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PLACES IN THE MAKING: HOW FASHION DESIGN TRANSFORMS THE MULTITUDE OF SCALES

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ABSTRACT

This short paper questions what it means to make a sense of place through fashion design. The notion of placemaking has been discussed in the literature of design and fashion yet remains fragmented, especially due to the complex fashion system. The nuances of place should be carefully examined when relating to fashion design. The ways in which the notion of place is conceptualized in fashion are introduced to explore impacts of designing fashion in two very different scales: the geographical space, such as cities and nations, and the human body. Fashion design transforms these scales continuously through its dual system of material production for clothes and meaning production for fashion. Conceptualizing these scales of placemaking in fashion design can contribute to the fuller understanding of its impacts in spatial and personal levels.

INTRODUCTION: REIMAGINING SCALES OF DESIGN PLACES

Understanding how different forms of design practice can impact on diverse scales allows both researchers and practitioners to recognize the value of design better (Hunt, 2020). Thus, the notion of *place* has been actively explored due to its possibility to convey flexible and inclusive definitions (e.g., Julier, 2013; Manzini, 2015). Moreover, the notion has been closely associated with the phenomenon of fashion (e.g., Breward & Gilbert, 2006; Crewe, 2017). However, these discussions on place from design and fashion have been developed in segregation.

This is partially due to the complexity of the contemporary fashion system that sets difficulties to explore (Aspers, 2006; Aspers & Skov, 2006). One of

the definitions for fashion is “what people wear” (Barnard, 2007). This simplistic definition actually connotes the complexity of creating fashion. Since the modernization of western societies, fashion is no longer dictated by an exclusive social class. Rather, it has been co-created by designers and people who wear clothes regardless of their class in society (Vinken, 2005). In fact, fashion has become a social process that is not created by an exclusive group of designers (Loschek, 2009). What fashion designers can create are only clothes (and accessories) that have certain potentials to become a fashion (Loschek, 2009), or simply *fashionable*. This material production of clothes is produced by not only a single designer but also a team involving multiple experts of pattern-making, pattern-cutting, sewing, sample-making, among others (Aspers, 2006). This duality of *material clothes* and *immaterial fashion* is essential for understanding the peculiar relationship between the practice of fashion design and its impacts on certain places / contexts. This complexity of fashion restricts developing the discussion on the making of place through a dynamic conversation between the fields of design and fashion.

Accordingly, the main intention of this exploratory paper is to open a venue to engage in a constructive dialogue between the fields. Understanding the impact of designing fashion in the multitude of scales can contribute to enriching the dialogue. As a theoretical endeavor, this paper seeks to inquire how the notion of place is conceptualized in designing fashion from previous studies in design and fashion. This inquiry provides a useful perspective to comprehend the ways in which fashion design makes meaningful transformations on different scales from the geographical space to the human body.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, the discussions on place in the design literature will be

introduced to provide the theoretical context from design. Second, from the perspective of fashion studies, two scales of the space and the body are presented to explore how fashion design makes a sense of place while making certain impacts. It concludes by projecting possible future studies.

DESIGN AND PLACES

In design, a number of scholars have explored the emerging relationship between design and place. For instance, British design scholar Guy Julier (2013) proposed viewing design as a culture that embraces a wider scope encompassing designers, production, and consumption, instead of limiting it exclusively to the visual aspect. To apply this perspective in the context of place-branding, two European cities, Leeds in the United Kingdom and Barcelona in Spain, were introduced (Julier, 2013, p. 138-159). Taking from the discourse of urban design, he noted that place-branding is “to promote a reconfiguration of perceptions of the human resources available in a location” (Julier, 2013, p. 151). Here, design contributes not only to forming visual and material artifacts based on the cultural heritage but also, as a practice, to projecting a certain “attitude” derived from the location (Julier, 2013, p. 159). Beyond the practice of architecture and urban planning, this involvement of design for places has taken place recently alongside the emergence of branding practice in the design profession around the 1980s (Julier, 2013). Besides these two cases, when emphasis on creative industries, especially design, in post-industrial cities has been increased, the development of designers’ new relationship with places has emerged more strongly in the context of cities and regions rather than nation-states. Julier (2013, p. 154) explained that the multicultural and inclusive aspect of a city or a region offers design-friendly conditions for interweaving production, consumption, and distribution into a tightly bounded location.

