with a hood and matching petticoat c. 1745-60” (Arnold, 1972, p. 31). Her 1/8" scale patterns were used to guide the pattern drafting process. The patterns were adjusted for 20th century bodies (e.g. enlarging the overall size of the garment, lengthening the waist and skirt, and adjusting the line of the shoulders etc.). Further adjustments were made, such as removing the boned lining, resulting in a softer drape and more contemporary style and fit for the jacket. For example, the jacket could be worn as an independent garment (without the stomacher) with a t-shirt and jeans. The patchwork design was developed to play on the idea of

contemporary quilting patterns, aesthetics, and techniques, and provide rhythm and emphasis on the hem of the jacket and skirt. The garment was hand quilted, which is a technique that was used during the 18<sup>th</sup> century as well as in contemporary fashion (Cold-weather couture, 2009). The mid-18<sup>th</sup> century-inspired ensemble represents the lingering impacts of colonialism and the concept of “colonial waste” in how large amounts of discarded and unwearable clothing from wealthy countries in North America, Europe, and Asia are exported to countries in Africa and South America (Kent, 2023). The objective was to update the aesthetics of the garment and include representation from the countries impacted by the clothing waste problem to generate conversation on this issue.

The appliqued designs on the skirt represent symbols that have been appropriated from both Ghana and Chile over time including the Sankofa, originating from adinkra symbols printed on textiles in Ghana, which represents learning from one’s past to make a better future. This symbol and others migrated to the United States through enslaved people who made early iron fences and has become a commonly appropriated motif with the original meaning forgotten (Lamback, 2023) (see Figure 2). The Cruz Simétrica symbol, or symmetrical cross, originated with the Mapuche people in what is now Chile centuries before the arrival of the Spanish. It represents the interconnectedness of elements in nature and the relationship between the divine world and mother earth; the symbol promotes a respect for nature (Mapuches, n.d.). This symbol has also been appropriated in architecture and products made outside of Chile. The appliqued designs were applied using HeatnBond (a more contemporary application method) to obtain a clean edge for the designs. These symbols were included to help generate discussion and elevate voices about ongoing systemic problems rooted in colonialism, as well as the importance of respect for the people and cultures impacted by the clothing waste issue.



**Figure 1.** *Photo of student projects, student muslins, and remnant fabrics, which were deconstructed for use as fabric this design.*



**Figure 2.** *A porch railing containing the adinkra symbol, Asase Ye Duru, which focuses on the importance of mother earth.*

**Contribution:** The purpose of this ensemble is to demonstrate the possibility of using discarded textiles and clothing to create something new and to spark conversation through design activism. It is intended as an art piece, with layers of meaning that can be interpreted by the viewer and/or wearer. This contributes to design scholarship by generating conversation about the clothing waste problem and how it impacts selected communities, such as Ghana and Chile. Through

design activism, this design takes a more direct approach to generating conversation that builds awareness and potentially can lead to change including more conscious design and consumption, as well as a global appreciation for the people impacted by clothing waste. This design emphasizes the importance of accountability with regard to the fashion waste issue, and it challenges others to approach design with circularity in mind.

Furthermore, this design helps to push the boundaries of what has previously been considered fashion waste. The use of textile “waste” has implications for educators. It is important to re-evaluate and re-educate students about the potential value of used garments and textiles within educational institutions. Educators and students should apply creativity and innovation to reimagine uses for fabric and scraps from student projects and discarded clothing. People can learn from the past and develop better ways of creating clothing, consuming clothing, and improving recyclability and circularity methods to achieve a better, more sustainable and socially just fashion industry.

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