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RE-FASHIONING LEATHER

A STUDY TO BRING TO THE FORE A
NEW AWARENESS OF HOW A SPECIFIC
MATERIAL (LEATHER) DOES NOT HAVE TO
BE FINITE AS NATURE

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Abstract

This research, interrogates and offers insight into the potentiality of leather, emphasizing that it is time to re-align thinking, provoke introspection and challenge existing norms. The aim is to demonstrate the value in forming a prosperity fashion philosophy centered on a specific by-product (leather), which offers a more ethical and sustainable viewpoint. Examining and promoting creative circular initiatives integral to a specific sub-group and creating an open collaborative and cumulative knowledge transfer, it is hoped that these shared ideas and practices gain strength, to create a blueprint for a prosperity fashion philosophy. To provide an actualized possibility for re-alignments and new approaches for leather production, consumption, and value as a starting point for cultural discussion. Challenging the fast fashion industry by presenting a slow, flexible future where leather fashion become investments because of their flexibility, and durability. Urging us to collectively forge new systems that disrupt and replace the current destructive cycle. Decreasing the negative impact of fashion on the environment, and people, through a focus on the ultimate circular material.

Keywords: *Leather, Nurture, Restore, Sustainable, Philosophy*

INTRODUCTION

Re-framing, leather as an ethical by-product, aims to educate a new generation to conceive a new belief system and material awareness of leather's durability, flexibility and value. The research serves to examine and highlight specific leather handcraft techniques and processes which have the potential to be disseminated at wearer/ consumer-level and shape new social and cultural models oriented towards a prosperity fashion system.

Prosperity encompasses so much more than money; it is when all people have the opportunity and freedom to thrive. Prosperity is underpinned by an inclusive society, with a strong social contract that protects the fundamental liberties and security

of every individual¹. If the notion of prosperity is considered from a fashion perspective, and the future of fashion is regarded ethically through its relationship with economy, environment and society, new approaches and design strategies can be developed which encompass this ethos. This study places education, communication, manufacturing processes, and sustainability first and foremost, offering a social model which improves individual elements – using natural and recycled material together with alternative slow methodologies, in sharp contrast to fashion brands current need for constant and exponential economic

¹ Definition. Retrieved from: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/prosperity> [Accessed 20/09/2024]

growth. As a designer and educator, we bear a responsibility to create work that serves as a catalyst for change. I believe, our creations and research should provoke introspection and challenge existing norms, urging us to collectively forge new systems that disrupt, and ultimately replace the destructive cycle of fast fashion.

This analysis contributes to and enriches a relevant debate on the role of activism in fashion, just as Fletcher (2014), champions a holistic consideration of a garment's lifecycle, promoting the concept of a circular fashion economy (Fletcher, 2014), this study looks to leather handcraft production techniques, specifically, restoration and customization, and investigates whether dissemination of knowledge and skills at wearer/ consumer-level could support a fresh belief system - quiet activism against disposable fast fashion. Challenging current industry practices to present a slow, flexible approach, where the user has an elevated sense of ownership, belongings are nurtured, and in-turn become valuable investments. If we as wearers/ consumers, begin to treat leather as an active source of design information and invite the making of tacit knowledge through direct material handling, we can then establish an intrinsic relationship between material, maker, and user (Sampson, 2020). This is one which allows a connectedness to emerge, driving new interpretations of materiality, preservation, and sustainability. Looking to other creative communities for examples of best practice is key to providing tangible models and methodologies to create potential for new ways of seeing leather garments within our wardrobes.

