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INTRODUCTION

Research & Teaching

Exploring Academia – From Practice to Publishing

In contemporary academia the boundaries between research and teaching are blurred and complex. Sometimes deliberately. Oftentimes by chance. Other times by need. We live in an age of research-informed teaching, practice-based learning, academic publishing and global collaboration. As a result, we are simultaneously educators, researchers, authors and practitioners. We are place-bound but international in outlook. It is a complex scenario further complicated by cross-disciplinary thinking and an ever-growing emphasis on impact, rankings, internationalization, our social role and most recently, the digital turn and AI.

In this context, the understanding of what we do as academics is far from clear. In the arts, educators continue to practice. In design, professionals engage in teaching and learning. In our schools, teachers are involved in lifelong learning. In the humanities and sciences, what we teach is often the very thing we research. In every discipline, whatever our country, we are frequently asked to publish, engage communities and adapt to change.

While this specific volume is focused on issues of art and design, the overall publication seeks to better understand current practices in research and teaching from across disciplinary and geographical boundaries. It is interested in presentations on specific research projects, innovative teaching, questions of ethics, equity and inclusion, innovations in academic publishing and the impact of technologies and AI on how we operate. In all cases, it seeks an interdisciplinary perspective.

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HAND MADE, HAND SEWING, HAND KNOWING. ON HOW ARTISTIC PRACTICE BASED APPROACH CAN IMPROVE FASHION DESIGNER'S KNOWLEDGE

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INTRODUCTION

This paper originates from the author's ongoing doctoral research at the University of Florence, which investigates textile waste in the pre-consumer phase of the fashion production process. The research specifically explores how textile offcuts generated during the cutting phase[1] can be reframed as a creative and expressive design space rather than eliminated as mere by-products. This work is part of *Re-Waste,*[2] a national research project funded by the Italian government under the NextGeneration EU programme. The project analyses strategic sectors of Made in Italy, such as textiles, to identify critical issues within the linear production model and promote a shift towards more sustainable and circular practices.[3]

The author's practice is grounded in pattern making and garment construction, drawing on technical knowledge acquired through hands-on engagement with fabrics and sewing techniques. Her research focuses on the "forgotten spaces" that emerge between the pattern pieces and the leftover fabric on the cutting table—spaces she defines as "negative spaces". The term refers to the offcuts—empty shapes and fragments—often discarded at the beginning of the production process. Inspired by both artistic and philosophical perspectives, the author considers these "negative spaces" not as waste, but as carriers of latent potential. As artist Marion Baruch describes, they are "remnants of something we no longer need," yet they still hold meaning, energy, and opportunity.[4]

Within this conceptual framework, the designer becomes a "transmuter": someone who transforms discarded materials into new material narratives. Through creativity and intentionality, the designer reclaims what was previously lost, opening up space for new ways of seeing and making.

Following previous investigations into production waste minimization[5] and the use of 3D simulation tools[6] the author had the opportunity to further explore this topic during a visiting research period at The Swedish School of Textiles, University of Borås, from September to December 2024.

This paper reflects on a practice-based design experience developed during that research stay. The project explored circular design strategies for textile waste generated in the garment-cutting phase, using an artistic and hands-on approach to examine the intersections between analogue and digital design processes. This experience became a pivotal moment, revealing the profound differences in knowledge acquisition through manual practice compared to digital methodologies.

A practice-based approach enables designers to develop knowledge through tactile engagement. Working directly with materials provides an understanding of aspects often overlooked or interpreted differently in digital environments: the physical properties of fabric, its weight and thickness, the relationship between fabric and body, the spatial dynamics around and within the garment, and the time required to engage with and resolve these elements through design.

The research wants to highlight the critical role of manual practice in developing knowledge that is unattainable through digital tools alone. It resonates with the concept of thinking hands or narrating hands—according to the theory of thinking through making as articulated by Groth and Nimkulrat—emphasizing how tactile interaction fosters embodied cognition.[7] As in medicine—where hands are essential to detect bodily anomalies—fashion design also relies on the hand's intelligence to shape, sense, and create through material engagement. By integrating analogue and digital approaches, this study underscores the importance of preserving manual skills in fashion education. It proposes a hybrid methodology that bridges craft-based knowledge with technological innovation, fostering a more holistic understanding of garment construction and sustainable design practices.

