

JOURNAL

Shopping With a Conscience

The Quest to Live a Sustainably Stylish Life

By [Eden Dawn](#)



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I remember the exact date I, and many other folks in the fashion industry, changed my way of thinking. On April 24, 2013, the massive concrete walls of Bangladesh's Rana Plaza collapsed — only one day after workers had complained to the building owner of cracks in the facade, but were ordered to continue working. Mahmudul Hassan Hridoy, then 27, was a quality inspector for New Wave Style Ltd. on the eighth floor when the building gave way, Hridoy was alive but crushed beneath a pillar. As he came to, he found himself looking at one of his friends, who was then missing the back of his head.

Floors of garment workers, sewing for familiar brands like Bonmarche' and Wal-Mart, came crashing down, with a final gut wrenching death toll of 1,134, and another 2,500 injured. The tallies of primarily young women ratcheted up every day while rescue crews combed through rubble. Those who lived still deal with massive pain. Hridoy walks with a cane, and runs the Rana Plaza Survivor Group, which has seen two suicides. Another survivor, Shila Begum, had both her kidneys and hand smashed, and can no longer work. Begum's former coworker, Shiuli spends her days lying on a cot with a crushed spinal cord. She is no longer able to have children.

As I heard these stories, it became apparent to me that sustainable design was a human rights issue. And as a fashion editor, my job title needed to encompass education and practice on ethical design as much as it did studying silhouettes or proper fit terminology.

In the five years since Rana Plaza, there have been massive strides. Thirty-eight people were charged with murder for the collapse, as a warning shot to other factory owners, and 20 companies — from Zara to Fruit of the Loom — signed the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh to prevent further tragedies. Additionally, the fashion media began speaking of how a garment was made as often as what it looked like, slowly bringing the idea of sustainable design to consumer life.

In part because, like me, others in the industry witnessed the roles they helped play in the tragedy, and wanted to leverage their platforms to advocate for smaller, slower design. This is not to say the quest is complete by any means, as the first hurdle to changing my consumer behavior has been the greatest one: there is no definition of sustainable fashion.

Gather together a group of designers, textile artists, cotton growers, stylists, and any

other member of the long and winding path of a garment, and each one will give you a different definition — from low-toxin fabrics like Tencel, to shopping vintage-only. Not only is it a weighty topic without a succinct definition, it is also a moving target. Should I have been a fashion editor in Victorian England, I would have no doubt encouraged milliners to make the finest felt toppers without realizing the mercury used in their process was propagating the infamous “mad hatters” who slowly succumbed to psychotic episodes, physical ailments, and suicide.

But as we learn from our treacherous mistakes, and the textile manufacturing industry makes scientific discoveries at a breakneck pace, we must learn to continually forge our own internal guidance mechanism for how to be conscientious consumers.

After Rana Plaza, my simplest change was to end my relationship with fast fashion. The pressure I felt to have a new outfit for a runway show, or to write articles about the latest trends in maxi skirts, ended in a single realization that the idea of pushing the low price of a dress came at a high cost. If I were to calculate in the cost of a brand-new item in a shiny window display with a \$10 price tag, I would have to look at the cost of fabric, thread, and zippers; the time it takes to cut and sew; as well as import taxes and overhead costs. Doing so, it soon becomes clear that the person who made this too-good-to-be-true deal could not have been paid a sustainable wage.

The issue of price when it comes to clothing is complicated. Fashion is something we all participate in — be it a couture dress, or your favorite band t-shirt. But it also has a reputation for exclusivity. A quote increasingly bandied about in fashion circles is one from our twenty-third president, Benjamin Harrison, who summarized my shopping baseline back in 1891 when he said, “I pity the man who wants a coat so cheap that the man or woman who produces the cloth, or shapes it into a garment will starve in the process.” It’s a worthy litmus test for buying new clothing, but it doesn’t change the fact that I still have the budget of a journalist and the eye of a tastemaker.

Still, affordable and sustainable options abound when you look closely. Already a lover of vintage clothing, I’ve doubled down on my thrilling hunt of garments perfectly made long ago. Like the 1960s Hawaiian-print maxi dress I found in a Seaside shop that once prompted a stranger to stop their car on Burnside, mid traffic, just to ask me where I got it. Or the time I made eyes at a gaudy gold bracelet in the shape of a dragon at the Palm

Springs Sunday Flea Market, and gleefully took it home with me like a trophy. I now only take it out for special occasions like other people do with fine china.

