

# DEVELOPING A DISCOURSE IN FASHION DESIGN WHAT IS RESEARCH FOR FASHION DESIGN?

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## **Abstract**

*The concept of fashion has attracted a great deal of interest from a variety of academic disciplines such as history, culture, anthropology, sociology, psychology and semiotics to name a few. This has often resulted in tension between different approaches. At a conference held in England in 2009 concerning the future of fashion studies, a number of fashion scholars such as Rebecca Arnold, Christopher Breward, Professor Stella Bruzzi and many others, deliberated on the methodologies and research agendas that have emerged in the growing research area of fashion studies. It was noted that although fashion studies has gained momentum over the last decade as an interdisciplinary field of research, fashion as an academic subject has remained weak. Research activities in the field of fashion studies include the contribution of authors from other fields of study that preserve their own disciplinary identities (Riello & McNeil 2010:7). In order to develop the area of fashion studies as an interdisciplinary field of study that is acknowledge by the academy, McNeil (2010) notes that key areas of concern need to be addressed. These areas include the development of research that combines theory and history with the development of material products resulting in a methodological richness. This poses a challenge for the development of fashion studies as a research area as students are required to have practical experience in the skills required in making a product as well as an understanding of historical and theoretical practices that encompass fashion as a broad and complex social phenomenon.*

*In order to achieve this, an opportunity arises for fashion design education in South Africa to engage in a discourse that promotes research that emphasises issues of materiality combined with theoretical and historical constructs. Recent research activity in the department on masters and PhD level has emphasised the above. This paper is a discussion document by two lecturers from the department of Fashion Design, Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture at the University of Johannesburg, on the future and development of fashion design studies and suggests that design thinking provides an important basis on which further discussions on fashion design education may be pursued.*

**Key Words:** *fashion studies, design, fashion design, fashion education*

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The nature of fashion in its broadest context is a complex social phenomenon. The vast body of existing fashion literature approaches fashion studies from a variety of disciplinarily persuasions that argue theoretical frameworks that lie outside of the domain of the practice of fashion design as an applied field of design. This has resulted in an imbalance between fashion theory and fashion practice which is often confusing for students of fashion design when embarking on research activities. There is a growing awareness, both locally and internationally, that fashion design education needs to extend the entrenched model with its strong emphasis on practical concerns and studio activity to include research activities that will raise the profile of fashion design within the academic arena. This paper suggests that there is an opportunity for fashion design education in South Africa to engage in an academic discourse that promotes the development of research and supports the reinsertion of the nature and process of design into the discussion of fashion. Christopher Breward (2003:15) argues that central to any definition of fashion is the ability to answer questions of 'intention, style, craft and materiality'. The intention of this paper is to provide a platform around which further discussions on the academic development of fashion design may develop and is divided into three thought processes. In the first instance a brief overview of the concerns about the future of fashion studies is elucidated. The second aspect follows with a discussion on design thinking as a productive means to establish an orientation for the practice of fashion design as an applied field of design. Lastly, how the first two impact on fashion design education is discussed.

When engaging in literature concerning fashion it becomes evident that the study of fashion is presented as a complex social phenomenon taking on different meanings for different academic

disciplines where the interests of diverse fields of study are pursued. Historians focus on the origin and evolution of dress. Anthropologists study the role of culture as having an impact on fashion and dress. Sociologists address issues of collective behavior when adopting a style of dressing and Social Psychologists answer questions of personal motivation that underpin dress behavior. Although many academic disciplines use clothing and dress as the unit of analysis when studying fashion Yuniya Kawamura (2005:1) argues that fashion and clothing are two different concepts which can and should be studied separately. She continues by stating that clothing, as a material object, cannot be considered as fashion, which is a belief system, unless it has been adopted by a large portion of society. Fashions exist in many aspects of social life and can be treated as a material object, an abstract idea, a social phenomenon, a system, a cultural value or an attitude (Kawamura, 2010). This view is supported by Ingrid Loschek (2009:2) who acknowledges that fashion is an abstract idea that is negotiated within society. She however continues by stating that in the absence of the designers 'voice' it is the task of fashion theory to recognise and evaluate both the practical aspects of creative design, the structural features of clothing as well as the social contexts of a culture in which fashion develops (Loschek 2009:7).

