



Tishman Environment
and Design Center



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Brittany Dickinson and Abby Calhoun Take On Waste Reduction in Fashion

 [abbybrittanyphoto](#)

[Brittany Dickinson](#), Part-time
Lecturer at [Parsons School of
Fashion](#) and [Abby Calhoun](#), Project
Coordinator at the [Healthy Materials
Lab](#). are taking on waste reduction in

fashion through their research, studies, and programming at The New School. They answered our questions about waste and fashion, its impact on the environment, and actions individuals can take to reduce waste in their own fashion choices. They will also be holding a clothing swap event at The New School on October 4 called [Discover. Connect. Swap!: A Fashion Reuse Event](#).

Q: What led you to being interested in reducing waste in fashion?

Brittany: As a clothing designer, I've recognized for quite some time that many aspects of the design process are extremely wasteful; however, I did not fully understand the impact of this waste until I took a year off from designing to go to grad school to study design criticism. Given the nature of my program, you could say I started to view the industry from a much more critical and skeptical angle than I ever had before. For my thesis research, I consumed every text I could find about environmental and social issues in fashion, and I focused on ways to build sustainable thinking into the design process.

Abby: My interest in reducing fashion waste comes from a combination of professional and personal experiences in (or closely to) the fashion industry, such as working in fashion immigration law, writing for a fashion blog, and working

backstage at New York Fashion Week shows. All of these experiences led me to dig beyond the glitz and glamour typically associated with fashion to learn more about what's really going on to prop up the multibillion-dollar industry. My initial interest was in the human and labor aspects, and it didn't take me long to find stories like the collapse of the Rana Plaza Factory in Bangladesh in 2013. My personal research soon uncovered the environmental impacts of fashion, which I continue to explore in the Environmental Policy & Sustainability Management here at The New School.

Q: What are some of the biggest challenges in waste reduction in fashion?

Brittany: The biggest challenge is that waste is built into the design process. Fashion design is a visual and tactile profession. We need to touch fabric and we need to see physical prototypes to get a sense for proportion and functionality. We often need to go through several rounds of fabric submits to achieve a desired color or handfeel, and multiple rounds of full garment samples to reach the perfect fit. Testing many ideas and editing them down is an essential part of the design process, which results in a *lot* of waste, particularly in terms of textiles. In fashion, there is currently not a widespread system in place for recycling textiles, and

unfortunately it also comes down to the bottom line: If it's more financially viable for a company to throw textiles away than to recycle them, then they will. The problem also lies within the fabric mills who set high minimums for fabric orders; this results in a lot of leftover fabric which often does not get used because designers quickly move onto the next color, the next print, etc. This is because of the constant pressure in the fashion industry to immediately move onto the next thing after completing a collection. The result is the production of more and more clothes, often purely for the sake of making more clothes. It is this mentality that makes it very easy to create, consume, and discard, and against the grain to hold onto a product forever. And of course more and more clothing inevitably leads to more and more waste from the consumer standpoint.

Abby: The biggest challenges I see are from my perspective as a consumer. As consumers, we have all the power—the market will eventually follow our lead, so we have to break the habits that are being forced upon us by industry. Reducing waste in fashion will require major behavioral shifts by individual consumers, not only in the ways we discard old clothes but also in the way we consume fashion in the first place. This is particularly challenging

in the face of the messaging we're inundated with from industry, telling us to buy more, buy faster, and buy cheaper. As consumers of fashion we're wasting more because we're consuming more, so the challenge becomes shifting behavior to break that consumption cycle.

The other challenge is the facing scope of the problem and recognizing the power of small, incremental change. The fashion industry is the second most polluting industry in the world, and it's going to take a lot of work and persistence to change its course. It can be overwhelming to think about all the cogs in fashion industry wheel that need to be slowed in order to make the change required to really reduce waste. But there's power in small actions, such as spreading awareness and creating conversation around our own fashion practices, and it's important to celebrate those moments of learning.

Q: How does fashion waste negatively impact the environment? **Brittany:** There are countless ways in which fashion waste negatively impacts the planet. Cotton, for example, requires a significant amount of water and pesticides to grow, and fibers that are man-made (like polyester, nylon, and acrylic) are created from non-renewable fossil fuels. Many chemicals are used to dye and process fabric, and in the leather


industry, for example, tanneries dump parts of animal hides, flesh, and other solid waste directly into water streams, as well as a significant amount of toxic chemicals. The design process, as I illustrated above, generates a lot of textile waste, but the negative environmental impacts do not stop at the point of sale. Every time we do laundry, tiny fibers enter our water streams, much of this fiber being plastic (polyester). And of course our insatiable thirst for new, cheap fashion has resulted in mass amounts of clothing and textile waste polluting landfills across the planet.

Abby: There are so many negative environmental impacts throughout the lifecycle of a single fashion garment, from the pesticide intensive process of cultivating raw material, to the toxic processes of dying and treating textiles, to the carbon footprint associated with transporting materials and finished products worldwide, to the landfills that are overburdened with the byproducts of our society's shift towards disposable products. All of these processes emit toxic chemicals into the atmosphere and our waterways, disrupt natural ecosystems, and carry health implications for people all along the supply chain.

Q: What are the best ways for individuals to reduce fashion waste in their own lives?

Brittany: I am a strong believer in designing products responsibly and durably from the onset, and then marketing those products in a way that educates and encourages customers to hold onto them longer. Of course I also realize there are a lot of steps people can take to reduce fashion waste in their own lives; however, the issue is that most people have already accumulated this waste in their own closets — so in order to reduce that waste, it involves the creation of more waste outside the home. Marie Kondo's writing on reducing clutter in our lives is important, yet we need to take this philosophy carefully. Not enough attention is spent on *how* we are to get rid of all of this stuff, and *why* we need to get rid of the things we already own. I think sometimes people swing from this extreme and end up buying more things (especially because they have made the space for it). Responsible ways to get rid of clothing include donations, drop-offs at NYC Greenmarkets, attending clothing swaps, repurposing old t shirts to use as rags, and most importantly: making thoughtful purchases in the first place.

Abby: Fashion operates on a linear cycle, meaning products go from design to production to distribution to consumer to disposal. We can all close this fashion loop and reduce our personal fashion

waste by 1) considering alternative uses for our garments at the end of our use, such recycling, swapping, donating, or upcycling; 2) become more conscious about how much and how often we consume; 3) research brands who are taking sustainability into account and support them instead of ones who are not; and, 4) learn more about the issues- a great introduction is the documentary 'A  True Cost'.

RSVP to Discover. Connect. Swap!: A Fashion Reuse Event here



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