

Fashion as Sustainability in Action

Dilys Williams

Professor of Fashion Design
for Sustainability and Director,
Centre for Sustainable Fashion,
University of the Arts London

Centre for Sustainable Fashion develops and applies situated learning in Fashion Design for Sustainability through practices of transformation and participatory design. This paper explains concepts, approaches, and considerations that underpin the research and practice pursued by the Centre in its quest to create conditions for fashion to be practiced as a means of creative self-expression, reflection, and fulfilment, promoting cultures that are equity and ecologically-centred.

Introduction

Centre for Sustainable Fashion (CSF) is a University of the Arts (UAL) Research Centre, based at London College of Fashion (LCF). Its members explore fashion's interrelated ecological, social, economic and cultural concerns. Our pluralistic approach involves undertaking a process of mutual learning with a diverse range of people in a range of settings. In so doing, we aim to shape and contribute to the nascent, burgeoning field of study of Fashion Design for Sustainability. Our work draws on and intersects with Design for Sustainability Fashion Studies, Education for Sustainability, Eco-feminist, Feminist, Postcolonial and Design Studies, as well as a range of disciplines relating to fashion's hybrid technical, philosophical, creative, commercial, and political concerns.

The Premise of the Centre's Practice

The premise of the Centre's practice is an understanding that dynamic interdependencies exist between people and wider ecological systems. Through fashion, one's inner identity can be visibly exhibited, and yet this exhibition of the "inner" is simultaneously a culmination of the outer world's effect on that person. An appreciation of this offers an inroad to understanding the reality of these ever-shifting interdependent relationships. The current dominant fashion system, however, with its blinkered focus on the economic value of garments, is complicit in and exacerbates socio-ecological crises of climate, social, racial, wealth and other injustices. Through the apparent success of the marketisation of fashion's cultural and material production and consumption, natural and human resources are depleted, creativity constrained and power gaps widened. Fashion, however, is — or should be — much more than a commercial transaction. Our work will be done only once fashion's life-sustaining possibilities are exercised in practice. We aim to achieve this goal through imagining, conceiving, realising and communicating ways in which it can equitably represent each clad citizen and dramatically reduce its resource consumption. Fundamental to Fashion Design for Sustainability is the creation of conditions for agency at individual and community levels, across multiple locations.

Fashion as Sustainability in Action

Identifying something by giving it a name and place to reside – whether an idea, practice or community – can give it shape and make it accountable, to itself and others. In 2008, CSF became the name for an endeavour to develop Fashion Design and Sustainability knowledge and practice through a systemic approach to transforming the fashion system from one with the economy at its core, to one where its dynamic economic activities contribute to social and ecological prosperity (2008).

From the outset, this approach has involved academic research, knowledge exchange with a range of collaborators and curriculum development: to create and apply fashion as sustainability in action (Sterling, 2001).

Now a world-recognised research centre, with a core membership of over 20 highly respected researchers, designers, tutors, practitioners, coordinators, administrators and communicators, we realise that transformation starts close to home. It involves recognition of the contribution of each Centre member and our ability to develop methods that ensure participation from people and perspectives from multiple disciplines, locations, cultures and identities as the “we” of our doing. We can only achieve this when the “what”, “how”, “why” and “with whom” of our work are considered with care, criticality, openness, and inclusivity. At the core of our ethos is a consideration of the cause and effect of our actions, which inherently means taking a “whole-systems” view to understand the reverberations of our activities and what they might positively, or negatively involve. To design well therefore involves consideration beyond the subjective and beyond the immediately visible. It involves a cycle of reflection, action, further reflection, and feedback; it is about cultivating mindsets and habits of sustainability alongside related products, services, and systems.

To develop such capabilities of expansive creativity in students, designers, and wider audiences, we must go beyond an account of the symptoms of the crisis. We can readily identify the problems we are facing. In the words of Escrigas, “education and knowledge resources are more available today than ever before. However, humanity’s two main conflicts – co-existence with nature and co-existence with each other – remain unresolved” (2016). If fashion is to be an exemplar of ways in which we can live well together, designers (professional and citizen) need agency to navigate a path through power dynamics, systemic bias, long-held beliefs of dominance, and entrenched aspirations that jeopardize the relational aspects of life on Earth. This means breaking down hierarchies within academic research practice, institutions, the fashion industry, and within neo-liberal, post-colonial power structures. We seek to create holarchic structures of working (Nowakowski and Rees, 2012) – networks that create conditions for participation, whilst recognizing the mutual co-dependence of the whole system and its constitutive parts. This design challenge pervades our work.