Although the phenomenon of fashion has been used as an example to argue theories from other disciplinary persuasions, fashion studies have emerged as a growing area of study within its own right. At a conference held at the University of Warwick in England in 2009 concerning the future of fashion studies the following key areas of concern were discussed: the challenges of navigating an array of theoretical positions; how borrowed theory is often used without real understanding and depth; the need for fashion to acquire a reputation within the academy; neglecting the development and promotion of scholarship; the lack of research history in design schools; the development of ways of teaching theory that is rich in history and is relevant to theoretical content; the over historicism of fashion neglecting the technological and global meaning of fashion relevant to the twenty-first century. During the conference Dr Giorgio Riello noted that although there was tension between opposing views on fashion studies this was positive in that it initiated a dialogue which is better than a state of indifference (McNeil 2010:106). This provides an opportunity within the growing area of fashion studies to establish how fashion design as practice may contribute as being part of the interdisciplinary nature of fashion studies. Christopher Breward (2003:14) notes that the growing area of fashion studies is multi-disciplinary in that it presents fashion as the outcome of "the process of creative authorship, technological production and cultural dissemination". He continues by stating that the re-insertion of the nature and process of design into the discussion of fashion studies provides the means to reconcile "fashion as idea, object and image" (Breward 2003:15).

In order to understand fashion design as discipline, one needs to first discuss design in a broader context. As a discreet and integrative discipline, design has emerged from a discourse equally diverse as that of fashion, this view sees the field of design as a unitary concept that encompasses and amalgamates all the design disciplines (Margolin 1989). When reviewing the variety of definitions and descriptions of designing, John Chris Jones (2009:77) a Welsh designer with extensive experience in the field of design methods, notes that there seem to be as many different kinds of approaches to design processes as there are writers in the field. Jones (2009:78) suggests that possibly a firmer basis on which to define the act of designing would be to look at the end result of the chain of events that begins with the sponsor's wish and progresses through to "the actions of designers, manufacturers, distribution and consumers" to the ultimate effect that the designed object has in the world at large.

Richard Buchanan and Victor Margolin (1995a:xvii) state that design (as product planning) is a professional activity whose outcome can be affected by an analytical approach to method, whereas design (as product) is evident of values that have been instilled in it through a number of strategies. John Walker (2009:42) mentions that design has more than one meaning and can refer to:

- process (the act of designing);
- the result of that process (sketch/model/plan);
- the result of the process (product); and
- an overall pattern of a product (a design of a building).

Ben Highmore (2009:4) refers to design as a process-oriented concept rather than referring to it as a product. He mentions that design shifts between a multiple of forms ranging from the process which results in a final product to an active sense of moulding and shaping the world we live in. He further describes design by using process-focussed words such as "negotiation, orchestration and activity".

According to Walker (2009:43), design can be viewed in various contexts and be associated to disciplines such as fashion, architecture, jewellery, communication and engineering, to name a few.

In 1995 theorists Buchanan and Margolin (1995b:x) noted that a tendency had arisen during the twentieth century to disregard design as a subject worthy of serious study. They acknowledged that there was a need to broaden the discussion around design in order to “clarify the nature of design and improve common understanding of its cultural significance”. Buchanan and Margolin (1995b:xii) argued that design was [and still is] a central feature of cultural and everyday life that manifests in activities or services “that are designed for the purposes of work, play, learning and daily living”.

Design is regarded as a distinct discipline with its own area of research with the intention to develop a body of knowledge. Buchanan, Doordan and Margolin (2010:1) mention that design needs to respond to current social, economic and technological imperatives and needs to be reactive rather than proactive. It is therefore essential that design activity needs to be embedded in the discourse of design, what design is now and what it will be in the future. In turn, as noted by Buchanan et al. (2010:2), how we think of design has implications on how we study it, how it is taught and how we practice design. In March of 2008, the Kyoto Design Declaration was signed (Sotamaa 2009:51), emphasising the role of design in a sustainable and social responsible world. This in turn places an emphasis on design thinking and design research. The Kyoto Design Declaration was signed by members of the Cumulus Association in March 2008 and is an international body consisting of 140 universities and colleges of art, design and media, across the globe. The declaration marks a commitment by the members of the Cumulus group to share global responsibility for building sustainable, human centred creative societies (Somataa 2009: 51).

