

## **In high heels on shifting ground: Fashioning lives in the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquake**

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### **Abstract**

Clothing serves as a marker of identity, but how do you dress when you have nothing left but the clothes that you were wearing when you had to run? Who are you, when dressed entirely in someone else's choice of clothes? Does the resourcefulness necessary for self-expression under such circumstances also reinforce our ability to cope and survive on a more than material level? What can losing everything help us to remember? Taking the earthquakes in Christchurch, New Zealand as its starting point, this article will examine the usefulness of fashion, sometimes dismissed as a "frivolous" concern, during times of crisis. It will consider examples from these and other catastrophic events, considering how individuals and communities have used fashion as an expression of resilience and to defy the devastation wrought by disaster (Howell, 2012; Labrum, McKergow, & Gibson, 2007). The article will be structured to consider the "epicentre" of the effect of the earthquake, as on the individual, the wider social ramifications as the tremors ripple out, and the aftershocks that can continue to disrupt attempts at re-establishing daily patterns.

"Habitus" is defined as a state of mind by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Nice 1977). It is what we practice, what has been "preached" to us, and what we have picked up from our surroundings. However, this mental space, a culmination of personal and cultural memory, requires a habitat, a physical place for its expression and evolution. Analysis of the success of the temporary Re:START mall, created from shipping containers, offers a case study on the role of fashion, as retail and spectacle, in the vigorously debated regeneration of this city. Workplaces, offices, bars and clubs serve as venues for interaction, identification and individuality, but if we dress up to go out, what happens when there is nowhere left to go to? If the street is gone, how could a shop serve "street style", and act as a site for social

interaction as well as retail and revenue? What role can fashion play in reinvigorating public spaces and events in a devastated area? From individual efforts to community initiatives, what is the role of fashion in the recovery of a city, and the cultural life of a region?

Keywords: fashion, earthquake, disaster, retail, resilience



Figure 1. Christchurch Cathedral just before the December 2011 earthquake (Schwede66, 2011).

## Introduction

On 4 September 2010, a large earthquake near the city of Christchurch, New Zealand, damaged a number of buildings, followed by another on 22 February 2011 that killed 185 people. Taking these events as its starting point, this article will examine the usefulness of fashion, sometimes dismissed as a frivolous concern, during times of crisis. The structure of this article echoes the course of an earthquake, beginning with the epicentre, interpreted here as the effect on the individual as revealed by some key aspects of their clothing.

From the epicentre, the shockwaves ripple out with wider social ramifications as infrastructure supporting individual and collective daily life is destroyed. This section of the article will consider the infrastructure needed to support fashion as an everyday social experience. Earthquakes are often not singular events that, although traumatic, are nevertheless finite, enabling the traumatized to move on emotionally. Instead, ongoing and unpredictable aftershocks frustrate attempts to rebuild, reminding communities as well as individuals of the need to create for the new landscape as well as recreate the old scenery.

The final section of this article will consider ways in which a broad interpretation of fashion can be used to continue to support the individual through the long reconstruction period. The emotional resources needed to address such situations are addressed in literature surrounding the concept of resilience (Zolli & Healy, 2013). This term is used in many different fields, such as mental and physical health, business, ecology, engineering and emergency response. These disparate disciplines are often brought together through the need to respond to a catastrophic natural event that, like "pulling on an errant string in a garment, ... unravels the whole even as it reveals how the elements were previously woven together" (Zolli & Healy, 2013, p. 6). Resilience is defined in a report by GNS Science, the leading monitor of geological activity in New Zealand, as "'adaptive capacity': society's capability to draw upon its individual, collective and institutional resources and competencies to cope with, adapt to, and develop from the demands, challenges and changes encountered before ... during and after a disaster" (Becker & GNS Science (NZ), 2011, p. 1). This report was published in the same year as the most devastating Christchurch earthquake.