A Discourse in Fashion Design for Sustainability

Scholarship and practice in fashion and sustainability – articulating concern about fashion’s part in human-induced degradation of ecological systems through its exploitative practices, as well as ways in which fashion can highlight concern, through captivating aesthetics – all have a long history. Often however this has been limited to exploring the symptoms, rather than addressing causes. Fashion is seen as a symbol of cultures of consumption and non-essential pursuit, often

viewed in gendered terms. Fashion Design for Sustainability challenges some of these “too easy” categorizations. It draws on and is informed by academic and non-academic disciplines, tacit knowledge, rituals and practices combining personal, professional, academic and industry knowledge. It references social design’s interdisciplinary, participatory and co-design approaches (Manzini, 2015) and environmental design’s restorative practices (St. Pierre, 2019; Sim Van der Ryn and Cowan, 2007). It draws on systems theory (Capra and Luisi, 2014) deep ecology (Bateson, 1972) and the work of a range of social scientists relating to ecology and equity (Guattari, 2000), Ontological Design (Escobar, 2018) and specifically relating to fashion (Entwhistle, 2001). Moreover, Fashion Design for Sustainability draws on stories, narratives and belief systems and practices that recognize nature’s central role in life (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2013). Design for sustainability recognises the central need to connect objects, environment and meaning (Walker, 2011) as it acknowledges that a re-designing is required not only of the relations in the system, but also of the rules and goals of the system. Thus reference is made to metadesign (Giaccardi, 2005; Wood, 2007) and transformation design (Jonas et al., 2016). The materiality of designing is the means by which human interactions, practices, cultural backgrounds, imagination, and differences form and transform artefacts, relating to the body, in creation and in use (Ingold, 2011). Fashion Design for Sustainability involves an interest in the material and immaterial implications of these interactions in social, ecological, political, and economic spheres.

Our Contribution: Diverse and Global Perspectives and Representation

The growing body of research in Fashion Design for Sustainability by Centre members includes the first comprehensive discourse in fashion from: a systems thinking perspective (Fletcher, 2008); within an Earth Logic context (Fletcher and Tham, 2019), as a means to recognise and build communities in place (Williams, 2018) through cross-disciplinary approaches (Fletcher and Tham, 2015); as a multiplicity of creative business practices (Black, 2012); and as a set of counter narratives in fashion (Mazzarella et al., 2019). Alongside these and a plethora of other academic publications, the Centre engages in a multiplicity of projects, evidencing fashion and sustainability in action, a current example being the AHRC funded Fostering Sustainable Practices project (2020). This study of emerging practices of UK designers engaged in small and micro businesses identifies fashion design values, visions, capabilities and practices that foster sustainability.

Whilst these and other examples of research draw on well-established sustainability, fashion and design principles, we also recognise this field of study must be shaped and informed by learning from indigenous peoples, researchers, designers, and makers from diverse cultures, locations, and identities. Global perspectives on fashion and sustainability (Gwilt et al., 2019) offers a rich variety of case studies from across continents; however there still remains a lack of representation

by some of the people whose radical, deep rooted practices embody sustainability. Learning with and from such participants often takes place outside of the usual structures of academic research, although it is sometimes possible for designers and researchers to spend time as co-learners within such contexts, as the Za-atari Action project (Storey, 2019) demonstrates.

Collaboration, Contextuality and Criticality at the Heart of the Centre's Practice

