

Finding “Hope”: An Empathetic Discovery in Designing with Women at a Local Shelter

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this co-creative design process was to inspire a valued sense of self for underprivileged women through imaginative exploration in a fashion design experience. Fundamental design education lessons were used to empower these women with a vocabulary to collaboratively discuss ideas with the fashion designer. The goal of this shared engagement was to encourage creativity and positively impact the self-confidence of these women by generating a designed garment. Three women from a social enterprise job-training program at a local shelter were invited to join in this collaboration. This program sets out to impart confidence and hope for women in poverty aspiring to improve their situations. Thus, this design project was initiated by exploring a shared understanding of the word “Hope” as an inspiration. To gain empathy for everyone involved, the group collectively began by exploring personal meanings of hope resulting in a word map that initiated the design process. The final design includes a digitally printed wrap skirt made of silk crepe de chine and a silk top developed from two heart shaped pattern pieces. Layered over the silk top is a wrap shawl in the shape of a heart. The final design is displayed at the shelter along with a poster illustrating the process to serve as a reminder of “Hope.”

Keywords: underprivileged women, job-training program, hope, empathy, design

Introduction

On any given night in the United States there may be approximately 550,000 people coping with homelessness (U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development, 2016). With this abundance in population in the United States, this is a community that cannot be overlooked. The fastest growing portion of this homeless population are women who often times require different needs than a population of homeless men. (Phipps, Dalton, Maxwell and Cleary, 2019). Increasingly, more of these

aging homeless women are searching for shelter and seeking to construct a sense of self and valued purpose of life (Gonyea and Melekis, 2016). Adding meaning to one’s life can come from a variety of factors such as community, relationships, family, and other activities that provide one with a sense of fulfillment. Specifically, Prescott et al. (2008) discovered that there was a positive connection between art related activities and life achievements of the homeless. Past research has acknowledged women’s resiliency, autonomy and hope to move out of

homelessness (Phipps, Dalton, Maxwell & Cleary, 2018) and others have explored inequities of fashion makeovers with Welfare-to Work (Gruys, 2019). However, there is a void of research looking at collaborative fashion design experiences as having positive impacts with homeless women. This research attempts to fill a gap within homelessness by engaging underprivileged women in a shelter through a co-creative design experience. By using these co-creative design approaches, this project explores accessible ways of engaging these women in a fashion design process. The goal of this project was to use collaborative fashion design as way to inspire and positively impact the self-confidence of these women through use of their creativity in designing a garment.

The design process for this “Hope” garment was a collaborative experience between one fashion designer and three women participating in a social enterprise job-training program at a local shelter. The aspiration of this job-training program is to impart confidence and provide hope for women in poverty who are striving to advance their economic circumstances. Women take part in various skill building activities such as sewing and gardening. The word “Hope” served as an initial inspiration for the designed garment as a result of the main mission of this program that the women were participating in. Ideas for the designed garment were collected through a series of accessible creative activities that occurred over a period of two months. These various creative activities took place at the shelter to ensure these women could interact in a comfortable, familiar environment that was most natural to them. In order to gain empathy for everyone involved, the group collectively explored personal meanings of hope through a discussion to create a shared understanding. Further, this initial creative exercise helped to establish a foundation for an exciting, open and empathetic dialogue that continued throughout the entire design process.

Empathy in design

Empathy as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary is, “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner” (Merriam-Webster.com, 2019). This form of understanding is more than observing but rather a non-judgmental act of relating to a person to interpret their unique situations and realize why specific experiences are meaningful for them (Battarbee 2004). Further, McDonagh (2006) describes empathy as involving an intuitive ability to perceive other’s motivations, emotions, values, priorities and even inner conflicts. Empathy is often used by designers as an effective approach to better understand others, and it is highly regarded as an integral component in design research and process. David Kelley, founder of the successful international design company IDEO, has been an influential advocate for empathy in the design process. Empathetic design is especially beneficial in the design process when focus shifts from practical and functional issues to more personal and emotional experiences (Mattelmäki and Battarbee, 2002). In the case of the “Hope” project, the intention of the resulting design was one meant to be set on more emotional experiences rather than practical or functional making it fitting for an empathetic approach. Designers may find that using empathy when designing can become an exciting and imaginative venture in creating for someone else’s circumstances (Koskinen and Battarbee, 2003). A sensitive focus and willingness from the designer to engage directly in a personal way with someone is usually required (Battarbee, 2004). This approach is resulting in professional designers transforming to more facilitator roles that embrace inclusivity in the process (Valentine, Ballie, Bletcher, Robertson & Stevenson, 2017).

