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BEHIND THE SEAMS OF THE GLOBAL DENIM INDUSTRY

insideDenim



Pepe's purpose Strength in heritage

Regenerative cotton / Rematters

Prosperity / Alice Tonello / Better buying

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Cover British model Lila Moss in Pepe Jeans London's W11 Love from London campaign, celebrating 50 years of the brand.

PHOTO: ALASDAIR MCLELLAN / PEPE JEANS LONDON

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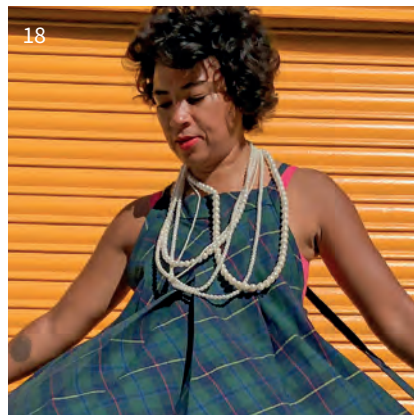
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A magnet goes both ways

It's a big market, denim, but it's also a small community. Just about everyone on this planet owns at least one pair of jeans, they all derive more or less from a single template, and still they express individuality like no other piece of clothing. It is something that never ceases to amaze me in my interactions with all the bright people that gravitate to the magnetic world of jeans.

Magnetic is the term that Romain Narcy uses to describe how the team he is building for his new endeavour, Rematters, is coming together. In this issue, he shares his insights on how he plans to scale textile-to-textile recycling to make circularity a reality.

Circularity, like sustainability and regenerative, is one of those words that is so commonly thrown about that it loses all substance. Putting together the infrastructure for the actual transformation of old clothes into new ones will require much more than empty words and we wish him the best of luck.

For Alice Tonello, who has contributed our Guest Comment, sustainability is much more than a word. She says it is the foundation on which the family-owned company “instinctively” built up its business, from the start. It informs every decision it makes, from the engineering and manufacturing to the design of its machines.

As regenerative agriculture begins slowly to expand, the term used to describe a diversity of practices is also vulnerable to being drained of meaning. The close-knit denim industry is well aware of the importance of cotton in its business. Efforts are being made to bring growers into the community.

This will improve traceability and transparency in cotton sourcing. It could strengthen a key step in the supply chain, but support from the industry is needed to ensure a healthier future for all.

Partnership is another word that has been emptied of any meaning, especially in the agreements between brands and retailers with denim and jeans manufacturers. Demanding ever lower prices, faster deliveries, cancelling orders once products have been made, and so on, have a dramatic impact on the lives of the workers who make the products. These unethical practices are driving due diligence policies in fashion and footwear. Brands and retailers may now face fines, but more than that, they may find it difficult to recruit the best and the brightest. A magnet attracts, but turn it around, and it will repel.

As this issue's Jean Genie, Towonda Vaughns points out, it is important to visit the factories, and we'll add, the farms as well, to see in what conditions the jeans we all love to wear are made. She sees it as essential “to put a human and cultural face to the process. To connect on a human level.” This circles back to the notion of community that the denim industry is so quick to evoke when discussing its commitments to environmental excellence and social good. More than spin, we need substance. It is, as said, a big market, but it is also a small community, a small community of shared interests. ■

Sophie Bramel

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“We somehow, perhaps by instinct, decided to side with the environment”

Telling your own story is never easy. It is even more difficult to summarise the evolution of a 40-year-old company where you have lived and worked for years. It is like trying to take a snapshot from a moving train – the landscape is blurred, details are out of focus. It is possible, however, to capture a broad vision where distinctive features can be seen and make sense. In my case, what I see as standing out clearly over the years is called sustainability. I use this word consciously, despite it having become a catchword that is used and abused by everyone. I use this term because it is ingrained in our essence since the very beginnings of our company. When there was, that is, no talk of it at all.

In 1981, we did not know it yet, but we were born sustainable. Back then, everything had yet to be invented, we did not even know we had a ‘vision’, we just proceeded like most everyone else does, from day to day, working like crazy, driven by an unwavering passion to ensure the company’s growth, and powered by the wild expansion of the denim market.

In the midst of this near chaotic spirit of experimentation and research, which was heedless of its effects and potential damage, when no one was aware of the need to think of future generations, we somehow, perhaps by instinct, had already decided to side with the environment. Right from the start, the machines we designed had a strong focus on efficiency, that is avoiding wasting energy, water, chemicals, and resources in general. The world of denim was decidedly ‘dirty’ at the time, and we were already striving to simultaneously ensure the growth of the company, the economic well-being of our employees and their families, and a completely unconscious attempt to lessen what would one day be called a carbon footprint.

Our aim, even back then, was not simply to produce and sell the best garment finishing machines on the market, we also sought to improve them and make production processes more efficient, to reduce costs for the customer and turn an expenditure into a long-term investment.



GUEST COMMENT

Head of marketing and R&D, **Alice Tonello** also leads the family-owned company’s Research Centre and Creative Area that are its innovation and experimentation hubs. Her vision and commitment have been instrumental in shaping the laundry machinery maker’s reputation for advanced and sustainable solutions.

This is basically what we continue to do today, guided by a vision for our own business, which is to reinvent the laundry and its processes, to give people back their value; and our dedication to our customers’ needs: improving their operations, inspiring brands, and making the laundry environment conducive to experimentation and research, a laboratory of ideas to imagine and design a sustainable, healthy, efficient future.

We have never considered ourselves to be just manufacturers of machines, but rather of ideas and solutions that help all realities become more virtuous, through constant incremental improvement. Our technologies and accessories can be applied to existing older machines. They are designed to contain energy waste and process residues, the use of hazardous chemicals, the spread of dust in the work environment, and the need for manual operations by staff. Without false modesty, I would say that we were pioneers in responsibility.

Today we continue to tread the same path with an ever more conscious determination. This can be seen in our ‘ideal laundry’ embodied by what we call the Laundry (R)evolution – simple, digital, responsible. I would add that it is also beautiful, as we pay attention to sustainability as much as to aesthetics. All our technologies are designed to work together in a single machine, even if it is not the latest generation. This is our All-in-One System that simplifies and automates processes, making the laundry a cleaner, safer, more creative, responsible and attractive environment, also for the young generations. It is an environment that makes it possible to create garments in an ever more responsible manner.

It is also, I would add, transparent. The entire process is monitored and controlled by Metro, our software that tracks the consumption of electricity, water and steam, etc., and can objectively measure the level of sustainability of each garment. Metro issues an environmental passport based on all the production stages of a garment. It is a real ‘report card’ based, this is important, on data that is automatically collected and cannot be altered.

Personally, I am convinced that the world of jeans will evolve towards greater traceability of processes and garments. This will be ultimately useful for the consumer, or rather the citizen, who is increasingly aware of and attentive to these issues. When purchasing a pair of jeans, he or she will no longer focus only on price and style, but also on sustainability. That is what I would call the added value of truly authentic ‘great beauty’. ■



PHOTO: ALICE TONELLO

Industry News

Candiani presents Coreva on European stage

Denim mill Candiani's head of sustainability and strategy, Simon Giuliani, presented a vision for a circular and regenerative fashion system at the Fashionscapes of Transformation event in Brussels.

An audience consisting of MEPs, NGO leaders, business representatives and stakeholders within the fashion industry deliberated on the fundamental role of the fashion industry in upholding the commitments of the Paris Agreement to limit global heating to below 1.5°C.

The event delved into the impact of policy measures such as the Eco design for Sustainable Products Regulation and the Waste Framework Directive in diminishing the fashion sector's dependence on fossil fuels.

Mr Giuliani, who highlighted Candiani's biodegradable Coreva fabric, said: "The true quality of a product is directly proportional to the impact of that product on the environment at the end of its life. That's why it's fundamental to have legislation that incentivises brands to adopt solutions that create high quality and can reduce impact. Less is more when less is better."

The event, hosted by Alessandra Moretti MEP, also featured Livia Firth, co-founder of consultancy Eco-Age; Commissioner Virginijus Sinkevičius; Paola Migliorini, deputy head of the environment unit at the European Commission; and Laurence Tubiana, CEO of the European Climate Foundation.

Speakers emphasised the goal of ending social exploitation and fostering a flourishing fashion industry that operates within the boundaries of the planet.

Commissioner Sinkevičius said: "It's very important to keep the textiles sector in the public eye. We must make fast fashion, past fashion. We very much want a competitive, resilient and innovative textile sector, but we want to deliver that with a different model. I hope we will all be brave enough and responsible enough in our behaviour, and realise that overproduction and overconsumption impacts us all." ■



New CEO for Lycra as it highlights progress

Fibre manufacturer The Lycra Company has announced Gary Smith as its new chief executive. He became CEO of performance fabrics manufacturer Polartec in 2012, following spells at Timberland and McKinsey & Company. He remained in this role until 2019, stepping down when Polartec was acquired by Milliken. Since then, he has led a business turnaround at Hatteras Yachts.

In the company's recent sustainability report, it outlines an ambitious target to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 50% by 2030 and be carbon neutral by 2050.

Last October, it announced "exciting results" from a project breaking down a fabric made from 70% polyester and 30% Lycra; both were recovered and spun again. "The fabric performed exactly the same. We were excited because we thought it was not possible," Lycra's vice-president of apparel for Europe and South Asia, Alistair Williamson, told *Inside Denim*. However, he stressed there is still a long way to go. Lycra is working recyclers to try to find technological solutions for various blends. "There's a lot that still needs to be done. What we want to convey is that Lycra shouldn't be the problem."

The company is also moving to biobased BDO as a raw material through a partnership with US company Qore. "We will have our first yarn being spun commercially by the end of next year and by 2025 we will start to convert our production over to it," said Mr Williamson. "Our plan is to convert everything, and move away from fossil fuels." ■

Diesel and Lee unite

In a show of unity, denim brands Diesel and Lee have teamed up to produce a collection made with offcuts of both brand's production. The front of the limited-edition jeans will be made with Diesel fabric and the back with Lee, or vice versa. All profits will go to the United Nations Refugees Agency. The collection will launch in March on both brands' websites.

Soko shines bright

Italian textile chemical group Soko launched Soko Diamond, a product designed to brighten all washing abrasions through dry or "towel-touch" application of Lumia by rags. Developed to deepen contrasts and high-low effects at the drying stage, the idea is to help customers either eliminate or "drastically" reduce the need for pumice stones and hazardous oxidants, Soko said.

Cone slashes freshwater use

US mill Cone Denim has achieved Bronze Status through Kontoor's Indigood Programme for freshwater savings achieved during 2022-2023, compared with a 2018 baseline. Cone president Steve Maggard said: "The Indigood Programme means a lot to Cone Denim and recognises an achievement for our employees who work each day toward meeting our sustainability goals."

Polygiene targets microfibres

Finishes maker Polygiene has created a product that could reduce microfibre loss by up to 70%, according to its research. Polygiene ShedGuard consists of a blend of polymers that form a film around the fibre bundles, reducing wear and enhancing other Polygiene technologies. It is in the later stages of development.

Chip Bergh to retire

Chip Bergh, Levi Strauss & Co's CEO, is to retire in April and will be replaced by Michelle Gass, the company's president. Mr Bergh will remain with the company as a senior advisor until the end of the company's 2024 fiscal year.

Panda's hemp on horizon

US-based Panda Biotech is nearing completion of its hemp processing centre in Texas, which will process 10 metric tons of industrial hemp per hour. The company says it will be the largest hemp decortication centre in the Western Hemisphere. It is due to open in the first quarter of 2024.

Raft of announcements from Isko

Turkish denim producer Isko has unveiled new collaborations, a recycling initiative and its most sustainably focused spring-summer 25 collection.

Adriano Goldschmied's latest collection is made in collaboration with Creative Room Italia, the Isko R&D hub, and is inspired by the 18th century. It uses Ctrl+Z fabrics – made entirely from recycled or regenerated fibres – using recycled polyester, recycled cotton and regenerated cellulose fibres.

The new ISKO Luxury by PG collection was designed without a specific seasonality or gender in mind. The four new capsule collections - Blob Trotters, Glamour Rock, Aurum Denim and ChArmy - were designed by creative director Paolo Gnutti.

Red Rags Waste is a six-piece collection by Creative Room Italia, inspired by historical and iconic denim pieces. Using paper patterns of historical garments, the collection is made with Ctrl+Z fabrics with minimal waste.

Isko's s/s 25 collection is entirely Ctrl+Z, including a new option of regenerative cotton. It has also updated some of its classic denims: ISKO Reform 100, this season is available in either a white or black viscose weft; and Jeggings with the addition of Tencel fibres.