The fashion cycle is both transitory and reproductive, captivating because of its acknowledged power to capture and reproduce the zeitgeist of a time through material culture expressed strategically by tastemakers but adopted or adapted democratically. In essence, "fashion" is the creation but also selection, in a particular period and place, of clothing, and accessorized with hair, make-up, jewellery, shoes, bags and the like. For this article, fashion includes concepts framed as dress,

clothing, apparel and costume, as the study of fashion encompasses these diverse aspects within itself, in addition to its interdisciplinary nature as an academic field. Securing a single definition to describe this field has been as difficult as predicting an earthquake, with attempts made but not universally adopted (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992).

There is an additional distinction needed between the commercial, business side of fashion and an individual's personal expression through clothing choices. As creation, professional fashion design and fashion production involves ranges of entire outfits. This is defined here as a sartorial practice, with a linguistic connection to tailoring and making. As selection however, fashion as experienced by most individuals instead involves pieces not outfits, with very few wearing clothing from entirely one store, or even a single designer. This is defined here as a curatorial practice, with its connotations of looking after and preserving, but also of selection. It is the combination of these pieces in a curatorial practice that forms the everyday experience of fashion for most individuals, where fashion is this combination of current items more than anticipation of upcoming trends.

### The epicentre

In the event of an earthquake, a very real possibility as many areas in New Zealand cover active geological fault lines, the governmental advice of "drop, cover, hold" is practised throughout schools and workplaces as a standard drill (Hamilton & Ministry of Civil Defence & Emergency Management [NZ], 2012). Those in high-heeled shoes often remove them so that although they risk cuts on their feet from broken glass and other materials, they can at least run if needed. After the February 2011 earthquake, the structurally unsafe centre of the city was swiftly cordoned off as "the Red Zone", as were some residential areas (Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority, n.d.). Many clothing stores in the wider area were also closed for several days, with electronic payment methods often compromised and inaccessible to those whose wallets and wardrobes were left behind in now inaccessible buildings. In the immediate aftermath of the 2011 earthquake, this meant that some were covered only by the clothes that they stood in and the everyday practice of fashion became a significant challenge.


Dress:

Psychologists help people with mental distress; journalists provide information to the mass population – even though some may be biased. I don't see what help fashion offers people. Yes, making clothes is useful, but does fashion help people? It helps fulfil their creative needs, makes people feel good and special – but that's it really. (Zinah Nur Sharif quoted in Tarlo & Moors, 2013, p. 206)

As a developed country, New Zealand struggled but succeeded in securing basic shelter and security for those significantly impacted upon by the earthquake. Once basic needs such as sanitation, food and water are met, re-establishing some semblance of normality is considered an imperative as a response to disaster, as seen after the recent typhoon affecting the Philippines (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [UNOCHA], 2013). The sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, coined the term *habitus* to describe the individual's mental landscape, evolving from cultural and personal memories as well as current events, and used as a mental map by an individual to navigate through past and present experiences (Bourdieu & Nice, 1977). In a changing physical landscape, the security of this mental landscape is under threat but also vital for facing threats. Material objects can support positive mental states, and the restoration of the habitual seems to offer a sufficiently safe space for the psychological *habitus* to gradually adapt to the altered circumstances (Chapman 2005, pp. 116–118). This is the adaptive capacity needed for resilience (Becker & GNS Science (NZ), 2011, p. 1). Dress, as the curatorial practice of selecting clothing appropriate to an event, constitutes most people's everyday experience of fashion. The act of getting dressed is a repetitive act, each time offering a new chance at this most everyday opportunity for self-expression, even if selection involves nothing more than the underwear under the uniform or a different tie for the suit. In the choice to defy or comply with uniformed wear, fashion allows a wearer to identify, subtly or overtly, as for or against a particular social construct or personal circumstance.

Clothing: "It was scary because everyone was just staring at you" (McGillivray, 2011).