Buchanan et al. (2010:2) argue that design research can therefore be divided into two streams of thought. In the years leading up to the 1980s, design thinking (and research) was directed at ‘making’ [products] and included design studies, design literacy and design criticism. The focus in this area was firstly from a philosophical, anthropological or psychological point of view, and secondly had social meaning and included the consequences of the process or product. From the 1990s onwards, design thinking and research broadened its approach to include how products are made; in other words design as practice.

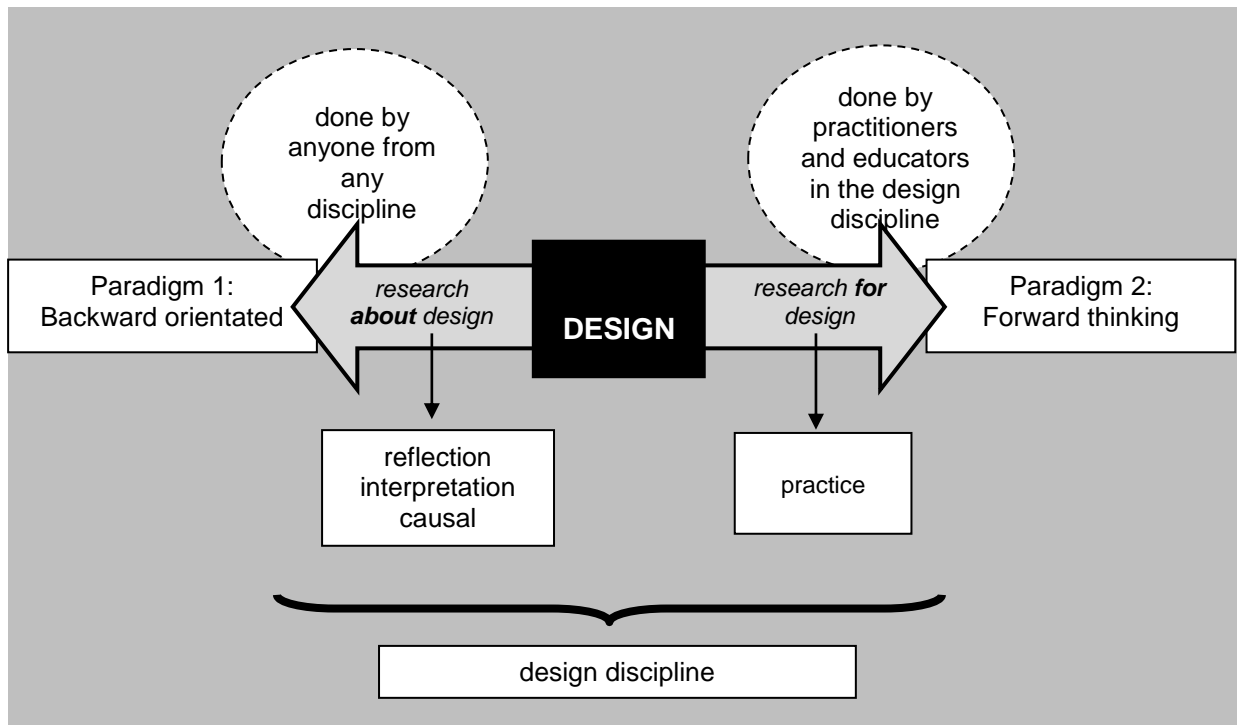
By the late nineties, research in design was divided into three stages. Stage one, as described by Buchanan et al. (2010:1), centred on *formation of design*, in other words, the place design had in the world and design integration. The second stage, according to Buchanan et al. (2010:2) focused on *fabrication*, and can be described as the translation of abstract ideas (process) of products. Most design research was (and still is) done in this area, and less research focussed on the role of the designer in the form making process. The second stage led to the four orders of design thinking. The four orders, as described in Buchanan et al. (2010:3), are as follows: The first order relates to communication and the delivery of information through images and symbols. The second order focuses on the construction of tangible artefacts or products. The third order is about the planning and implementation of actions, process or services. The fourth order deals with organising the complex wholes around us and provides systems and environments of human culture. The third stage is *evaluation* (assessment of functionality) and relates to the values of practice and drawing out the values in relation to what might be designed or the consequences of the practice of design.

