

The Fashion Empowerment Course Module

Introduction

The Course is based on the concept of **social design**. In this context, design is seen as a methodology of creative problem solving where the attributes of design process are employed to facilitate social needs. In Papanek's words, it is design for the "real world".

Social design is inclusive, catering the needs of all humanity, not only for the desires and excessive consumption of the affluent minority, as has been the case of market-oriented design. Many terms refer to social design, such as design-for-all, responsible design or ethical design.

The rise of social and ethical consciousness among designers in general has led to the increased interest for the participatory, user-centred design methods.

In fashion design, subjected to the obscure notion of "fashion", defined by rapidly changing trends, mass production, media hype, celebrity culture and obsession of distorted body images, the co-creation, the interaction (or co-creation) between the designer and customer is more complex.

Clothes can, still today, be custom made and tailored for the individual users in atelier-settings. Furthermore, fashion has become more democratic in that sporting the right "look" is not only accessible to the wealthy but also to the well informed, regardless to their social class. One can be fashionable with very little money as long as one has access to the information of what is *in* and *out* at any given moment.

While fashion has become more diverse and democratic, the supply of "fashion" in the mainstream market does not celebrate the diversity of human body. By far the majority of fashion labels focus on catering the desires of a very limited consumer group: young, healthy and slim women.

Questions of inclusion and *design-for-all* have not been high in the agenda of fashion design. The same applies to fashion design education. While users are often consulted via interviews or mood boards e.g. in various *functional clothes*-projects, such as sports wear or work uniforms, the fashion students are seldom encouraged to address the needs of those who fit poorly to the body image of the idealized norm: young and healthy and skinny. The paradox is that majority of garments is designed for the minority of users, while a huge number of consumers stay in the margin.

Course Aim

The aim of the course is to open a social perspective to fashion design.

The fashion students are encouraged to expand their notion of clothing design and adopt a more inclusive and socially meaningful approach to their practise.

The students will apply user-centred methods, such as co-design, and design a collection for a group of their choice that they consider as marginalized in the mainstream fashion market. They will report of the process

The Course Structure

The course takes approximately 5 weeks depending on how intensively the students are able to work.

1. The start. Introduction to **social design**¹. Discussion on the aspect of **design-for-all**² and **empowerment** in the context of fashion design.

Duration: 2-3 hours

2. Grouping. The students are organised into groups of ca 3 students. The grouping assignment: design an outfit of old newspapers (with the help of masking tape) that presents your group's style and philosophy. The results will be presented in a catwalk and discussed.

Duration: 4 hours

3. On-line reporting. The groups set up a blog that will be a web diary reporting their research and design development process throughout the project. This will serve as means of assessment and public awareness. All the links to blogs will be available at the central "home" blog of the project.

Duration: Setting up the blog: 4 hours. Blogging: 1 hour/ day.

¹ See e.g. <http://www.design21sdn.com/design21/news/304>

² Design for All is design for human diversity, social inclusion and equality (EIDD Stockholm Declaration, 2004). According to the European Commission, it "encourages manufacturers and service providers to produce new technologies for everyone: technologies that are suitable for the elderly and disabled, as much as everybody else.

4. Choosing the target group. The groups discuss and choose a target group for their project that they consider as marginalized in the mainstream fashion market.

Duration: 2 hours

5. Making a plan of action. The groups plan the process within the time reserved for the project. This can be done in a form of a time-line.

Duration: 2 hours

6. Getting connected. The students search for and get in touch with the representatives of their target group.

Duration: 2 days

7 Doing research. The students do research on the needs of their target group. They work with their clients, involving them in the design process with *co-design*³ methods. Alternatively (in case finding a real client proves difficult) they can create a *persona*, a profile for a fictive client that represents the target group.

Duration: 5 days

8. Defining the concept. The groups decide the concept and present their ideas in a form of inspiration board in a poster format (A2) and include a short essay (1-2 pages) to explain the project proposal (technique, materials, concept etc).

Duration: 1 day

³ See e.g. <http://www.designcouncil.org.uk/resources-and-events/designers/design-glossary/co-design/>

9. The design. The students work for their designs. A collection of 5 outfits is appropriate.

Duration: 5 days

10. The making. The students make the garments.

Duration: 10 days

11. The final show. The groups present the results in a public event, in the presence of their peers and target groups representatives. The collections are discussed, the process reflected upon and feedback given.

Duration: 4 hours (depending on how many groups there are).