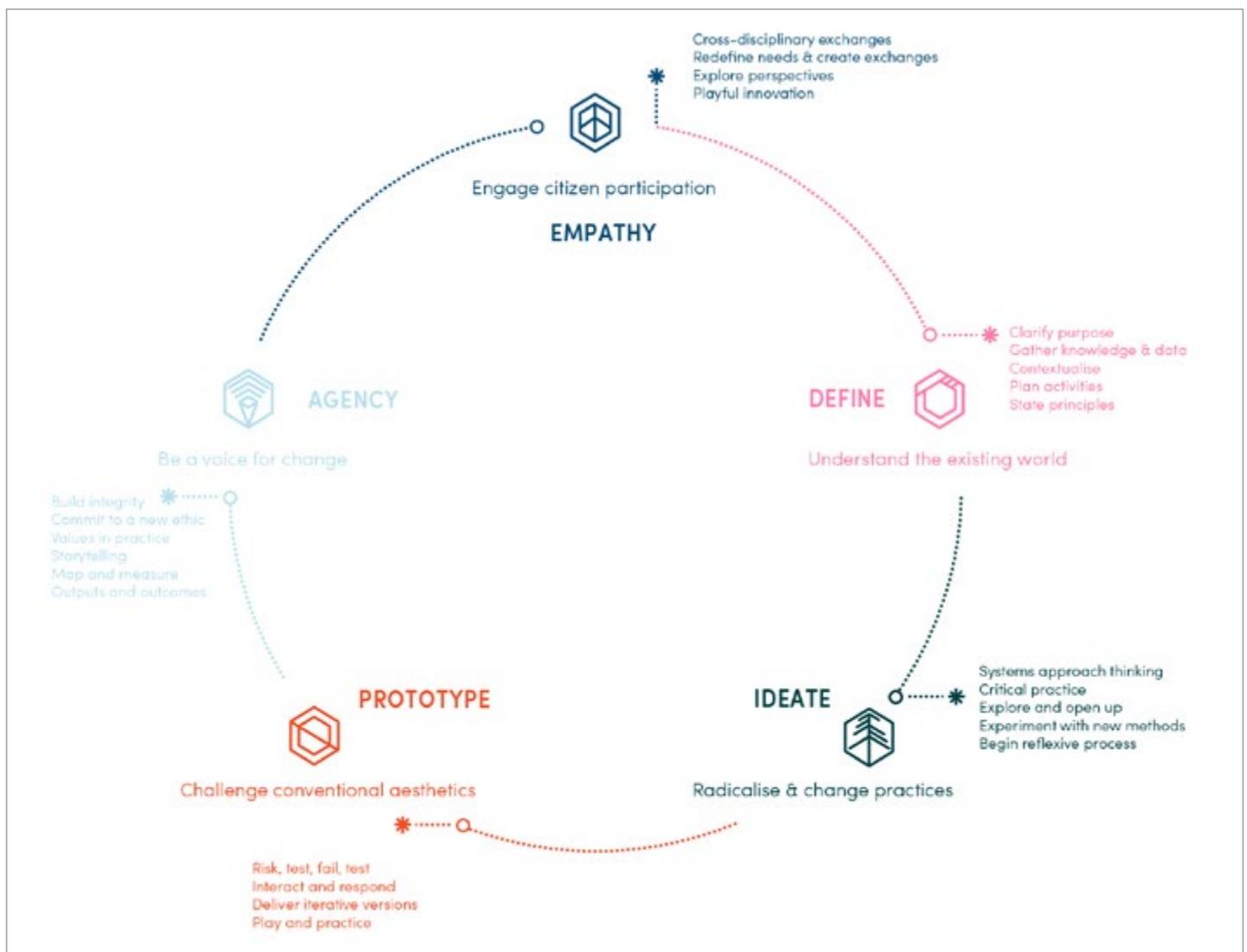
Practices of mutual learning, to create and extend knowledge with a range of collaborators beyond the academy, has been vital to the Centre's practices since its conception. Through developing understanding and collaborative co-learning partnerships between academia and fashion sector practitioners, a greater exploration of possibilities and pressures is undertaken. Such partnerships foreground the importance of careful consideration, a non-judgmental approach and the development of sustainability mindsets, alongside a criticality in approach, all with reference to a transformation framework to check that interventions are made in places that can leverage change in deep and lasting ways.

