

FREECYCLING IZMIR: AN ETHICAL OUTLOOK FOR FUTURE FASHION DESIGNERS*

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ABSTRACT

Within the context of social responsibility and environmental awareness in design, a group of students were assigned the task of designing and producing a recycled bag to highlight, either a specific social problem, or environmental cause prevalent in the city of Izmir, Turkey. To realise their designs, students were asked to adopt the idea of "Freeganism" whereby they may only reclaim and utilise discarded materials such as old clothes, discarded packaging and industrial waste for the production of their designs. This paper documents the process of this project from concept development, to material sourcing, design development and product realisation. It analyses the design outcomes and documents how students used a wide variety of alternative materials which, when assembled using basic textile production techniques, created a collection of usable recycled ethical handbags. This paper explores the significance of such conceptual projects in relation to raising the student conscience with regards to social and environmental problems in contemporary society. It aims to determine the necessity of reinforcing the importance of an ethical stance in relation to a future career within the fashion and textiles sectors for the next generation of fashion and textile designers. Similarly, can and should conceptual projects be used as a way of communicating and raising awareness of such critical issues amongst the wider general public.

Keywords: Fashion, Textiles, Recycle, Ethical Design.

GERİDÖNÜŞÜM İZMİR: GELECEĞİN MODA TASARIMCILARI İÇİN ETİK BİR BAKIŞ AÇISI

ÖZET

Tasarımda sosyal sorumluluk ve çevre bilinci bağlamında, İzmir'de bir grup öğrenci özel bir sosyal problem ya da çevresel nedenle, geri dönüşüm bir çantayı vurgulamak, tasarlamak ve üretmek için görevlendirildiler. Freeganizm fikri benimsetilmek istenilen öğrenciler, tasarımlarını gerçekleştirmek için, tasarımlarının üretiminde yalnızca gerikazanım ve eski giysiler, bozulmuş ambalajlar, enstrüstriyel atık gibi atılan malzemelerden yararlandılar. Bu çalışma, projenin üretim sürecinde tema gelişimden, malzeme kaynağına, tasarım geliştirmeyi ve ürün gerçekleştirmeyi belgelemektedir. Makale, öğrencilerin çok çeşitli alternatif malzemeleri nasıl kullandığını, basit tekstil üretim teknikleri kullanarak toplanan, tasarlanan kullanılabilir geridönüşüm etik el çantalar koleksiyonunun tasarım çıktılarını ve belgelerini analiz eder. Bu çalışma, çağdaş toplumda sosyal ve çevre problemlerinde öğrencilerin bilinçlerinin artışı hakkında kavramsal projelerin önemini açıklar. Çalışma moda ve tekstil tasarımı sektöründe genç nesil moda ve tekstil tasarımcıları için bir gelecek kariyeri hakkında önemli bir etik tutumun desteklenmesi gerekliliğini belirlemeyi hedefler. Benzer şekilde, böylesi sonuçları olan kavramsal projeler, geniş halk kitlelerinin bilincinin artırılmasında ve iletişimde bir yol olarak kullanılabilir ve kullanılması gerekir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Moda, Tekstiller, Geridönüşüm, Etik Tasarım.

Introduction: In recent years, issues related to ethics, environment and sustainability have become increasingly prominent in all walks of life. As the general public has grown more knowledgeable of such issues, they have begun to develop a greater conscience, and this in turn has spawned a plethora of ideologies, movements, and initiatives whose aim is to address the problems facing both people and planet in they own unique ways. This more ethical standpoint is now a fundamental constituent of contemporary living and impacts on all areas of our life. From a design perspective an awareness of these issues is critical and is quickly becoming a fundamental consideration in all aspects of the design process, from the initial conception, through all stages of production to the point of sale.

Freeganism: As societies grow more affluent they increasingly discard more amounts of waste, this modern phenomenon has initiated a variety of reactionary movements. One such movement is freeganism which refers to the practice of a person who rejects consumerism and seeks to help the environment by reducing waste, especially by retrieving and using discarded food and other goods (Oxford Dictionaries Online, 2012). There are differing archetypes of the freegan movement, some more radical, contentious, and political, others more practical and pragmatic, nonetheless the underlying philosophy stems from the desire for a more simple way of life removed from the culture of capitalism and overconsumption (Pentina, I. & Amos, C., 2011). Freegans explore different avenues in search of waste reclamation; they may forage through the garbage of retailers, residences, offices and other facilities. They are in search of waste products, primarily foodstuffs but also toiletries, household goods, and clothing, which nowadays the average citizen is more inclined to dispose off even if it is in perfectly good condition. Another associated movement is freecycling; this is the practice of swapping unwanted, new or used goods with like-minded people.