Re&Up is a new company that focuses on textile-to-textile recycling technology involving mechanical and thermo-mechanical recycling. It can provide its clients with in-store solutions for collecting clothes. Isko's goal is to recycle 1 million tonnes of textile waste through the Re&Up platform. ■



PHOTO: ISKO

EU sustainable textiles rules need a rethink, says Euratex

Europe's textiles and clothing association Euratex has published a manifesto containing 15 requests for the European Parliament that will be formed after elections in June.

As part of this, it is requesting that the EU Strategy for Sustainable Textiles should be approached with "economic realism".

It said: "The EU Strategy for Sustainable Textiles is pushing our sector towards new business models with a lower environmental footprint. To realise that ambition, no less than 16 regulatory proposals are on the table, each of them with a different timetable, managed by different departments of the European Commission.

"Euratex is committed to sustainability, but asks for economic realism. This set of new regulations needs to be coherent, enforceable, feasible and applicable for SMEs, and not push textile companies out of the market. Moreover, some member states are moving faster and some legislations will be decided at national level, creating fragmentation of the market. Such scenarios will hamper Europe and its possibilities to grow."

In the manifesto, Euratex is also pushing for "smarter" EU industrial policy, incentives to attract younger employees and investment in innovation and digitalisation. It also suggests the European Commission should incentivise the demand for sustainable textiles, creating standard requirements and fiscal incentives. Public authorities should also implement green public procurements. ■

Brand revamp at Guess

US-based Guess has relaunched Guess Jeans by Nicolai Marciano, with a brand update focused on younger consumers and men. The company said the collection is "strongly oriented towards eco-conscious practices" and will include new store concepts. The group is betting on the revamp to be a significant driver of revenues in 2024.

Tribute to Miguel Sánchez

Founder of denim washing company LaundRe Salli Deighton has thanked colleagues and friends for their positive response to a tree-planting appeal in honour of the late Miguel Sánchez, Barcelona-based head of technology at the Kingpins denim event, who died in December. She explained that planting trees would be a good way to pay a lasting tribute to Mr Sánchez. "He made a huge impact and educated us all on building a better planet," she said.

Advance puts faith in Circulose

Denim mill Advance Denim launched a collection made using a blend that includes 50% high-tenacity viscose fibre from Chinese fibre developer Grace. It used Circulose pulp fibre from Renewcell to make the viscose product, which it has called Gracell x CIRCULOSE. Renewcell makes its Circulose dissolving pulp from 100% recycled textiles.

London inspires BLA

UK jeansmaker Blackhorse Lane Ateliers (BLA) has teamed up with Spanish mill Evlox for a collection that recreates "the London aesthetic". BLA has designed six jeans in vintage straight silhouettes using different fabrics: three contain Regenagri-certified cotton and use Evlox's low-impact Ice dyeing; the other three are made with textile waste fibres.

Denham wins Olympic stage

Denim brand Denham is partnering Dutch sporting association NOC*NSF as the fashion wear partner of the Netherlands Olympic and Paralympic Team for the Paris 2024 opening and closing ceremonies. Denham is set to outfit 500 Olympians and 250 Paralympians.

Changes at Fashion for Good

Fashion for Good has changed strategy to enable wider adoption of fashion innovations. It will bolster its Innovation Platform and boost brand uptake, supplier integration and financing. The Museum will close and evolve into a co-working space. ■



The dynamics of regenerative cotton

It may be a new denim industry buzzword as well as a solution to mitigate climate change. It may just be a new term for traditional agricultural practices. It is in any case being rebranded as 'regenerative' and is spreading to cotton growing regions all over the world. It has attracted the attention of agri-tech start-ups. It is well-aligned with direct-to-farm programmes seeking to support smallholder farms. Large growers, such as Sheffer in Brazil and members of the US Cotton Trust Protocol in the United States, are adopting 'climate positive' farming practices that Good Earth, in Australia, has been championing for years. Standards are also becoming available, as would be expected. The assurances they offer brands could boost demand for cotton grown according to this holistic – and inherently diverse – form of agriculture.

Denim mills, especially those based in cotton-producing countries, have in recent years participated in setting up programmes that support farmers and their families. While they offer mills a source of locally produced and fully traceable cotton fibre, they aim to be more than just a business transaction. These bottom-up initiatives are now shifting from organic to promote a practice that regenerates soil, favours biodiversity, stores carbon, and improves the livelihoods of indigenous farmers.

Believed to build the resilience of both farmers and our planet, regenerative cotton farming is slowly gaining ground. Denim mills are stewarding projects and standards are now providing a more formal framework. Will brands follow suit?

Farm-forward thinking

Taking a scientific approach to the development of regenerative cotton agriculture, Turkey-based mill Maritaş is working with a research programme with the Harran and Gaziantep Universities in the Harran region in the south of the country. "Our project is a first in our industry as we will also be looking at fibre, fabric and clothing properties. These have not yet been measured or reported," says Maritaş deputy general manager Fatih Kesim. He expects to see improved results in garment comfort and crop cultivation. In its first year, the cotton fibre yield made it possible to weave nearly 500,000 metres of fabric, he says. The programme will be expanded fivefold next season, potentially bringing the mill's regenerative cotton capacity to 2.5 million metres, or 10% of its production.

More than 200 local and global customers attended Maritaş Denim's harvesting event for its Regenerative Cotton Project last fall.

PHOTO: MARITAS DENIM

Several direct-to-farm programmes have been set up in Pakistan, with support from denim mills. Their initial focus was often on organic cotton, but many are now shifting to the more holistic, or all-encompassing, scope of regenerative agriculture that covers both the preservation of natural ecosystems and supports local communities. This is the case at Interloop. “Building upon insights from the Interloop Organic Kapas initiative, launched in 2022, we are advancing towards regenerative cotton, embracing a comprehensive farming approach to revive and enrich the agricultural landscape in Pakistan,” says Faryal Sadiq, chief marketing officer. The new Interloop Regen Kapas programme is launching this year with 1,000 farmers and 5,000 acres, he tells *Inside Denim*.

Soorty’s Organic Cotton Initiative (SOCI) has successfully obtained organic certification in just two years and is much more than just a cotton growing programme, says Ebru Dabbag, its sales and marketing manager. “It also has a positive impact on farmers’ lives and on the field,” she says of the programme in Khuzdar in Balochistan. Soorty has since joined a regenerative cotton project in Bahawalpur, South Punjab, with REEDS Pakistan, the country’s regenagri certification partner. “We are working with smallholder cotton farmers who are the driving force behind building resilient and sustainable communities,” she says, adding that it has already registered 1,100 farmers covering 5,000 acres.

Created by UK-based Control Union, the regenagri standard is the most widely adopted by denim mills, including Sharabati, Candiani and Cone Denim. It is also the framework chosen by Vicunha. The Brazilian denim manufacturer is betting on regenerative cotton and has an exclusive agreement with fellow Brazilian cotton grower Scheffer. “In addition to reducing the use of chemical products, contributing to soil health, and promoting biodiversity, Scheffer’s regenerative cotton is rain-fed, and this helps lower the water footprint of the fabrics,” points out Maria Estela Rodrigues, Vicunha’s branding and marketing manager. Over the next five years, the mill plans to quintuple the volume of fabrics made from regenerative cotton, to nearly 15% of its total production. The company has also obtained regenagri certification for its three manufacturing sites in the northeast of the country.

In addition to working with farmers to develop low-tech solutions for pests and such, the SOCI and regenerative cotton programmes backed by Soorty also include high-tech tools such as those developed by FarmDar, which includes remote satellite monitoring.

PHOTO: SOORTY



Australian cotton grower Good Earth applies the principles of regenerative agriculture on its farms in the country, and its Sundown Pastoral Company is regenagri-certified. But the grower also claims that its cotton is “climate positive” as it sequesters more carbon than it emits, certified by Brisbane-based Carbon Friendly. “For a long time, the retail sector was under the impression that organic cotton would be the answer but there are many reasons why organic will never reach scale. In recent years, regenerative cotton has started to appear as an alternative. Although it hasn’t quite picked up pace yet, it is scalable, as it does not have the same limitations as organic. But it does reduce the environmental impact of cotton farming by implementing certain practices and can be verified with science-backed data,” says Ben Eaves, manager of cotton brokerage WizCot. He introduced Good Earth Cotton to AGI Denim back in 2020.

Through its Regen Kapas project, Pakistan-based Interloop seeks to promote not only sustainable agriculture but also the health and welfare of the communities with which it engages.

PHOTO: 2023 INTERLOOP LIMITED



Organic vs regenerative

The development of regenerative agriculture is a source of some confusion as to its relation to organic produce. The two practices differ on some points, notably inputs, but their objectives do in many cases converge. Control Union points out that its regenagri standard is not just a traditional pass/fail system as its methodologies “consider the context and capabilities of each business seeking regenerative certification”.

The overlap between the two will only grow. A direct-to-farm system in which brands actively support indigenous smallholders in Andhra Pradesh, India, Raddis Cotton applies the principles of regenerative and organic agriculture with a view to achieve organic status. “Raddis Cotton is regenerative cotton in conversion to organic,” Niccy Kol, brand catalyst, tells *Inside Denim*. But she points out that organic does not cover all the needs of the communities nor of the mission that the Grameena Vikas Kendram Society for Rural Development (GVK Society), an Indo-Dutch social enterprise, seeks to promote through Raddis Cotton.

The principle it abides by aligns with indigenous practices and seeks to regenerate the ecosystem as a whole. This includes growing plants with deep roots to ensure soil health and other crops such as pulses that can be sold or feed a family. Buyers looking for GOTS-certified organic cotton can “hop from one supplier to another,” says Sanne van den Dungen, co-founder and supply chain manager for Raddis Cotton. “This is not possible with Raddis Cotton, as it is founded on brands committing to a long-term relationship with farmers.”

In addition to building the resilience of these indigenous communities, the organisation also seeks to bring greater transparency and traceability to the cotton supply chain. Farmers, for instance, are now being paid through bank transfers. “Close to 95% of transactions now transit through banks, and for many farmers, who are often women farmers, this is the first time they have a bank account. It gives them dignity and truly helps build a more resilient community,” says Ms van den Dungen.



Vicunha intends to increase the use of regenerative cotton to 15% of its total production, as a result of an exclusive agreement with cotton grower Scheffer.

PHOTO: VICUNHA

This feature is part of a new digital platform, called Vihanga, which she says means ‘wings’ as in ‘to take off’, that will also be monitoring impacts and collecting data from seed to finished product. Raddis Cotton has chosen to develop it with Salesforce. “It has a good track record in protecting data, which is important for farmers,” says Ms Kol. Brands will also have access to the platform and thus be able to trace various parameters (water saved, estimated carbon stock, etc.), which could then feed a product’s digital passport.

Spanish retailer Mango is taking its first steps in this direction through a partnership with Materra, a UK and India-based start-up that develops ‘climate-resilient’ cotton production systems, including a direct-to-farm regenerative cotton supply chain in India. Co:Farm, Materra’s digital platform, will enable the retailer to have full traceability of its cotton sourcing, from seed to garment, and to track data related to soil health, nutrients, water usage and plot size, among others.

Materra has two projects related to cotton growing, one based on hydroponics and the other on regenerative agriculture, both in India. The regenerative programme has recruited nearly 1,000 farmers in Maharashtra and Gujarat, and could increase three or fivefold this year, CEO and founder Edward Brial says. “If we can make it work in India, we can make it work anywhere,” he notes. A tech company, Materra seeks to combine the indigenous practices of restorative farming with modern-day instruments. “There is a lot of lore and knowledge at farm level, which we naturally intend to preserve, but we can also use technology to mitigate risks,” he says.

New developments at Raddis Cotton include bank-based payments to farmers and the Vihanga digital platform.

PHOTO: RADDIS COTTON

Cotton growers in the United States are also investigating the potential of regenerative practices with Climate Smart Cotton, a five-year programme led by the US Cotton Trust Protocol in collaboration with the Soil Health Institute (SHI). SHI, a non-profit whose mission is to safeguard and protect soil, started by monitoring soil health in 124 locations where cotton is grown. This will enable the organisation to define regional soil health benchmarks, ultimately covering an area that represents 85% of the country's cotton growing regions, Dianna Bagnall, research soil scientist tells *Inside Denim*. "SHI has chosen to focus on four indicators (from a starting point of thirty different soil health metrics) that will make it possible to assess the regenerative nature of cotton farming practices without imposing too many constraints on farmers." One easy-to-use solution developed by SHI is a smartphone app, Slakes, which measures the aggregate stability of soil. "Soil health depends on many, many factors, but farmers know their soil. With this app, they can see if something new they have tried has had an impact on soil health or yield. Regenerative doesn't have to be complicated," she insists. The research programme will inform the US Cotton Trust Protocol's upcoming framework. "This partnership will lay the groundwork to include practical ways of improving soil health into the Climate Smart protocol," she says.

