



COLLECTIVE MAKING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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As researchers and academics at LCF, we have long worked in the fields of fashion sustainability and design for social innovation, and have recently come closer together under the UAL DESIS Lab. Building on Ezio Manzini's (2015) pioneering work on *design for social innovation*, we recognise that in the context of today's polycrisis, the lines between social design and design for social innovation have blurred. Contemporary debates foreground *design justice* (Costanza-Chock, 2020), *designing social change* (Noel, 2023), and *design from the margins* (Casas-Romero & Mazzarella, 2024). Recently, Manzini (2024) has highlighted a double shift in the field of design for social innovation – from those “rich in time, energy and resources” to those “poor in these”, and from the centre to the peripheries.

The Portrait(s) of Camden project, led by Joana Monteiro, explores co-design for social change with individuals from varied cultural, social, and lived experiences. Through a series of making workshops in the London Borough of Camden, it opens fashion and textiles up as a democratic and participatory process that enhances inclusivity, wellbeing, and empowerment. The variety of individual expression and creative energy displayed in the textile portraits reflects the diversity and richness of Camden's evolving population and has demonstrated empowerment in action. A sense of pride and tangible achievement of the makers is inherent in the final quilts, a collective statement that stands witness to real lives and the positive effects of the shared activity of making.

Situated within the field of *fashion design for sustainability*, this project focuses on the social pillar (Mazzarella & Williams, 2022) and exemplifies how designers are increasingly acting as *hosts* and *facilitators* (Williams, 2018).

Left: Camden Inspire Festival,
2nd September 2023

Designers now play multiple roles: facilitators, relationship brokers, collaborators, and empathetic listeners. Joana's *sororalistic* approach extends beyond maternalistic or fraternalistic models (Thorpe & Gamman, 2011), prioritising trust, care, and equity built through shared making.

Such collective practices challenge conventional notions of authorship and power in design. They decentralise the designer's role and reframe design as a social practice centred on relationships and experimentation rather than on mere physical outputs. Yet, the very notion of "empowerment" warrants reflection – who gives power to whom, and under what conditions?

As in this project, collective making, or "social making" (Hackney *et al.*, 2022), generates tangible and intangible benefits: skill-building, creativity, pride, self-confidence, agency, and community engagement. It preserves cultural heritages while nurturing mental wellbeing and belonging. As Charny (2011) notes, making connects cultures and generations, offering freedom, pleasure, and self-expression. For Helen Storey, working with refugee communities in Jordan and Malawi, making allows sharing care, meditating, and shaping better lives (Black & Storey, 2023).

While *Portrait(s) of Camden* is a community art project, it also hints at new models of sustainable fashion entrepreneurship, echoing findings from *Fostering Sustainable Practices* (Black *et al.*, 2021), which demonstrated the radical potential of purpose-led, small-scale design ventures. Yet, challenges persist: navigating community dynamics, limited funding, institutional barriers, and the emotional toll on facilitators.

Projects like this raise crucial questions: how can designers work ethically with vulnerable communities, decolonise dominant design practices, and sustain impact beyond initial project timeframes and funding? How can we capture the intangible, transformative effects of social design?

Ultimately, we see *Portrait(s) of Camden* as planting seeds of hope – moving from a fashion system negligent to people and planet toward one grounded in care, empathy, equity, collaboration, and social justice. As Joana's PhD supervisors, we have witnessed her evolution as a pattern-maker, designer, researcher, entrepreneur, and change-maker. This project already stands as part of her doctoral legacy, fostering community, agency, and paving pathways toward a more equitable, diverse, inclusive, and sustainable future, in and through fashion.

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