In comparison to Julier who related the notion of place with a geographic location, Italian design strategist Ezio Manzini (2015, p. 189) suggested a place as “a space that is meaningful for someone.” This inclusive definition of place connotes that the meaning is constructed through dialogues between diverse actors in a social space; this thus shifts design practice from place-branding to place-making, as “making” requires collaborative efforts beyond the design profession. Manzini (2015) argued that the evolution of the design profession has not occurred in isolation from the rest of society. Rather, it has happened concurrently with the emergence of collaborative initiatives that are willing to get involved in local issues. While seeking new modes of constructive coexistence for the design profession and these collaborative organizations, Manzini (2015, p. 63) introduced potential strategies to achieve “the expert

design contribution to a co-design process aiming at social change” – in other words, design for social innovation. The strategies include making the current condition more visible in order to identify points of change; making new infrastructure that encourages active participation of diverse social actors; making the encounter between collaborative organizations and design experts more effective and meaningful; making social innovation replicable and expandable; and making the new ecology of a social and physical space (Manzini, 2015).

The last strategy is especially associated with the emergent design practice of placemaking. According to Manzini’s definition of a place (2015), the discursive process of meaning-making in contemporary society is no longer restricted by geographical distance due to the development of communication technology, such as the Internet. Thus, the idea of places is more relevant for the social context as their existence reacts to fragile and uncertain conditions in the physical territory. Building and rebuilding of places deal with “a close relationship between the existence and the quality of a territory and that of the communities which live in it, and by living in it produce places and keep them alive” (Manzini, 2015, p. 195). With cases from two very different contexts (Italy and China), he examined the ways in which design experts contribute in this practice of placemaking (Manzini, 2015). Upon the employment of design expertise, the experts adopt the current local state and focus on available or potential resources to construct a new place collaboratively with local actors.

From these perspectives of design, placemaking can be conceptualized as the emerging practice of design from the social construction of meaning for places through continuous and collective efforts of making in action. This connects design with physical and social, or material and immaterial, places.

MAKING THE PLACE IN FASHION: FROM SPACE TO BODY

Meanwhile, since the birth of modern democracy in the western societies, the idea of fashion has been discussed as a certain level of changes in symbolic and material worlds involving a wide range of individuals (Lipovetsky, 1994). Fashion has been strongly attached to these multidimensional ideas of place not only in the historic development of modern fashion in particular cities, such as Paris and New York (Rantisi, 2002; Kawamura, 2005; Breward & Gilbert, 2006), but also in the contemporary condition where the geographic and socio-economic bonds of clothes are inseparable (Skov, 2001; Crewe, 2017). Aspers (2013, p. 222) emphasized: “Spatiality is both constituted by fashion and helps to constitute fashion.” Furthermore, separately from the literature on designing places in design research (e.g. Julier, 2013; Manzini, 2015), placemaking of fashion

design has been discussed already in the sociological domain of fashion research (Rantisi, 2011; Skov, 2011; McRobbie, 2015).

However, designing fashion requires further articulations due to certain differences in comparison to other subfields of design. For instance, Swedish fashion researcher Lars Hallnäs (2009) shed light on how fashion design and other design subfields are different in terms of methods. He noted the absence of “a problem” to solve in the practice of fashion design, unlike in other subfields. In contrast to this problem-solving approach, fashion design tends to highlight “introducing a difference” as the foundational characteristic (Hallnäs, 2009, p. 59). Thus, understanding the impact of fashion design in scales can help the initiation of constructive dialogues between the fields. In the following, the relationship between fashion design and place is conceptually explored in two-fold: the geographical space and the human body.

GEOGRAPHICAL SPACE AS PLACE

As noted earlier, the relationship between fashion and geographical spaces / places has been explored from different perspectives, such as education, policy, styles, production and consumption (e.g., McRobbie, 1998; Skov, 2001; Niessen, Leshkovich & Jones, 2003; Crewe, 2017). Instead of covering them all, this paper pays special attention to the ways in which the practice of fashion design actually involves the making of places.