This contribution aligns with broader reflections on circularity and the idea of refashioning,[8] investigating how waste can be transformed into valuable resources. It focuses on the potential of zero-waste design practices that address the offcuts produced during cutting, repositioning them as "negative spaces"—or "containers," as Marion Baruch describes.[9] Instead of being discarded, these spaces are reimagined as inputs for new textile-based products in fashion or related sectors. In this context, the designer acts as a "transmuter" of waste—infusing discarded material with economic, social, cultural, and productive value by intervening in the design process. As Binotto and Payne suggest, waste can be perceived with a renewed sensitivity, enabling the identification of both visible and invisible components of the material world, and allowing us to revalue and reshape the remnants of things we no longer want or need.[10] Research developed in recent years around circular practices in fashion and the reduction and reuse of textile waste has contributed to defining a range of approaches that shape the theoretical framework of this study.[11] This project specifically aims to support eco-design by adopting practices that minimize textile waste through digital technologies—optimizing pattern development, placement, and cutting to reduce material consumption.[12] The study embraces the philosophy of upcycling, transforming waste into higher-value products, and applies the fashion hacking approach to subvert and redesign industrial processes.[13] By doing so, it proposes alternative design methods that reuse materials typically deemed unusable by fashion brands, activating their value in new ways.[14] These perspectives are grounded in a recognition of the value of textile materials and advocate for a rethinking of the design and production process. Within this frame, the author emphasizes the importance of investigating the role of design—and designers—in proposing circular alternatives at various stages of the supply chain.

RESEARCH AIM AND FOCUS

This research investigates textile waste generated during the garment cutting stage—a critical point of material loss in fashion production. In this context, offcuts are conceptualised as *negative spaces*—a term developed within this study to describe the voids and irregular shapes left behind after garment pieces are cut from the fabric roll. The project focuses on the pre-consumer phase of fashion production and explores the creative and material potential of these offcuts.

Adopting an artistic and practice-based approach, the research examines how hands-on, manual engagement can lead to new insights in circular fashion design. Initiated in 2023, this doctoral project is supported by a scholarship funded through the NextGeneration EU programme and forms part of *Re-Waste*, a national research project dedicated to the pre-consumer textile supply chain. The

scholarship includes a mandatory three-month international research period. After consulting with supervisors, the author chose to conduct this period in Sweden, at the Swedish School of Textiles in Borås—a city whose historical textile industry parallels that of Prato in Tuscany. Both cities are small yet significant textile districts, shaped by local rivers and characterised by their rich heritage and technical expertise in fabric production. As part of the international experience, the author conducted interviews with stakeholders from the Swedish textile and fashion supply chain to better understand their approaches, challenges, and circular strategies.

In the early phase of the research, the central questions became: (i) What kind of waste are we talking about? (ii) Where does it originate? (iii) And why is it generated? To address these questions, the author conducted interviews across different segments of the supply chain—including yarn and fabric manufacturers, garment producers, independent designers, small brands, start-ups working with waste, stockists, and resellers. Of approximately 50 contacts reached out to, 20 interviews were conducted.

The interviews revealed that while some stakeholders are actively recycling production waste into new yarns and fabrics, many manufacturers still discard offcuts as waste. A particularly critical point in the supply chain is the marking and cutting phase, where large volumes of offcuts are generated. Often, these scraps are mixed with paper and plastic supports, making them difficult to separate and recycle. Sorting requires manual labour, which many companies are reluctant to allocate due to time and cost constraints. As a result, these offcuts frequently become *invisible* within the production process, losing their value as textile material.

The concept of invisibility emerged as a key theme. In exploring this, the author encountered the work of Romanian textile artist Marion Baruch, who works with post-production scraps. Baruch emphasises the “invisible value” of textile remnants, describing them as *containers* of meaning and potential. Encountering her work was a pivotal moment for the author, offering a new way to perceive offcuts not merely as excess, but as meaningful material. While an individual offcut may seem insignificant, its impact multiplies when production is scaled. These offcuts represent the “negative space” of both the garment and the fabric. The term “negative” holds dual meaning here: practically, as waste excluded from the pattern; and artistically, as the complementary form that shapes the whole image, echoing the photographic or sculptural notion of a negative that reveals the positive. This raises key questions for design practice: - How can designers reframe the value of waste? How can they render it visible? - Designers, in this view, possess a unique ability to “make visible”—to assign new value to what has been overlooked or discarded.

The author proposes two strategies to address this issue. First, pattern-making techniques could be adapted toward zero-waste solutions, maintaining fit and aesthetics while eliminating offcuts. Second, when zero-waste design is not feasible, a consistent “marking system” could be developed to produce uniform offcuts that can be repurposed into new garments or accessories. Ultimately, the findings and approaches developed through this research may be disseminated through workshops with students and companies, fostering greater awareness and practical knowledge on how to work creatively and sustainably with textile waste.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This research, developed within the framework of the “Re-Waste. Circular Ecosystems in the Textile Chain” project, aims to identify design-driven strategies to recover post-industrial textile waste generated during the pre-consumer phase of the Italian fashion supply chain. The goal is to create new value through circular practices while reflecting on the social role of fashion designers in driving sustainable change. The goal is to create new value through circular practices while reflecting on the social role of fashion designers in driving sustainable change. Building on the work of Karell and

Niinimäki, the study investigates the tools, approaches, and methodologies designers can adopt to operate within a circular economy and to position fashion as a political instrument for social transformation.[15]

The investigation is structured around three main research questions:

- What is textile waste, and when, where, and why is it generated?
- How can designers influence the perception of textile waste and transform it through specific tools and methods?
- How can fashion design processes make textile waste visible and foster a shift from linear to circular supply chains?

