

University of the Arts London Research and Development Grow a Garment

About the project

Summary

London College of Fashion (LCF) partnered with Cordwainers Community Garden (whose members use LCF land to grow food crops) and the artist Zoe Burt to grow and manufacture an item of clothing entirely within London. The project was conceived as a way to highlight the environmental and labour costs of growing fibre, inspire people to connect creatively with their surroundings and demonstrate the power of collaboration. *Grow a Garment* brought together over 500 people including LCF students and staff, primary school children, community groups, growers and craftspeople to sow, grow, harvest, dry, ripple, ret, break, scutch, heckle, spin and knit flax into a linen garment.

Project partners

Cordwainers Community Garden and Zoe Burt from Seeds of Fashion

The results

The problem

We wanted to create a practice-led, materials-focused, community engagement research project to encourage sustainable procurement and design practices. We decided to create a garment within London as a means of connecting the local community, fostering a connection with the growers, spinners and knitters who produce our clothes and placing a greater value on fabrics and green spaces.

The approach

In addition to creating a community grown garment within the M25, we also wished to investigate how this type of participatory art project could affect how environmental issues are perceived and what future sustainable actions are taken, both by the project participants and viewers of the final garment. As such, research and development fell into 2 overlapping categories: skills/discipline based, and education for sustainability.

Our goals

LCF is committed to integrating sustainable and ethical practice into all aspects of college life. This project demonstrates this approach by encouraging participants to consider community collaboration, sustainability, and their behaviours through a student-centred, active and engaging approach to teaching and learning.

ual: university
of the arts
london

Profile

- LCF is one of 6 colleges which comprise UAL
- LCF has over 500 staff & 5,500 students
- UAL has over 2,000 staff and 19,000 students
- LCF is located over 6 urban London sites.

Obstacles and solutions

- Although linen production was once common in the UK, almost all of that knowledge has been lost.	- Research was carried out, consisting of a literature review and practical experimentation to build knowledge.
- Range of participants with a variety of abilities.	- The finished garment was designed to celebrate the varieties of colour, thicknesses and qualities of the yarn, rather than hide the differences.
- Danger of disconnect between theory/research and practice in workshops and future behaviours.	- Workshops were planned to encourage participation, critical and futures thinking. Focus groups following the workshops questioned future behaviours.

Performance and results

Grow a Garment is an original research and development project combining community education, collaborative learning, participatory practice and the revival of historical craft skills. The project demonstrates global thinking at a local level, embracing our immediate surroundings and local community members. This type of project is relevant to other institutions and sectors and we have been keen to share findings from the project.

Both the approach (embedding sustainable pedagogy) and process (growing and processing flax) were important in realising our aims of demonstrating the power of collaboration, highlighting the environmental costs of fibre processing, and encouraging more sustainable actions as a result of participation in the project.

The London-grown garment is a visible and tangible outcome of the project, featured in exhibitions and articles, and therefore an aid to disseminating the findings from the project. However, as Kate Poland wrote in the FT Magazine (May 2015): 'Really, it wasn't about the... [garment] but the community that emerged to create it – the invisible threads that bind us together.'

The future

Lessons learned

Through observation and questioning of students during the LCF workshops, we did find that participants learnt from and influenced each other, highlighting the importance of collaborative learning. We found that participation in activity created a lively and varied discussion, resulting in greater understanding, knowledge sharing and new thinking, confirming recommendations from theory made about advantages of participatory and praxis-orientated learning for sustainable pedagogies. During a focus group following the flax processing workshops, some students reported changes in behaviour to incorporate more sustainable ways of working.

Sharing your project

From the start, *Grow a Garment* was designed to share the research and development from the project. Many people collaborated to learn how to grow and process flax and can now share these skills in their communities.

The finished garment was displayed at a Royal Horticultural Society Secret Sunday event and at the London Linen Exhibition. Articles about the project were published in the FT Magazine and Permaculture Magazine.

LCF is now working with a PhD student to further disseminate how participating in this type of collaborative project can influence the perception of environmental issues and future sustainable actions.

What has it meant to your institution to be a Green Gown Award finalist?

To win a Green Gown award would be an outstanding achievement for London College of Fashion, UAL. As a University we are working hard to embed principles of sustainability into everything we do. When our work is recognised in this way it really helps to galvanise staff and students and underlines that the work we are doing must continue and that we're heading in the right direction.

Further information

Contacts: Rachel Clowes: r.clowes@fashion.arts.ac.uk, Rosie Willatt: r.willatt@fashion.arts.ac.uk

Better Lives is a term we use here at LCF to describe the work we do that uses fashion, as a discipline, to drive change, build a sustainable future and improve the way we live: www.arts.ac.uk/fashion/about/better-lives/