

sustainable futures

Dr Karen Dennis



Karen completed a PhD in 1999 at Leeds University, which looked at the role of textile and clothing production within rural development programmes in India, Nepal and Zambia. Through this research she worked alongside aid agencies such as OXFAM, Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG) and local charities to investigate the potential for small-scale craft production to address issues relating to empowerment, income generation, appropriate technology and community development. Guidelines developed as a result of this research have informed subsequent work where the concern has been the establishment of a Yorkshire based social enterprise (Ketchupclothes) involved in the re-manufacturing of second-hand clothing and the development of a clothing collection that draws on sustainable design practices. Based in a relatively deprived area of Leeds this enterprise runs workshops in key manufacturing skills and aims to investigate the ways in which design can harness local capacities and provide a force for change. Future plans include the development of a sewing cooperative and teaching material that will further contextualise this practice.

Now in its fourth year 'Ketchup' has provided Karen with the validity to call herself a sustainable fashion/costume designer. Karen is a firm believer that as educators in design need to be involved in the practice of design within professional contexts.

Her significant outputs include: *20,000 Leagues Under Hyde Park*, Leeds (2009); *Paparazzi, Red Arrows, Inspectors, Pacman*, Pandemonium Theatre Collective at Big Chill, Solfest, Limetree and Beatherder Festivals, 2009; *It's Christmas in Hyde Park*, paper presented at Design Activism Conference, Leeds Metropolitan University, 2009; *Take Something Old and Make it New*, Leeds City Council Breeze Youth Festivals; Toolbox Marketing, Sheffield, Leeds, Bolton and London shopping centres; Groundwork Leeds, Green for Go Fashion Show, 2009; BBC Look North, television interview and exhibition of design work, Dec 2008; *Sustainable Design and Development: A Personal Journey*, published paper for Design Pedagogy Research Conference, Leeds College of Art and Design, June 2007; *The Role of the Designer in Sustainable Development*, Design Paper and Manufacture for Sustainable Development Conference, Cambridge, June 2003 and ARS Textrina Conference, Edinburgh, 2001; *Widening Participation*, secured £25K for Participation Activities, Leeds University, 2002.



Recurring themes in Karen's work relate to sustainable and environmental design, social enterprise and in particular the re-manufacture of second-hand products, culminating in winning the Artsmix Emerging Design award in 2008 for a re-styled leather jacket. Karen is interested in parallel discussions that relate software and hardware technologies with knowledge and resources, in particular where individual choice and social expectations may have had a detrimental effect on the environment combined with notions of equality.

To this end theories surrounding ethical and empowering design have framed much of her research enquiry and have led to the investigation of social enterprise projects and attempts at designing as if waste does not exist. She is inspired by the theories of EF Schumacher (*Small is Beautiful*, 1993); Papanek (*the Green Imperative*, 1973), Braungart (*Cradle to Cradle*, 2002) and Kate Fletcher (*Sustainable Fashion and Textiles*, 2008). These design aspirations have led to the conclusion that waste is unacceptable within 21st Century design and that more needs to be done to embed sustainable design practices within both teaching and practice based contexts.

Designing products that have meaning in respect of ethical contexts and thus fostering emotional attachment is critical to Karen's creative philosophy. Sustainable design pivots on

creating garments that sustain a longer life span by their ability to develop emotional attachment; clothing that speak to us about identity, memory and aspiration. It is important that design products are treasured and not discarded to counteract the fickleness and constant insatiability for 'newness' fuelling the throw-away culture. Participatory design is borne out of an individual and society's true needs for a sustainable future; away from a purely commercial context. In this respect the notion of Design Activism informs Karen's professional practice and educational strategies to activate this process and underpin much of Karen's outreach and community work.

Karen is currently engaged in a critical review of her previous design paths that involves her approach to teaching of historical and theoretical studies as well as professional practice. Learning from past mistakes, reviewing traditional practices through the prism of modernisation and new technologies provide inspiration to teaching and practice. As an educator Karen wishes to discuss this review in informing her teaching and design theory. Karen has also been involved in theatre design and her interests are informed by both Bauhaus aesthetics and practices and by postmodern theories. Creative thinking, collaborative-design, seeking new solutions to old problems, and reviewing old solutions to new problems are all avenues for exploration



as we seek to educate students on ways of identifying viable and valuable research topics to help them communicate their ideas and realise new sustainable products. These thoughts are utilised not just in studio-practice but equally in the dissertation assignment as a creative conceptual-contextual tool for design students to deepen the understanding of their own work and that of others. To this end visual mapping exercises and differing forms of presentation and theoretical enquiry are important in the development of future professionals.

In respect of sustainable design and community development, Karen's recent research activities have focused on the transfer of knowledge relating to environmentally friendly design practices and on the development of a range of garments made from recycled materials. To date this collection has been shown at a number of fashion shows, in particular Alternative Fashion Week (2009) and www.ketchupclothes.com. Manufacture of these garments is developed in an artist's studio in Leeds, Yorkshire. New collections are presently being developed for BagItUp, which is a regional textile recycling company.

Seeking ways in which designers can engage with a local community through participatory workshops has been central to the collaboration with a number of community agencies, in particular working with Leeds City Council: Groundwork,

Leeds Federated Housing (youth), mental health and women's groups. The workshops demonstrated recycling techniques in garment production and presented methods on the transfer of key practical skills in deconstruction, design and re-manufacture. These initiatives were presented at the Design Activism conference organised by Leeds Metropolitan University, June 2009. In many cases these workshops provide a key social role in bringing people together through design.

Attention has also been focused on costume design, street theatre and all things theatrical. Ten years ago Karen helped establish a community theatre collective called Pandemonium, and through this she has been involved in many theatrical and street performances – both as costume designer and performer. Pandemonium have previously performed at Glastonbury and put on a number of original plays including 'Space Invaders' (a play based around the politics of squat parties) and community street theatre performances. In 2009 they performed at four key festivals: Beatherder, The Big Chill, Limetree and Solfest. As a practitioner and educator Karen's intention is to further converge and articulate these varying interests within a wider societal and political context. Particular interests include international trade in relation to the creative re-manufacture of second-hand clothing, social enterprise and local production in relation to sustainable futures.