To realise the systemic change invoked by placing equity and ecology at the core of the fashion system involves designing interventions at multiple locations in the fashion system. Alongside the development of new knowledge through research and knowledge exchange, fashion design education offers a third and crucial space for the development and application of personal and professional skills, capabilities and values-in-practice. Through the development of sustainability pedagogies, holistic assessment criteria and course content that situates design in an equity and ecological context, tutors and students are able to engage in self-reflexive and co-reflexive cycles of seeing, knowing, and doing (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2011). Now with well over a decade of teaching and learning with tutors and students, we take a broad view, teaching across all levels and departments, as well as a deep dive with MA Fashion Futures students at London College of Fashion, who critically engage in fashion design for sustainability throughout their studies through a cycle of action and reflection relating to the context of fashion in a climate emergency and increasing social divides. This is giving rise to new typologies of fashion designing and evidence of an expansion of what it means to be a designer (Stevenson, 2011). Study includes questioning the errors of modernity perpetuated through the techno-optimistic, eco-efficiency approach (Walker, 2017). Learners are encouraged to undertake a profound reappraisal of human values in today's society (Walker and Giard, 2013) which opens up, rather than constricts, designers' capacity to conceive new ideas and to realise those ideas in tangible forms.

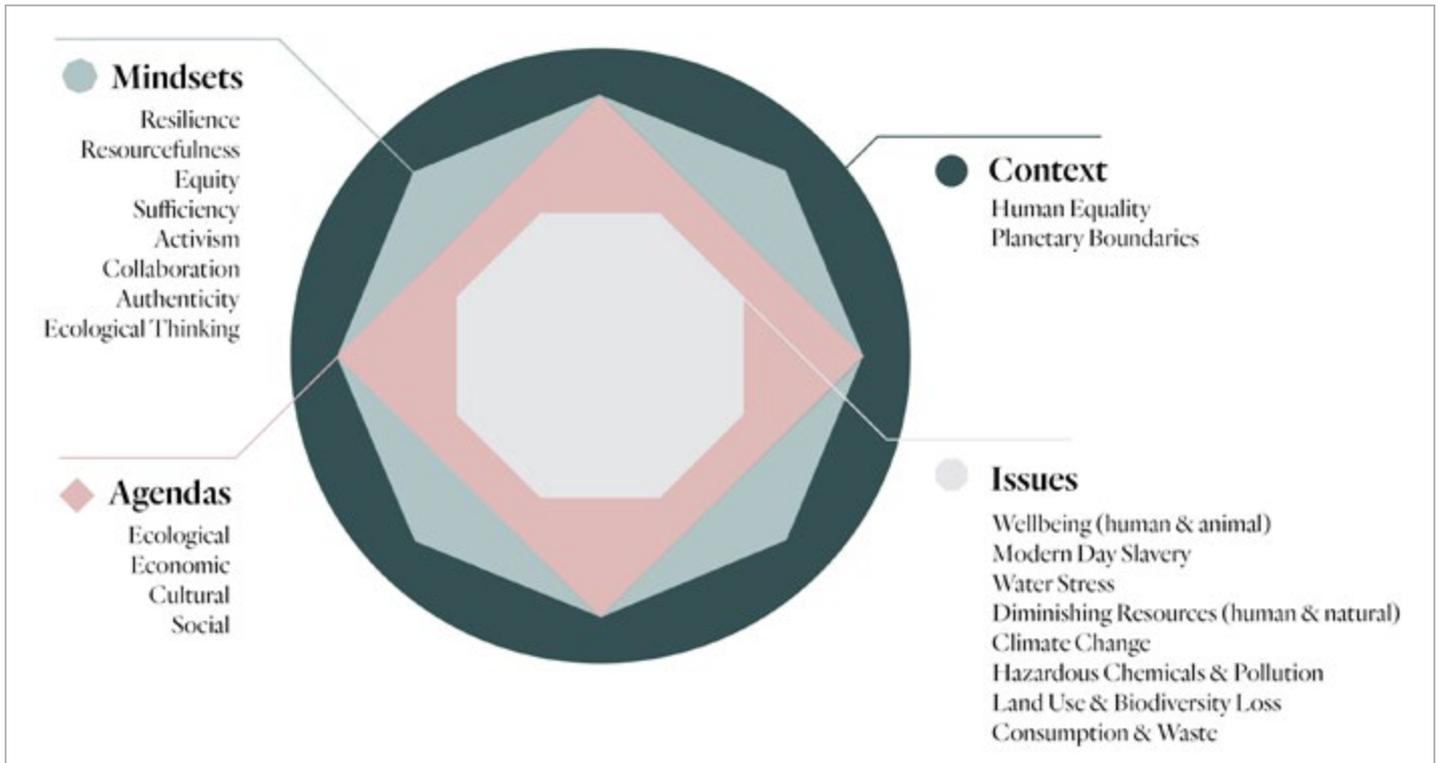
Methodological Frameworks Underpinning Our Work

Education that takes a values-led and knowledge-based approach to design (Williams, 2016), ensures that intuition and creative imagining is cross-referenced with credible data sources relating to impacts of decision-making. It is with this in view that our methodological framework was developed as a guiding process for research and other projects (figures 1 and 2). This process follows a traditional model of divergence and convergence, familiar to many designers, but with additional considerations and reference points for each design stage.