The starting point for clothing in most Western cultures, including New Zealand is, ironically, its absence, as nudity requires clothes to hide, disguise or enhance areas of the physical person. The term person refers to the physical body and to the personality, and perhaps this is why the public experience of nudity for most is of vulnerability as well as transgression. The personality may be harshly exposed along with the body, and the unfamiliar view is rendered shocking by seeing what custom dictates is to be hidden. The McGillivray quote above refers to a young boy's experience of walking in his pyjamas to his Auckland school's earthquake fundraiser. Outside of Christchurch, with no context of crisis, his appearance was eye-catching because it was unusual at that time of day, and he was upset by the attention that he received. Earthquakes are not restricted to standard working hours, and in the aftershocks that followed the Christchurch earthquakes, sleeping with no clothes on became less of an option, and nightwear more informed by physical modesty than climate and comfort, due to the possible need to exit a building in a hurry. In World War One, *Woman's Life* magazine offered a pattern for a "sleeping suit for air-raid nights", much like the current onesie, to address similar unpredictable situations (Adlington, 2013, p. 188). Its successor in World War Two was the siren suit, with a version worn by Winston Churchill. Howell even suggests that "The need for practical clothing, easy and quick to put on in the event of an air-raid warning, ... arguably produced the first fashion of the war" (Howell, 2012, p. 67).



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Figure 2. A sleeping suit for Air-Raid nights [World War One]. (Adlington, 2013, p. 188).

Clothing is the most immediate shelter for the human body, and serves as a form of carapace, defending the body inside as well as defying the elements on the outside. Feeling appropriately covered contributes a feeling of psychological as well as physical safety that allows those affected to address the future as well as the immediate situation. Suffragette Margaret Mackworth survived the torpedoing and

sinking of the *Lusitania*, finally wearing a blanket around her waist, a soldier's khaki army coat over that, and a local captain's carpet slippers, but "she was soon compiling a list of all the clothing she would need - including hairpins. Her hair would be pinned back into place and life would go on" (Adlington, 2013, p. 190).

Incongruous and mismatching outfits can also introduce moments of humour that if handled appropriately are invaluable for dealing with a difficult situation, reminding all that immediate danger has passed, and that life is fun as well as fragile (Vanistendael, 2007, p. 124-125).

"It's very humbling having to borrow knickers" (Interviewee, Christchurch resident, 2014). Selection of underwear is very personal. Those who claim not to follow fashion may not follow its seasonal whims but the slow assimilation of its advances in technology and materials marks the anachronism of those who still wear previous styles of corsets, petticoats and long drawers (The Oamaru Whitestone Civic Trust, 2011). Garments are the closest form of shelter carried daily on the body, protecting and projecting the person, and underwear lies closest of all. Due to sanitary concerns, underwear tends to be purchased from new and worn clean each day. Often with no immediate facility to purchase new items in Christchurch, donations of underwear as physically small and light allowed some overseas relatives to airfreight such contributions as a very personalized form of relief. However, although unseen by most, as underwear comprises the items worn closest to the body, active selection processes operated even here as donations of "dodgy floral numbers" (Female interviewee, 2014) were appreciated but the actual items were discarded as soon as practicable. In the response to humanitarian disasters, donations of new underwear from a range of styles might be received with as much gratitude as the usual warm clothing and blankets, along with civic provision for the laundering of "smalls" amongst the provision of sanitation.

With insecurity around cornerstones for self-identity such as housing and employment, the ability to "look like myself" can become as much an act of defiance against difficult circumstances as an act of personal reassurance. Some items of clothing were seen as tainted if they had been worn on the day of one of the earthquakes, others were discarded on eventual access to personal clothing stores



as no longer “me”. Selection, even within the necessity of borrowed or donated clothes, reveals how important it can be in extreme situations, to “look like myself” (Ahmed, 2013). This is the immediate step in fashion’s ability to propose the future, with the clothing embodying “how I want to feel” as wearers literally put on a positive front. There can also be a social imperative to put on a brave face for the good of others as well as oneself. Female ambulance drivers in France during World War Two were advised to “remember to wear lipstick because it cheers the wounded” (Hartley, 1994, p.105). Borrowing clothes to extend wardrobe choices is common practice amongst relatives and friends but occurs usually as an activity of choice rather than necessity, with items chosen or rejected according to personal preferences. In most cases, this extends even to the receipt of charitable donations of clothing. The international second hand clothing trade is “about commerce not charity” (Tranberg Hansen, 2010, p. 39) with selection for suitability at all stages of the process. Items are recommodified as they are appropriated and assigned new aesthetic and financial value on local terms (Tranberg Hansen, 2010). After initial distribution of donated clothing, longer-term disaster response could include opportunities for recipients to come together and swap for more preferred items, or repair existing items. Swap meets could allow residents to meet their neighbours as well as to swap clothing items, enabling the social interaction that is needed to develop resilient communities (Becker & GNS Science (NZ), 2011, p. 2).