Wolfgang Jonas (2010:37) in an article in Design Studies in 2001 mentioned that design in research terms was an underdeveloped research area and used borrowed theories to argue from. Then, and now, there is a danger in doing so, in that the borrowed theory often gives an isolated focus on the field of studies. Jonas mentioned (2010:38) that there is a necessity to continuously develop theories for any discourse, as to constantly use other theories (borrowed theories) from other disciplines can weaken the discourse and value system and that weakness can lead to a loss in communication or ability to communicate with other established disciplines such as philosophy or culture. In addition, Jonas (2010:39) mentions that in order to build a theory for design one needs to consider the practice of design, and thus develop a theory for the practice.

According to Jonas (2010:39), design research can be divided into the following paradigms of thought as depicted in figure 1. The first is *backward orientated* and relates to reflecting, interpreting and causal reconstructing of design. This therefore speaks to theory and can be done by anyone from any discipline and research from this paradigm becomes research *about* design. The second paradigm of thought is *forward thinking*, and relates to practice. Because this paradigm centres on the practice it can

only be described by practitioners in the field, the designers, and therefore research from this paradigm is described as research *for* design. According to Jonas (2010:48-49), design research is project orientated where the design process becomes the subject of design research and argues that the design practice and the process of design research are interrelated. These areas are not always clear cut, sometimes the division between design practice and the practice of design research are blurred, yet together they describe the discipline. Buchanan et al. (2010:7) reiterates this notion and mentions that the meeting ground of theory and practice in the twenty-first century is in the designed world of images, objects, activities and environments.

The above viewpoints are summarised in figure 1.



**Figure 1: Research in design (based on Jonas and Buchannan, Dooren & Margolin 2010)**

Ezio Manzini (2008:5-8) adds to this argument by saying that design research must be seen as a design activity developing [new] knowledge that is useful to those who design in order to use this [new] knowledge in the processes of design. He divides design knowledge into three cognitive artifacts that have different purposes, namely:

- visions: that stimulate and promulgate strategic discussion,
- proposal: that integrate knowledge into projects and
- tools: that assist in understanding and implementing design ideas.

If one adds these three constructs to the above diagram, tools form research that helps the designer understand the nature of what we design (research about design) and therefore are based in history, sociology or philosophy. Research for design includes ethnography, semiotics, ergonomics, technology and economic disciplines, and refers to research that stimulates and integrates knowledge in design visions and proposals. Manzini (2008:6) proposes a third aspect, that of research through design, and explains this to be the research that effects change through the discipline of design for example, sustainability. This third aspect highlights the need for autonomous design research, as he mentions "Design is a discipline that combines creativity and subjectivity with a dose of reflection and arguments". The knowledge produced in research through design cannot be "...implicit and integrated, but should be explicit, discussable, transferable and accumulable."

