

THE RESTART

COPENHAGEN FASHION SUMMIT: SOLUTIONS FOR RESPONSIBLE FASHION

ONE YEAR TO THE DAY AFTER MORE THAN 1,100 PEOPLE DIED AND 2,500 WERE INJURED IN THE RANA PLAZA FACTORY COMPLEX IN BANGLADESH, THE 2014 COPENHAGEN FASHION SUMMIT WAS HELD ON THE SYMBOLIC DATE OF APRIL 24, 2014. NOW IN ITS THIRD YEAR, THE MEETING OF FASHION LEADERS AND OTHER AGENTS OF CHANGE IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY FOCUSED ON A CRUCIAL TOPIC OF URGENT IMPORTANCE: SOLUTIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE FASHION. AT THIS EVENT CREATED BY THE FORWARD-THINKING SCANDINAVIAN COUNTRIES AND SUPPORTED BY THE NORDIC FASHION ASSOCIATION AND THE DANISH FASHION INSTITUTE, CRASH SAW A CONCRETE WAY TO MAKE THE FASHION INDUSTRY MORE RESPONSIBLE. THE MESSAGE IS CLEAR: BEYOND THE ETHICAL CONCERN, INSTITUTING A MORE RESPONSIBLE FORM OF FASHION PROVIDES AN OPPORTUNITY FOR LUXURY BRANDS AND DESIGNERS TO BECOME MORE COMPETITIVE.



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SUSTAINABLE AND PROFITABLE FASHION

Innovating by developing a more sustainable and profitable business model is a question of survival for luxury brands. Companies that fail to do so will be out of the game in the future, warns Marco Bizzarri, Chairman and CEO of Bottega Veneta, one of the Kering Group's flagship brands in terms of integrating a successful sustainability strategy into its business model. Another tell-tale sign: the normally very low-key house has now launched a communications campaign based on its actions, positioning itself as a leader in the luxury goods market through its commitment to more responsible manufacturing practices in the fashion industry. Labelled "irreversible", this movement is not motivated by ethics alone, ensures the CEO, because the company is not a charity organization – though it did create a vegetable garden for its employees and support the development of artisan coops specialized in leather goods in order to preserve and expand the trade, all expenses paid.

But the main goal is to build a sustainable and profitable business model at a time when the company must provide a satisfactory answer to the question most asked by students visiting the leather goods workshop: has the company developed a sustainability strategy for its business? Attracting new talent is of fundamental importance for Bottega Veneta, since its success depends primarily on human skills rather than, say, technology. In this case, integrating a sustainability strategy transforms the company into a magnet for these talents, who will appreciate the additional reason to move to Veneto and not Milan. What result is expected from this series of initiatives to improve working conditions for its employees, notably its artisans and craftspeople? According to the Chairman and CEO, designs are better than ever, sales are up and everyone is happier! And he is indeed thrilled to see his revenue grow by 150% over the past four years. But he is also proud of his new eco-responsible workshop opened in 2013 and now certified LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) – a first for any company in the luxury sector. The company is continuing to optimize its sustainability strategy, notably by lobbying for increased traceability in chrome-free leather.

The actions taken by this one leather goods brand reflect the broader mission of the Kering Group, a listed company owning 22 luxury and athletics brands all required to adopt sustainability strategies based on the Group's "common vocabulary" – a tool for promoting innovation through institutional and financial means,

explains Marie-Claire Daveu, Chief Sustainability Officer and Head of International Institution Affairs at Kering. Confirming the private sector's role in sustainability, she suggests we should look at our dependency on natural resources not only as a responsibility, but also as an opportunity. In practice, the methodology developed to measure the Group's Environmental Profit & Loss Account (EP&L), which tracks the environmental impact from its suppliers to its operations, is set to be adopted by all Group brands by 2016. Eventually, the methodology will be freely provided to any company wishing to use it. Applauded for its pioneering cachet as well as its efficiency, the risk management tool helped Kering secure the Global Leadership Award in Sustainable Apparel (GLASA) at the Copenhagen Fashion Summit.

EXPERIMENTING WITH RESPONSIBLE MATERIALS AND TEXTILES

What the fashion industry needs right now are leaders and designers like this, who will steer the entire industry towards a more responsible future, underlines Chantal Malingrey-Perrin, Marketing Director at Première Vision. Brands need to start exploring responsible materials and textiles. Indeed, brands are the dream weavers who can dust off the musty image of ethical design and give customers new aesthetic experiences that are in step with today's world. In this way, brands can help push the industry into the future, following the widely appreciated example of Marithé+François Girbaud, who now use an alternative process to produce denim washes that cuts back on water and chemical products.

Lacking the resources of a major group like Kering, many designers are left wondering about the cost of adopting a sustainability strategy, rather than the profitability, regrets Giusy Bettoni, CEO and Founder of C.L.A.S.S. (Creativity Lifestyle and Sustainable Synergy). She suggests setting up ways to help designers experiment and get creative with responsible textiles, and to underline the fact that designers need to start looking for the fair price instead of the lowest price. It's up to the creatives to seize this opportunity to redesign their business models. Don't we always say that creativity comes from constraint?

CRASH 27.



ALTERNATIVE WAYS TO CONSUME AND LIVE FASHION

But just how far will fashion go in the name of sustainability? Will it ever have the courage to challenge its own programmed obsolescence, a process accelerated by the addition of more and more collections (now up to eight a year for luxury brands and sixty for H&M, one of the Copenhagen Fashion Summit’s partners)? “Sustainable fashion? It’s an oxymoron”, says Vanessa Friedman. As fashion editor of the Financial Times and soon-to-be Chief Fashion Critic and Fashion Director of the New York Times, her words resonate throughout the entire industry.