New standards in the making

In addition to Control Union's regenagri and the Regenerative Organic Alliance's Regenerative Organic Cotton (ROC) standard, the Aid by Trade Foundation is rolling out its own Regenerative Cotton Standard (RCS). Building on the foundation's experience with its two other standards, Cotton made in Africa (CmiA) and Cotton made in Africa Organic, it claims to be the first regenerative cotton standard to prioritise the interests and knowledge of smallholder farmers. "Compared to CmiA, RCS has a new focus on animal welfare and an explicit focus on community engagement," says Holger Diedrich, project manager spokesperson. Many of the foundation's current partners implement elements of regenerative farming. RCS, he says, seeks to "systematise those efforts" and "incentivise farmers to do more". The new RCS offers digital tracking and transparency along the entire value chain like its other standards, and thus "gives companies the security they need," he says. The organisation expects to pilot RCS with some 15,000 farmers in the first year.

A minute market share

Is it possible to imagine a time when regenerative and organic cotton dominate the market? Together, they account for a minute portion – less than 2% – of all cotton grown. While organic farming is governed by fairly well-defined conventions, which do not rule out bad practices, its long 'in-conversion' period and nature's own ways of 'contaminating' crops can be challenging for farmers. Even the Textile Exchange, usually a good source of information on organic cotton, has given a low confidence rating to the data presented in its latest report. Regenerative agriculture poses an extra set of challenges, as it covers a wider array of practices that are site-specific. It is hoped that existing and future standards will avoid overburdening farmers and the pitfalls of organic certification.

From a practice rooted in tradition and location-specific (agri)cultures, regenerative farming is thus slowly being formalised into a more closely monitored, data-based practice that aligns with the needs of corporate concerns. These may shape or distort the concept. For some, the term regenerative is very much open to greenwashing. "Like sustainability or circularity, it can mean everything and nothing," says Sanne van den Dungen, at Raddis Cotton. Mostly, as points out Dianna Bagnall at the Soil Health Institute, people find it to be "a great word". Its basic – and so very diverse – principles, it is hoped, can mitigate the effects of climate change that farmers bear the brunt of every day. If brands and retailers invest in regenerative cotton, they would be actively contributing to this daunting task. This would allow this form of agriculture to build resilience, from the bottom up. ■



Agri-tech start-up Mattered is working with farmers in Maharashtra and Gujarat, in India.

PHOTO: MATERRA



Better purchasing practices

It is no longer if, but when. Due diligence legislation will be implemented, and it will make companies responsible for the conditions in which their goods are made, wherever they are made. Some may cringe at a future extension of corporate legal obligations. But voluntary mechanisms have been found largely ineffective. For many, the only true incentives are those that are legally binding.

The mass cancellation of contracts during covid shed a cruel light on the lack of consideration by brands and retailers for the companies that manufacture their products. “During the early months of the pandemic, fashion companies cancelled \$40 billion worth of clothing in production, triggering layoffs without pay and a massive humanitarian crisis,” states Remake in its 2022 Accountability Report. Founded by Ayesha Barenblat, Remake advocates specifically for fair payment to women garment workers. Its highly successful #PayUp campaign helped recover \$22 billion from 25 brands.

The denim industry is often cited as a driver of change in making fashion more sustainable, through its choice of materials and innovation in processes. It is not, however, considered a model of best practices in social compliance. Will new due diligence legislation change the rules of the game?

Media coverage of the dramatic collapse of the Rana Plaza in 2013 was the first event to draw attention to working conditions in factories supplying clothes to global fashion retailers. The pandemic, a second event considered just as dramatic for its effects on workers, did not, despite Remake’s viral campaign, attract much media attention beyond business and trade publications. It is unlikely that consumers have wage theft in mind when they go shopping, though \$5 T-shirts could raise a flag. Signs of dissatisfaction are, however, beginning to be heard inside the industry.

One such initiative is the Ethical Denim Council (EDC), which grew out of a Transformers Foundation 2020 report exposing unethical supply chain practices in the denim industry. A new report by the non-profit, the result of a voluntary poll, finds that change is slow. “Some brands and retailers have taken steps towards greater transparency and accountability, however, there is still a long way to go in terms of addressing their relationships with suppliers and the link between payment terms and worker welfare,” it states.

The EDC has given itself one simple goal: to redefine transactions between parties. “What we want is that when brands and retailers sign an order, they fulfil it. And if they change their mind or don’t fulfil it, they offer compensation,” says EDC founder Andrew Olah. The EDC’s focus is on upholding contract sanctity, seen as a first, and essential, step in creating more balanced relations within the industry. “Brands and retailers impose a long list of rules and obligations on their suppliers. Manufacturers are not given that option and can impose little to nothing,” he points out. As a starting point, it proposes Eight Ethical Principles to make purchasing practices fairer, derived from the Transformers Foundation, which will be followed by a series of model clauses for more responsible contracts. “We are working on a small set of provisions that better addresses the considerations of both parties, the brands and retailers, and the manufacturers, to even the playing field,” says EDC project manager Sharmon Lebby. These measures will thus help “amplify the voice of the suppliers”.

Introducing responsible contracts

The EDC’s model clauses suggestions are being drafted in collaboration with the Responsible Contracting Project (RCP). This organisation, co-founded in 2022 by Sarah Dadush, a law professor at Rutgers Law School, and Olivia Windham Stewart, a business and human rights specialist, seeks to improve human rights in global supply chains with better contracts. RCP is a spinoff of an American Bar Association working group.

Another manufacturer-led coalition, the Sustainable Terms of Trade Initiative (STTI) is also seeking to realign the balance of power between buyers and manufacturers in the apparel industry. It is led by the STAR Network, a consortium of humanitarian organisations, the International Apparel Federation (IAF) and the Better Buying Institute with support from GIZ FABRIC, a German authority born from the country’s Supply Chain Act. One of its goals is “commercial compliance”, which it defines as “a common understanding of purchasing practices that do not cause obvious and avoidable harm to manufacturers”.



In addition to its work with EDC, the Responsible Contracting Project is also collaborating with STTI and GIZ to propose model clauses that apparel manufacturers, who rarely have extensive legal departments, can include in their agreements with brands. “We know that contracts are drafted by brands to be entirely favourable to them. Our mission is to make them more balanced, so that responsibilities are not shifted but shared,” Sarah Dadush tells *Inside Denim*.

As the first country to promulgate a law imposing due diligence, Germany serves as a testing ground for more ethical practices in business relations. GIZ, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit or German Society for International Cooperation, has set up a Partnership for Sustainable Textiles (PST) to accompany the implementation of the new legislation. “The textile industry is one of the sectors in Germany that is best prepared for the Supply Chain Act,” says Linda Schraml, who heads the textile sector for GIZ. Its template for more responsible contracts clearly addresses human rights and wages. “Unfair contract terms and purchasing practices between buyers and their suppliers were found to be key drivers of human rights violations in the apparel sector,” she says. The payment of living wages is thus a key focus topic for the organisation. “Training courses were developed and implemented for both buyers and suppliers. While the former learned about the consequences of purchasing practices on working conditions in the supply chain, the latter were trained in calculating product prices in a way that takes into consideration workers’ wages.”

The Fair Wear Foundation is now working with the Sustainable Terms of Trade Initiative (STTI) to implement better buying practices. It advocates for a bottom up instead of a top down pricing system.

Photos from the NGO’s Good Clothes Fair Pay campaign in 2022.

More than a nudge

Fierce competition between manufacturers, and overcapacity, create the conditions for manufacturers to bow to pressure, and coercion, to cut prices below the cost of making the products. When they were left without compensation, even after goods had been delivered during the pandemic, the scales began to tip from incentive to directive.

For organisations working in human rights and due diligence, legislation is the nudge that brands and retailers in the global north need to recognise their role on the working conditions in the global south. It is slowly, but steadily, taking shape. Last December, the European Commission and Parliament finalised the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), which draws on the German Supply Chain Act. It will require businesses “to identify, prevent, and mitigate actual and potential adverse human rights or environmental impacts in their entire value chain”. Companies will thus be held directly responsible for the social and environmental impacts of all their activities.

The CSDDD will first apply to European companies with more than 500 employees and a global net turnover of €150 million. Three years later, it will apply to non-EU based companies that generate €300 million in net sales in the bloc. Fines for breaching these rules could be as much as 5% of a company’s global revenues. Once adopted, the 27 EU member states will have two years to transpose the CSDDD into their national laws.

The EU is not alone in drafting due diligence policies. The United States FABRIC Act ‘Fashioning Accountability and Building Real Institutional Change’, introduced in 2022, was the first federal bill seeking to protect American garment workers. The US has also banned the import of goods made from forced labour with the Uyghur Forced Labour Prevention Act (UFLPA), signed into law in late 2021. The EU is considering similar legislation.

In this new context “brands and retailers will no longer be able to say that they are not responsible for abuses and non-payment of decent wages,” says Sarah Dadush. It broadens the scope of responsibility to those that place the orders, and it makes it possible for suppliers to negotiate better terms. “This is the first time that a link is being made between the behaviour of Western corporations and their impacts on human rights in the rest of the world.” Both the German law and the EU directive explicitly mention the role of contracts in protecting human rights, she further points out.

“Reducing overproduction could unlock funding for better wages.”

MATTHIJS CRIETEE, INTERNATIONAL APPAREL FEDERATION

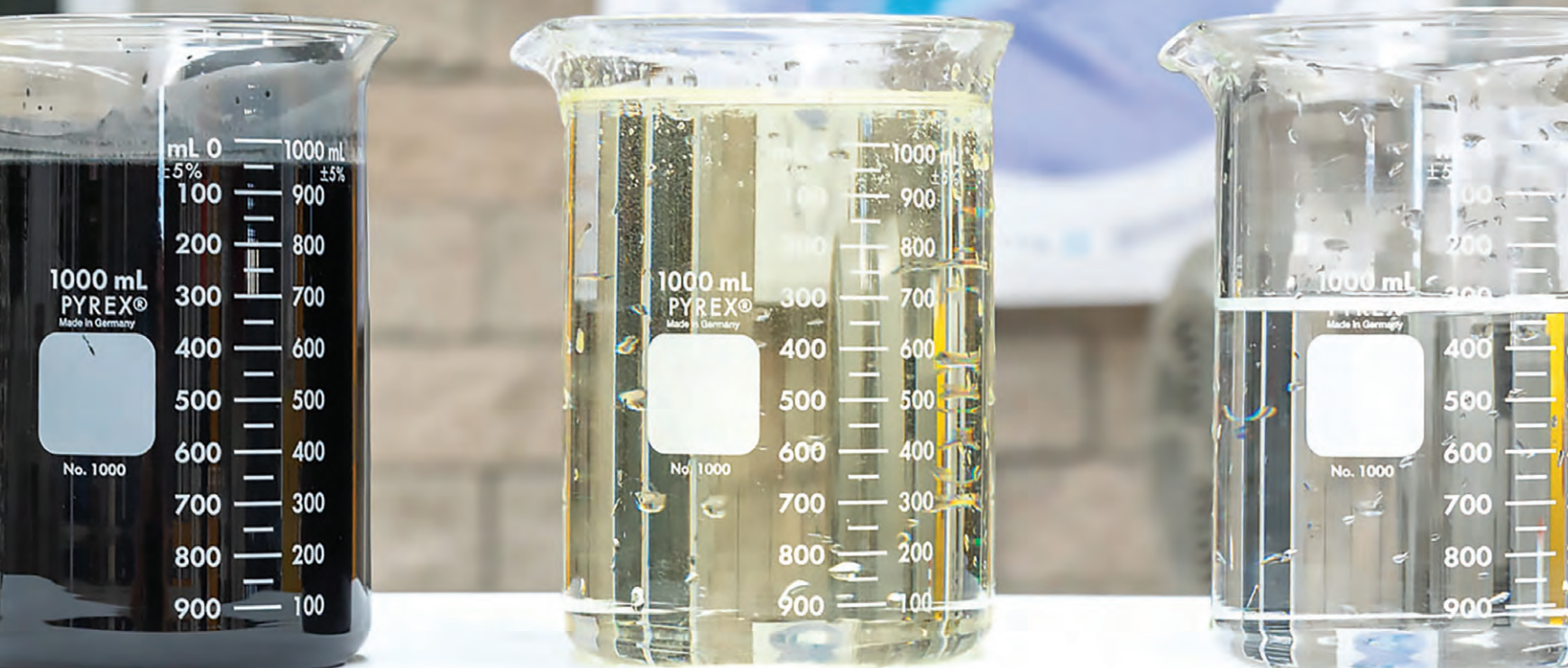
Wages and cost structure

The issue of living wages in the apparel industry made headlines at the end of last year when garment workers in Bangladesh took to the streets to demand a higher minimum wage that the government was in the process of revising, as it does every five years. Commenting on the unrest in Bangladesh, Anne Bienias, Living Wage Coordinator for the Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC), an alliance of labour unions and NGOs, notes that “the negotiation process itself was very untransparent and the proposals brought forward by the employers were not based on any assessment of cost of living in Bangladesh but were rather a reflection of economic interests and the desire to attract more foreign investment from brands.” CCC has been supporting trade unions in Bangladesh by calling on brands to increase their purchasing prices to help shoulder the wage hike. “Brands can do this if they are willing to revise their purchasing practices. Instead of paying their suppliers a lump sum for orders, they should earmark specific amounts in their purchasing price specifically for labour,” she says.