Even buying a fast-fashion item from a local second-hand shop keeps it out of a landfill, and helps support the local economy. Ditto for the growing number of clothing rental services online like Le Tote or Gwynnie Bee. Of course, I also simply began buying less. Instead, I began saving up for classic, custom-made pieces from local designers. Myriam Marcela made me a perfectly tailored wool cocoon coat with one-of-a-kind leopard print sleeves, and a hand-woven leather binding to ensure I feel special every time I wear it.

When I got married, I didn't set foot in a traditional bridal shop. I took a roll of pink Blanche Devereux inspired fabric from LA's garment district to Holly Stalder, a designer I've been a super fan of for 15 years, who's become my friend since that time. Every fitting was full of laughs, and far surpassed any day I've ever had at a department store. I honestly can't believe people would choose any other way.

In Portland, we're blessed with a plethora of local designers like these, offering everything from lingerie and plus-sized dresses, to business suits, fancy gowns, and even custom swimwear. Each thoughtfully making patterns that limit fabric waste, stitching pieces with care over speed, and believing the slow method wins in the end. And there's a growing stream of small retailers across the country who accept the same truth, and dutifully carry these small lines. But as a nation, our domestic manufacturing has plummeted.

In the 1960s, more than 95 percent of our clothing was made in the United States by national brands and town dressmakers, alike. In the '70s, China and a handful of other developing nations opened massive factories and textile mills offering manufacturing for pennies on the dollar, soon luring away most of our biggest brands. Customers were enamored with the cheap fashions coming quickly down the pike, and suddenly a local dressmaker seemed like a slow — and more expensive — option.

Now, less than two percent of our clothing is Made in America. Even brands that sometimes desire to produce locally don't always have the options open to them, as factories across the country are proverbial ghost towns with tumbleweeds rolling through. When recently interviewing one northwest denim label, they told me the closest factory

they could find that could produce the long-lasting quality they prioritized was in Merida, Mexico.

Beyond who makes my clothing, the next item on my sustainable-movement checklist was a garment's lifespan. Americans love to throw things away: on average, we toss 68 pounds of clothing a year from our closets. One of the easiest ways we can aid in the eco-movement is the simple act of repairing garments. Even the act of mending a popped button can lower the tonnage we send to the landfill. Coming from a family of sewers, this skill was instilled in me at a young age as a way of life. By the time I got to fashion school, I had already paid my dues in two decades of field trips to fabric stores. But with Home Economics also out the door, it didn't even occur to me that the ability to wield a needle was a rarity.

Afraid to attempt a stitch fix? An equally viable option is to buy garments that are made for the long haul. A pair of jeans made from heavy duty denim with proper flat-felled double seams are engineered to last years longer than the \$20 version that falls apart within months. It doesn't take a degree in fashion to eye a garment critically, and check if buttons are thoroughly attached, the fabric feels thick, and zippers slide easily.

Despite ending my relationship with fast fashion, my journey towards even more sustainable fashion will never be over. I liken it to my commitment to "healthy eating," which once meant a diet soda and a frozen dinner. As I learned what health truly meant for me, the act of healthy eating then translated into becoming a vegetarian, followed by quitting high-fructose corn syrup and ingredients I couldn't pronounce, to joining a CSA from a local farm, and planting garden boxes of heirloom tomatoes and fresh herbs in my yard. In other words, it was a process. One that will continue to shape and shift, as does my relationship with ethical fashion.

The single greatest advice I can share to others embarking on a journey to live a more sustainably stylish life is to ask more, and greater, questions. "Who made my shirt?" is one place to start. But don't stop there; keep asking. "Is the company transparent in how they manufacture?" "Can these jeans be repaired?" If we all continue to vigilantly look for cracks in the façade, together we can stop the walls from tumbling down.

[Eden Dawn](#) is the Fashion Editor for *Portland Monthly* magazine and owner of [Claws Out](#), an ethical nail polish company. When she's not doing those, you can find her wardrobe styling music videos for bands like Portugal. The Man or Tonya Harding's glamor portraits.

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