

Fashion designers respond to environmental crisis

By [Anika Kozlowski](#)

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CANADA - Canada has never been a driving force in fashion. As a nation, our culture and identity are often reduced to stereotypes involving plaid, nature and hockey. Though we have held multiple fashion weeks, they never quite found their rhythm, and failed to sync with the global industry.

Our government has failed to support Canadian designers or to recognise their contribution to our economy. As consumers, we tend to stay safe and don't take risks on new designers. Instead, in order to survive, most designers end up leaving the country for more established fashion centres where consumers do take risks.

Our homegrown talent, however, has begun to blossom in the face of a global sustainability crisis, and Canadians are taking notice.

Fashion is one of the top polluting industries

My history as a designer in the industry opened my eyes to the environmental destruction and social injustices that plague the fashion industry, and led me to my current research on how the fashion apparel design process can spark sustainable consumption behaviours and new business models.

The global fashion market is facing a major environmental crisis. Today's linear economic model of take, make and dispose is reaching its physical limits as the earth's natural resources are increasingly under pressure. The fashion industry is a major consumer of natural resources and a major polluter. If the industry maintains current trajectories of production and consumption, these pressures will intensify to the point of threatening the very survival of the industry.

The Canadian fashion industry finds itself at a decisive point. The lack of previous support for fashion designers, has created an opportunity for Canada to take on a leadership role in the global fight for a sustainable fashion future.

Global fashion centres with an established industry – with its complex systems, supply chains and structures – can struggle to develop sustainability. Typically, brands have limited control of their offshore suppliers and the relentless pace of the industry leaves little room for research and development or trying new methods of production.

Canada can benefit from its small industry – as there is a fresh foundation to build a sustainable industry upon – without the challenges of disrupting a rooted system.

Harmful toxins sit close to our bodies

Research shows that consumers are generally aware of the negative environmental and social impacts associated with clothing. However, this awareness and pro-environmental attitudes are not necessarily a good predictor of behaviours and consumption. There needs to be more emphasis on the negative health implications of wearing clothing that has been produced using harmful toxic chemicals and processes.

For example, as a society, we now understand the health benefits of eating organic food or using a body wash without [parabens](#). Considerable research exists about the effects of the toxic chemicals used in the food and beauty industry. Clothing, however, is not as clear and the area is still under-researched.

One major agency has explored this issue. The Danish Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) documented the exposure of toxic chemicals on human skin through normal wear of standard clothing. The agency found people absorb chemicals on clothing through their skin. Tiny fibre particles abrade or fall off, which can be ingested or inhaled. The Danish EPA found residues of toxic chemicals used in clothing production on participants' skin, inside washing machines, showers, baths and in the grey water following laundry or bathing.

Current technologies and resources restrict brands from achieving 100 per cent sustainability. Designers therefore often choose those issues that resonate with their personal values.

By interviewing sustainable-fashion designers, working with an entrepreneur and analysing current design tools, I can see the broader patterns of consumer engagement, barriers, opportunities, business model development and overall design practices. I have created a sustainable design canvas that incorporates a series of building blocks for designers to work through to further develop sustainability into their brand.

Designers present beautiful sustainable visions

Our homegrown talent, however, has begun to sow the seeds of sustainability and Canadians are taking notice. This past spring, Fashion Takes Action (FTA), Canada's non-profit sustainable fashion organisation, celebrated its 10th anniversary with a sustainable design competition. Design Forward 2017 saw 10 Canadian designers present three sustainable looks at a runway presentation.

The winner of the competition receives the Sustainable Fashion Award, which comes with financial and industry support. The FTA runway show proved Canada has the talent to compete at an international level and to be a leader in sustainable fashion.

Notable designers from the Design Forward fashion competition highlights the diversity that represents the Canadian spirit:

Peggy-Sue Collection is the equivalent of farm-to-table and the 500-mile diet all rolled into one. The designer, Peggy, is not only talented, but she also shines a light on the ecology, farmers and artisans that make up the Canadian Fibre shed.



Design Forward. (Leann Parker)

Peggy Sue Collection at

Eliza Faulkner uses sustainable materials to create clothes that emanate cool by playing with volume and the most flirty ruffle and bow accents.



Eliza Faulkner at Design

Forward 2017. (Leann Parker)

Triarchy Atelier Denim is focused on reducing water usage in denim production through sustainable production processes and repurposing used denim into fresh new silhouettes with bold accents.



Hierarchy Atelier Denimat Design Forward 2017. (Leann Parker)

Lisa Aviva presented a collection of timeless silhouettes for more curvaceous women. A slow fashion ethos is promoted through the use of luxurious natural textiles, clean lines and local manufacturing.



Lisa Aviva at Design Forward 2017. (Leann Parker)

Noémiah embodies a playful feminine spirit available only in limited editions produced in Montreal using organic cottons, linen, wool, silk and bamboo. This collection used voluminous silhouettes with subtle detailing, prints paired with the daintiest umbrellas evoking feelings of playing in a summer wheat field.



Nóiríah at Design Forward.

(Leann Parker)

Jennifer Glasgow believes in producing locally, using organic natural materials in easy silhouettes promoting a slow fashion lifestyle. The pieces used blocking and volume in a smart way producing cool clothes that will be coveted by mothers, daughters and grandmothers.



Jennifer Glasgow at Design Forward 2017. (Leann Parker)

Bronwyn Seier masterfully blended age old craft embellishments such as embroidery with a futuristic feel demonstrated through sheer material choices and well thought-out layering.

Bronwyn Seier Design at Forward 2017. (Leann Parker)

The list will be narrowed down to only three finalists who will compete this fall to become the grand winner of Canada's Sustainable Fashion Award at the Expo for Design, Innovation and Technology (EDIT).

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