PERSPECTIVES ON LEATHER

Leather, man's earliest garment, has come to occupy a unique role in the history of fashion. The most extreme images are associated with leather, from the animal hides that caveman wrapped themselves in, to haute couture dresses as finely cut as gemstones. Whether sophisticated or crudely fashioned, fragile as gossamer, or tough and synonymous with power, leather shows up in every kind of wardrobe, in every kind of climate. In Greenland, clothing from the fifth century BCE has been recovered in a state of perfect preservation (Quilleriet, 2004). Proving the durability of leather as practically indestructible. Clothes made from leather and suede allow ventilation, absorption, and evaporation of moisture. In other

words, it breathes. The millions of tiny air spaces among the fibers provide insulation and ventilation for warmth in the winter and comfort in the summer (Allyne, 2016). An organic material which continues to move and change with use, exposure to the elements and age, in fact, tend to enhance it.

Every piece of leather is unique, and a well-designed leather product will make the inherent strength, grain and beauty of its raw material more apparent. No two leathers are alike, every hide has its own distinct features, depending on any number of factors - not only breed, but also age, gender, diet, and the way in which an animal has been reared. Leather is easily cleaned, comfortable to wear, and straightforward to work with, since it drapes well and is sewn like fabric (Harris & Veldmeijer, 2014). Leather items can be considered old friends, and if cared for, products last a life-time - a standard to aspire to. Leather affects us indelibly with its singular texture and feel. A living mould, sculpted by the body's habits which leave their mark in the memory of its folds and scratches. In this total fusion of body and clothing, leather should stand out in fashion. This chameleon-like material, half protection, and half ornamentation, acts as an identity-revealing second skin that defies the seasons and stays with its owner for years, until it is handed down to the next generation (Quilleriet, 2004). Leather takes on experiences, embodies memories and acts as a witness to every age and era. The true beauty of leather's durability is that it can be repaired, restored, altered, enjoyed for a lifetime, and passed down through generations. This makes it the perfect material to develop circular ways of thinking. Leather craft is the ultimate upcycling activity, turning industry's trash into treasure.

LEATHER THE MOST CIRCULAR MATERIAL

Circular design embodies an ethos of prosperity through sustainability, aiming to minimize waste and extend product life cycles (Circular Design Institute, 2024). According to the Circular Design Institute (2024), this means reimagining the traditional linear production models to create systems where resources are continually reused, recycled, or regenerated. This approach within fashion could affect real change and recenter our view of fashion. In doing so, fashion can become agents of social and environmental change, promoting ethical morality in a world shaped by

colonial legacies and capitalist exploitation (Barber, 2022).

Buying cheap items has meant not worrying if it is only worn once, or if it is not good quality, simply shop again. The environment can no longer sustain this cycle or mindset; the way we see our pre-loved fashion items must be altered to lose the ethos of the owner 'falling out of favour'. In this context leather, the most durable flexible and luxurious material, should be foremost. Restoration and customization are natural ambassadors to leather, and this study explores these processes to provide a flexibility which could garner a fresh fashion philosophy and attitude. Supporting the belief that looking to artisan crafts and heritage is vital for conservation, change, and for future concepts to emerge.

Fletcher (2014) considers that by focusing on creating circular systems of design the whole life cycle of a garment can be considered, which means that the ethical impact of garment manufacturing and the sustainability of a garment is considered from the very beginning of creation (Fletcher, 2014). The argument for a systemic shift is also central to Thomas's argument (2019) and links with Fletcher and Grose's (2012) call for a change to our approaches in design. Recognizing the claim that designers have a responsibility to create change within their work, to drive a catalyst for necessary change, this research harnesses this ethos by interrogating the relationship between material (leather), techniques, and processes (restoration and customization) in practice, and developing opportunities to breathe new life into existing leather fashion, to develop a circular system that disseminates fresh perspective, understanding and skills.

THE VALUE OF PRE-LOVED

Existing fashion, i.e. fashion we already own, pre-loved and/ or second-hand is key to this study, and altering perspective, heightening nurture and garnering desire to preserve pre-loved items is integral to the development of prosperity fashion, through ethical thinking and sustainable ways of seeing our wardrobes. Fashion produces a multi-sensory experience, which both mediate and create our experience of the world. This tactile experience of our garments binds us to them. As we use fashion items, they become records of our experiences, archives of the experience of wearing. Worn things are the outcome of our being in the

world; they are a mediating layer at the confluence of environment and bodily self. As, such our used garments hold a particular place in our networks of things, at once intimate and public, visible and on display (Sampson, 2020).

