Developing Methodologies for Creating a Textile Design Collection based on Archive Material

Slide 2

My research is involved with working towards a methodology for developing textile designs from archive material and historical collections. At a future point, this practice led project will select and use a number of Parker Knoll fabric samples from the Parker Collection of upholstery fabrics currently held London Metropolitan University. I intend to apply my methodologies for utilising these historical collections to initiate new textile designs.

Slide 3

As an early stage researcher, I am looking for a picture of current research, as well as established texts, and these are questions that I am asking of these precedents-

- how do textile designers work?
- why and how do designers work with archives? What are their motivations?
- how do designers work with archives, and how do they work as research precedents?
- who else uses textile archives, and how do they use them?
- what can I take forward from these, and where are the gaps that my research might begin to fill?

I want to outline today which precedents are currently informing my work, briefly looking at examples of the above that I found useful.

Designers use textile archive for a variety of motivations, most frequently as reference for reproducing close imitations of existing historical or genre collections.
However, there are also numerous examples of designers taking inspiration from the archive that reflects something deeper about the subject matter. In addition to visual inspiration, this could reference a particular technique, a historical memory or commemoration of a location, industry, person, or sociological circumstance.

**Slide 4 how do designers work with archives?**

Looking at how designers work with archives has started with an examination of the methods used for textile design development, closely linked with pedagogical approaches to design.

Current literature on the study of textile design development shows that this is an area that has a 'scarcity of literature regarding textile design approaches to archive utilization.'

**Slide 5**

The thesis of Torunn Kjolberg, gives a precedent for the discussion of textile design methodology being inextricably linked with the teaching practices in Higher Education in the UK. She believes that the teaching models that are instilled at design schools are those which the designer continues to follow in professional practice.

Furthermore, these are historically grounded in the experience of the industry connections of both institute and staff. Although they followed the art school model, design schools invariably emphasized vocational training, sometimes linked directly to places of work, particularly in locations close to textile industry. The emphasis on commercially creative skills has prepared the student for an industry focused career. This means that they would undertake visual

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2. Kjolberg, Torunn, Transfer Report Mphil to PhD, University of Brighton, Faculty of Arts and Architecture, May, 2009, p19
research, defined by Douglas, Scopa and Gray\textsuperscript{4} as ‘research as critical practice’ but without the necessity for analytical reflection on their outcomes.

Textile design as part of ‘formal research’,\textsuperscript{5} for academic study is much less prevalent. Helena Britt, of Glasgow School of Art, argues that ‘there are comparatively low numbers of staff holding PhD qualifications, and small numbers of design research degree students, \textsuperscript{6} in the design subjects, as opposed to traditionally academic.

As a rationale for this situation, she describes the pressure on textile academic teaching staff, wishing to continue their professional practice which keeps their contacts, profile and technical skills relevant (particularly in digital), with the demands of assessable research. There is seldom a compatible match, ‘Work produced solely from individual creative or professional practice, no matter how reputable, is unlikely to meet AHRC (2012) requirements.’\textsuperscript{7}

This can account for the low output of formal research by textile practitioners, who when forced to prioritise, often choose to continue their professional practice. Not only does this keep their links with industry but can provide live projects and current skills which will also be of benefit to their students.

There is no doubt that textile designers must meet the rigors of academic criticism to be included in research discourse. Examples of practitioners who are undertaking research that can be considered both critical practice and formal research appear to be few, and further study into why and how textile designers engage with both types of practice is viable.

\textsuperscript{6} Britt, H, The Art of Textile Design Research: Educator Approaches to Creative Practice
\textsuperscript{7} Britt, H, The Art of Textile Design Research: Educator Approaches to Creative Practice
- how do designers work with archives, and how do they work as research precedents?

**Slide 7 Shadow Tissues**

Recent research precedents in textile design provide valuable insight on how researchers from various disciplines identify, interrogate and interpret archival material.

One method is a laboratory style recreation of a technique, as demonstrated by the ‘Shadow Tissues’ project which attempted to replicate the production of a fabric that combines print with weave, where the machinery used, along with the expertise of the workers employed, has now disappeared. Philip Sykas and Trish Belfield set out to recreate the fabrics, knowing that they would have to improvise to reconstruct the methods to do so.8

Without details of the original production, Belfield took the theory found in the records and original samples to research by practice. Their practical recreations were unable to solve some of the technical difficulties encountered, and they concluded that although the machinery needed could be reproduced, the associated knowledge had been lost.

The comprehensive investigation into the technical means of recreating the fabrics led to subsequently innovating with these processes, to develop and take the technique to another level with outcomes that are aesthetically more contemporary. The results show how far this ‘laboratory’ style of investigation with archive material can be taken, although there are issues about how it could be used commercially, one of the original research questions that was asked.

There have been numerous projects undertaken by textile designers using archive material to develop new work.

In the Awaken Project: Contemporary Fashion and Textile Development of Archive Material, the paper written up on a project which culminated in an Exhibition in 2009, members of staff at Glasgow School of Art used the Archive and Collections Centre at the School, to inspire fashion and textile related outcomes.

The project set out to explore the creative processes used, and to record and critically analyse the results. The aim ‘was to add to the minimal existent literature regarding the textile and fashion design creative process, specifically related to utilization of archive resources.’