Overproduction and overcapacity in the fashion industry are often cited as creating more competition between manufacturers and more abusive working conditions. This point was raised by Matthijs Crieetee, head of the International Apparel Federation: “reducing overproduction could unlock funding for better wages,” speaking in a webinar on due diligence and responsible business conduct.

The world’s first exporter of jeans to the EU and US, Bangladesh may be one of the cheaper sourcing countries, but prices are going up everywhere. Cambodia, Vietnam and Turkey have recently taken steps to raise minimum wages. Does this create the conditions for relocating manufacturing to zones that pay even lower wages? “Wages in Cambodia have increased quite substantially over the past 10 years and there are no signs that this has led buyers to leave the Cambodian market. The same goes for China. Wages of workers are not the only advantage countries can have over another country, things like infrastructure also play a big role, and in that sense, Bangladesh is still a very attractive sourcing destination for brands,” says Ms Bienias, at CCC. Denim-making factories in Bangladesh are typically three to four times larger than other cut-and-sew facilities, and the advanced automation of their production processes means they are not the worst offenders, notes Apoorva Kaiwar, regional secretary, South Asia, IndustriALL Global Union, which fights for better working conditions. “Wages are low, but denim factories typically pay 5-10% more than the minimum wage. It is not a fair wage, but it is better than the basic T-shirt factory,” she tells *Inside Denim*.

The cost of living has risen dramatically recently, affecting not only the world’s workers, who can barely afford food or shelter, but also consumers around the globe. In the denim industry, jeans are negotiated free-on-board (FOB) at around \$8, and some say this average is now closer to \$6. These prices do not cover the cost of doing business for manufacturers, and will not help workers make a living wage. Consumers may appreciate bargain-basement prices, but they may also find products uninspiring, or not inspiring enough to warrant adding a new pair of jeans to their wardrobe. Up till now, these unethical practices had little impact on brands and retailers, who have generally managed to maintain their margins. New legislation may make it more costly to pursue this business-as-usual scenario. ■



100M

**GALLONS OF
WATER SAVED PER
YEAR**

At Cone Denim, we're committed to 25% water savings by 2025

Our Zero Liquid Discharge wastewater treatment system plays a key role in our water conservation efforts by recycling the wastewater used in denim manufacturing. The recovered water is treated and recycled back into the manufacturing process, saving up to 100 million gallons of water per year.



Retailers, brands, journalists and the public delve into the science behind the style.

ALL PHOTOS : THE MILLS FABRICA

Glimpse of the future

“This is a pivotal moment for denim,” says Hasan Javed, executive director at Pakistan-based mill and manufacturer AGI Denim. “As the consequences of climate change become increasingly evident and consumers seek eco-conscious choices, we are excited to present our vision for responsible denim manufacturing.” AGI is one of 18 companies exhibiting at The Mills Fabrica’s new London exhibition, Denim Futures – a chance for the UK-based fashion sector, students and the wider public to witness some of the groundbreaking work that is going on across the supply chain.

The Mills Fabrica originated from Hong Kong in 2018, when parent company Nan Fung Group transformed its former cotton mills into a destination for “heritage and innovation”. The group was founded in 1954 as a yarn spinner, before diversifying into real estate and investments. The Mills Fabrica, which describes itself as a “solutions platform for accelerating techstyle and agrifood tech innovations”, expanded into London in 2021, recognising it as home to “talented individuals with a forward-thinking mindset”.

The Mills Fabrica’s London exhibition unites companies across the supply chain to promote the positive behind-the-scenes work and innovative solutions for responsible denim manufacturing.

AGI introduced UK-based cotton consultancy WizCot to the exhibition, having worked together for a few years. WizCot founder Ben Eaves linked AGI with Good Earth Cotton – another exhibitor – which uses “climate positive” growing techniques and tracking technology FibreTrace to verify its products. “Under the ever-increasing regulations, this sort of supply chain should be highly desirable for retailers and brands,” Mr Eaves tells us. “It is such a great success story, and it really demonstrates the role we can play in connecting supply chains.”

“They are located in a great spot, so anyone who wants to go through the recent developments can easily show up”

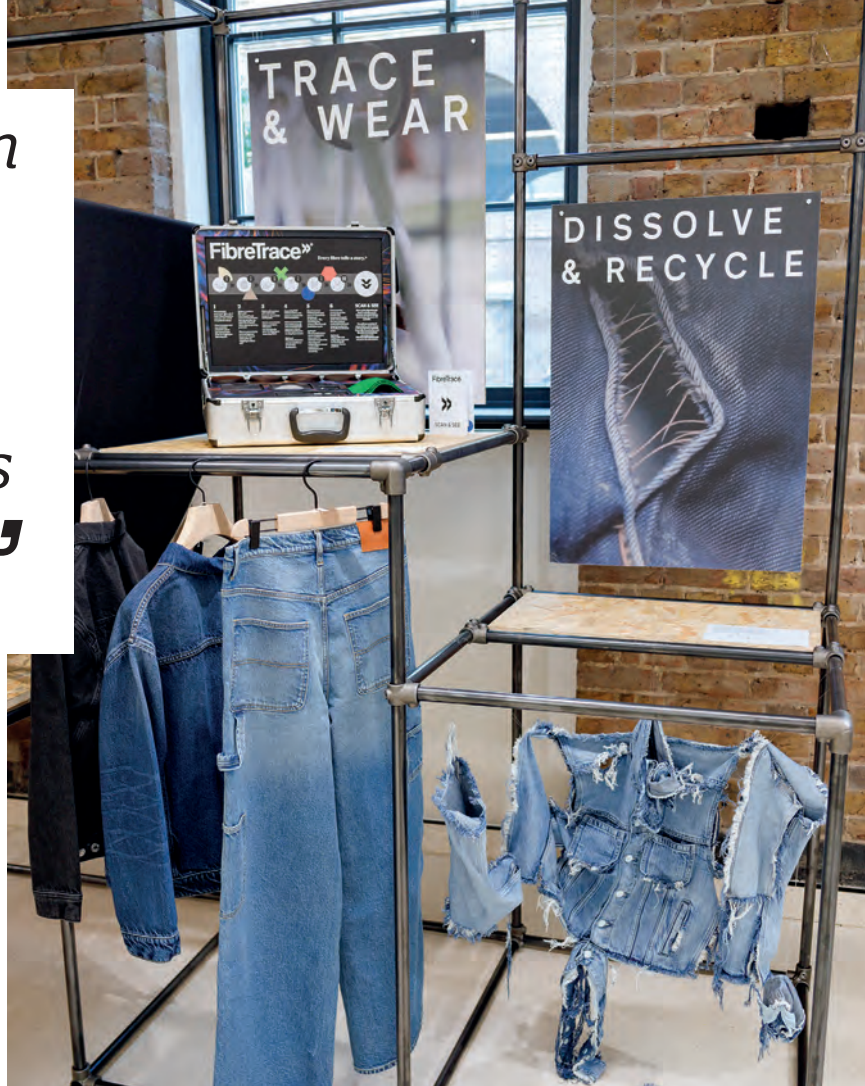
TUNCAY KILIÇKAN, LENZING

The main strands of WizCot’s business involve sourcing and marketing cotton; and advising on the price direction of raw cotton by tracking the ICE NY Futures. Mr Eaves believes the future of cotton sourcing will hinge on sustainable growing, circularity and traceability, and demonstrates this through his display at the exhibition. “I expect sourcing to move towards sustainably certifiable and traceable cotton, but several roadblocks need to be addressed before it can reach scale and this must come from the top down. Regulation will be the driving force,” he adds.

Innovation library

The companies exhibiting in the Kings Cross space include other familiar names in the denim supply chain: Italian chemicals company Officina39, textile-to-textile recycling technology developer Renewcell and Tencel producer Lenzing. Others that might not be so familiar include pineapple leaf fibres supplier Nextevo, which offers blended yarns for denim. For Lenzing, Denim Futures represents an alternative way to reach the brands. “Due to travel and time restrictions, not everybody can attend the trade fairs so this kind of ‘innovation library’ helps us to convey our message,” Lenzing’s head of business development for denim, Tuncay Kiliçkan, tells us. “They are located in a great spot, so anyone who wants to go through the recent developments on the raw material side can easily show up and have an idea.”

UK-based Xeros is showcasing its XFN1 technology, which uses reusable polymer spheres called XOrbs to wash and finish denim. The company claims that by replacing pumice, the XOrbs reduce costs and lower the environmental impact. However, partners are needed to promote and scale. “We are fully alive to the fact that adopting new technologies can be challenging for brands and manufacturers, so having partners that showcase the potential benefits is a vital step in this journey of adoption and commercialisation,” says Emily Axten, Xeros’ marketing director.



For Amy Tsang, The Mills Fabrica’s acting head for Europe, one of the most important processes that needs addressing by the denim industry is dyeing, which is why Nature Coatings, with its carbon black alternative made from wood waste, and Huue, a maker of bio-based indigo dye, are part of the exhibition. “Another big topic is the amount of virgin polyester that is used to make garments, that ultimately ends up in landfill,” she adds. “Circ is solving this issue with its technology to recover and recycle polyester and cotton from textile waste, especially polycotton blends, which can then be used to make new clothes.”

On the finished product and retail side, the partners are mycelium producer Evocative, sketchbook maker Fashionary, and upcyclers Alexandra Armata and Beyond Remade. ‘Biodesigner’ Zena Holloways shows how roots are her inspiration, Sparxell makes glitter from bio sources and WNWN creates chocolate without cocoa.

“Although a lot more needs to be done, there are many incredible innovations out there that contribute to reducing the negative impact of denim production on the environment,” adds Ms Tsang. “The exhibition provides a platform for these brands, innovators and manufacturers to showcase their solutions to not only the industry but the everyday consumer, in the hope of inspiring and educating.” ■

Denim Futures runs until March 31 at Fabrica X, 36-40 York Way, Kings Cross, London N1 9AB. 9am-6pm weekdays.



Two decades in denim design and development has taken **Towonda Vaughns** around the world, giving a long-lens perspective on how the industry is changing. She believes travel is key to appreciating the symbiotic role of brands and manufacturers, and has developed a new-found love for denim-inspired crafting, as well as supporting charities through fashion-based initiatives.

Building the human connection

Q You have worked for both brands and garment factories, collaborating up and down the supply chain. What are some of the most important lessons you have learned?

A I don't even know where to start here! Firstly, I would say perfecting the art of flexibility and that there is no one right way to get things done. This is especially true when dealing with so many entities on each project. When it comes to denim, we are in an ever-changing industry. I have been specialising in denim washing, product developing and design for over two decades so I have experienced the reckoning when it comes to figuring out more sustainable ways of washing. When I started in this industry, we were certainly doing amazingly creative things with washing but at the time had not realised the true environmental and human ramifications of this creativity paired with mass production. Now, with clear examples of the negative effects of the wet processes from many years ago, we have had to do a 180° and start producing in a responsible way.

What does it mean for me? Placing myself in "student mode" to investigate how to work on better ways to design and produce. I have had to learn how to ask the right questions when working with factories to make sure that what I am doing does not have a negative impact in any way.

One very important lesson that has always stuck with me is the importance of going to the places where you manufacture. This is not only imperative to promote transparency and to "get the job done" efficiently but to actually see who is making our product. To put a human and cultural face to the process. To connect on a human level. To see the people on the other side of the world as not just faceless bodies "working" for the companies or me personally but as necessary partners.



How does living and working in different countries shape your attitude or understanding of the fashion industry?

I have been lucky enough to travel to many countries on behalf of the brands in which I have worked. Coming from the US, and New York in particular, I had a very specific approach to design and my understanding of how I saw the industry. To be honest, I had great experiences but it was stressful, with emphasis placed on producing at high intensity with little regard to personal wellbeing.

Once I started to travel, I realised that my counterparts in each country had their way of approaching design and life in general. I have always known that I would end up living abroad and with that mindset, took the first leap in 2010 to live in Shanghai for six years. It was there that I started to understand the other side of the fashion chain, the side that a lot of designers don't get to see deeply due to company budget constraints, etc... the realities of production, the reasons why we can or cannot construct garments in a certain way. I was able to now get a 360° view of the industry.