A Practice-Based, Artistic Approach

Practice-based research involves learning through doing. In fashion design, this includes cutting, sewing, and draping—direct, tactile forms of engagement that serve as both investigative tools and modes of material thinking. Initial experimentation began with digital tools, as physical scraps were not yet available. The first step was selecting a garment pattern and preparing a layout for the cutting table. Due to the unavailability of industrial layouts, a basic women's shirt (size EU 38) from the CLO3D library was chosen. Since the garment's shape was not central at this stage, the focus was placed on optimizing fabric use. Traditional layering methods were compared to zero-waste design principles to analyze the emergence of different "negative spaces." These digital offcuts were then used within CLO3D to drape new shapes resembling garments (Fig. 1), offering a visual representation of their reuse potential. Subsequently, physical experimentation was carried out with the support of the Do-Tank Center at the Science Park, during a visiting research period at The Swedish School of Textiles, University of Borås. With guidance from researchers Anna Lidström and Jennifer Tengroth, second-hand 100% cotton bed sheets were used as material. After the cutting stage, the positive shapes were allocated to garment construction, while the remaining negative spaces were retained for the project.

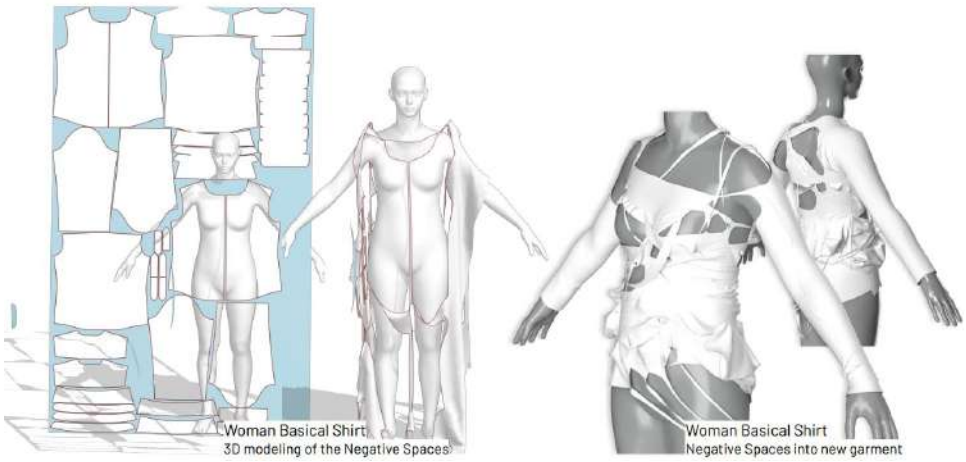

Figure 1. Digital offcuts in CLO3D to drape new shapes resembling garments. October 2024. Courtesy of the author.

Fabric Manipulation

Manual experimentation followed, involving hand-sewing and draping directly on the mannequin. This allowed for an embodied exploration of how fabric and body interact—insights that digital simulations cannot fully replicate.

Three different approaches were tested to transform the fabric offcuts into new garments (Fig. 2): 1. replicating the digital design process using the same layout and shapes; 2. draping based on a moodboard inspired by the fabric, with a clear design intention; 3. assembling the offcuts freely, allowing their shapes and lines to guide the composition.

This phase aimed to demonstrate that fabric scraps can be repurposed into new garments, thereby preserving their value. It supports the notion that designers can redefine our relationship with materials by transforming offcuts into expressive, meaningful products. Drawing from the insights of textile artist Marion Baruch, fabric scraps can be understood as "containers" of meaning. As Baruch states, “In these leftovers is contained all the industrial and social work from which they derive; they reveal the contradictions of this flow involving the social and cultural production of our society”.[16] Recognizing the intrinsic value of these materials requires re-educating consumers, workers, and companies to adopt a more conscious approach to fashion production. Just like hackers, fashion designers can subvert existing systems by developing new tools and methodologies that decode fashion and restructure its mechanisms. Through this approach, designers act as agents of transformation, attributing new identities and functions to pre- and post-consumer waste within a circular design paradigm.

Figure 2. The three different approaches to transform fabric offcuts into a new garment, October 2024. Courtesy of the author.

EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE

Digital vs Physical Draping – A Comparative Reflection

A comparative analysis between 3D digital draping (using CLO3D) and physical draping on a dress form highlights two distinct modes of knowledge acquisition in fashion design—each with specific implications. In the digital environment, designers can instantly visualize the garment, quickly modify patterns, and simulate outcomes with precision. However, this mode often omits key material realities: there is no real sense of fabric weight, tension, or tactile feedback. Edges are treated as clean lines, and seam allowances are not inherently considered unless manually added. While digital tools offer efficiency and flexibility, they lack the bodily negotiation that occurs when working directly

with fabric. By contrast, dress form draping requires manual manipulation of fabric scraps and demands close attention to material behavior, balance, and fit. It is not always easy to visualize the final garment immediately, and the process is slower. Yet, it reveals crucial design challenges: how to refine raw edges, how to assemble complex shapes, and how seam allowances affect construction and manipulation. These tasks foster deeper engagement with form, space, and structure.

This comparison (Fig. 3) underscores that digital and physical modelling do not generate the same kind of knowledge. Digital tools excel in visualization and speed, but they risk abstraction. Physical draping, by contrast, supports an embodied, sensory understanding of the design process. For fashion education, this implies the need for hybrid approaches that teach not only how to visualize garments on a screen, but also how to feel, manipulate, and construct them in space.

Aspect	3D Digital Draping (CL03D)	Dress Form Draping
Visualization	Immediate garment visualization	Not immediate to visualize
Sewing/Assembly	Must simulate sewing every small piece	Not easy to sew small pieces physically
Pattern Management	Easy to edit or redesign patterns	Requires physical adjustments and experimentation
Material Behavior	Absent or limited (fabric is abstracted)	Directly experienced (weight, resistance, behavior)
Edges and Seam Allowances	Often overlooked; no seam allowance required	Must refine edges; seam allowances needed for assembly
Fabric-Piece Relationships	Controlled placement; cutting is virtual	Must manage distance between pieces during cutting
Construction Logic	Predefined by software	Requires figuring out how to assemble the pieces
Learning Mode	Visual, efficient, abstract	Tactile, slow, embodied

Figure 3. Digital vs Physical Draping

What the Hands Reveal

Hands-on making revealed insights often flattened in digital environments—such as the fabric's weight, resistance, and interaction with the body. These experiences activated a form of embodied knowledge, where understanding emerges through touch, slowness, and attentive engagement with materials. This resonates with the concept of thinking hands or narrating hands, where cognition is grounded in physical interaction. Just as medical professionals use their hands to detect signs within the body, fashion designers rely on their tactile engagement to understand fabric behavior, garment shape, and fit. A tailor's knowledge develops through the act of making and through haptic exploration—revealing how form and material co-evolve during the creative process. These insights hold significant implications for fashion education. An exclusive reliance on digital tools risks severing the designer's connection to the material world. Manual skills are not obsolete; rather, they are fundamental to understanding sustainability, the dynamics of design processes, and the materiality of garments. What is needed is a hybrid methodology—one that integrates craft-based practices and technological innovation, fostering a more holistic and sustainable approach to fashion.

CONCLUSIONS: BRIDGING CRAFT AND TECHNOLOGY

In conclusion, hand-making is more than a technique—it is a way of knowing. It fosters sensitivity, awareness, and care. Preserving manual skills alongside digital innovation allows future designers to engage with fashion in its full complexity: materially, physically, and ecologically. This contribution

aligns with broader reflections on sustainability and the concept of refashioning[17]—examining how waste can be transformed into valuable resources through design. It underscores the urgent need to reimagine garment production and to explore innovative methodologies that reduce or eliminate waste—particularly during the cutting stage. By adopting a dual approach—merging digital experimentation with physical prototyping—this research highlights the complementary nature of technology and craftsmanship. While digital tools offer creative potential and powerful simulation capacities, they cannot replace the tactile knowledge acquired through manual manipulation of fabric. Without this embodied understanding, digital design may overlook critical factors such as seam positioning, edge preservation, and compatibility with industrial cutting systems. The integration of digital innovation and manual expertise not only enriches the design process but also ensures that new methodologies are aligned with the functional and operational realities of the fashion system. By bridging these two dimensions, the study contributes to a more sustainable and responsive mode of fashion production—one that reduces waste while maintaining the aesthetic and technical standards required by the industry.

Finally, the concept of negative spaces—defined as the voids left by textile offcuts—emerges not only as a physical remnant but as a metaphorical and creative site. These spaces invite designers to engage in new narratives of value, transformation, and circularity within twenty-first-century fashion. This ongoing research, part of the author's PhD at the University of Florence, will continue to investigate how digital tools can further enhance design methodologies, especially in relation to the cutting phase, with the aim of integrating sustainability into the heart of fashion practice.

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