Fourteen members of staff selected items, both textile and non-textile related, but the majority selecting non-textile, including photographs, architectural drawings, a travel journal and Charles Rennie Mackintosh’s sketchbooks.

The participants design development processes were documented in Creative Practitioner Journals which not only provided an insight to the methodological approaches, but aided self-reflection and understanding.

Some of the designer’s outcomes in terms of material selection, design and production processes appear to be closely linked to their normal practices. This might suggest that established designers are

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reluctant to take risks in a public project, in case experimental work does not resolve in an aesthetically pleasing result. Britt appears to be surprised at the anxiety this public showcase caused some of the participants, particularly as there was no commercial requirement. She speculates on the possible differences that there could be between archive inspired products that are for a gallery space and those designed for commercial use, suggesting that there can be further research into archive utilization in the fashion and textile industries. Does this suggest the archive/gallery project, even without a commercial remit, is too limiting? Do designers require that the outcome should have a focused theme to allow for in depth engagement?

Slide 10

Another mixed exhibition of artists and textile practitioners, the Bradford Pick and Mix Exhibition, held in early 2015, responded to artefacts in the Bradford College Textile Archive. This comprises of remnants of the many mills and factories of the textile industry that dominated the town and surrounding area for centuries. Much of the contents were saved by textile staff at the college, and fellow researchers, aware that as the traditional manufacturing diminished, valuable evidence of a whole way of life was in danger of disappearing forever. This has given the Bradford staff a particularly strong attachment to their archive, motivating them to respond with methods that do it justice.

Slide 11

In the Symposium that followed, one of the participants to the Exhibition, embroiderer Hannah Lamb spoke on how she commemorated the career of a lifelong employee at Lister’s Mills, in Yorkshire with her stitched and cyanotype tribute, inspired by one of

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10 Lamb, Hannah, How to Use Archives Creatively, paper given at Infinite and Various Conference, Bradford College of Design, April 2015
his weave plans. Textile pieces such as Hannah’s are accomplished and evocative, reminding us that the disappearance of the skills and knowledge is one of great loss to the heritage of textile production.

**Slide 12**

Another contributor, Claire Wellesley-Smith, used a recipe book for black dyes compiled by David Smith, a Halifax based dyer, printer, writer and strict Baptist minister.\(^\text{11}\) Her response was to work with local people on activities that benefitted the community and the area, growing plants for natural dyeing, and taking part in textile based activities, sewing and telling stories.

Both of these responses to archive have addressed an issue of relevance to their post-industrial location, and to the social issues arising. The method employed by Wellesley-Smith ensures there is a continuation of activity that is of benefit to the community and could be argued as a valid legacy for the dyers’ recipes, now that they can serve no other practical purpose.

**Slide 13 who else uses textile archives, and how do they use them?**

**Slide 14**

There are two important precedents for textile archive providing historical and sociological information. Firstly the textile remnants known as the Foundling Textiles. These are 5,000 scraps of textile used to identify babies who were left at the Foundling Hospital by women, in the mid 18\(^{\text{th}}\) century, the majority of whom used scraps of their own clothing as identifiers, in the hope that they would one day return to reclaim their child. These are mainly woolen and cotton garments which were worn by most of the population, rare examples as this was clothing that was recycled, handed down, cut up and

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**Commented [2]:**

you must grasp the difference between method and methodology, esp as the latter is the crux of your project title! method is the how of doing something and methodology is a systematic, critical do comparative study across methods. see Friedman and others to get this right.
reused as children’s clothing and household linens, until it was worn away. These small swatches are listed, with information on the babies, but also describing the name and content of the fabric.

Historian John Styles recognized that these textiles not only provide a precious insight into the clothing that ordinary people wore, and but also an accidental source of information on the fabrics themselves, and the terminology used to describe them. For me, this suggests that my response to the archive may need to involve not only a textile outcome, but also a contextual written narrative on the circumstances around the selection, manufacture and use of the fabrics.

**Slide 15**

In the one year VARI Project, the Victoria and Albert Museum has worked with researchers and academics to enhance the existing provision by the Museum, in order to make it more accessible to an international and public audience.

Using different formats, such as conferences, object handling and study sessions, they looked at cross-disciplinary research. One example was a workshop inviting spinners into the Museum to use spinning wheels of the type used from 1400-1800. Alongside of the demonstration, fabrics from this time were shown, so the connections could be made between the two, and further understanding of the construction and process, including weave methods and use of yarns.

These methods provide the starting point for a range of different approaches into the use of archive material, and suggest that combining the experience and skills of different practices through

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13
conversation during a demonstration, or handling session, can bring about new insights.

**Slide 15 Conclusion**

The precedents suggest that there is a gap in the literature available on how, and why textile designers are involved in research. There is little understanding about who is undertaking research that can be considered both critical practice and formal research. In addition, there can be ongoing study on how the designer works in the archive.

They suggest that an appropriate response to the archive will be outputs and outcomes that involve innovative material and technical experimentation, but also have a purposeful rationale.

The methods for generating this are likely to involve a layering of outcomes, encompassing narrative and social engagement, which will start to build methods for developing my own methodology.