“What do fashion designers produce that is significant for the nation?” (Skov, 2011, p. 150) This question well represents the discussions on placemaking in fashion research. From previous studies that investigated placemaking of fashion design, three themes were identified (see Rantisi, 2011; Riegels Melchior, 2011; Segre Reinach, 2011; Skov, 2011; McRobbie, 2015): (1) the involvement of diverse actors in the implementation of placemaking, including designers and local fashion actors from both the public and private sectors; (2) the contribution of fashion design in both symbolic and economic developments as well as internationalization for a place; and (3) the flexible range of placemaking in fashion design from a neighborhood to a city and a nation. Based on these themes, placemaking of fashion design can be conceptualized as the ability of fashion design, based on collaborative efforts of diverse local actors, to contribute to the development of a local fashion scene while creating a stronger sense of place, from nation to neighbourhood, to be recognized in the global context (Chun & Gurova, 2019).

HUMAN BODY AS PLACE

Adopting the perspective of British fashion scholar Joanne Entwistle (2000, 2015), the notion of place can be revisited to relocate the focus from geography to the

human body, which is one of key characteristics for fashion. This can be viewed as an expansion of placemaking but on a smaller and more private scale compared to the geographical space. Entwistle (2000, 2015) discussed the ways in which the individual human body is dressed with clothes, which can become fashion through social dialogue and acceptance. She theoretically explored the notion of the human body as a place while situating the dressed body in the social world through several angles, such as gender and dress code, among others. In particular, Entwistle emphasized the perspective of Merleau-Ponty (1976, 1981) viewing the body as forming a “point of view on the world” (1976, p. 5) rather than passively being objectified. She noted that “our body is not just the place from which we come to experience the world; it is through our bodies that we come to see and be seen in the world” (Entwistle, 2000, p. 334). This view deepens the understanding of the impact of fashion design and its application to a more personal and thus more meaningful place for individuals.

Aligning to this view but more relating to the actual design of immaterial fashion and material clothes, the human body situates and is situated by the practice (Ræbild, 2015; Chun, 2018). Dressing the body of the wearer or being worn by someone is often mentioned as one of objectives for their design practices (Chun, 2018). Thus, as much as the geographical space, the human body becomes an important place where fashion design makes a certain impact.

In fact, being associated with this more private and intimate scale caused creating social prejudices toward fashion design to be considered as frivolous and insignificant (Nixon & Blakley, 2012; Finn, 2014; Chun, 2018). By introducing this perspective of the human body as place, the research on fashion design practice can overcome the prejudices. Individuality in the collective has become more important in the neo-liberal society (Lipovetsky, 1994). Thus, the impact of fashion design that directly communicates with human bodies can contribute to developing new dynamic discussions at the intersection of design and fashion while sensing the difference. As a continuation of these efforts, more recently, a number of practice-based researches were published to further explore the agency of clothes on the bodily scale of wearers (see Valle-Noronha, 2019).

CONCLUSION: NEW OPENING

In relation to fashion, the notion of place can be understood from geography to the human body. Fashion design engages with these scales through its unique contributions that embrace both material and immaterial productions. In other words, the place, where fashion design involves transformations, is located somewhere

not only “out there” in the world but also “in here” within the private body of individuals (see Figure 1).

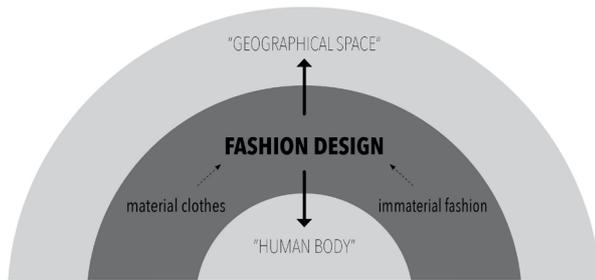


Figure 1: A visualization for two scales of the geographical space and the human body in fashion design.

This short paper aimed at exploring how placemaking can be conceptualized for fashion design while examining a number of seminal works from two neighboring yet distanced fields of design and fashion. Its intention was neither to devalue the development of each discussion nor to draw a line between the fields. Rather, acknowledging the particular contribution of fashion design supports developing the dynamic interplay between the fields. Thus, this conceptualization of placemaking on the geographical and bodily scales invites active future conversations to follow.

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