Figure 1. Fashion Design for Sustainability design cycle, source: Williams, 2010.



This design methodology is overlaid onto the Centre's framework for Fashion Design for Sustainability that offers context, agendas, issues, and mindsets of design. This has been developed, tested and continues to be reviewed through application in research, curriculum and knowledge exchange projects. By considering fashion as residing within a world view of human equity and an honouring of planetary boundaries, critical consideration is then given to four cross-cutting design agendas and mindsets of sustainability to resolve many current problems rather than putting them centre-stage. This inverts the role of designers as problem solvers to them becoming possibility makers.



↑ Fashion Design for Sustainability framework, source: Williams, 2019.

A Reflection Back Looking Forward

To mark its tenth anniversary, a “CSF is Ten” (2018) two-day event was held and centre members were asked to consider a series of questions about the centre’s work, processes and practices. The responses, alongside a review of projects to date, were collated and synthesized into 10 statements of intent (below). This declaration is aligned to our guiding principles and code of practice that holds us to account, informs our decision-making processes and how we consider the impacts of our work.

Declaration

- We recognise our ecological context
- We respect the rights of all living beings (things to live well)
- We engage in design as a means to improve existing situations
- We practice critical, reflective thinking
- We participate in fashion’s relational elements
- We explore fashion’s political, cultural, ecological, economic and social dimensions
- We believe that education plays a vital role in our ability to live well together
- We undertake rigorous processes in order to create credible knowledge
- We embrace dissensus on our path to transformation of ourselves and of fashion
- We speak truth to power

We continue to reflect on what has gone well and not so well in our practices and projects, with reference to plans, identified themes and contribution to wider communities within and beyond UAL, academia and the fashion sector. The amplification of the concerns, considerations and potential for change in the socio-ecological crisis of climate and equity in 2020 brings into sharp focus the imperative for us to step up, and change. The three tactics for change that we set out in 2008 are now more critical for us to realise than ever:

Building a transformed fashion system through questioning the values, rules and goals of the fashion sector and to recognise the power of design to transform cultures as well as materials.

Fostering human wellbeing through a critique of racist and other destructive cultures, a championing of wellbeing practices and the creation of a visionary education system.

Working within nature's limits through a valuing of all of fashion's elements and gaining an understanding of the interdependencies involved through interdisciplinary learning.

This requires active negation of destructive practices and the exaltation of regenerative ones, as two-fold actions (Camus, 1956). It also calls for care and kindness at the core of our practice. This is very much in line with placing empathy at the heart of our representation of the Fashion Design for Sustainability design cycle reproduced above.