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Co-creative design processes

Co-creative design processes engage people through a variety of creative activities to generate ideas throughout the design process. This close connection with the designer throughout the process makes co-creation inherently embrace an empathetic mindset. In this role, the designer serves to support idea generation while those involved continue to inspire the process. These approaches place people as experts of their individual experiences that actively influence the design process instead of passive approaches such as interviews and observation (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). While co-creative spaces are often exciting and interactive, these methods are constantly developing and can get a bit chaotic (Sanders, 2006). However, there are many benefits to these approaches as they allow people to freely communicate and collaborate across disciplines (Steen, Manschot, & De Koning, 2011). While designers from a variety of disciplines apply co-creative approaches in the design process, several fashion and textile projects are worth noting. “The Peoples’ Print” by Melanie Bowles and Emma Neuberg is an ongoing textile design project that empowers consumers through direct involvement in the design and making process. Through workshops, tutorials, competitions and exhibitions they are creating innovative systems to engage the consumer in the design process to create unique bespoke textile designs. Earley (2017) also highlights the effectiveness of co-designing as part of the process used with the Textiles Environment Design research group. Knowledge of co-design approaches can have the potential to create textile design interventions that enable individuals to partake in personalizing new clothing concepts and participate in the making (Valentine, Ballie, Bletcher, Robertson & Stevenson, 2017).

Everyday creativity

In order for co-creative design processes to thrive, it is integral that designers value the everyday creativity of those they are actively engaged with.

Amabile (1983) suggests that there is an innate creativity in everyone and that those with normal cognition are capable of demonstrating some level of creativity in a variety of different domains. Perhaps the reason is because many people find an array of creative experiences enjoyable (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Richards (2010) describes this form of everyday creativity as something universal to all and evident in the human ability to innovate, adapt and act on “gut feelings”. This type of everyday creativity is valuable and necessary in co-creative design spaces. When people often talk about everyday experiences there is an abundance of creativity that shows up in activities such as adapting a recipe, decorating a workspace, or spending time on hobbies (Sanders, 2006). Piirto (2004) further explains in an example with teacher workshops where they are asked what activities they enjoy so much that they lose all track of time. At first they may say they are not creative, but when they think of activities that are challenging yet pleasurable enough to do for a long time, they discover their creativity in a variety of hobbies such as cooking, building furniture, designing exercise routines and gardening. This creativity is also found in experiences such as making breakfast or resolving conflict in the workplace (Richards, 2010). Through 25 years of experience as a design research practitioner, Sanders (2006), discovered this can be an expansive range of creativity activities from basic organizing to more artistic examples such as drawing and painting. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1997) enhancing creativity through exploration and discovery may consequently improve well-being, making this co-creative experience potentially valuable to the underprivileged women in this project.

Process

Upon IRB approval, three women from a local shelter working with a social enterprise job-training program were invited to take part in this collaboration. The mission of this program sets out to instill hope and self-confidence for women in poverty

desiring to improve their economic condition. This project began with three weekly lessons to provide the women with a foundation of design knowledge. These lessons included information on color theory, Gestalt principles and design principles relating to line and shape. This introduction provided a basic vocabulary for the women to discuss design ideas with the designer. Educating the women in this way aided in allowing effective communication between the group. It was also a way to level the playing field and give them confidence to talk with a designer more knowledgeable than them in this area. The lessons were presented in an approachable way to insure belief in the creativity of each woman. The women were enthusiastic about initiating the project in this way. Inspiration for the design in this project came from exploring the word “Hope” as part of the main mission for the participants in this program. The group collectively began discussing the word “Hope” from individual perspectives and as a whole. A word map was created from this discussion and used to help drive the silhouette, color, print and detailing for the design. The group then went through a series of fun creative exercises to experiment with color, print and silhouette.