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Exchanging and reusing such products can minimize consumption and offer an alternative to sending unwanted items to landfill (The Freecycle Network Online, 2012).

The Fashion Industry: In recent years, there has been a drive toward more ethical and eco-friendly friendly practices within the fashion industry reflected in more highly publicised codes of conduct and corporate social responsibility initiatives. Various strategies have been adopted and implemented to address these new issues in all areas of the industry, from production to point of sale. The concept of dealing with environmental and social issues through fashion is creating a new outlet for an emerging global fashion business namely Eco Fashion. Many consumers are concerned with the moral and ethical issues often associated with all areas of the fashion industry. They are increasingly using their spending power to support brands which they believe to be more ethical and beneficial for both people and the planet. There are several parallels between this more ethical standpoint in the world of fashion and the philosophy of the freegan movement reflected in their desire for a reduction in waste and consumption.

Recycling in Turkey: The idea of recycling waste is gathering strength in Turkey where local municipalities and licensed firms are gradually introducing initiatives to collect and sort household and industrial waste. Nonetheless, recycling in Turkey does have some negative connotations particularly attached to the community of recycling workers found in most urban centres. “Everyday recycle workers walk around with their two-wheeled carts and look through garbage containers in order to find materials that can be recycled...It is the conditions of unemployment, internal migration, crime and many other social and economic problems of Turkey that force people to work as recycle workers in Turkey...In this sense, it is not a voluntary choice but a last resort” (Hurriyet Daily News, 2010). These workers provide a valuable service for the environment but are unfortunately marginalized by society due to their low socio-economic standing and as they contravene the modern norms and values associated with hygiene and cleanliness. There is a need for a more proactive and positive stance with regards to waste management and recycling in Turkey. One initiative which offers an optimistic outlook for recycling in Turkey is Çöp(M) adam. This is a design scheme focused on the idea of empowering women by providing an income through the production of a variety of stylish products including purses and bags constructed using recycled materials. Their website explains the significance of this ethical enterprise for both business and community, “When revamping its corporate social responsibility efforts, Unilever Turkey and Sabanci University strived to contribute to a community-based project that would allow the company and the university to address current social needs of Turkey ranging from waste reduction to women empowerment (Çöp(M) adam, 2012)”.

Aims: This student project aimed to assess how students worked when confronted with a different approach to project development unrelated to the conventional constraints of fashion design pedagogy and removed from the traditional dictates of the global fashion system. Could students use an ethical concept and ecological method of production to create a sophisticated design able to communicate an ethical message? Would confronting students with the principles of freeganism as a means of sourcing materials encourage creativity, or prove debilitating and restrictive? Could this approach to design education help disseminate the importance of an ethical practice in relation to a future career within the fashion sector.

The Fashion Design Pedagogy Perspective: Fashion design courses typically develop curricula from numerous perspectives, projects can be conceptual or from a more commercial standpoint. Briefs can be developed as a personalised project, for a specific product family, brand or sector, or as a competition brief. The final product is invariably a usable contemporary product design aimed a specific customer. In order to prepare students for a future career in the fashion industry, it is imperative to increase awareness of issues related to ethical and ecological design. As the industry adopts these new practices, likewise it is critical that a new approach in education is developed to remain up-to-date with these current issues. Many design courses are beginning to tailor their curricula to meet these new criteria while some institutions are now offering courses targeted specifically at this new field. One Austrian initiative which analysed its curricula in relation to ethical practice as part of a EU project identified several key areas that should be integrated into the existing teaching (Clean Clothes. Mein Design. Meine Verantwortung, 2012). By grouping the key issues they were able to formulate a range of courses to cover all critical areas in relation to ethical practice in order to provide a more comprehensive overview of this diverse subject area. These classes included Ecological production, Globalisation, Social Issues and workers rights, and International Initiatives.

Freecycling Izmir Methodology: This student project could not encompass all the diverse range of subjects associated with ethical fashion practice but instead aimed to quickly and intensely underline the issue of ethical design in a way that novice students could easily comprehend. It was introduced in the context of a core Fashion Design Studio class in the 2nd year. This class operates as a series of projects, each focused on an original brief. By focusing intensely on such a project it was hoped that students would be able to grasp the significance of ethical and ecological design in their future role as designers and the responsibility of the designer in society as a whole. Students worked in groups of 2 or 3 to develop their concept and source materials. Each group member then produced one bag each to reflect the concept.

a) **A Local Concept:** “Community-building recognizes the importance of cooperation and concern for one’s neighbour. At a fundamental level, members of a sustainable community understand the well-being of the individual and the larger community are interdependent” (Edwards, 2005: 23). As a starting point, students were asked to identify a social or environmental problem in the Izmir or Aegean region which they thought needed to be addressed. By focusing on local issues students were able to experience firsthand the reality of the problem. Also, the proximity of the specified problem offered the possibility of using local resources, perhaps directly associated to their cause, for the production of their final design.