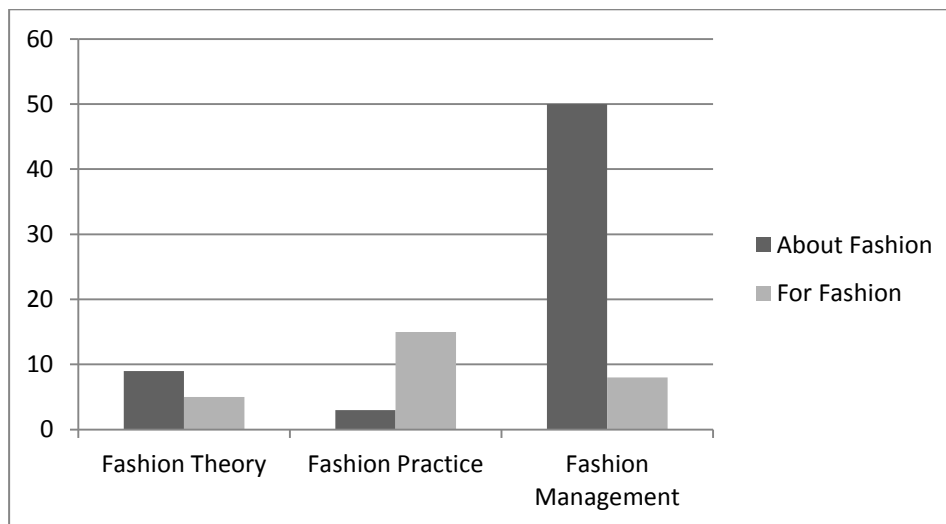
How does this discussion inform research about and for fashion design? Research *about* fashion is debated in society and this is where fashion studies lies. Research about fashion centres on product and the impact of product(s) within the context of society, therefore research *about* fashion would not be possible without a product. On the other end of the spectrum (figure 1), research *for* fashion (fashion design), centres on process, product and form, and (as per Manzini) developing [new] knowledge for

fashion design as a construct, fashion design as a process and for fashion design as product are key to fashion design as a way forward.

A survey of abstracts (published in 2010 and 2011) of three well-known international fashion journals, namely *Journal of Fashion Theory*, *Journal of Fashion Practice* and *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management*, emphasises that current research in fashion predominantly lie within the paradigm of research *about* fashion.

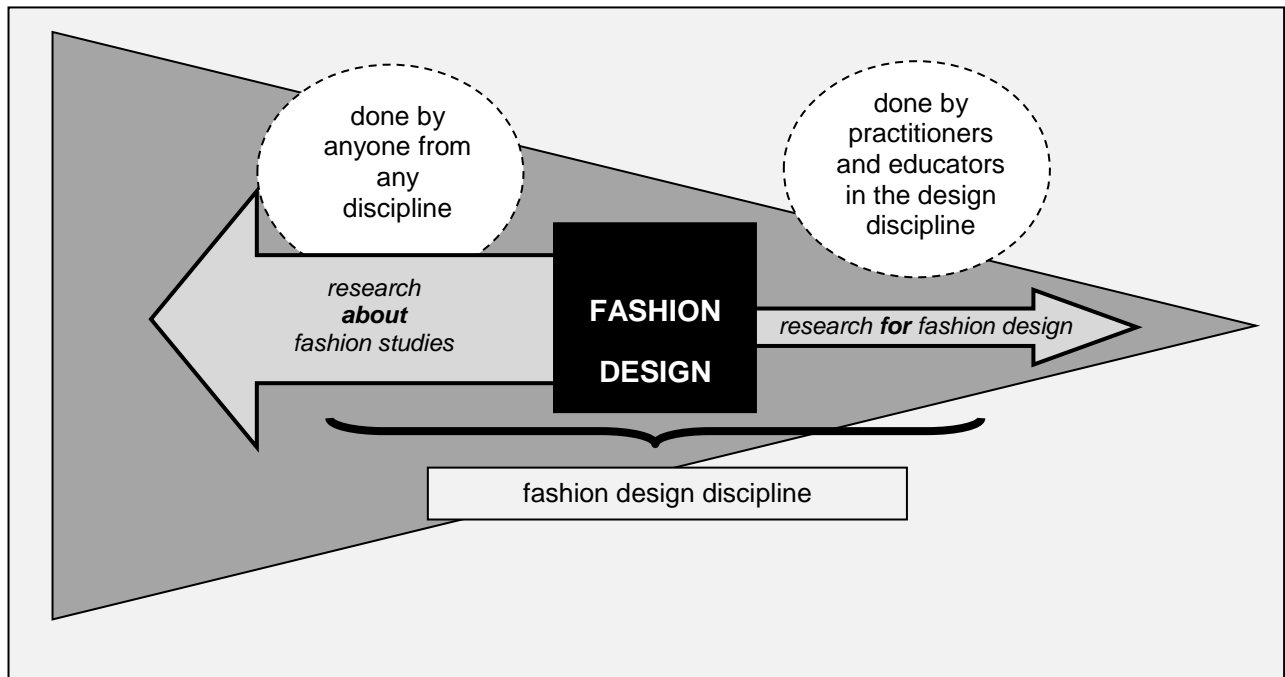
Fashion Theory	About Fashion				For Fashion	
	Social		History		Process	Product
	8		1		2	3
Fashion Practice	About Fashion				For Fashion	
	Other				Process	Product
	3				8	7
Fashion Marketing	About Fashion				For Fashion	
	Purchasing	Consumer behaviour	Marketing and branding	Buss. strategy and retail	Process and product	and
	14	11	10	15	8	
	<b>Total</b>				<b>28</b>	