Before the starting any activities, each woman was given a sketchbook and pen to record their ideas throughout the process. The design process for this garment started with the women exploring a range of color palettes. Color for the design was discovered through exploration with paint chips from a local home improvement store. The women began by creating their own individual unique color palettes to represent what hope looked like to them by cutting and pasting the paint chips in their sketchbooks. Color is often highly personal and subjective, so starting with this activity immediately made them feel comfortable voicing what colors they liked. Cutting the swatches was a simple task that was also welcoming in this design process. While the color palettes had differences, there were several commonalities between the women. Together the group discussed these similarities such as bright colors that included yellows, blues and some fuchsia hues as seen in Figure 1. The yellows related to the sun and brightness that made them feel happy. The blues provided them with feelings of peace and calm. Another theme was that most chosen colors were light values. These lighter colors made them generally feel optimistic and hopeful for the future.

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Figure 1. Illustrates the pages from each of the women’s color palette activities

The next activity provided the women with the opportunity to represent the word hope through hand drawn symbols in their sketchbook. To make sure they felt comfortable with doodling, the designer encouraged any kind of experimentation and exploration. The designer also did not do any sketching in order to prevent any intimidation. It was important to explain that there were no perfect drawings and anything that they sketched was acceptable and encouraged. Even freely scribbling could illustrate a representation of how they feel about “Hope”. This helped to set a tone for the activity that was approachable and demonstrated a respect for the everyday creativity that each possess. The women

initially laughed while starting this sketching process, but by the end were pleased with some of the ideas they came up with. While there were differences between the women, there were also many similarities of what they drew. Some common themes included flowers, hearts, the sun and rainbows as seen in Figure 2. There were even a few doodles of the word “Hope” with a combination of these symbols within the word. As the group discussed, the flowers seemed important and appealing for the concept of beauty and new growth. The designer took each individual woman’s flower and combined them together to create an original print for a textile design for the garment.



Figure 2. Shows a variety of the doodles from the women’s sketchbooks

As a way to explore shape and silhouette, the women were provided a half scale dress form and a heart-shaped piece of muslin for the next activity. The heart shape was chosen as a representation from the women’s past doodles in their sketchbooks. With this heart-shaped piece of muslin the women were able to experiment with draping it in different, unique ways on the dress form. This was a way to include the previous heart theme from the doodles in a three-dimensional way. The women had fun playing with the fabric, pinning it and shaping it in different ways. While the other activities were done separately in their

individual sketchbooks, the women decided to work together on this draping activity. There was lots of laughter, fun and enjoyment to this activity. By providing them an initial heart shape it created a more accessible way to creatively play with different ideas. Figure 3 shows how the women were able to come up with various creatively draped garments. Giving them the context of a body and garment allowed them to draw on their knowledge of sewing. It was clear the women felt they could relate to this activity as it got them thinking about things they’ve made in the past or things they wish they could make in the future.



HEART SHAPED
PATTERN PIECE



Figure 3. This photo demonstrates the different views of creative draping the women imagined through heart shaped pattern pieces

The designer then created a series of illustrated ideas from all the previous creative activities. This included silhouette ideas from the collaborative draping activity with the heart shaped pattern pieces, print designs from the flowers in the previous doodling sketches, and different colorways from the original paint chip explorations. The designer selected five design ideas to present to the group. On a later date, the group collectively examined the ideas in a critique. Each individual design idea was discussed, followed up by each member voicing their favorites. While there was some variance in thoughts all agreed on the best design to represent the word “Hope”. Figure 4

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highlights the chosen design with a heart based on the five total designs. Through this critique process the women were able to utilize some of the design vocabulary from the initial lessons to discuss the ideas. Knowing that an artistic critique might be something the women were unfamiliar with, the designer led the process with an empathetic perspective. This inclusive approach was used to make sure that everyone’s voice was heard and that everyone felt comfortable talking about the ideas. During the discussion one woman commented about the design selection, “It was amazing that we all agreed on one pattern and color. We put in a lot of our own ideas.”