Extended tactile engagement with a garment creates imprints, both on the body and the garment itself. As established, leather already has imprints, scars and experience of the animal which initially 'wore' it. Each imprint is a record of our body-selves or the garment at a particular time and place. As consumers and wearers of clothes, we implicitly understand that people and the garments they wear are entangled, and that a garment holds meaning, and memory. This is particularly pertinent when the garment is made of leather, due to its durability, flexibility, and ability to mould itself to the wearer, forging the perfect fit. The garment is akin to a second skin: a two-sided surface, touching the body and the world. The garment is, as a substitute or second skin, the site on which multiple tactile encounters occur (Winnicott, 1971). We cannot help but engage with material culture in the context of meanings and memory that we and others have ascribed to the garments we wear (Sampson 2020). In wearing a leather garment, the boundaries between the self and the garment, blur, and we – materially and psychically – are incorporated into it. Therefore, our leather attire is intrinsic to 'ourselves' and as such, should be cherished, celebrated, nurtured and preserved.

RESTORATION & CUSTOMIZATION

By developing slow fashion practices rooted in anticapitalism and circular design aimed at pre-loved garments, this research vision is representative of an idea of prosperity fashion which could lead to a shared and widespread well-being. The philosophy advocates for a transformative shift, challenging existing power structures within consumer thinking, behaviors and the fast fashion industry. The connection we have with our clothes is described by Chapman (2015) as emotional durability, a bond between wearer/ consumer and their material things, with meaning at the center. He examines consumers' experiences within object relationships and the role of possessions in our lives. Objects relate to people and place, and witness a continuous, systematic narrative of events. They become a personal record of lived experiences and gather their own

history. They become priceless and irreplaceable, elevating them beyond monetary boundaries, disrupting the conventional hierarchy of our value systems (Chapman, 2015). This research highlights emotional durability, celebrates material durability, and provides a blueprint of knowledge and skills at wearer/ consumer-level which could improve the life cycle of leather fashion and inspire a more sustainable ethos of nurture and preserve.

In *The Craftsman* (2008), Sennett explores the 'intimate connection between hand and head' (Cooper, 2008, p. 9) examining the physical attributes of craft, such as movement and touch as well as the rhythm of concentration in a repeated task. The book seeks to better understand the making of things, that through the experience and action of craft, knowledge is gained in our hands. The craft of restoration and customization of clothes can also be considered in the context of Marx's theory of the value of labor. That the value of things should be calculated in terms of the amount of labor in production rather than its market value. Marx observes that greater value is attributed to the final product when the maker has a sense of ownership and control over the process of production (Trainer, 2017).

The craft of restoration, and customization gives fashion a new lease of life, and reason to be worn, providing flexibility to the item. These processes provide style elevation, a new sense of ownership and longevity to pre-loved fashion items, improving their life cycle. The development of a deep relationship through craft and the ability to change a garment by restoration and customization are ways in which clothes can evolve. Repeated tasks are hailed as a mindful experience, one of slowing down and reflection. Cooper (2008) asks 'what the process of making ... reveals to us about ourselves' (Cooper, 2008, p. 8) and Marx also identifies the value of making to our emotional well-being (Trainer, 2017). Through these processes, restored and/ or customized garments become so much more than the functional objects they were made to be. Instead, they become physical representations of individual ideas, theories, dreams, and accomplishments; they live on as timestamps of innovation and human achievement, elevating the object. This supports the notion of nurturing difference, as innovation is what makes things unique.