## Tremors



Figure 3. A Japanese urban search and rescue team at the ruins of the CTV building, Christchurch, 24 February 2011 (Gabriel, 2011).

The central city Red Zone cordon finally lifted more than two years later. Well beyond the immediate aftermath, any access to structurally compromised areas required “hi vis” clothing (specific clothing items featuring fluorescent colours and reflective trims that offers high visibility to wearers), closed and low-heeled footwear, and often hard hats with a head torch attached. The long term appearance of hi vis in the downtown area reveals how long it took for structurally unsafe buildings to be demolished, before any rebuilding could even begin. There is a quiet correspondence between architecture and fashion. Both design practices are concerned with the creation of three dimensional shapes from predominantly two dimensional materials, both needing to accommodate personalities, figuratively as well as literally. Humanitarian disasters most frequently deprive humans of houses, homes and their customary habits. Without these, clothing becomes a most visible means to view the disruption and then attempted resumption of daily routine.

Bourdieu's habitus also requires a physical space as the habitat for its expression. The epicentre section of this article has focused on the key moments in the experience of dressing for oneself, as a reiteration and reassurance of personal identity. As the tremors from the epicentre of the earthquake ripple out to affect the wider community, this section of the article will consider dressing for a public identity, and places for parade.

Apparel: "Gumboots they are wonderful, gumboots they are swell,  
'Coz they keep out the water, and they keep in the smell ..." (Archer, 2014).



Figure 4. The Student Volunteer Army after the 2011 Christchurch earthquake (Ross, 2011).

There were moments during the immediate aftermath of the Christchurch earthquakes when the everyday playing field of fashion became somewhat level. One volunteer, directing vehicles at a junction with no traffic lights, wears a suit, because that's all he has (Smyth, 2014). Clothing selection includes consideration on

a utilitarian basis, such as suitability for task, that encompasses a hierarchy of use within a personal wardrobe, where old, stained or damaged clothing is reserved for tasks where further marking or damage is likely to occur (Chapman, 2005). The interpretation of clothing can involve the use of a hierarchy of status, with those wearing old, stained or damaged clothing likely to be involved in manual or dissolute activity, and less respected within the community. Within the disaster aftermath however, such clothing hinted that the wearer was involved in the dirty and difficult activity of community recovery and so deserved respect. Some of the customary social hierarchies and assumptions had been as shaken up as the city. Following the September earthquake, university students had already begun a volunteer student army via social media to assist with non-lifesaving, often dirty tasks, such as cleaning up liquefaction residue from residential areas (UC Student Volunteer Army, 2014). Skellerup is a local company that manufactures gumboots (Wellington boots). It made a donation to this organization of its gumboots (Skellerup Industries, 2011); as a local company, this was good brand promotion, but also suitable for the students' circumstances and culturally appropriate. Gumboots retain iconic status in geographically remote New Zealand as a link to the country's rural past with its reputation for self-reliance and self-deprecating humour (Labrum et al., 2007). Gumboots even have their own song (Archer, 2014; Taihape Information Centre, 2014).

Costume: "You know you're from Christchurch when ... 'dressing up to head into town' means putting on a hi-viz vest, hard hat and boots" (Dominion Post, 2011).

Black coloured garments feature in many New Zealand wardrobes, making it also easy to support the national rugby team (Reid, 2011). In Christchurch however, these were now often worn under the rapidly ubiquitous hi vis waistcoat. Long term and diverse use of such workwear revealed the need for styles that accommodated the diversity of physical shapes in the population. Emotional stress meant that weight was lost or gained, and as new life grew, pregnancy and breastfeeding needed to be accommodated. Poorly fitting hard hats that fell off when wearers bent over to pick up fallen items was a particular concern, with this risking the hat being discarded once the cordon had been entered. This safety "uniform" emphasized the shared

experience, and spoke of the new priorities of workers in the city. It became the mayor's standard wear and was worn on official occasions, even with sleeves rolled up by Mayor Bob Parker, as Prime Minister John Key visited dressed in a business suit (Le Grand, 2011).