The Fashion Cares programme will this year be supporting Fundacio Ared, a Spain-based charity that supports people at high risk of vulnerability, mostly women leaving prison or in social care. The next event will be held on February 25. "We organise a day of fun: fashion shows, music, raffles, with all the proceeds going to the charity," says Towonda. "We would like the denim community to support us, sponsorships are always gratefully received."

US born Towonda Vaughns has worked as a denim designer, wash specialist and product development manager for brands including Tommy Hilfiger, Nautica Jeans, Esprit and DKNY Jeans, leading teams to produce garments in the most sustainable way. As part of her work, she has lived in China and Germany and was also global design director at Artistic Fabric Mills, Pakistan. She is now creative director of her own consultancy firm and lives in Barcelona, Spain.

PHOTOS: TOWONDA VAUGHNS @GYDEONVALDEZDOESSHANGHAI



Once I made the decision to move to Europe, my mind was again blown away with how people in the industry lived their lives. It was when I moved to Germany that I realised the importance of work/life balance — that you can do a great job and put your heart into it while taking time away to enjoy life with loved ones. The fashion industry was no longer this big machine that was draining my spirit. I started to fall in love again with my craft because of the ability to step away at times to enjoy life and place importance on balance again. I went from a world that didn't allow much time for reflection, where it was a positive thing to see someone work 'til midnight as a sign of dedication, to a world that pushed for dedication but in a more holistic way. Working 15-hour days was a sign that something was wrong with time management. I also appreciated working out of different countries and witnessing the intersection between the industry and the respective cultures and customs.

What are some of the key wet processing developments that you've seen over the years that have made the most difference? Any recent innovations that you're keen on?

When people complain about this industry, especially us designers who don't feel that we are as creative as we would like, working in corporate fashion for many reasons, I have to remind myself that I am actually fortunate to be a part of the denim world. We are a special tribe within an industry and I feel lucky to be a part of this community because we actually get to be creative and the creativity comes in the form of working on new, innovative and sustainable wash and dyeing techniques.

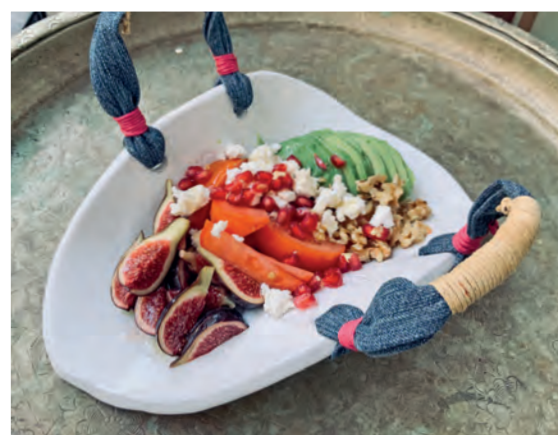
Over the years, we have had to evolve at rapid pace and prove that we are not a group of people that doesn't care about the environment, the health of others and ourselves, so it is constant problem-solving and finding better solutions.

The most important for me is the influx of modern machinery that any factory that wants to be a part of the solution has invested in. Water wastage or contaminated water has been a major issue in our industry so I am happy to see the machinery that wash or dye garments with minimal water wastage such as the machines from Jeanologia, Tonello and Yilmak, for example. I am also noticing more and more factories are investing in effluent treatment plants (ETP) to purify industrial wastewater for reuse. Also, the introduction of alternatives to potassium permanganate, pumice stone-free washing, industrial bleach alternatives. On the fabric side, the ability to produce PIW (post-industrial waste) or PCW (post-consumer waste) recycled cotton through the shredding and breaking down of unused product into a new fibre to be re-spun and made into fabric via the Laroche machine. Of course, from many years ago, the discontinuation of sandblasting. However, there are still many companies utilising this process despite the clear connection between sandblasting and silicosis.

How do you balance supply chain investments in terms of sustainability with keeping costs acceptable for brands? Who do you think should pay for "sustainability"?

This is a tough question because as much as we all want to produce, and buy sustainably, the reality always comes down to cost and what a company is willing to spend for it. All of the innovations that I mentioned earlier tend to come with extra costs due to many reasons such as production time, if it is new to market, maybe the demand isn't yet high enough, adjustments to formulae, to name a few.

For the suppliers, part of their function is to come up with innovative and sustainable options to get the units from the brands, especially those that garner



high unit orders. I have been in numerous meetings in which we were all excited about a new technology to make the product more sustainable, only to fall back on the conventional way due to cost. The question for brands has become, how can we utilise this while maintaining our margins and not increase the retail? I can easily say that the retail prices should also increase and if the consumer is educated about the reasons for the increase, they will accept.

However, what about the consumers who do not have disposable income and can barely afford to get by? Are we to expect them to jump on this "sustainability train" and pay more for product? I think we all have to play a role in pushing for sustainability whether it's the supplier who is producing to lower their cost in a realistic way in respect to their overhead, the brands (especially the mega ones) can adjust the margins a bit to accommodate. Depending on the tier, the consumer can share a bit on the cost as long as the quality and longevity is there (with explanation!), and maybe for extreme bargain companies, if they can't raise the prices because of their customers' financial limitations, offer fewer styles and put the numbers behind a smaller assortment for better price negotiations.

Denim and used fabrics are remade into clothing, homeware and accessories, such as ceramics with denim handles and a chair.

I am still sorting out my opinions on this topic because I am willing to pay more for quality and sustainability, half of my own wardrobe and accessories are well over 20 years old, proudly, and it is because I paid for quality over trendy. I was only able to do this because I just happen to be in a career that warranted me a decent pay cheque though. It is not fair to push this ethos onto everyone and be judgmental about it, thus bringing me to another point... how do we prevent the “sustainability” from becoming interchangeable with exclusivity? Or “gate keeping”?

**Where is the market heading in terms of trends?
Has Y2K designs got staying power?**

I can't believe that I am reliving this trend already. The good thing about trends lately is that they don't seem to change over so quickly now. This is bringing me to the point that it is no longer necessary to put out whole new completely different collections every month. It is wasteful. With that said, I do see it sticking around for a bit but then evolving via colour, fabrications but maintaining the comfort, well, at least for the bottoms. It's been many years now that we have been embracing more comfortable silhouettes that allows for flexibility in activities; day attire into night-out-in-the-city attire. I have seen this trend in both settings and that usually tells me that a trend will stick around.

Maybe it is where I am living these days or just the sign of the times but I am feeling that more and more people, regardless of age group, are less interested in jumping on-of-the-moment trends and more on experiences. Comfort has definitely taken more of a prominent role but you can do comfort in a sexy way as well. I am seeing more and more people becoming interested in making things last via upcycling – learning how to make your own alterations, transforming older garments into something cooler. I see so many videos out there now of young people transforming their clothes and I am here for it!

What changes would you like to see?

I would love to see people become more and more self-sufficient in their daily lives. I want to see more and more companies take responsibility for providing sustainable and durable options while being transparent about their supplier partners, as it is the right thing to do. I want to see factories protect their technicians physically and monetarily. Yes, I already see major improvements in this area but let us not forget the factories that are operating on the fringes by selling dirt-cheap product to companies who want to pay the bare minimum... we would be naive to think that all of the rules are being followed in that regard.

“The thing that really gives me purpose is applying what I have learned to helping others in my community.”

I want us as individuals to do our part by shopping less and fixing things that are broken instead of throwing away and buying new product unnecessarily. This is not just with apparel; it is with everything. If you have old fabric or clothes around, figure out a way to transform them into something for homeware, for example.

I would like to see more of a human connection between the people working for the brands and the people working for the factories so that we can understand that we are all important in this supply chain. This was brought to light during the pandemic when factories called out the perils of not being paid for product already produced. The great thing is that I am very much optimistic about these things.

Aside from work, what are you passionate about and what makes you happy?

Geez, way too many things! I am lucky to be able to include my work in denim as a passion because of the constant learning involved. My new passion is working with ceramics! I have discovered a whole new infinite world in this craft where the possibilities seem to be endless. I am now trying to explore ways to combine the two worlds and focus on practical solutions.

My passion involves anything to become self-sufficient. I make my clothes when I can, I am crazy about upcycling textiles and scraps into home textiles. My goal is to make as much as possible and even includes getting into horticulture. I want to figure out ways to produce less waste as an individual and reuse, reuse, reuse!

The one thing that really gives me purpose above all of these things is applying what I have learned over the years to helping others in my community. I signed on with an amazing woman in Barcelona named Laura Avery and together we formed a collective called Fashion Cares in which we organise events to promote pre-loved shopping with the backdrop of music, entertainment and fashion catwalks, spotlighting local artisans, amongst others, with 100% of proceeds going to local charities. This is what is truly making me happy because I get to see proof that people generally do care about each other and will help us to help others.

Describe a great day.

Usually a Saturday because I am dancing!
All day long! ■

Denim industry stalwart Romain Narcy, an Ereks & Era partner since 2020, details the optimistic yet pragmatic vision behind new venture Rematters – Textile Recycling Solutions for us.

A stitch in time

Many congratulations again on the launch of Rematters! How have your denim learnings over the years informed your decision to set up your own textile recycling consultancy at this time?

As a conscious producer, we are fully aware [at Ereks-Blue Matters] of all the effort that goes into creation and production, but manufacturing does have a strong environmental impact. We struggle with the notion that what we make can be seen as throwaway fashion or consumable goods. How can we accept that up to 30% of product can end up in landfill, or incinerated, even before it reaches the consumer, for example? So, considering all these factors, we have decided to evolve and fight to revive the perceived value of products. At end of life, fashion and fabrics should be seen as [useful] secondary raw material, rather than waste.

From a more macro perspective, in this time of overconsumption and overproduction, we have decided to pursue positive impact in our sphere. After much thought, we decided to focus on addressing the issue of textile waste. Our aim is to move the needle on the dramatic figure shared by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation several years ago now, in 2017: less than 1% of the 100 billion garments produced every year are recycled into 'new' textiles or clothing. We still have a way to go to valorise 100% of the fabrics we produce, but we are up to the challenge and will do our part! It is time to scale up!

New regulations such as the European Green Deal, including CO₂ taxation, extended producer responsibility (EPR) and principles of Ecodesign, will also force our industry to change. It seems that the needs of the planet, policy and public perspective are all converging, so it feels like the perfect time for action in the area of repair, reuse and recycling.



Tell us about the team of experts you have assembled and how you all came to meet.

Our team of experts has more than half a century of textile industry experience combined. We all came to meet at various stages in life. One of my business partners in this venture is my wife of more than twenty years, Ece Muftuoglu-Narcy, for instance. Ece studied international relations and has worked as general secretary for a leading NGO, working on protecting Turkish cultural heritage and the environment. She has had significant experience in managing big-scale, European Union-financed projects in our industry, too. This ultimately led to her joining Ereks-Blue Matters over five years ago. It was during covid that we together decided that the moment for taking action on circularity had come. My wife is now our chief strategy officer, while I am chief executive. It brings a lot of intellectual satisfaction to share such deeply held values with the person you spend most of your time with.

From left to right, Rematters' executive team: Hakan Ucar, Ece Muftuoglu-Narcy and Romain Narcy.

ALL PHOTOS:
REMATTERS/ROMAIN NARCY

We met our executive director, Hakan Ucar, through a series of webinars organised by the Istanbul Textile and Raw Materials Exporters' Association. I was presenting on sustainability and circularity in fashion and the need for industry change. He liked what I'd said and contacted me via LinkedIn afterwards, saying that he would like to meet me to look at possible avenues for collaboration – we clicked and made it happen! Hakan is a chemical engineer by training, with very strong international experience in Turkey and across Europe as a research and development director, specialising in materials and processes for multinational textile enterprises.

We are now finalising the recruitment of an experienced business development director and have hired a young graduate to manage our customer relationship management. I must admit that our purpose-driven venture leads us to meet fantastically motivated candidates; individuals that desire to be agents of change. It is always a source of extra satisfaction when you hire people that share in your vision.

Beyond our core team, we can additionally draw from a fantastic pool of textile experts from the fields of marketing, industrial design, finance, impact funding and more. This ecosystem reflects the connections we have made during our careers in business and fashion so far. Again, when you have a clear and noble mission, you tend to attract a tremendous number of highly valuable individuals, I have found. It feels almost magnetic!

What are some of the fashion industry's most concerning blind spots or knowledge gaps (and, therefore, future opportunities) when it comes to implementing recycling systems for post-consumer fabric waste, would you say?

There are a number of blind spots and knowledge gaps in the fashion industry when it comes to implementing recycling systems for post-consumer fabric waste. Some of these include:

Lack of infrastructure. The fashion industry lacks the infrastructure necessary to collect, sort and process post-consumer textile waste efficiently. There is need for improved recycling facilities and technologies that can handle a broader range of material.