Considering that true innovation can percolate design across society, necessitates the

need to alter what people find valuable, and redefines what value looks like, within a fashion context. A person's emotional response to an object is unique, articulating a complex combination of life experiences and cultural surroundings. This makes objects critical devices in forming identity and navigating place in society, the relationship is intrinsic to who we are. Chapman (2015) theorizes that by appreciating the role of meaning, not only do consumer-product relationships endure, they 'flourish within long-lasting empathetic partnerships' (Chapman, 2015, p. 22). This research harnesses this thinking by developing plural networks where basic skills and processes of restoration and customization are disseminated at wearer/ consumer-level. With the end aim of progressing greener, adaptable, durable attire; through sustaining and nurturing pre-loved leather fashion, and developing a more ethical, and flexible connection towards existing garments.

THE POWER OF PLURAL NETWORKS

Much can be taken from the practice of sharing particularly within the new fashion landscape to nurture, wear vintage, and restore our garments, rather than throw them away and contribute to landfill. According to Hoette, R. & Stevenson, C. in their book, *Modus* (2000), Modus networks demonstrate that the need to find other ways of understanding and operating within fashion is urgent and shared. Experimental networks and spaces, which interrogate and expose tensions between theory and practice, between disciplines and individuals, are a necessary divergence within fashion. Fashion is in many ways a process rather than a thing: an activity whose outputs and products are frequently impermanent and transitory (Hoette, & Stevenson, 2000). This research seeks to evidence that this does not have to remain the case or the only way, and that by creating the network, and the mechanisms through which to adopt a skill, gain insight, or realize a new way of seeing existing fashion; that the 'knowing' increases and cultivates. These networks create and uncover spaces of overlap through forging individual connections, highlighting emotional durability and offering scope to broaden awareness between, in this case, practice (restoration & customization) and product (garment) whilst maintaining and re-framing the basic material contingency (leather). Supporting socially responsible actions and

building inclusive plural networks where communication and practice drive campaigns through social engagement will go some way to counter this. As established, true prosperity extends beyond monetary gain to encompass a rich tapestry of relationships, experiences, and personal growth. A country's future prosperity depends to an extent upon the quality of education of its people, therefore as Dudley (2010) affirms, museum exhibitions, workshops, and educational programs increase public understanding and appreciation (Dudley, 2010). Driving an open economy that harnesses ideas and talent to create sustainable pathways so that investment can grow, and supporting the economic sustainability of traditional arts, encourages younger generations to maintain these traditions and learn the art forms (Duncan, 2013). If circular systems are refined and new slow creative methodologies are presented and disseminated, at all levels, to diverse communities and industry, then fashion could move beyond its singular profit-driven vision to develop the idea of multi-faceted shared well-being, one which could offer a blueprint to redirect other knowledge and disciplines. Challenging the fashion industry in terms of ethical, environmental, and social aspects, by highlighting the positives of coveting, adapting, and self-creating our fashion. By making the collaborative and cumulative nature of a specific material, and fashion knowledge explicit and open, via accessible networks, it is hoped that these shared ideas and practices gain strength, and culture can be preserved, through plural networks which trigger more opportunity, and greater platforms.

METHOD

As the research aims to establish if a new way of seeing leather may contribute to the construction of plural networks who challenge the current fast fashion landscape and consumer behaviors - examination of a specific sub-group of artisans from the sneaker community who embrace and celebrate the craft of restoration and customization was an integral source of data.

