

OUR PROJECTS ([HTTPS://WWW.VAM.AC.UK/BLOG/PROJECTS](https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/projects))

RESEARCH ([HTTPS://WWW.VAM.AC.UK/BLOG/PROJECTS/RESEARCH-DEPARTMENT](https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/projects/research-department))

The power of spaces to transform: refugees' stories of change shaped through fashion

August 2, 2024

Blog

V&A

This post was written by:

Dr Francesco Mazzarella, Reader in Design for Social Change at London College of Fashion, UAL

Dr Seher Mirza, Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at London College of Fashion, UAL



Participants in 'Fashioning Stories of Change' at the V&A during Refugee Week. Photo by Asmae el Ouariachi.

As the [AHRC \(https://www.ukri.org/councils/ahrc/\)](https://www.ukri.org/councils/ahrc/)-funded two-year research project '[Decolonising Fashion and Textiles: Design for Cultural Sustainability with Refugee Communities](https://www.sustainable-fashion.com/decolonising-fashion-and-textiles)' (<https://www.sustainable-fashion.com/decolonising-fashion-and-textiles>) (DFT) comes to a close, we reflect on the project partnership between [London College of Fashion, UAL \(https://www.arts.ac.uk/colleges/london-college-of-fashion\)](https://www.arts.ac.uk/colleges/london-college-of-fashion) and the V&A.

Through participatory action research, the project team led by [Dr Francesco Mazzarella \(https://researchers.arts.ac.uk/1206-francesco-mazzarella\)](https://researchers.arts.ac.uk/1206-francesco-mazzarella) (Reader in Design for Social Change at London College of Fashion, UAL) explored the concepts of cultural sustainability and community resilience through the lived experiences of London-based refugees and asylum seekers, and contributed towards decolonising dominant fashion design practice.

Throughout the project, the team (comprised also of Professor Lucy Orta, Dr Seher Mirza, Nicole Zisman, Alisa Ruzavina, JC Candanedo, and Camilla Palestra) continuously listened to the needs and aspirations of collaborating refugees to make informed decisions and plan ‘with’ the participants the types of activities and outcomes they wanted to see. We embarked on a reciprocal process of textile making to conceptualise and reflect on important aspects of the participants’ identities, cultures, migration journeys, and shape collective visions for the future, as documented in the project’s films *Refugee’s Stories and Visions of Cultural Sustainability and Fashion as Catalyst: Making and Advocacy for Social Change*.



In this project, we advocate for considering culture as an essential component of a sustainability agenda, besides the three most recognised pillars of sustainability: environment, economy, and society. Drawing from Williams (2022), through the term ‘cultural sustainability’ we refer to tolerant systems that identify and cultivate diversity of cultural heritage, beliefs, practices, and histories in connection with places, resources, and ancestral lands. Starting from the premise of not re-enacting dominant power narratives, we engaged the project participants in storytelling sessions, textile co-creation workshops and roundtable discussions with the aim to understand what cultural sustainability and community resilience meant in this context, and address some of the multiple-level challenges faced by refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. These liminal and peripheral communities actively search for a new voice and identity as they rebuild their lives and resettle in a new place. Our research contributed to understanding the lived experiences of refugees, mapping ways to build resilience within the local community and collectively framing visions for a more compassionate future. The ambition was also to shift prevailing narratives around refugees, amplify the participants’ voice and agency, and foreground an alternative fashion and textile system grounded on equality, diversity, inclusion, and sustainability of cultures.

We are aware of the ever-present question of working with a British institution with entangled and entwined colonial legacies. However, collaborating with the V&A through the DFT project underlined the reclaiming of spaces and free resources to make art accessible to all, and inspire creativity and heritage innovation. In DFT we consider culture as a multi-layered and ever-shifting reality, not as a return to our fixed ‘roots’, but as ‘routes’ that evolve with people as they travel, integrate, learn, unlearn, and make meaning.

In this vein, the V&A partnership started in June 2023 with a tour of the Fashion collection led by Assistant Curator Jessica Harpley for our project participants. She showed the museum's vast collection of historical garments, jewellery, and accessories from all over the world, while fostering debates around decolonising fashion and cultural sustainability. The participants were surprised but happy to learn that the V&A is free to visit, and anyone can use the space and see the permanent exhibits. They have now discovered a cultural organisation they can start to connect with as they rebuild their lives in London.



Tour of V&A Fashion Collection led by Assistant Curator Jessica Harpley. Photo by Francesco Mazzarella.