Limited consumer awareness. Many consumers are not aware of the importance of recycling their clothes and the options available to them. There is a need for increased education and awareness campaigns to better inform consumers about recycling's benefits and how to properly dispose of their clothing.

Complex material composition. Apparel is often made from a blend of different fibres, such as cotton, polyester and elastane, making it a challenge to separate and recycle clothing effectively. Developing technologies capable of separating and processing mixed-fibre fabrics efficiently is therefore crucial.



Mr Narcy began his denim career at Ereks-Blue Matters in Turkey, joining the team in 2001. Now a Denim Deal steering committee member and a contributor to House of Denim Foundation's international advisory board, he is pictured here attending to some Japanese indigo plants in the Blue Matters Circular Garden in Çorlu, Thrace.

Chemical processes. Certain materials, such as those treated with dyes, finishes or coatings, pose a challenge when it comes to recycling. Finding environmentally friendly and cost-effective methods to removing chemical treatments and ultimately recycling the fabric is an ongoing challenge.

Scaling up recycling processes. Most industry recycling initiatives remain on a small scale right now. Maintaining quality standards during scale-up is a must, to ensure they have a meaningful impact.

Collaboration and supply chain integration. Fashion is complex and the industry relies on multiple stakeholders to function as it does, from designers and manufacturers to retailers and consumers. There is a need for improved collaboration and integration across the supply chain, to implement effective recycling systems and ensure materials are kept in circulation.

Addressing these blind spots and knowledge gaps presents many opportunities for innovation and collaboration. Developing advanced recycling technologies, promoting consumer awareness, investing in infrastructure and fostering partnerships throughout the supply chain can unlock the potential for a more sustainable and circular fashion ecosystem.

What should “a comprehensive solution for the entire circular supply chain” look like? And how does Rematters hope to help clients and partners realise this?

Rematters aims to use its textile expertise to help clients and partners realise a comprehensive solution for the entire circular supply chain. We provide tailored recommendations for optimising sorting and recycling processes. Our clients include collectors, sorters, recyclers and brands looking to enhance circularity in their textile products.

We utilise our network and connections to ensure that correct inputs, such as post-industrial or post-consumer textile waste feedstocks, are obtained. This includes providing the outputs needed for mechanical, thermo-chemical or chemical recycling, such as sorted garments or sorted and cleaned clippings, plus fibres for spinners and weavers. We harness our technical and operational know-how to assemble the best ecosystems and networks for our circular textile systems possible, to facilitate partner companies' seamless transition towards more circular and sustainable textile production and consumption.

What does your vision of a state-of-the-art textile recycling ecosystem consist of? For instance, what should some of its main features, parts or components be?

A state-of-the-art textile recycling ecosystem would include the following:

1. **Automated sorting.** One of the main challenges to textile recycling is sorting garments based on condition, material composition and their potential reuse. A state-of-the-art system would involve advanced technology such as artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning algorithms, to automate the sorting process and improve both efficiency and accuracy.
2. **Wearables/resaleable goods.** For items that can be resold or reused, AI and machine learning would be utilised to identify high-quality wearables and separate them efficiently, to help maximise their value and make sure they do not end up landfilled, or littering unlawful dumpsites in the Southern Hemisphere.
3. **Sanitisation and contamination removal.** Post-consumer goods often contain harmful chemicals or contaminants from their original production process. A comprehensive textile recycling system would include methods for the sanitisation and removal of these contaminants, ensuring that the recycled material meets safety and environmental standards.
4. **Material identification and separation.** Multilayer materials and components like buttons, rivets and zippers always present a challenge. State-of-the-art systems should be able to identify and separate this material efficiently, to optimise the recycling process.
5. **Recycling methods.** A textile recycling ecosystem should integrate various technologies, including mechanical recycling, thermo-mechanical recycling and chemical recycling. This would allow for different fabrics to be recycled in the manner most appropriate to their composition, only serving to reduce current landfill and incineration volumes.

“Rematters aims to use its textile expertise to help clients and partners realise a comprehensive solution for the entire circular supply chain.”

ROMAIN NARCY

6. **Closed-loop system.** Ideally, this kind of ecosystem would strive for a closed loop, where materials recovered from recycling are used to produce new textiles. This would lower reliance on virgin resources, put our industry on the path to circularity.
7. **Zero-waste approach.** The ultimate goal should be to minimise waste generation. Through maximising the reuse and recycling of textiles, less waste should end up in incineration – and none in landfill.

In order to offer clients a comprehensive solution, it is essential that we leverage the best solutions available for addressing current industry challenges. By harmonising these components in a cohesive system, a state-of-the-art textile recycling ecosystem would contribute to a more sustainable and circular economy.

How did you find the response to Rematters' booth at Textile Exchange in London last month? Why did you decide to exhibit and did you find the experience fruitful for networking, etc?

The response to our booth at Textile Exchange's conference was absolutely fantastic. The number of visitors and contacts we made exceeded expectations, with 80-plus valuable connections made during the event.

As a longstanding Textile Exchange member through Ereks-Blue Matters, we have always admired the organisation's dedication to promoting sustainable textile materials. When considering where to launch Rematters, it seemed like the perfect fit. After all, our mission is to support the widespread adoption of recycled 'raw' material.

Participating in the event was great for networking and meeting new faces across the entire textile supply chain. We were able to connect with industry professionals, forge new partnerships and gain valuable insights from peers and colleagues. The experience was fruitful in terms of showcasing our offer, making connections and strengthening our position by contributing to the wider sustainability conversation.

Overall, our decision to exhibit was met with overwhelmingly positive feedback. We are excited about the potential opportunities that have arisen for Rematters as a result, and we are all eager to continue to make an impact on our industry. ■

S/S*25

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Putting Genoa back on the map

The connection between Genoa and jeans is twofold, as it originates from both a heavy cotton twill fabric, fustian, and from its colour, dyed with indigo. The term jean, according to the

Oxford Dictionary of English, is a mutation of the pronunciation of these Genoese-made fabrics. The noun, it says, comes from the Old French name for Genoa, Janne. In the 16th century, when the cotton cloth was shipped to Britain, Janne fustian, literally 'fustian from Genoa', was shortened to "jean".

Anecdotaly, before the launch of *Inside Denim*, one of the headings the team seriously considered was to be named 473 km, roughly the distance between Nîmes, where denim fabrics were first created, and Genoa, which gave the world the word for jeans. Despite its appealing historical reference, it did not make it into the publication, perhaps because fustian fabrics are no longer associated with jeans and Nîmes is no longer on the map as a supplier of denim fabrics.

The global denim industry has since moved far beyond its two founding cities, but it can be argued that jeans are much more than just a global industry, they have become a global culture that leaves ample space to delve deeper into their history and legacy. This is what gives Genova Jeans, a city and regional authority initiative, its grounding. A first event was held in the midst of the pandemic in 2021, with its attendant limitations. The second edition, held in October 2023, set the stage for a possible recurring event dedicated to reviving the Genoese roots of jeans, with the ambition of mapping the future of the denim industry.



The city of Genoa would like to remind denim lovers that it made a significant contribution to the world of jeans, through the very term itself, derived from its historic indigo-dyed fustian fabrics. The second edition of Genova Jeans, held last October, aspires to add a new chapter to the city's cultural attractions and mark a new date in the denim world's calendar

The four-day event featured a wide array of exhibitions, workshops and panel talks spread across the city and open to all, from denim lovers to the industry at large. The Biblioteca Universitaria hosted both the panel discussions and an overview of 'heritage brands'. The selection, chosen to illustrate the history, development and best practices of the iconic garment, included Blue Blanket Division, which specialises in raw denim, and Diesel's Rehab Denim made from recycled cotton fibres, partially recovered from existing Diesel fabrics, along with recycled elastane and Tencel x Refibra lyocell. Mud Jeans, Pepe Jeans, and Italy's first blue jeans brand Roy Rogers, founded in 1952, were also on display.

An exhibition presented a selection of heritage brands, chosen for their contribution to the history, evolution and best practices of denim, in the Biblioteca Universitaria.

PHOTO: WTP



One of the city's modern art museums, the Edificio Metelino, located in the dock area, opened its doors to next-generation denim designers. Andrea Grossi presented designs made from leftover fabrics made by Isko and Gilberto Calzolari chose fabrics using the Turkish mill's most sustainable technologies.

Gimmijean's opted to reintroduce hemp denim, in reference to the trousers that Genoese sailors would make out of used hemp sails. Jeanne Friot's faux fur jacket, dyed with natural indigo, was also on show, as was a silhouette by zero-waste label Zerobarracento cut from a denim fabric woven by Berto.

The same space featured an exhibition of artworks, some never shown before, by contemporary artists from Italy and abroad. They were all made from fabrics donated by Candiani Denim and gifted to the city.

Art and industry

Denim industry suppliers also participated in the event, showing their goods in the former Oratorio di San Tommaso. Here, visitors could discover a selection of innovative companies spanning the entire supply chain. Soko, Tonello, Circulose and YKK presented their latest developments. Candiani showcased its Coreva stretch yarn, Officina39 its dyes made from old fabrics, and Pure Denim its cupro-based fabric made from Bemberg by Asahi Kasei, to name a few.

Two series of panel talks, organised on the first and second days of the event, covered an array of topics and targeting a public seeking to work in the industry or curious to delve into its future prospects. Circularity was the main theme of the Saturday morning session. One of these, moderated by CoCircular Lab founder Adriana Galijasevic, featured Kering's head of denim, Caterina Tonda, and Angela Antolini, a representative of the Cradle-to-Cradle Institute. Joining via video were Unspun co-founder Walden Lam and Lorenzo Albrighi. The former Etro designer is the founder of Spin.Fashion, a start-up developing digital technologies to reduce waste in the fashion industry.

Furthering the strong cultural agenda of Genova Jeans, Blue Tailoring, a consultancy founded by Corinna and Stefano Chiassa, presented a book that brings together their research into denim's heritage, based on their extensive archives, and explores new technologies and materials drawn from their work with brands. The coffee table tome includes developments from more than 30 companies working in denim.

The exceptional I Teli della Passione, housed in the Diocesano Museum, were another highlight of the event. These fourteen large indigo-dyed linen and cotton cloth wall coverings were painted with white lead by Teramo Piaggio and his workshop in 1540. They are striking early precursors of today's jeans.

Genova Jeans' ambition to present a very broad overview of the world of denim makes the event truly unique. Creating meaningful discussions that can appeal to both consumers and industry professionals was, for some, a stretch, as is Genova's link to today's industry. For others, it offers a space to reflect on industry practices. "Business as usual is no longer possible," as one visitor told *Inside Denim*. That, in a nutshell, is the challenge inherent in creating an international venue that seeks to bridge the past and the future of jeans. ■



Paola Maestro, chief product officer for Pepe Jeans London, tells us how staying close to its London roots has helped the brand maintain its relevance, as it celebrates its 50th anniversary.

Pepe: heritage with attitude

Q: Pepe Jeans London is celebrating its 50th anniversary. How have you marked this milestone and how do you keep a brand relevant over so many years?

A: Pepe Jeans London is celebrating its 50th anniversary under the seasonal story “I love London”. The original London-born denim lifestyle brand presents captivating collaborations that pay homage to its timeless London heritage. The brand has launched two campaigns in collaboration with two style icons that are set in the streets of London, and the celebrities wear clothes that reflect the signature style: denim, lifestyle, London boho, modern, casual and eclectic. Each location selected matches the London Boho style of the AW23 collection to create a story that captures the essence of the city.

First is the “W11 Love from London” campaign, lensed by photographer Alasdair McLellan capturing British model Lila Moss, whose presence graces covers worldwide, as she embarks on a journey through the spirited streets of W11, which encompass the vibrant neighbourhoods of Notting Hill and Ladbroke Grove in West London. “London After Hours” presents standout pieces worn by singer Rita Ora and styled by Julia Sarr-Jarmois, directed by Lee Swillingham and Stuart Spalding. The campaign premiered on zalando.com and across various platforms.

Pepe Jeans London has set the fashion standard since 1973. While trends have shifted over the course of its 50-year history, denim has consistently been a fundamental part of its DNA. Our inspiration is to establish Pepe Jeans London as the global reference for denim lifestyle infused with British heritage and driven by an eclectic style and edgy attitude.

What is it that customers love?

The brand remains true to its DNA and origins. Pepe Jeans has evolved with the trends, upholding the quality of its garments and applying advancements in new technologies while drawing on its long history and legacy.

What styles are the most popular or important for Pepe? Where do you see trends heading?

Pepe maintains its unwavering commitment to its origins and core identity while staying attuned to evolving trends. It has embraced advancements in technology and sustainability, ensuring the enduring quality of its garments. This dedication allows the brand to offer increasingly sustainable collections that resonate with the shifting preferences, lifestyles and growing environmental concerns of its customers.

