

Mud to Lux

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Introduction

This is the story of a student project and the student's response to specific materials. The students were all beginning their second year of study for BA Textiles at Plymouth College of Art in 2015.

In part this story gives an explanation of a project, which was extremely well resourced but more importantly it explains the immense creative ambition on the part of the students, to a material, which would otherwise be thrown into landfill sites. The student's creative attitudes to the material presents us with an inspiring insight into the idea of the life cycle of a material through design and invention.

Glastonbury Music Festival 2014



In 2014, 175,000 people arrived at the Glastonbury Music Festival. At the close of the festival, there was an estimated 5000 tents, 400 gazebos and 6500 sleeping bags left abandoned in the mud.

This amount of waste and landfill represents an environmental disaster. However it also represents a great material resource! During a meeting with a small company called 'Wrag Wrap', discussing design for a gift product, I learned about Wrag Wraps concerns for environmental issues and their endeavors to use recycled polyester materials. In relation to this, I further learned that Wrag Wrap had been to the Glastonbury Festival and retrieved hundreds of the discarded muddy tents and gazebos.

With the knowledge of the huge waste of tent material, the environmental consequences of it being discarded to landfill, the open-minded attitude of Wrag Wrap with regard to a project collaboration and my natural curiosity for reinvention and design, I began to crystallise an idea for a student project based around the materials of a tent. The first question to ask is what is a tent made of?

Polyester/Nylon/Polypropylene/Zips/Poles

The second question: what is the potential of these somewhat unforgiving, unglamorous, purely practical materials? What could we do with all those meters of muddy tent material? The third question: what could we focus on, in order to elevate this functional material in such a way to offer a new, more glamorous life and launch the materials into a new life cycle.

Plymouth College of Art, Textile Design programme, teamed up with 'Wrag Wrap' to conceive a design project aimed at making a design statement about the 'value' of these throw away tents by considering a new life for the tent material.

The student group came from a background of textile design through manipulation. Their core skills were craft related. Their design experience was limited, as they had only completed year 1 of their studies and their expertise in design thinking was relatively untested.

The academic team conceived a project, aiming to take the students on a journey, exploring materials, resulting in a final product made out of discarded tents. One of the objectives would be to explore the perceived value of the fabric, using design and processes to bring a transformation and added perceived value.

A design brief was introduced to the students, inviting them to use the tent fabrics, design and make a structure capable of supporting human weight. To take their visual lead by referring to their research around the subject of cocoons, pods, hammocks. Their design should be aimed at a designer-maker market and should express the potential of the tent fabrics in a new context. second year students studying textile design, were asked to research, pods, cocoons, enclosures and hammocks; looking broadly and conceptually at these subjects.

Meanwhile, we took delivery of hundreds of retrieved tents and began considering the material development options; pleating, stitching, dyeing, printing, laser cutting, laminating, bonding, knitting, crochet, circular knitting....

A specialist willow weaver, was invited to work with the students and give demonstration workshops for braiding, binding and weaving, using cut strips of tent fabrics.

The academic team experimented with layering and sandwiching multiple layers of the tent material, creating an extremely rigid material with a colorful stratum. Samples of this material were passed to our colleagues in the FabLab, where it was laser cut and etched, further revealing the decorative strata and exploring its strength and structural qualities.

What followed was an intense period of material manipulation, making reference to student's individual visual research and the physical properties of the tent fabrics.

The students began to synthesise 3 strands of research:

- Research relating to pods, cocoons, enclosures.
- Research relating to material experiments with the tent materials.
- Research relating to drawings, aesthetic and design development.

The greatest challenge presented to the students was the task of making a structure, which would support human weight. The students approach to material invention and the development of a methodical approach to material experiments had begun to bear fruit. Now the task was to address supporting human weight.

Each student developed a unique approach to their design, taking account all the experiences and experiments with the materials and processes.

Examples of the students' design and material conclusions:

Sam Witts, cut the tent materials into ribbons. Keeping the original colours, but carefully selecting she produced 200 discs produced by circular knitting, to form the decorative and structural base for her hammock.



Kaye Morgan over dyed the tent fabrics to produce her colour palette of deep violets. Cutting the tent fabric into ribbons she produced 250 pompoms, to create a soft luxurious and fun fabric for her design.



Amy Wright developed a circular design, embellished with tent fabrics which have been tie-dyed, pleated, embroidered and patch worked together to create this large swing-seat.



Lottie Star developed a conical cocoon, the outer surface embellished with stitch detail, the inner dyed and coloured, reminiscent of fruit or a fig.



A selection of these products, have been exhibited at Port Eliot Festival, July 2015 and received great attention via social media.

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