

Amy Powney is a British fashion designer and creative director for British clothing brand Mother of Pearl.

How to fix fashion and protect the planet

I was determined to be a designer. A fashion designer. My career was built off my childhood happy place of crafting with my mother, and I dreamt of unleashing my creativity in an industry that was borne on style and trends and luxury. It was a contradiction to my own childhood of hand-me-downs and no logos, often teased by my peers.

I grew up in the north of England, off grid. My parents worked as local food farmers, and I had a real innate understanding of where things came from. We were the bottom of the food chain. We all worked as farmers, and I watched our small wind turbine turn natural resources into energy firsthand. It did also mean if it wasn't windy, I couldn't watch TV.

Getting into my dream industry. I'm a very inquisitive person, so I decided to pick away at the seams. And so six years ago, as the creative director of Mother of Pearl, I embarked on a mission to make a fully sustainable collection for my brand. I didn't really know what that meant, so I journeyed from field to finished product, emotionally engaging with the people and the planet, picking away the chains, linking them back together.

We all get the notion of farm to table, right? We understand where our fresh produce comes from. It's written on the packet and also from point of harvest to the final product, it kind of looks the same. But what about field to fashion? Fashion is also born of natural resources. Your clothes come from either a worm, an animal, agriculture, forestry or fossil fuels. Without worms, there is no silk, no sheep, there's no wool. Without agriculture, there's no cotton, no trees, no viscose. And polyester, which is the most widely used fabric of all, because it's cheap, comes from fossil fuels, is made of crude oil, which is the same oil that you put into your car, the same fuel you put into your car.

When we talk about climate change, we talk about the big stuff. We talk about aviation, travel, shipping, logistics, agriculture, industrialization, plastic pollution, fossil fuels. But this is where your clothes come from, and they are playing their part. Take a polyester dress, for instance. It is both fossil fuel and plastic pollution combined. When it's made, it contributes to climate change in its industrial processing. When it's washed, it releases microplastics into the ocean, into the food chain, into us. When you throw it away, it ends up in landfill, and in landfill, it takes hundreds of years to degrade. It's no different than your plastic packaging, but it does give trashy dressing a whole new meaning. (Laughter)
Thank you. (Laughter)

OK, so how did we get here? We buy three times as many clothes as we did in 1980 and wear them for half as long. Your grandmother would have mended her clothes, but now three out of five end up in landfill within the first year of purchase. It changed within one generation, and it's set to

40 increase by 62 percent by 2030. This is one of the biggest landfills. This is in Chile, and it can now be seen from space. It's mostly also made up of unused and unsold clothing.

45 So mass industrialization and a linear production model of global capitalism gave birth to the notion that we could and should have it all faster and cheaper, which means we've lost connection to our clothes. We do not know or seem to care where they come from. And when I say we, I mean all of us that wear clothes, but also the brands that make them. When you look in your label of your clothing, it will tell you where it was manufactured, but it doesn't tell you how it was spun, woven, dyed, finished. Also, it doesn't tell you about the 3.4 billion people that work in the industry, 70 percent of which are female, often invisible, and for the most part not paid a living wage.

50 In fashion, we love to talk about equality, feminism, diversity, empowerment. We celebrate the celebrities and the influencers that wear our designs, and yet we don't talk about the women that make them. We treat them just like that polyester dress, disposable and cheap.

55 And in that search for that cheap supply chain and cheap materials, your garments here, one of your garments today, that you're wearing, could have traveled through five different countries, and up to 20 different processes along the way. Chances are your outfit is better traveled than you are, and your wardrobes most definitely are.

60 So, we have to choose ethics, too. But how do we do this? Fashion is borne on buying more, shopping more, consuming more. When I was at design school, they just taught me to design something beautiful, and how it was made was almost an afterthought. But now, with everything that I've learned, I flipped that entire process on its head. So I start with sustainable, traceable supply chains, and I design from there up. Some designers would suggest that was hindering creativity, but to quote the economist Kate Raworth, "Boundaries unleash potential." Look at what Mozart did with a five-octave piano. And I would agree.

70 So with everything I learned, this is what I did for our brand. I set my non-negotiables. This is the best possible practices of the supply chain. For instance, we use natural organic farming practices for our natural fibers and replacement of synthetics or virgin synthetics like polyester. There's many more, but they are just some of the solutions. This was also designed for two reasons. It was designed as a kind of benchmark for my team. So we had kind of goals to work to, but it was also to help educate the consumer. Most online stores, when you shop, you can filter them by size, color, fit. But for us, we also let you filter it by attribute or material, trying to put ethics and aesthetics in the same conversation.

75 But only once I'd implemented this -- and it took a long time to do it, and we were very proud - - but what I also realized is that we just made a better version of an existing system which was broken. It's the best of, but it's still take, make, use and lose.

80 And so now I realized we have to add another link to that supply chain and join it all together and create a circular system. And by that I mean so many things. But for an example, if we're going to cut a tree down and we replace it, could the replacement add more value back to the forest? What

85 about if regenerative and organic farming practices could become the new normal, and each
picker's lives nourished along with the soil itself? And then new links could be added for every
aspect of the business. What if we looked at profit and loss, for instance? What if we turn that into
pay it forward? What if we reimagine the concept of success?

90 They say we eat a credit card's worth of plastic every week with the microplastics. And when all is
said and done, we won't be able to eat money. For me, the answer is very simple. The very notion
of questioning everything is key, and being responsible for my actions as a business leader and an
individual is key. And for those that are willing to not think and rethink, we have to pass legislation.

95 On this journey, I didn't think it was very revolutionary trying to meet my sheep that made my
clothes, but it turns out it was. Before I knew it, I was on the news, the subject of a
documentary, writing columns for British "Vogue¹." And that gives me a lot of hope. But fashion is
still everything you think. It's trends, fast pace, logos, brands. But to fashion something is to make
something. And that was where my passion came from. And what I've learned in this journey is if
I'm going to continue to design and fashion clothing, I must also fashion our future. The two things
100 come hand in hand.

Yes, there are technical solutions to this problem, to these problems, and I can talk endlessly about
them, from biomimicry²-based dyes and finishes to regenerative and recycled textiles. And it's
important. Technology is important. But the other thing I've learned in this journey is that it's only
105 when we reconnect back to the living world and look at it in awe and wonder and the respect that
it deserves will true systemic change happen. And when I talk about the living world, I talk about
the people and the planet. Box-ticking³ is greenwashing⁴, and greenwashing is dangerous. It's just
the medicine to a symptom and not the solution to a problem. And fashion absolutely should not
cost the Earth.

110 Nature designs or fashions the most incredible designs there are. We just simply forgot to look. So
my ask: next time you open your wardrobes, instead of seeing clothes, brands, logos and perhaps
your favorite dress, delve a little bit deeper. Go to Narnia⁵. And instead see the vast and unique
ecosystem that makes each piece individual and its inherent connection to our planet on which all
115 of our lives depend.

Thank you. (Applause)

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¹ International fashion and lifestyle magazine

² Solutions inspired by nature and the natural world.

³ The fact of doing something just because there is a rule that says that you must do it.

⁴ Behaviour or activities that make people believe that a company is doing more to protect the environment than it really is.

⁵ A series of fantasy novels in which a group of children happen upon another world.