Regarding style, Pepe Jeans remains dynamic, blending contemporary fashion with its rich legacy. The brand's direction reflects a growing emphasis on sustainable fashion, integrating innovative technologies and eco-friendly materials. This approach enables us to continue delivering versatile collections that harmonise modern trends with its esteemed heritage, appealing to individuals seeking both fashion-forward styles and eco-conscious choices.

Pepe has strong connections with London but has its headquarters in Spain. How do you balance this international outlook when it comes to products?

What markets are most important for Pepe?

Although our headquarters are in Madrid, we are born and bred on the streets of London. Our connection to London is pivotal in shaping our product strategy. We understand the resonance of our brand with a global audience, and our aim is to craft products that cater to a spectrum of tastes and preferences. We foster collaboration between our design teams, leveraging their respective creative strengths and cultural perspectives.

At the same time, we observe and monitor global fashion trends, ensuring that our products seamlessly align with the latest styles and preferences across diverse markets. Interestingly, what we often see is the consistency in our best sellers – they tend to perform exceptionally well across various regions. However, what fluctuates more is the specific consumer demands influenced by seasonal changes in different parts of the world.

Paola Maestro is chief product officer for Pepe Jeans, overseeing product development, trend direction and production across a global workforce. She has more than 20 years of global experience, previously working for brands including McGregor and Tommy Hilfiger.

PHOTO: PEPE JEANS LONDON





In terms of working with the supply chain, how do you stay informed about fabric and chemical innovations? What do you look for in your suppliers?

We have an amazing relationship with all our denim suppliers, we are in constant communication with them, and they share the latest news regarding sustainability so that we can stay abreast of new updates. On top of that, we have our CSR team who share everything related to innovation findings in the industry with us. It is very important that our suppliers care about the challenges in the denim industry, finding sustainable alternatives and working towards developing and adopting safer alternatives to minimise environmental impact. But not only that but Pepe Jeans' supply chain transparency, fair labour practices and worker wellbeing are equally important.

What is your focus when it comes to minimising your footprint and what do you see as the main issues the denim industry will be working towards over the next few years?

We are in constant search of circular production solutions, sustainability innovations and facilitating knowledge within the denim industry. Over the next few years, it is likely that the denim industry will continue to focus on production challenges such as water, chemical usage and waste management, with an increasing emphasis on sustainability, transparency and responsible practices. This includes the adoption of new technologies, materials and production processes to create a more eco-friendly and socially responsible denim industry.

What do you personally like most about working in the denim industry?

Denim is one of the key items in fashion. It is a wardrobe staple for many people, creating a strong connection between consumers and the products. While working in the denim industry, I often have the chance to witness the impact of our work on the everyday lives of individuals. We make people feel amazing when they wear denim. It is a really enjoyable industry because it allows for true creativity. Designing new styles, experimenting with washes and creating unique finishes provide an avenue for self-expression.

I appreciate the rich history and tradition associated with denim, especially in Pepe Jeans. Working in the industry can provide a sense of connection to a classic and timeless product that has been a fashion staple for decades. ■



The denim manufacturer has managed to harness around 190,000 kilowatt-hours of renewable energy every year since 2016, when it first moved to install rooftop solar panels at its main Guangdong site.

ALL PHOTOS: PROSPERITY TEXTILE

Cool threads

Chinese denim supplier Prosperity Textile was founded in the city of Shaoguan, northern Guangdong province, in the year 2002. Beyond deepening its manufacturing footprint with the establishment of a full-scale Vietnamese mill in 2018, the company's network of sales offices also stretches to France, Turkey, Belgium, Bangladesh, Italy and the US, as well as several cities across China itself, from Zhengzhou to Shanghai, Beijing, Xiamen and Hangzhou, plus more. On last count, it employed over 1,900 individuals globally.

After being introduced at Intertextile Shanghai Apparel Fabrics (Intertextile Apparel) in late August, marketing director Andy Zhong walks *Inside Denim* through all the latest at Prosperity.

Blue-sky mindset

Mr Zhong joined the denim producer back in 2014. From exhibitions and presentations through hangtag design, content development and press liaison, he oversees all things communication from the manufacturer's Guangzhou headquarters (home, he says, to thousands and thousands of pairs of jeans, in all shades of blue). This includes brainstorming both commercial and sustainability-forward strategies alongside Prosperity's teams around the world.

FACTORY TALK: PROSPERITY

Learning the value of print, process and photorealism with Prosperity.

When we met at Intertextile Apparel, the supplier was launching its autumn-winter 2024 fabric collection, which emphasises "new fibres" such as hemp, recycled cotton and Renewcell's Circulose-branded dissolving cellulose pulp, in addition to the latest Stella Blu-NTX Cooltrans technologies. Product highlights included a double-printed denim trucker with complicated wash effects, "eco-denim aroma" prototype jean jackets, and more. The customisable, deodorising surface details of the latter had been realised via artificial intelligence-enabled digital design platform Metaray, a Prosperity collaborator since earlier last year. Metaray puts together original, trend-led designs quickly and "with a higher hit rate" than human hands and minds, Mr Zhong explains, primarily due to its reliance on big data for decision-making. Indeed, the best part of the job is always that moment when you catch a glimpse of buyer-approved denims made from company-produced fabrics at retail, he shares.

Factory thoughts

July's announcement of a joint venture between Prosperity-owned Italian design development entity Stella Blu, specialists in indigo yarn dyed fabrics, and Singaporean textile colouration business NTX gives a clear indication of how the Guangdong mill will navigate the coming years at factory level. In gaining access to NTX's novel Cooltrans technology, which requires no heat and can reduce water usage by up to 90%, Prosperity expects to be able to create eco-friendlier denim with improved colourfastness. Stella Blu's teams have embraced the challenge wholeheartedly, the China-based marketing director goes on to say, evidenced by yet another standout from Shanghai: Stella Blu Clone+. This "waterless" process attains photorealistic motifs for printing directly onto fabrics, effectively eliminating dyeing and washing. Classic denim effects, more typical of rigid, 15-ounce 100% cotton denims, may thus be printed and transferred onto a four-ounce lyocell fabric to achieve the same visual effects, just with a lower ecological impact.

Bluesign system partner Prosperity already washes with Jeanologia laser and ozone machines, has a caustic soda recovery system in place, and minimises hydrosulfite use where possible. It also recycles wastewater, employs robotic automation in its laundries and has been generating approximately 190,000 kilowatt-hours of energy every year since installing rooftop solar panels in 2016. The producer generally prefers to source certified organic and/or recycled cottons, as well as Better Cotton-approved fibres, Lenzing's Tencel lyocell and recycled polyester when required. Today, more than 60% of its materials are purchased from eco-friendlier sources, Mr Zhong adds. "The whole idea of sustainable denim is everywhere on the factory floor", he says.



More than 60% of the materials Prosperity now uses to make its jeans come from what it considers to be eco-friendlier sources, according to Mr Zhong.

A new groove

On a related note, Prosperity has been quietly exploring a potential new original brand manufacturer or OBM production model for domestic orders in recent months. Although trials are still underway in this respect, more customers are benefiting from its existing all-in-one or "one-stop" denim clothing development and white-label supply solutions via its Denergy Apparel business. The goal is for Denergy to target small-to-medium overseas fashion brands for jeanswear manufacture, to make space for its more well-established sibling to focus on higher-volume orders in and around the Chinese market. Whereas its "big sister" company can afford to reprogramme and therefore reroute its strategy from the group up, Denergy's agility – and access to Prosperity's multifaceted expertise – certainly makes it one to watch. ■



Prosperity Textile's headquarters in Guangzhou, China. The company also established a full-scale Vietnamese mill back in 2018.



Weaving of Freitag's linen and hemp denim twill.

PHOTO:
LUKAS WASSMANN/ FREITAG

The need for biodegradable fibres

A denim mill, producing fabric collections for major fashion brands, Tavex has reached the conclusion that reasserting a preference for biodegradable fibres will help the industry address its contribution to the fashion sector's carbon footprint.

Everything we make has a carbon impact: producing fibres, processing them, creating fabrics from them, washing and finishing the fabric, turning the fabric into a pair of jeans, transporting the garment to the consumer's home, then washing the jeans after a certain number of wears and, finally, disposing of them at the end of their useful life. It all counts. And, according to Tavex's head of sales, Alicia León, any method for improving any aspect of the denim eco-system is worthy of serious consideration.

"The more proposals we look at, the better chance we have of finding solutions," she explains, "and this includes developing a greater understanding of biodegradable fibres." She says seeing images of clothing dumped in the Atacama Desert in Chile made her think about this in a new way. "I think if I went to the Atacama, what I would expect to see would be the sun and sand dunes," she continues, "but we have all seen the images showing tonnes of garments that are not biodegradable."

FACTORY TALK: TAVEX

Mexican fabric developer Tavex argues that the denim industry should have a preferential option for biodegradable fibres.

She says 39,000 tonnes of these garments are arriving in Chile every year and that the country is being used "almost as a dumping ground" for second-hand clothes, produced in Bangladesh and China for retail groups and consumers in Europe and the US. Ms León says she has also been alarmed by reports of fish coming into the human food chain with ocean plastic microfibrils inside them.

In-house analysis

Tavex is part of the Siete Leguas Group, which makes finished garments for a host of leading denim brands, many of them from fabric produced by Tavex. In-house analysis of the biodegradability question set out to assess how long it would take for a pair of jeans made 100% from cotton, or from a mix of cotton and other cellulosic fibres to biodegrade. Tavex and Siete Leguas concluded that it would take between six and 12 months. "But we have a very serious problem," Alicia León says. "If we put petroleum-derived fibres into those jeans, it could take anything from 40 to 200 years for them to biodegrade. It would be a serious contamination problem."

Water conservation is an important part of the strategy at Tavex and Siete Leguas.

PHOTO: SIETE LEGUAS GROUP

Her colleague, Arlethe Sánchez, who is head of marketing at Tavex, points out that making a biodegradable product starts with the raw materials. “For us in the textile industry, it is obvious that this means the fibres we put into our fabrics.” Two of the three types of fibre she identifies, natural and manmade cellulosic fibres, are biodegradable. Only one type is not biodegradable, synthetic fibres deriving from non-renewable resources.

“Here is a curious point, though,” Ms Sánchez says. “Around two-thirds of all the clothes being manufactured globally now are made from those synthetic materials.” If it is true that these fibres do not break down in nature, she points out that it is also true that they provide performance characteristics that materials manufacturers and consumers have come to value highly, ranging from flame retardancy in protective clothing to stretch properties in swimwear.

Examples to follow

Alicia León flags up, from as long ago as 2014, a real-life example of denim clothing that was free from any non-biodegradable fibres, created by Swiss brand Freitag. The Zurich-based clothing brand wanted to source tough, sustainably produced and, crucially, compostable material that was made in Europe. It could not find anything on the market at the time that met its needs, so it decided to develop its own, starting from the fibre up, calling the programme F-ABRIC. It included sweatshirts, T-shirts, work trousers, overalls and jeans.

This programme ran through 2023, but will not continue now as Freitag turns its circular-economy focus to other types of product. At the time of writing, the company was selling off the last of its F-ABRIC products, including the final pairs of jeans for women and men. These jeans were made from the brand’s own denim twill, with a composition of 81% linen and 19% hemp. The fibres were grown in Europe, the denim fabric was woven in Italy and the finished garment construction took place in Poland.

Other initiatives the Tavex team admires include the WellThread collections from Levi’s, which seek to use innovative technologies, chemistry and fibres to make jeans, including a new version of the 501s that contain at least 97% plant-based material. They are also enthusiastic about projects for collecting and repurposing old jeans, for example in Cotton Inc’s Blue Jeans Go Green programme, launched almost 20 years ago.



“We are trying to be a company that looks after our people and looks after the environment.”

ALICIA LEÓN

Collection points

Translating all of this to the hustle and bustle of making fabric and finished garments for fashion brands with exacting demands would probably prove challenging for any company, but Tavex is working to adopt sustainable practices as completely as it can. “We are recycling some of the water we use in our processes,” Ms León says, “and we are also making use of stored rainwater. We use indigo that causes no contamination. We are trying to be a company that looks after our people and looks after the environment.”

Among its recent collections, Earthy Naturals offered distinctive-looking denim made from natural fabrics with ecru finishes. More recently, it developed a collection of fabrics called Denim Vibes, incorporating hemp. The properties of this fibre that Tavex likes include high levels of abrasion resistance and durability, its antimicrobial and UV resistance, the ease with which it absorbs dye, plus its breathability and washability.