Fig.1: Sourcingmaterials **Fig. 2:** Election Bag by Seval Yilmaz **Fig.3:** Art Student Bag by Fulden Neslihan Dikici
Fig. 4: Overdosed Bag by Mina Karakullukcu **Fig.5:** Taffic Bag by Fatma Nur Ozkara.

The idea of localism is something highlighted by Fletcher in her study of contemporary trends in sustainable fashion and textile design, “Local action helps develop human creativeness as we inventively respond to problems with the resources and expertise that is to hand. The result is a less homogeneous or cloned society, one which reflects the ideas, skills and resource flows of a local place and an aesthetic agenda- be it of buildings, food or clothes- that grows from the ground up and is not set by and for the convenience of big business” (Fletcher, K., 2008: 138). On selection of their individual concepts, each group carried out an extensive research before presenting their findings in a mood board.

b) Production through Freegan Finds: Utilizing the principles of freeganism to source materials such of old clothes, discarded packaging and industrial waste, students were asked to find materials suitable for the creation of their designs. Students were required to limit their financial needs as much as possible even with regards to finishing’s and accessories. No restrictions were placed on their material choice or on the method of assemblage.

The Results (a) Concept): Students explored a diverse range of social and environmental issues prevalent in Izmir and the Aegean. Some explored issues associated with the urban environment such as overcrowding, air and noise pollution, and traffic congestion. Others focused on pollution affecting the natural environment such as sea life, beaches and green areas. Although many of the causes identified by students remained relevant from a local to a national or global level, the ability to examine the impact of such problems on their local city and communities offered a more pertinent perspective. It was difficult to classify the specified problems as being either social or environmental as most problems crossed the threshold between these two parameters (Table 1).

Table 1: Ethical Concepts

Social impact or cause	<< Local Problem >>	Environmental impact
Low recycling rates	Over packaging	Landfill pollution
Littering	Sea & Beach Pollution	Biodiversity destroyed
	Election Pollution	Flags, Posters, Banners
Poor urban planning	Overcrowding	Noise and waste pollution
Drunkenness	City Nightlife	Littering in town centre
Dependency on cars	Traffic	Air and Noise pollution
Over- consumption	University Studio Pollution	Excess waste for landfill
Over-prescription	Medical Waste	Toxic products to landfill

b) Materials: A wide variety of manmade and natural materials were sourced. Household waste provided a wide selection of plastics, paper and cardboards. Found objects from the natural environment included sea shells and plants, and also polluting beach flotsam such as rubbish, wood, fishing nets and buoys. Industrial finds included materials recycled from car safety-belts and seat upholstery, medical waste, and election campaign paraphernalia. Polythene bags unsurprisingly were selected by several groups. Derived from a non-renewable resource and responsible for a considerable amount of litter pollution in the natural and urban environment, the plastic bag can be seen as a symbol of overconsumption in our throwaway society and provided an apt material choice. The plastic bag was a prominent pollutant in several of the causes identified by the groups and provided a durable and malleable material. Issues of cleanliness and hygiene proved problematic for some students even though nearly all of the found materials could be easily cleansed. Some student’s subtly acquired new raw materials as opposed to used thereby disregarding the rules on the brief. Some groups identified natural materials that could be utilised in the design which they juxtaposed against manmade materials often representative of the problem they were targeting. This comparison created a clear contrast between the natural environment and the manmade problem. Some materials had a close affinity with the concept which was being developed. One group analysed the considerable pollution created during the local government election campaign by the various political parties. They sourced a wealth of interesting materials including posters, bunting, placards and leaflets which would normally be discarded after the election. This Election Bag (Fig.1) highlights the problem of waste created during the election campaign while at the same time offering a practical solution. The main body is constructed using a knotted mesh of nylon cord and lined with the discarded flags. The handles are wrapped to offer support for the flexible

body and the base is reinforced with card and leaflets. The design for this bag developed in sync with the material choice and exploration, demonstrating the importance of material to the overall design.