Figure 5. Mayor Bob Parker talks to members of the ships' company from HMNZS CANTERBURY, HMNZS OTAGO and HMNZS PUKAKI prior to taking a tour onboard (New Zealand Defence Force, 2011).

The practice of fashion in its widest sense includes its production, purchase and ultimately varying degrees of parade in public and professional spaces. The central business district of Christchurch was the site of many workplaces, with bars, cafes and clubs for socializing. As the impact of the earthquakes significantly damaged the centre of the city, immediate sites for work and socializing radiated out to less affected outer suburbs. Despite the destruction, symbolic gestures were needed to re-engage understandably cautious citizens with the centre of the city. Debates over the cathedral, symbolized as part of the civic identity, divided the community between its rebuild or replacement (Anderson, 2013). As a single faith space, the

cathedral was also arguably a limited spiritual heart for the city. Shopping, however, was a relatively safe focal point. In the popular media, fashion most frequently proposes the future, suggesting what will be worn and what will be available in the upcoming weeks or season. Shopping for new clothing is not necessarily an indulgence, but can be interpreted as an expression of the person that we might want to become. Shopping as a leisure activity can itself provide the spectacle and parade of fashion, with some identifying spaces such as shopping malls, not necessarily the shops themselves, as key places to see and be seen, particularly although not exclusively for teenagers (Matthews et al., 2000).

“Even pillows hurt [if they hit you fast and hard enough]” (interviewee’s friend, shopping for bedding at the time of an earthquake).

There is however a significant distinction in shopping for necessity rather than pleasure, particularly when job insecurity means financial caution, and purchases are for items that you may already own but cannot access. There can also be some “survivor guilt” at taking pleasure in shopping. Opening in October 2011, approximately eight months after the February earthquake, the Re:START pop-up mall was housed in colourful and robust shipping containers (Cairns, 2011). With the iconic Ballantynes department store as a key participant, this offered predominantly upmarket, boutique shopping. However, the structures were positioned to incorporate public space for eating, a stage, and seating with planters that could also be casually perched upon.

Similarities were drawn with structures built in response to the 1931 earthquake that destroyed the centre of Napier, a New Zealand town now defined by its post-earthquake Art Deco-influenced reconstruction (Strongman, 2012). This open plan layout offered a chance to parade some street style, and the rough but robust ambience appears to have reassured citizens wary of enclosed spaces and the enclosure of the Red Zone to re-enter the CBD. Hazard identification became innate for most residents on entering any building or large enclosure. In the immediate aftermath, rumours had circulated around which were the safer malls to enter. Areas such as Christchurch might benefit from shop fittings that secure shelved items and

shopping mall designs that protect from the elements but do not enclose their population.



Figure 6. Re:START Mall, Christchurch. (Cie, 2012).

Governmental support will shift the Re:START mall to a new temporary site to allow more permanent reconstruction in the area (Re:START, 2013). Financial support from government is however less likely for venues for the hospitality industry, particularly if serving alcohol, often used as stress relief during difficult times but with erratic results (Mathewson & Dally, 2013). Bars and clubs as sites for parade offer a night time economy and an additional time frame for generating some semblance of normality, significantly also offering a definition of normal that is not normative. The developer of The Terrace, the first major development in the city centre, as well as the Re:START mall, wants his new bars to attract “more sophisticated” and “an older crowd” (Bennett, 2014; Gates, 2013). In an area now marked for “upmarket residential housing”, proposed security measures suggest that in “the East Frame you can read the looks on people’s faces as to whether they are supposed to be

there or not” (O’Sullivan, 2014). Presumably this will also include an appraisal of their clothes. These are property developers rather than urban planners, but a diverse mix of venues is needed to achieve this “lively area” and to attract patrons from beyond the relatively small local population. There is a need for city centres at night to be safe but not sanitized, with sites to serve and satisfy diversity.