References

- Bateson, G. (1972). Steps to an Ecology of Mind. *Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*. University of Chicago Press, 496 – 502.
- Black, S. (2012). *The Sustainable Fashion Handbook*. Thames & Hudson. Camus, A. (1956) *The Rebel*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Capra, F., & Luisi, P.L. (2014). *The Systems View of Life: A Unifying Vision*. Cambridge University Press.
- Escobar, A. (2018). *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Duke University Press, 3 – 4.
- Escrigas, C. (2016). A Higher Calling for Higher Education. *Great Transition Initiative*, 1. <http://www.greattransition.org/publication/a-higher-calling-for-higher-education>
- Entwhistle, J. (2001). The Dressed Body. In J. Entwhistle and E. Wilson, (Eds.) *Body Dressing*. Berg Publishers, 33 – 58.
- Fletcher, K. (2008). *Sustainable Fashion and Textiles: Design Journeys*. Earthscan.
- Fletcher, K., & Tham, M. (2019). *Earth Logic: Fashion Action Research Plan*. JJ Charitable Trust.
- Fletcher, K., & Tham, M. (Eds.) (2015). *Routledge Handbook of Sustainability and Fashion*. Routledge.
- Giaccardi, E. (2005). Metadesign as an emergent design culture. *Leonardo*, 38(4), 342 – 349.
- Gwilt, A., Payne, A., & Ruthschilling, E. (2019). *Global Perspectives on Sustainable Fashion*. Bloomsbury.
- Guattari, F. (2000). *The Three Ecologies* (Pindar, I. & Sutton, P., Trans.). The Athlone Press, 27.
- Ingold, T. (2011). Materials against materiality. *Being alive: essays on movement, knowledge and description*. Routledge, 19 – 32.
- Jonas, W., Zerwas, S., & von Anshelm, K. (Eds.) (2016). *Transformation Design. BIRD (Board of International Research in Design)*. Berghauer Basel.
- Manzini, E. (2015). *Design, When Everybody Designs. An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation*. MIT Press.
- Mazzarella, F., Storey, H., & Williams, D. (2019). Counter-narratives Towards Sustainability in Fashion – Scoping an Academic Discourse on Fashion Activism Through a Case Study on the Centre for Sustainable Fashion. *The Design Journal*, 22(sup1), 821 – 833.
- Nowakowski, L., & Rees, B. (2012). Pathways for Sustainable Education: from hierarchy to holarchy. *Interconnections Evolutionary Education* (8). Anglia Ruskin University, 47 – 57.
- Sterling, S. (2001). Sustainable Education, Re-visioning Learning and Change. *Schumacher Briefings* (6), 35.
- St. Pierre, L. (2019). A Shift of Attention. In K. Fletcher, L. St. Pierre and M. Tham, (Eds.) *Design and Nature: A Partnership*. Routledge, 20 – 26.

- Stevenson, N. (2011). *Tools for teaching and learning in fashion that contribute to all our collective futures*. <https://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/id/eprint/3246/7/networks-2013-final-report-stevenson-et-al.pdf>
- Storey, H (2019). Za'atari Action, Centre for Sustainable Fashion. <https://sustainable-fashion.com/projects/zaatari-action/>
- Thich Nhat Hanh (2013). The Bells of Mindfulness. In L Vaughan-Lee (Eds.) *Spiritual Ecology: The Cry of the Earth*, Golden Sufi Centre, 25 – 31.
- United Nations Economic and Social Council. (2011). *Learning for the future: Competences in education for sustainable development*. https://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/env/esd/6thMeetSC/Learning%20for%20the%20Future_%20Competences%20for%20Educators%20in%20ESD/ECE_CEP_AC13_2011_6%20COMPETENCES%20EN.pdf
- Van de Ryn, S., & Cowan, S. (2007). *Ecological Design, Tenth Anniversary Edition*. Island Press.
- Walker, S. (2011). *The spirit of design: objects, environment and meaning*. Earthscan.
- Walker, S. (2013). Imagination's promise: Practice-based design research for sustainability. In Walker, S., & Giard, J. (Eds.) *The handbook of design for sustainability*. Bloomsbury Academic, 446 – 488.
- Walker, S. (2017). *Design for life: Creating meaning in a distracted world*. Routledge.
- Wood, J. (2007). *Design for micro-utopias: making the unthinkable possible*. Gower.
- Williams, D. (2018). Fashion Design as a Means to Recognize and Build Communities-in-Place. *She Ji. The Journal of Design, Economics, and Innovation*, 4(1), 75 – 90.
- Williams, D., & Stevenson, N. (2008). Centre for Sustainable Fashion. *Volume 3.0*, 47 – 49.
- Williams, D., & Fitzpatrick, A. (2018). *Ten years of Centre for Sustainable Fashion*. London College of Fashion.
- Williams, D. (2016). Transition to transformation in fashion education for sustainability. In W. Leal Filho and L. Brandli, L. (Eds.) *Engaging stakeholders in education for sustainable development at university level*. Springer, 217 – 232.
- Williams, D., & Toth-Fejel, K. (2016). The will and skill of fashion design for sustainability. In W. Leal Filho, U.M. Azeiteiro, F. Alves, and P. Molthan-Hill (Eds.) *Handbook of theory and practice of sustainable development in higher education* 4(1), 79–95. doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-47877-7

The Social Design Institute champions social and sustainable design at University of the Arts London. Its mission is to use research insights to inform how designers and organisations do designing, and how researchers understand design, to bring about positive and equitable social and environmental changes. The Institute achieves its mission through original research, translating research through knowledge exchange and informing teaching and learning.