In May 2024 the final in a series of three fashion and policy roundtable discussions was held at the V&A's Creative Studio. The roundtable brought together 24 stakeholders from across the fashion and creative industry, policy makers, and charities working with refugees and asylum seekers. We facilitated a holistic discussion on policy changes that can ensure that refugees and asylum seekers are not trapped in cycles of poverty as they are not allowed to work or await the refugee status to be granted, prolonging gaps on CVs. The roundtable informed the policy paper '[Threads of Opportunity: Good Work for Refugees in the Fashion Industry](https://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/id/eprint/22088/11/Mazzarella%20Mirza%20Legaspi_2024_Threads%20of%20Opportunity.pdf)' (https://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/id/eprint/22088/11/Mazzarella%20Mirza%20Legaspi_2024_Threads%20of%20Opportunity.pdf) and a lobbying campaign.



Dr Francesco Mazzarella facilitating a roundtable discussion at the V&A's Creative Studio. Photo by Toyin Gbomedo

In June 2024, during Refugee Week, we delivered 'Fashioning Stories of Change' (<https://www.vam.ac.uk/event/lkjLwgqyQk/refugee-week-fashioning-stories-of-change-june-2024>), a series of fashion performances and events at the V&A connected to the theme of 'Our Home'. These were conceived as a celebration of refugees' craft skills and transformative journeys, shaped through fashion and the visual arts. The clothes that twenty-one participants designed and made during the project's series of co-creation workshops were showcased in three performances to express the refugees' personal and cultural identities. Two performances took place in the dramatic Raphael Gallery with sound recorded statements played in the background with bespoke music produced by Diego Garcia Martin to enhance the participants' stories of change. These statements were written as part of the representation of the garments or accessories created by the participants.

A Mile in My Shoes

Nope, not an hour or a minute.

Not a suggestion, wish, or even a learning experience.

Yet the shoes and the journey mean so much.

A dreamer reaching for the stars as they fall from the dream catcher above filtering the bad...

Colours of hope (white),

New beginnings (yellow),

The ocean (blue).

The threads entangled via surgical knots to hold it all together,

Carrying "one step at a time" into the future.

Hope.

(by Lexi)





DFT project participant performing in the Raphael Gallery. Photo by JC Candanedo

Another public activation took place in the John Madejski Garden, a more playful and interactive space with a sense of informality, where the participants weaved through the general public. The participants expressed their unique personal and cultural identity as the V&A spaces transformed not only their garments but also the sense of self. The participants experienced the fashion performances as a contribution towards healing their trauma and shifting prevailing negative narratives around refugees.



DFT project participant performing in the V&A Garden. Photo by JC Candanedo

Finally, we transformed The Globe, in the Europe (1600 – 1815) Galleries into a ‘Nest’, where visual artist Lucy Orta facilitated a drop-in workshop called ‘Lifeline’. The public was encouraged to share responses through interacting with a series of so objects relating to different themes. This public action built on a collaborative workshop which invited asylum seekers and refugees to reflect on the meaning of lifeline and share their lived experiences. The results came together in a zine (https://mcusercontent.com/9af0b65b52db89ea7c04d1e3b/files/ea8d5e7c-3804-b822-4e59-bf3d38a59b62/00342_Lifeline_Zine_A5_AW2_Digital.pdf) expressing the challenges that asylum seekers and refugees face upon arrival in the UK, as well as the opportunities that have helped rebuild their life in the place of resettlement.



"I am planting my own seeds in this country; I believe one day I will harvest my own fruits"

- Zeej



Professor Lucy Orta facilitating the Lifeline workshop in The Globe

We are infinitely grateful to the V&A for this partnership, showcasing the possibilities of using spaces in different ways and how they can be powerful in impacting people in reflecting on and project their sense of identity. We are excited to explore this partnership further and how it can evolve and expand as the [V&A opens its new site \(https://www.vam.ac.uk/east\)](https://www.vam.ac.uk/east) next to our LCF campus in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, Stratford, London. We look forward to exploring further opportunities to leverage the power of research and learning through making and develop innovative approaches to working with fashion and textiles within our local communities, creating new stories of social and cultural change.

FASHION ([HTTPS://WWW.VAM.AC.UK/BLOG/TAG/FASHION](https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/tag/fashion))

REFUGEES ([HTTPS://WWW.VAM.AC.UK/BLOG/TAG/REFUGEES](https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/tag/refugees))

SUSTAINABILITY ([HTTPS://WWW.VAM.AC.UK/BLOG/TAG/SUSTAINABILITY](https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/tag/sustainability))

TEXTILES ([HTTPS://WWW.VAM.AC.UK/BLOG/TAG/TEXTILES](https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/tag/textiles))