Natural credentials

Further work is going on to enhance these natural credentials. Arlethe Sánchez indicates that increasing the use of a whole range of natural and manmade cellulosic fibres in its fabrics, plus its promotion of the use in finished garments of biodegradable sewing thread and buttons made from renewable, biodegradable materials, including coconut shell. Rivets have a functional purpose as well as being decorative, Ms Sánchez points out, but she says sewing reinforcements into strategic parts of the garment using biodegradable fibres can also achieve both objectives. The same applies to external branding labels and care labels on the inside of the garment, she argues.

“If closures are one part of a pair of jeans that we have not yet been able to make from biodegradable material,” she says, “what we can do is make them easy to remove so that the whole of the rest of the garment can safely go into the earth.”

For Alicia León, a large number of fashion consumers today could, and perhaps should, bear all these considerations in mind when shopping for clothing. Labelling now, especially with QR codes on hang tags or in display areas, can provide the consumer with a wide range of information about the product, about the people who made it, the source of the raw materials and the policies of the brand selling it. She thinks that looking for products that will last a long time and that may be wearable by new owners further down the line is a good starting point. Then, eventually, if these products have come from the earth originally (in the form of natural raw materials), it would be good if they could return to the earth at end of life. ■

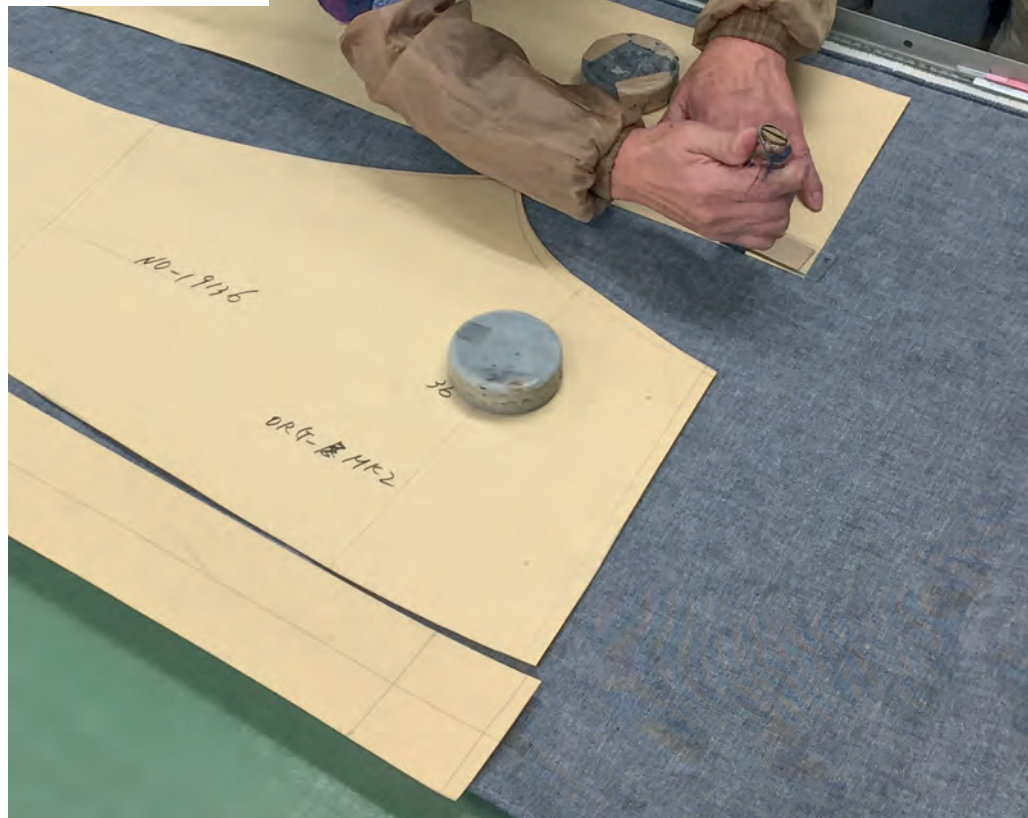
FACTORY TALK: BETTY SMITH JEANS

When digging into the history of women's jeans, especially the history of the early makers of jeans for women, would it occur to you to look towards Japan? Well the country has a true pioneer in this space, and a formerly very well-known denim label to boot. Today, Betty Smith is more than just a brand.

Japan's first women's jeans

You may already know that the very first women's jeans, called Lady Levi's, were released in 1934. You may even have seen Marilyn Monroe wearing a cool pair of jeans in "The Misfits". You might have heard that a few other well-known denim brands ventured into women's styles, such as Lee Cooper with the very first women's jeans with a zipper fly. That was in the 1950s, and it was quite a shocker at the time.

But have you ever heard of Betty Smith Jeans? Its story begins in the city of Kojima, in the denim famous Okayama prefecture. This is where a garment maker, Maruoka Hifuku, started manufacturing school uniforms in 1927. Then the information that I was told personally, in Japan, differs a bit from what denim history books say. This is what I was told: when Maruoka Hifuku began making corduroy pants in the early 1930s, the company was approached by Levi's. And, as Betty Smith Jeans general manager Toshio Oshima told me when I visited the factory, Levi's had denim fabric yardage sent from the United States for testing by Maruoka Hifuku. Whatever the truth, it sparked a very special and very strong link between the two companies. In the early 1960s, Maruoka Hifuku changed its name to Big John. This name will be familiar to the heritage denim nerds reading this Factory Talk, as it is one of the most prestigious Japanese denim brands and though it nearly disappeared, it has recently begun to re-emerge. In the early 1960s, the company decided to create Japan's first women's denim brand, which it called Betty Smith Jeans. Its very first jeans were launched in 1962. The label fast became famous for its rigid jeans which were soon followed by stretch styles.



So that's the story? No, there's more. Unfortunately, the success of Betty Smith Jeans did not last, the brand never grew to become 'world famous'. Still, and owing to our Japanese friends' taste for history and heritage, the Betty Smith label never went out of business and the company continues to make jeans in its original factory site in Kojima. It employs 45 people and generates a small and respectable ¥60 million in revenues (some €400,000). When I visited, Mr Oshima showed me around the actual factory that usual visitors to the site can only observe through windows.

The factory includes bespoke jeans making.

ALL PHOTOS: TILMANN WRÖBEL



Located on the site of the factory, the Betty Smith Jeans Museum presents a full overview of jeans making, from cotton bale to washing machines.

Imagine a typical Japanese building, which, besides a regular denim manufacturing unit, includes bespoke denim services, where jeans are cut and crafted by hand, one item at a time. Think Savile Row and you've got it. Highly skilled Japanese tailors working on your pair of custom jeans.

In 2003 the company converted its former dormitory into what is now the Betty Smith Jeans Museum. It is the only jeans museum in Japan to this day. It presents a full overview of the entire denim value chain, starting with cotton bales and going through spinning, weaving, manufacturing and washing to final product. The machinery on display is vintage more than modern, with a wealth of denim memorabilia from back in the day. The visit finishes in a room full of very old replicas of even older vintage Levi's jeans along with vintage Japanese denim items. Next to the Museum, denim lovers will find a space where they can manufacture their own pair of jeans and finish them with a large selection of different trimmings.

Mr Oshima also showed me his personal archives which are stored on the second level of the building. Let me tell you, he has several thousands of jeans and denims from all over the world. When I told him that I had learned my denim basics at French denim company Chipie in the late 1980s, he immediately pulled out rare Chipie gems from the past. Simply unbelievable.

One last fun fact. In 2002, Betty Smith Jeans launched Eco-Betty, offering jeans, and I quote, "made from old denim scraps". This label was in fact introducing what many of today's jeans brands would call a game-changing revolution in denim. A brilliant, yet difficult-to-achieve sustainable concept of making jeans from 100% pre-consumer waste. In Japan it is humbly called "jeans made from old denim scraps".



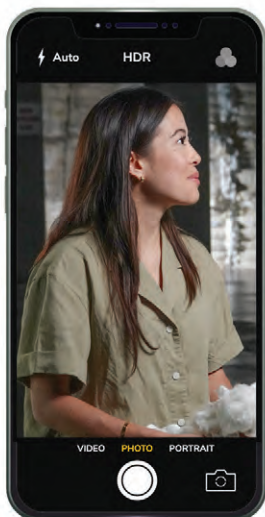
Vintage Chipie jeans.

I don't know what, if its in-depth knowledge of denim or its specific history, has made the people in this land, a quite small area of Japan, so relevant to this art and trade. But I am sure that a deep dive into true denim culture would inspire many of our industry leaders to focus more on the real roots and the sunny side of denim. ■



Tilmann Wröbel is the founder of Monsieur-T, the 'denim lifestyle' studio. He started his career as a haute couture designer before moving into streetwear and denim. He has worked as a designer and consultant for some of the world's top brands. He is based in Dusseldorf, Germany, and Biarritz, France.

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Annabelle Hutter is managing director of Sántis Textiles, a Swiss family-owned textile company headquartered in Singapore. In 2016, Sántis developed 100% recycled cotton yarn, RCO100. In 2023, it worked with Turkish denim mill Kipas, machinery company Temsan and engineering firm Swinsol to jointly develop a mechanical recycling system.

PHOTOS: ANNABELLE HUTTER

CLOCKING ON...

A busy schedule means a base in Zurich but a global workplace for Sántis Textiles' Annabelle Hutter, as she helps brands and manufacturers further their circular ambitions.

Pushing the envelope

6.30am

I make a cup of tea and get all my random thoughts out in my journal. I listen to the *Financial Times* podcast while going through my first emails in the kitchen. There are also the mornings where nothing goes my way: I don't want to get out of bed, resulting in panic mode. But even if I have two hours or two minutes, I have perfected my signature dishevelled look (often wearing my RCO100 recycled cotton pieces). I prefer not to eat breakfast because I hate being full in the morning. Sometimes I make a smoothie if I am feeling peckish.

8.30am

Living in the centre of Zürich means I commute with tram or by foot. I like to walk with some upbeat music bumping in my headphones. I love Diana Ross' 'The Boss' or Elton John's 'Mona Lisas and Mad Hatters'. I usually find myself side stepping along the pavement or singing out loud, which is pretty much forbidden in Switzerland. Nevertheless, I think Swiss people can learn a thing or two from my not-so-Swiss quirks.

10.00am

When I'm not in NYC for a show, visiting spinners in Italy or hanging out with my friends at Kipas where our RCO100 machine is, I participate in online meetings. My favourite meetings are in person. No matter what it is about, these are where I learn most. I'm often busy trying to navigate the world of running a business and fighting misogynists, but I thank my lucky stars that my fundamental work is creative. I get to develop products and strategies with brands and suppliers who are adopting RCO100 fabrics/yarns/fibres/machinery into their supply chains. These include Mara Hoffman, some under the Kering group, Eco Alf, Patagonia and PVH, to name a few.

I am working on a marketing overhaul of our branding. I'm trying – in tandem with my dad's newly released machine technology – to bring the spotlight back on the real textile OGs who truly change our industry for the better through not only innovation but also familial values. I constantly strive to push the envelope to incite more change so it is time for an elevated marketing look to reflect that.

12.30pm

For lunch I like to eat something light but packed with protein. Zürich has the world's oldest vegetarian restaurant which I love to go to. Then I have a coffee to avoid taking a nap.

1.30pm

My priorities are to create an inspiring recycled textile experience, and together with my colleague Filipa, I think we are really achieving this. Slowly but surely. Oh, and I almost forgot, I spend a lot of the afternoon speaking to my dad. Family business things!

7.00pm

I come home and often find myself contemplating life, which can be both a blessing and a curse. If I have a call past 7pm I'll take that from the elliptical machine at the gym. I like to go to a spinning or yoga class when I can. On Thursdays I love to see my friends, go to an art gallery or swim in the lake in the summer.



8.30pm

Because I live alone, I will most likely forget to cook dinner. But I hate feeling as if I neglect to nourish my brain so I love to lose myself in a book. I'm reading *What Artists Wear* by Charlie Porter. I'm a bit of a homebody so the time I can be at home is a blessing. If I have a trip the next day, I spend a good half hour packing because most of my flights out of Zürich are in the morning (sigh).

11.00pm

I drink a hot cup of herbal tea and get into my cozy bed. If it's a Friday, I am most likely not in bed at 11pm and probably downing a martini somewhere, itching to dance. ■



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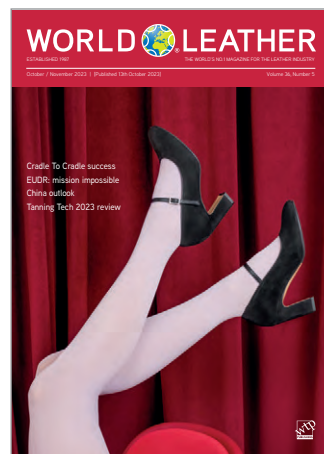
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HEROES
NEED
A HELP”

NO MORE
YELLOWISH FOR
A BEAUTIFUL
LOOK