To bridge theory and practice the aim was to provide rich perspectives by mixing ethnographic methodological approaches, including object research and participant observation via action research. Ethnography is a qualitative research method in which a researcher studies a particular social/ cultural group with the aim to better

understand it (Kramer & Adams, 2017). Professor Gary Alan Fine's 2003 article 'Towards a Peopled Ethnography: Developing Theory from Group Life' argues for a distinctive form of participant observation- 'peopled ethnography'- and suggests that ethnographic research is most effectively carried out when one observes the group being studied in settings that enable him/ her to 'explore the organized routines of behavior' (Fine, 2003:41). Thus, by entering a group of people with a shared identity at sneaker festivals, workshops, and retail outlets, allowed specific materials, techniques, and processes of leather handcraft, to be explored, experienced, and recorded. Observation of sub-group members, and artisans during restoration and customization workshops opened natural dialogue and allowed conversational data to be gathered. This method was a successful and authentic tool for collecting data about people, process, and culture, which in-turn immersed the researcher into sneaker subculture.

Participant observation encouraged two-way communication between the researcher and artisan, providing high validity as the researcher could gather first-hand detailed accounts of perceptions, actions, and roles among the practitioners. The qualitative and 'conversational' data derived effectively collated and recorded to form a new strand of research - Sole-Zine (Fig. 01), a research output dedicated to archiving and recording British Trainer Culture. Engaging with process, learning through investigation and taking an empirical approach by occupying global sneaker specific events, such as Sneakerness², Sneaker Con³, Crep City⁴ the U.K.'s original sneaker and streetwear event, SOLE BLOC⁵ and Laces Out Fest⁶, it was possible to observe subscribers and shoe fanatics coming together to celebrate their passion. These events were an opportunity to gather local and global insights of perspectives on the sneaker scene, and engage with specific materials, techniques, and processes via workshop participation.

The craft of customization was explored in practice at Laces Out sneaker festival (2023), specifically the use of embossing to alter and elevate a worn shoe.

