Zero-Waste Design: Closing the Gap

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The project I chose to submit for the Minerva Teichert competition is a six-piece zero-waste clothing collection. I have always been passionate about sustainability and fashion and how they intersect. This is largely because of what I have learned about the negative consequences surrounding fast fashion. Companies built on this quick and cheap model need to cut corners in order to make an exorbitant profit. They source materials that contain plastic which harms the environment, and they harm workers by paying them less than a living wage. Low pay disproportionately affects women and young girls in underdeveloped countries who work to manufacture the clothing. In an effort to support their families and desperate to make ends meet, young girls in many countries, such as India, Malaysia, Thailand, and China, will drop out of school and work in factories, earning little to nothing. In fact, in 2020, Fashion Checker found that 93% of the fast fashion brands they surveyed were not paying their workers a living wage. This often creates a cycle of poverty and generations of women trapped by
fast fashion production wages. The vulnerable state of these women often leads to unsafe work environments and even sexual assault.

On the consumer side of things, these fast fashion brands target young girls and women alike with campaigns aimed at convincing women that they don’t, and never will, have enough. They hear that they need to buy, buy, buy to keep up their image. These companies continuously shout messages convincing women that their worth is tied to their appearance. Through social media channels, material things—like clothing—and keeping up with the ever-changing trends become falsely associated with obtaining happiness. This leaves girls to clamber after impossible perfection, repeatedly feeling disappointed and unsatisfied. All while fast fashion profits soar.

With an understanding of these complicated issues, and feeling heartbroken for how this industry was negatively affecting the women around me and far from me, I dove into researching sustainable clothing and current environmentalist movements. In addition to my passion for sustainability, I was also an avid sewer. I followed many sewing related accounts and one day came across a woman on Instagram who had “Zero Waste Clothing Designer” written in her bio. I researched everything I could surrounding the topic and quickly became fascinated with the principles guiding this methodology and the way it could potentially empower women. I wanted to apply it to my own sewing.

Zero waste (ZW) clothing design is the idea of using methods of recycling, applique or pattern strategies to ensure there is no waste left over once the final piece is completed. I became particularly fascinated with the jigsaw-cut
methodology. This is where all the pattern pieces fit together like a puzzle and use the whole rectangle of fabric.

I saw the potential for this ideology to not only reduce textile waste, but also decrease cutting time and cost of materials for manufacturers, and potentially create more opportunity for factory workers to get paid better wages. I wanted to put these ideas to the test. I began sketching, sampling and sewing. I discovered that, just as I had hypothesized, the nested nature of the pattern pieces lessened both the cost of the materials and the time I spent cutting. I worked for several months to fine tune my patterns, source fabrics and create a
brand under which my project could live. The end result was a six-piece clothing collection that created about only half a mason jar’s worth of scraps (see documentation), was sustainable, and made the wearer feel beautiful.

I firmly believe that this methodology has the potential to change the way we produce clothing, improve the lives of garment workers, and change the narrative around what it means for women to feel beautiful, as well as change the role of consuming clothing. These clothes tell a story of careful and intentional design that prioritizes the lives of all the women involved—from creation to consumption.