**Table 1: Focus of current research**



**Graph 1: Illustrates an emphasis of research conducted about fashion**

For this exercise, only essays, articles and exhibition reviews were considered. The journal *Fashion Theory* presents four issues per year (volume) with an average of five reports or critical essays per issue in addition to book and exhibition reviews. In the sample, no book reviews were considered. The journal *Fashion Practice* publishes approximately the same number of articles per issue in four issues per year. *Fashion Marketing and Management* has been in circulation a lot longer than *Fashion Theory* and *Fashion Practice* (since 1996) and delivers 4 issues per year, averaging 9 articles per issue. Both *Fashion Marketing and Management* and *Fashion Practice* do not include book reviews in the journal.



**Figure 2: Fashion design research**

A reoccurring notion that applies to fashion and design is that both areas of study have been approached from diverse perspectives and have emerged as interdisciplinary areas of study. Fundamental to both areas is that they exist within a system of interrelated activities which must adapt to environmental and cultural change with implications for both practice and education. If one views figure one with regard to research in fashion design, it becomes clear that research *about* fashion [fashion studies] has dominated research *for* fashion [fashion design]. Figure 2 explains the phenomenon in a schematic format.

The education of fashion designers at an undergraduate level has traditionally placed emphasis on 'practical skills' training with a vocationally focused curriculum comprising technique, professional knowledge and job-related skills. Theoretical aspects consist essentially of what can be termed 'trade theory' with focus being placed on the chronology of dress based in a historical paradigm. If fashion design adopts what Buchanan et al (2010) emphasise, how we think about fashion design impacts on how we teach fashion design, how the student studies it, and how it (fashion design) ultimately informs the practice of fashion design, then the following research *for* fashion design could be divided into three categories (modelled on Design Research: a disciplined conversation by Nigel Cross 1999:6), namely:

- **People:**  
This research area has a focus on fashion design knowledge and includes how people design fashion. For example empirical studies of fashion designer behaviour, theoretical deliberation and reflection of the nature of fashion design ability and studies of the development of design ability in individuals. This can lead to how people learn fashion design and how design development may best be nurtured in design education.
- **Processes:**  
This research area focuses on fashion design praxis, and includes tactics and strategies of designing fashion, research methodology for fashion design, the study of processes of fashion design and development and application of techniques which could aid the fashion designer.
- **Products:**  
Product is a research area that focuses on fashion design as a phenomenon, and includes forms, materials and finishes, semantics of the discipline, syntax and form in fashion design, efficiency and economy in fashion design and relationships between form and context.

If fashion design is thought of as being part of the integrated system of fashion, that is equal in value to all other parts such as production, distribution and consumption, research *for* the discipline of fashion design and the development of theoretical underpinning for this discipline is imperative.

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## Short Biography

**Desiree Smal** currently heads the Department of Fashion Design at the University of Johannesburg and has been involved with fashion design education for the past 23 years. Her current research interest is in Fashion Design, and in particular sustainable design and eco-design within the fashion industry on a global and national level. In addition, she is passionate about developing the discourse in the discipline of fashion design in South Africa, as well as how the above manifests in design education.

**Carol Lavelle** is a lecturer in the Department of Fashion Design at the University of Johannesburg. She is currently registered for an MTech in Fashion within the Faculty of Art Design and Architecture. Her interest lies in the development and promotion of research activities that recognise that fashion design is part of an integrated system that is equal in value to issues of production, distribution, adoption and consumption.