2 Sneakerness: Sneaker Festival, Global (<https://sneakerness.com/events/london-2023>)

3 Sneaker Con: Sneaker Convention, Global (<https://sneaker-con.com>)

4 Crepe City: Sneaker Festival, Global (<https://www.crepe-city.com>)

5 Sole Bloc: Sneaker and Lifestyle Festival, Scotland (<https://www.crepe-city.com>)

6 LacesOut: Sneaker Festival, Liverpool, U.K. (<https://lacesout.co.uk>)

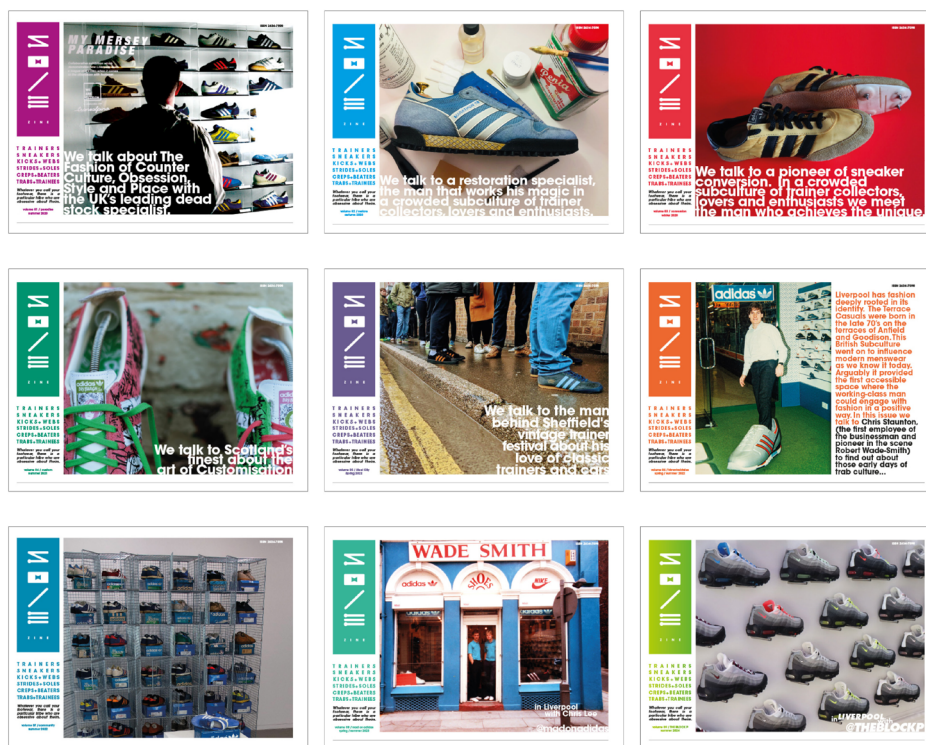


Fig. 01

The workshop consisted of a small group of seven sneaker enthusiasts and run by Benji Blunt Shank⁷ a well-known U.K. customizer and shoemaker. Other workshops attended were concerned with traditional leather hand techniques, including sneaker making, bag making and leather engraving. All of which were attended by small groups of approximately three people and run by Jason Stocks-Young of Diamond Awl⁸. Workshop participation was key to embed skills and knowledge, drive discussion and observational data collection which enabled the analysis of practical research to support the understanding of concepts, opinions, and experiences integral to this sub-group. ‘Making’ gives the researcher the ability to alter or enhance their experience of the research subject in a manner that would not be possible through observation alone (Sampson, 2020).

Using action research, participatory observation, and object research, through studying a specific creative subcultural group has impacted value systems to the point of re-alignment and

the transferring of skills and knowledge from one leather object (sneakers) to another (garment).

Substantiating that the wearer/ consumer can become the creator of the object of enquiry and making this an important methodology within a fashion context. Reinforcing the actualized possibility of an alternative sustainable wearer/ consumer-product relationship.

CONCLUSION

The planet cannot sustain current customary fashion consumption, and this gives rise to an urgent and necessary cultural shift in mindset toward leather, pre-loved fashion, meaningful purchases, and preserving items we already own. This study seeks to redefine the concept of prosperity, through cultivating the craft of restoration and customization via plural networks, to offer a more ethical and sustainable philosophy and attitude to leather garments. These principles offer a unique opportunity to work towards a more sustainable and fairer fashion ecosystem. Creating a blueprint which encourages flexible ways of seeing pre-loved leather fashion and supporting the cause for less

7 Benji Blunt Shank: Bespoke maker, designer, restorer and customiser of sneakers, U.K. (<https://bluntshank.com>)

8 Diamond Awl: Leather workshop, U.K. (<https://bluntshank.com>)

damage to an already fragile environment (Fletcher, 2014).

The best solution arises out of users and designers working together, Government, civil society and artisans. So, by designing innovative systems of plural networks which promote restoration and customization, nurture and preserve, circularity can be achieved, and the wearer/ consumer can take ownership, and maintain an ethical responsibility.

Centering the research on leather, the most durable and flexible of materials and drawing attention to specific techniques and processes, provides significant grounding for new ways for individuals to transform leather surface into artistic canvas, telling stories through fashion. Developing plural networks, sharing skills and putting fresh perspective on pre-loved leather fashion opens dialogue and has the potential to build cumulative creative spaces for providers who nurture and preserve existing garbs. This practical and problem-solving approach aids the findings to an effective solution, generating useful knowledge that can be applied to real-world situations. This challenges the fashion industry and presents a new slow, and creative way of using leather, one where the user has an elevated sense of ownership and in turn, belongings are nurtured and become investments due to their flexibility. These processes re-frame leather, push ethical boundaries, and blur the relationship between wearer/ consumer and attire, presenting a prosperity fashion philosophy which additionally could be used to enrich theories of fashion and material culture, influence wearer/ consumer-product relationships, and create an alternative solution which withstands pressure from capitalist industry to buy new and therefore reduce consumption. If the wearer/ consumer can become a 'leather fashion activist' then this blueprint and plural network will serve as a powerful tool.

CAPTIONS

[Fig. 01] Sole-Zine (Volumes 01-09) A Poster-Zine Dedicated to Recording and Archiving British Trainer Culture (2020-2024).

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