c) Production: Due to the unconventional material selection ingenious new methods of construction were developed to manage the different textures and proportions being used. Tools were also rethought and designed to cope with the unusual material choices. Basic construction methods derived from textile production were adopted including knitting, stitching, crochet and weaving. One group investigated the pollution generated by the first year design students at Izmir University of Economics. In their art and design studio class these students are continually exposed to a large variety of material, and experiment with new techniques in each workshop. These studio classes and their students generate much waste material and clutter which is often swept into the university rubbish bins. Silver duct tape was the main bi-product after one particular workshop in basic design principles. On completing the class the participants left any remaining duct tape on the desks for the cleaners to dispose off but the fashion students identified this as an interesting material for the construction of a bag and quickly collected the remaining rolls. This group then experimented with various methods of assembling this highly adhesive tape before creating double layers which were subsequently woven into larger sections. This multifunctional shoulder bag (Fig.2) with integrated carry-tube for paper is entirely composed from the duct tape and its cardboard inner roll. It had been designed as a functional bag for the art & design students to transport paper and materials but also to raise awareness of the considerable waste material being generated by the students in the first place.

d) Awareness Through Design Activism: This project challenged students to develop an ethical concept into an ethical design product which could be used to highlight a specific cause. It is an engaging process which offers students more than just a simple design experience. As Kate Fletcher highlights the overall design experience became “a transformative act of change that furnishes us with skills, products relationships and experiences that allow us to become engaged with ourselves, each other and the material world” (Fletcher, K., 2008: 192). This type of creative practice challenges the normal conventions of fashion design which are more usually associated with commercial value and a conventional aesthetic. The engaged action of creating an ethical design that raises awareness of a contemporary issue in society offers the designer a chance to convey an important message through their work. All of the student designs offered a very clear message about the cause they had identified as their starting point for the project. The Overdosed Bag was developed to draw attention to medical waste produced by healthcare facilities and in our homes. Every year, households acquire vast amounts of prescription medicine including tablets, syrups, creams, and capsules, much of which remains unfinished and stockpiled in medicine cabinets. This bag was conceived to draw attention to this problem; it utilizes bandages, medical accessories, and embroidery to convey the message. Another design in the shape of a box clutch bag offers a poignant message about the increase in traffic pollution. Students utilised recycled components from motor vehicles to underline the issues related to traffic pollution such as the effects on our health and environment. Rubber, reclaimed upholstery elements, metal foil, and transparent plastic were assembled in a design inspired by the form of a steering wheel. In conjunction with the different messages that each product was intending to communicate, the method of production as a reaction to the problem also provides its own unique form of design activism. By adopting the principles of freeganism the participating students actively played a minute part in waste reduction due to their decision to re-use existing materials. The ingenuity of the final design outcomes also has the possibility to impact of the conscience of others to perhaps rethink their position in relation to the identified problem, waste and recycling. As Petina and Amos pointed out in their analysis of the freegan phenomenon, mainstream perception often attributes negative stereotypes to the more radical freegan movement as they strive to highlight the various causes dear to their movement (Petina, I. & Amos, C., 2011). This type of project offers a more positive perspective for activism through the use of the freegan ideology.

Conclusion: Through this project I have attempted to develop an alternative approach to fashion pedagogy which draws on ideas previously discussed by Papanek, “Design, when nourished by a deep spiritual concern for planet, environment, and people, results in a moral and ethical viewpoint. Starting from this point of departure will provide the new forms and expressions - the new aesthetic – we are desperately trying to find” (Papanek 2003: 235). The student groups identified a variety of critical social and environmental problems prevalent in their local communities. By carefully researching and analysing these different issues they were able to experience firsthand the cause and effect of the various problems. This ability to gather primary research proved indispensable to the overall success of the project, and especially with regards to sourcing the materials which for most groups became such a critical component in the overall design. Most groups sourced materials in some way related to the cause they were intending to highlight thereby creating a direct correlation between the ethical concepts between communicated and the real problem as it exists in society. Working to the principles of freeganism may have seemed restrictive at first but instead it challenged the students to develop creative ways in which to use the materials related to their individual concepts. These parameters focused the students to develop processes and techniques to transform their limited resources into something that fulfilled the requirement of the brief, as opposed to buying something ready-made. It encouraged resourcefulness, ingenuity and creativity throughout the design process, and forced students to devise interesting solutions for fabric creation from the unconventional and limited resources at their disposal. By appropriating the materials using the freegan ideology and outside their normal supply chain for fabric, it was possible to maintain an ethical stance in the face of the concepts that were being explored. By realising a fully functioning professional product in found materials students were able to see the capabilities of recycling as a real approach for ethical design practice. Something worthless became something with potential which when developed through the design process became something of value, usable as a design product but also successful in communicating a specific societal problem to the viewer. Perhaps in future, how the students consider concept development and material choice need not always be dictated by the trends and the market.

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