Fashion, alongside film, exemplifies how creative industries can boost the local as well as national economy in New Zealand (Larner & Molloy, 2009, p. 37). The provision of maker spaces, with some civic support, has generated significant interest in the creation of a diverse but distinctive local fashion scene in Berlin. This has become a point of difference, and a selling point for that city amidst the usual proliferation of international fashion conglomerates (McRobbie, 2013). The recovery plan for the Christchurch city centre appears to concentrate primarily on retail and service-based industry, with the innovation precinct focusing on technology-based industry (New Zealand Government & Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority, 2012, p. 73). In securing the regeneration of commercial, urban centres, the generally perceived frivolous and fun nature of fashion makes general but particularly high end fashion retail, but often not fashion production, an attractive, non-threatening participant. Provision of specific indoor or outdoor market spaces as alternative retail options in Christchurch is only suggested as dependent on private sector interest (New Zealand Government & Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority, 2012, p. 65), despite market stalls often acting as good launch pads for internationally successful fashion designers (Cain, 2011). The plan includes short term, transitional spaces but apparently no long term provision of space for artisan or atelier-style workshops, temporary or informal maker spaces or small scale production (New Zealand Government & Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority, 2012, p. 98). These would encourage entrepreneurship and provide the live/work/play opportunities in the city centre that is prioritized in the plan, particularly for those needing flexibility around family commitments (Larner & Molloy, 2009, p. 46).



## Aftershocks

In psychology, self-categorization theory suggests that social identities are often multiple and mutable, and self-identification with a group can be as much about the event as about the individual (Novelli et al., 2013). By being worn on the body, fashion as an expressive practice can translate the general political gesture into its personal impact. Hussein Chalayan transformed his Turkish family's experience and exit from Greek-held Cyprus into clothing that converted to furniture for a home for his "Afterwords" collection, as an evocative but non-confrontational statement (Chalayan, 2000). Valerie Rangel recently considered the artistic and commercial creation of clothing and images in response to crises, within the sartorial practice of fashion (Rangel, 2014). Fashion "victim" or "disaster" are colloquial terms, but those who use disasters as mere backdrops risk commodifying them into distasteful "spectacles that are used to enhance brand identity and serve commercial interests" (Rangel, 2014, p. 162). However, the commercial practice of fashion can address humanitarian crises through awareness-raising events such as charity fashion shows, cause-related merchandise and long term fundraising campaigns such as MAC's "Viva Glam" fund, running since 1994 (MAC Cosmetics, n.d.). After the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the fashion designer Donna Karan established her "Haiti Artisan" project for encouraging design and artistic production in the region as viable trades (Urban Zen Foundation, 2014). This "trade not aid" model, pioneered by charities such as Oxfam (Fair Trade Resource Network, 2014), is also the foundation of Edun (nude spelt backwards), founded to promote trade by sourcing fashion production from Africa, and now owned by the fashion conglomerate LVMH (Edun, n.d.). Fashion celebrities such as Karan, and Bono, of the rock group U2 and co-founder of Edun, bring a high media profile, and large fashion enterprises such as LVMH have the finances needed to support assistance projects.

## Conclusion

The curation of one's appearance has long offered a creative response for those marginalized by choice or circumstance, as defence and sometimes defiance (Steele, 2013). With its capacity for transformation, fashion can offer a personal and powerful but changeable space to express instability and insecurity (Evans, 2003). Fashion then, as dress, clothing, apparel and costume, allows access to experiment

and express a range of social identities in response to the everyday as well as to the extraordinary events, “shapeshifting” from one physical shape and psychological state, to another. Christchurch and its citizens are contributing their experiences to spread a global network of “resilient cities” (McCrone, 2014). Resilience here is not the ability to bounce back from adversity, but instead to bounce forward into the construction of a new, and maybe improved, “normal” (Strongman, 2012; Zolli & Healy, 2013, p. 9).

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