



Adaptive Technology and Design in Recent Fashion Exhibitions



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Abstract

This season, three New York City museums included clothing designed to improve accessibility in exhibitions on fashion and design. They featured innovations in adaptive technology expressed in textiles, clothing and accessories. In all three cases, the museums developed enhanced web sites and educational projects aimed at students, as well as attracting their usual general-interest audiences.

Keywords: Fashion; Adaptive technology; Accessibility; Adaptive garments; Textiles

Introduction

New York City's museums frequently integrate fashion into their exhibition schedules. Clothing, textiles, jewelry and related artifacts are displayed at design, history, and art institutions as featured elements or to add context. This season, many of the exhibitions used adaptive clothing and textiles in their focus on gender, body size and accessibility.

The Body: Fashion & Physique Emma McClendon [1] concerns clothing for men and women and what interventions are required to fit bodies into those fashions [1]. It begins with a quick tour of garments and stays, corsets and crinolines from the 18th and 19th centuries to introduce the manipulation of bodies into an ideal. As the exhibit enters the 20th century, undergarments relying on elastic fabrics and bra construction do not suffice and it takes lifestyle changes (diet, exercise, surgery) to mold the body.

Just before the exhibition returned to the present, there was a section dedicated to body diversity garments for plus sized women with garments designed for assistive technologies, all on dress forms. Combining them into an "Other" or special needs category is problematic at best, although mitigated by being presented as victories over the fashion industry. A short video shows FIT professor Deborah beard discussing how technical design and prototyping can be used to serve a variety of bodies. The examples of Plus size include a red crepe gown designed for actress leslie jones by Christian Siriano, 2016, and La Quan Smith's "naked" gown for a pregnant Kim Kardashian, both "red carpet" outfits, and a 2015 outfit by Chromat, which uses spandex and boning, without a fabric layer, to make an evening gown that resembles a dress form displaying a crinoline.

The platform ends with garments resembling contemporary fashion but designed for adaptive use. A [post-] Mastectomy Jacket, 2017, was designed by Grace Jun, director of the Open Style Lab, in neoprene and mesh with computer chips. As explained by the caption: "Electronic components in sleeves and sides connect to chip hidden in the back, which records the wearer's range of motion. The data can be accessed by a physical therapy or a doctor to aid in the recovery process, highlighting how technology is changing the relation between fashion and the body." The invention of neoprene was also featured as a mid-20th century innovation in an overlapping FIT exhibition, the underwater section of Expedition: Fashion from the Extreme. The platform ends with a white cotton shirt with extra sleeve designed by Lucy Jones, 2017, for "a seated body," including wheelchair users. As well as cropping the shirt, Jones' experiments focus on the selection and placement of fasteners at seam points and the use of magnetized components. The sleeves can be changed easily at bound seams at arms eye and elbow, which is lowered to avoid interfering with the arm rest.

Jones' adaptive garments were also included in Items: Is Fashion Modern? [2,3]. MoMA had not presented a fashion exhibition since 1944's Are Clothes Modern? so the current project (exhibit, symposium and book) was eagerly awaited. Developed by the department of architecture and design, it filled the large special exhibition space on the 6th floor with temporary walls and platforms, creating islands of garments and accessories by genre. One island, Shirts and Shirdresses, included mens and womens garments, catalogue pages, and an accessible technology shirt with magnetized closures by Maura Horton. Jones, who was first

recognized for her seated design line, was asked to create the prototype of torso shaping panty hose for wheelchair using women for the exhibition. The adaptation was her use of a large, easy-grip zipper at the side seam. The display on a half-mannequin seated on a stool was criticized by accessibility advocates and by Nadine Stewart on fashion historia [3]. MoMA's minimalist captions offered little information, but Jones' website however, detail her technical design and her view of why these are useful garments [4,5].

Many of the progressive connections among the fashion and disability communities come from the parson's school of design's open style lab, a 10-week research program which produced Jones and Horton [6]. Some mid-range clothing lines have recognized that adaptive design can be a selling point. However, descriptions in disability scoop of the target and tommy hilfinger lines show that they have found other solutions lengthening tops rather than cropping them [7]. "Adaptive denim in the [Universal Thread] collection will offer a high-rise back and longer inseams, wider leg openings to make dressing easier, no back pockets and faux front pockets..." [8].

Cooper-Hewitt, the Smithsonian Design Museum, developed a major project on adaptive design and technology throughout most of its 2018 season. It comprises an exhibition, Access + Ability (through September 3, 2018), a series of symposia and talks, and an intensive weekend for design students, as well as dedicating its design access lab to the topic [10]. The project's web site features video documentation of many of the activities, as well as an ongoing blog series. The focus is on artifacts whose adaptive design makes them more universally functional. While there is very little clothing per se, curator Cara McCarty [11] included many smart textiles. Her blog, "Designers are Optimists," highlights uses of conductive yarns to laser printed fabrics [11]. Two sets of jewelry that doubles as assistive technology are featured in the exhibition Maptic (tactile navigation systems for the visually impaired, 2017), which comes as wearable bracelets and necklaces that send navigation information via vibrations, and Zon, a hearing aid as fashionable earrings by Stewart Karten designs, 2011.

Conclusion

As a fashion historian, exhibition developer and museum accessibility proponent, I was pleased that creative solutions to

access based on clothing and textile technology were featured by the museums. The next step will be to solve the problems of display. It may be that the exhibition teams decided to integrate the adaptive garments into design scheme employing dress forms, not mannequins, but the lack of wheelchairs may have interfered with the comprehension of the garments and appreciation by those who would use them.

Conflict of Interest

As a member of the steering committee of the museum access consortium, I collaborated with the Cooper Hewitt to develop a professional development workshop on universal design and exhibitions that was presented in the design access lab, February 12, 2018.

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