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Circular, Human, Vol. 4, Issue 1

Golden Rules for Ethical Fashion Design

by Ioana Ciolacu



When I first started studying Fashion Design back in 2008, I thought it was all about self-expression, aesthetics and being desirable. While all this still applies, I learnt that it means nothing if you do it at any cost. Especially at a cost to the planet.



Ethical Fashion Design by Ioana Ciolacu

While at school, I was avid about trying all these techniques and I would grab any fabric I could get to explore and experiment. My bachelor degree's collection has leather in it – using scraps from a warehouse. Today I feel guilty for putting my ideas first, before thinking about what the use of leather implies. I love all creatures dearly and witnessing animals being abused makes me angry. I cannot stand it. When we see leather, we often do not link it to mistreated animals.

Being eager to learn more in an international and experienced market, I applied to the University of Arts in London for an MA, where I was awarded a scholarship for the Fashion Design and Technology course at the London College of Fashion. Whilst this gave me a lot of new information and opened endless possibilities to me, I had no clue what lay beneath this amazingly attractive industry. At that time, I had stopped using leather for logistic reasons – I did not have access to the more specialised machines that are used in the accessories sector.

One year passed and my choices on fabric use were limited solely by my budget. I managed to do half of a collection with which I applied to the Designer for Tomorrow award – an international young designer competition which was headed that year by Stella McCartney.

When I reached the round of 5 finalists, I flew to Berlin to meet her and we spoke about how I could improve my collection. The winner was to be selected based on a catwalk at Berlin Fashion Week, so I was very keen to hear her thoughts. This conversation, that lasted on 10 minutes, completely changed the way I was looking at fashion design. This was the moment that I understood that without being conscious and thoughtful, we are doomed.

The month before the final show I finished the second part of the collection. I implemented a few sustainable techniques, such as switching from silk to bamboo silk and using natural dyes, for which I was applauded by Stella. In the end I was the winner, which got me unexpected visibility and finances to build my brand. I was responsible to not disappoint, so from early on I built my brand with responsibility, think that if I were to grow bigger, my caring would really make a difference. From then on, for each new collection, I would implement new measures to lower the impact and each time I would achieve it, I would become more frustrated about the organisational and financial limitations of being an independent brand. Steadily my passion to do good grew, subtly directing a new aesthetic and a new approach in my design.

The way it is now, natural resources are limited and there's a certain feeling of irreversible doom hanging in the air. The way I see it, if you work in fashion design and don't consider moving towards a more sustainable, environmentally friendly approach, ideally one in favour of a circular economy, what you are developing is not only irresponsible but also old fashioned and, may I say, plain stupid.

So, what can be done?

Where do you start?

What does a brand have to do to lower its environmental footprint?

Speaking from personal experience, I can share my four Golden Rules for Sustainable Fashion to be implemented or observed for a brand to grow sustainably.

4 Golden Rules for Sustainable Fashion

Become an expert in raw materials and resources

Back in the day, leather was the most efficient and common way of keeping yourself protected from harsh weather. Not only might you need to tackle an animal bare-handed, you would also make sure to use every part of the sacrificed animal. The modern manufacturing industry, using leather relentlessly to satisfying our vanity, has travelled a long and sad path from these origins.

Since fashion is all about trends, that is projecting a near future with all the new technologies that craft more sustainable, better looking and more efficient fabrics, why be old fashioned and use leather.

Leather should never be on hand for goods use. These days it requires around 1,800 gallons of water to produce a pound of beef. A one-ounce silkworm and 3,500 pounds of mulberry leaves are needed to produce about 8 pounds of silk. 22,500 litres of water are needed to produce one kilogram of cotton. Even if you eliminate animal cruelty in a manufacturing process, which should be the first step, you must still think of the resources used in the production of the fabric and, very importantly, the labour conditions in which the fabric was made. Plain old cotton should seem safe, but most plants are grown using pesticides that have been linked to cancer, not to mention the excruciating competition for lower prices and the many human casualties that have resulted.

The deeper you dig, the more complicated, sad and restrictive it gets. Therefore keep sourcing simply. First, you do research. Then, start small. Many companies these days have certificates for their fabrics that guarantee production equity. Many new companies use ground-breaking new techniques to produce new fabrics. All of these come with a higher price, but only because they are new and less known. Often there are nearby fabric producers that have competitive prices and a thoughtful production process that you can check. Small is better than nothing.

Example:

I saw a televised news report on local shepherds who throw away their wool because no-one would buy it. I partnered with Kraft Made, a company that brings together local producers and traditional crafts with companies. They found local shepherds in the same situation, as well as local wool manufacturers that could wash and traditionally brush the wool and a few local knit workers. We made beautiful huge knit pullovers that were so appealing to my customers that we managed for one season to generate a work force for several local people, paid at equitable rates, and saved some wool in the process. As a small company with few resources and some logistical difficulties, it was not possible to keep the trend for the following season but imagine what could be achieved with a larger organisation.

Build regenerative operations (recycle materials and sustainable processes)

For a collection you need an idea and a development plan, based on hand resources and fabrics. Whenever I develop my patterns, I strive to make them compact, so there's as few scraps as possible. Even so, the human body is a complicated mechanism and patterns are restricted by this - scraps when designed can be as high as 40% of the material. This means that nearly half of the fabric would be thrown away. Except there are alternatives to waste. My alternative came from my grandmother. She was born and raised in a small Romanian village where people used their fabric scraps to make beautiful rag rugs. It is a fairly common practice in most of the Romanian countryside and beyond. One day my grandma came to me, saying that some people in her village didn't have enough scraps to make rag rugs, and asked if I have any spares from my production. From this day on, I stopped throwing away scraps, instead packaging and sending them to grandma's village.

In addition, I now use recycled paper for all my office documents and am setting up recycling processes to deal with waste paper.

Be radically transparent and proactive

After winning the Designer of Tomorrow award, I received enough resources to build my brand and my studio in London, which with a year of almost unlimited resources, seemed like a natural step. It was, then, a huge surprise to everyone that I decided to move to Bucharest. I knew that producing in London is extremely expensive and that I would eventually need to find more convenient sources abroad, both for materials and labour, in order to survive as a brand. The thought of producing in far away countries without being

able to control the whole process was not something I could deal with. I know Romania as a excellent place to locate production and that, by moving there, I could easily involve myself and supervise the processes. I am happy to say I now personally know each person who works for my brand. Moreover, while sustaining local production, I also ensure fair labour rates and almost never negotiate, instead keeping a balance between everyone's profit.

Think purpose over profit

If your community is thriving, you are thriving. Sure, a "smart" business plan can make you business profitable, but not at all costs. If you buy a five-euro t-shirt you will only use for one weekend, somebody else is paying for that shirt. Usually someone from a less advantaged area. So next time you tweak your business plan, do not exclude your community and don't take labour for granted.

Allow me to close with one piece of advice: don't green wash; don't market for sake of a trend. Show, rather than tell. At this point in time, being considerate of our planet is not an option but a necessity.