Figure 4. Shows the designers illustrations from the creative activities done by the women. The heart highlights the chosen design by the group.

Findings and discussion

The final design includes a wrap skirt made of silk crepe de chine and a silk top developed from two heart shaped pattern pieces. A third heart shaped pattern piece was used to create an overlaying shawl also made from silk. These three heart pattern pieces were used to represent the three women from the local shelter. The floral sketches drawn by the women were used in multiple ways on the garment. On the skirt the floral sketches from the women were turned into a repeat print by the designer in Adobe Illustrator. A border motif of the flower sketches was then layered over the repeat print at the bottom edge to finish off the skirt. This skirt was digitally

printed on a Mimaki DS-1600 textile printer. Some minor revisions to the garment were made such as overall length based on reevaluating some proportions of the design. The silk top created from two heart shaped pattern pieces also has the flower sketches incorporated as a motif cut out in silk organza and layered as an applique along the edges. Using a digital textile print along with an applique of the floral sketches provides a different interpretations of women's work. Figure 5 shows the final design which is displayed at the shelter along with a poster illustrating the process to serve as a reminder of "Hope" for any woman entering the shelter.



Figure 5. This is the final resulting design from the collaboration with the three women



Figure 6. These detailed close ups show the print and motif of the combined sketches from the three women

All three women responded positively to this design process. It was clear that not only were they comfortable in participating, they were excited to be a part of this process. This was achieved, due largely in part to a continual empathetic dialogue between the groups. These sessions were not held under the thought of strict attendance policies or with rigid outlines. There were times when someone might be running late due to bus schedules, personal ailments or other reasoning, but they were always welcomed in to the process. Flexibility was included in each activity in case more time was needed. Conversations might have digressed on occasion, but often led to a new understanding of each other. Overall the women were excited to be a part of the design and could not wait to see the final result. Feedback from the women at the end of the process provided some positive evidence. As an example, on participant said, "This lifted my spirit to a whole new level. I would tell all my friends about this experience." Another woman positively responded about the uniqueness of the process by saying, "I have never been a part

of this kind of experience before!". Upon completion of the design, the simple pattern pieces were given to the women to further explore and modify to create new items for their training program shop at a local marketplace. Digital files of the print were also given to them to make their own printed fabric to sell in their marketplace.

Conclusion

An increasing number of homeless women are looking for a sense of value and meaning in their lives. As this population continues to grow, it is important to find empathetic approaches that could help provide insight into new purposes for the lives of these women. This project illustrates an opportunity to engage underserved populations, such as these homeless women, in co-creative fashion design processes with goals of adding meaning to their lives by valuing their everyday creativity and looking hopeful at their resiliency. Despite this process being limited to three women, each one expressed a sense of value and optimism from the experience. The findings from this project indicate that collaborative

experiences with underserved populations such as the homeless can have a positive impact. This could have implications for additional shelters to consider adding other art related activities for their occupants as a way to raise their spirits by valuing their creativity and cultivating their imagination to help bring meaning to their lives. While this fashion project did require additional financial materials such as fabric, sewing machines and other various items, some aspects of photography are now very accessible creative outlets for which one can express everyday creativity. Drawing and collaging are also available forms of expressing everyday creativity that may be useful in shelters. Limitations to this study could provide opportunities for future empathetic research in fashion design with this population. The exploratory nature of this project was limited to only the three women and feedback was only followed up immediately completing the project. In future projects it may be worthwhile to follow up with the population served on a later date to see if these experiences continue to have a lasting impact on their lives.

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