For Justin Keeble, Managing Director, Sustainability Services EALA at Accenture, the fashion industry should revise the notions of innovation and revolution driving its campaigns in order to change how fashion is consumed, rather than pay lip service to sustainability. According to this management specialist, it is now time to work on a global scale in order to transform business. He is even optimistic when it comes to the creativity of designers and entrepreneurs. Nowadays, apparel can be rented or shared through online platforms that have proven highly profitable in their own right. Friendly gatherings of a new sort are popping up to let fashion addicts swap outfits, which is one of the easiest and most effective ways to extend the life of clothing items. One example of this even took place during the Summit: the Fashion Exchange organized by the Danish Fashion Institute. Schemes like these point to the emergence of a new mindset and a new relationship between consumers and the clothes they buy. For Vanessa Friedman, it is also time we change the way clothing fits into our lives: we need to place more meaning and value in the clothes we wear. This year, a third of the clothing we own has never been worn, according to a study by Ginetex. Instead of sustainable fashion, the journalist suggests we fight for a sustainable wardrobe and clothing with more humanity: recognizing and appreciating the marks of good craftsmanship, local production supporting a place we care about, remaining open to tastefully recycled goods...

Luxury brands, she says, think a lot about this idea of the wardrobe: how can we give meaning to garments and their production history so that they can find a lasting place in our wardrobes? This master of the slender silhouette, who seems to look at home in just about anything, admits it took her ten years to put together her ideal travel wardrobe: a few dresses, a pair of slim-fit wrinkle-free black pants together with a pair of tall heels, and a vest with a sparkly metallic look for day or nighttime outings. And here we are, we consumers, faced with the fashionable advice not to follow fashion. Apparently the time has come to put together our own sustainably glamorous wardrobe – a sort of Slow Fashion to experiment with while, during the Summit, the entire Copenhagen Opera House felt heavy with the memory of the victims who lost their lives in one of the tragedies of Fast Fashion, the disposable wardrobe worn by everyone, which sometimes includes items that cost more to clean than to buy.

What might our wardrobe of the future look like? It’s a “voyage”, a “journey” to find out how to adopt a strategy combining ethics and aesthetics, because the goal of fashion will always be to delight us. We will never buy clothes to change the world, insist two of the primary champions of sustainable fashion: Eva Kruse, Chairwoman and CEO of the Danish Fashion Institute (DAFI), who teamed up with the Nordic Fashion Association to contribute to the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference, gathering 650 fashion professionals, experts and NGOs to discuss the prospects and challenges of sustainable fashion; and Livia Firth, Creative Director at Eco Age Ltd and Founder of the Green Carpet Challenge, who has lately worked on one collaborative project after another with fashion brands.

STEERING DESIGNERS TOWARDS RESPONSIBLE FASHION

So where does the journey into the land of innovation begin for designers eager to use responsible textiles? Especially at a time when global fashion employs 60 million people around the world and ships its materials over thousands of miles, to and from suppliers and subcontractors located in many different countries... These textiles need to be traceable, says Giusy Bettoni, who is in favor of helping designers experiment with natural and organic textiles, recycled and recyclable fabrics, innovative and reusable materials and biopolymers. This will fuel their creativity, she insists, notably because new technology is available to find new uses for raw materials, like wool. A lot of times, remarks the CEO and founder of a development consulting agency, designers are surprised to discover the creative and aesthetic potential of responsible textiles. A situation that speaks to the challenge currently facing these textiles: improving communication about the innovations they make possible.

Given this need for clear and comprehensible communication on the first steps to adopting a responsible approach to fashion, one initiative is proving that any designer can move from words to action in just five steps. Starting a sustainable “revolution” is the goal of Restart Fashion: Five Easy Steps to Sustainability, a joint project by the Danish Fashion Institute (DAFI) and Not Just A Label, a platform dedicated to emerging fashion. All 15,000 designers registered with the online retail platform are asked to respect and adopt five simple actions outlined in its manifesto:

1. “reclaim design power”, in order to use sustainability as a positive design opportunity;
2. “know your supply chain”, by asking critical questions to suppliers and understanding your supply chain’s consequences;
3. “choose one focus”, making just one better choice can make a huge change;
4. “create more, use less”, by choosing materials that will have a positive impact on the final product;
5. “engage your customers”, by telling a compelling story about your design, because meaningful relationships pay off.

A new community of designers aware of these challenges and ready to take action can share their experiences and work towards gradually integrating responsible fashion into their business models. “We aren’t asking brands and designers for perfection”, explains Solidaridad, an NGO currently committed to a long-term partnership with H&M to improve the retail giant’s use of natural resources and its fair wage policy. Integrating responsible fashion principles into a business model takes time and requires a long-term perspective on design and business. One step at a time to make fashion design more responsible.

So while the rest of us are having fun compiling our sustainable wardrobes, the fashion industry, along with its institutional and non-profit partners, will continue working to apply the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, in association with national and international labor unions and the International Labor Organization (ILO). Presented at the end of the Summit, the accord was signed by 150 brands in more than 25 countries, expressing their commitment to improve health and safety conditions in Bangladesh factories, while ensuring transparency by publishing online reports on its efforts. So that this disaster – or murder, as some call it, and not an accident – never happens again, the fashion industry is taking action. First motivated by calls for more responsibility, ethics and innovation, the industry now has an opportunity to increase its sales revenue by successfully integrating a sustainability strategy into its business model: a new model of industrial reconstruction known as the “circular economy”, based on integrating more recycling efforts into industrial processes and technologies.

A sophisticated way to renew the capitalist model, according to the philosopher and sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky, who studies the intrinsic paradoxes and tensions of hypermodern capitalism. An artistic capitalism, continuously in search of creativity and aesthetic experiences available all around us and in many forms.

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