The Fabric of the City, Archive textiles inspire a collaborative project in contemporary design and innovation

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Abstract:
The 'Fabric of the City', a collaborative group project supported by Arts Council England funding, was initiated in order to further understand the impact of the 'archive' on textile practice. The project ran during 2015, culminating in an Exhibition and Symposium. The response was framed by the requirements and restrictions of the situation created by the archive conditions and reproduction limitations, leading participants to challenge their normal modes of practice. Sharing the reflection on the outcomes of the work is a step in the building blocks necessary to develop our thought processes, within the security of the collaborative practitioner group. From immersive archive sessions through to group consultation, the supportive environment engendered outcomes which have left a legacy on creativity and innovation in new products. These can be seen in the impact on developments in commercial applications, in addition to theory, in product and textile design.

Keywords: archive; collaborative; innovation; immersive; reflective

Introduction
This paper explores the creative response to archive material of a group of fashion and textile designers who were invited to participate in The Fabric of the City Exhibition and Symposium held at The Cass, London Metropolitan University, in July 2015. Beginning with the context for the Exhibition, it sets out to explore how designers and makers engage with archive material in a collaborative project. The invitation to participate provided the designers with an opportunity to respond to archive material to produce an open response that would reflect their practice while being experimental, innovative and original.

An overview of the aims, outcomes and objectives for the Exhibition is addressed before going on to discuss the responses to the Project in the retrospective qualitative review that was held. This discusses the experience of being in the archive, the making processes and the changes in practice of a selected sample of the participants.

Themes explored include looking at the use of the archive material to inspire innovation when framed by the restrictions of reproduction limitations and museum conditions, particularly those that are haptic in nature, and how we replace the experience when it is denied to us. The participants’ attitudes to the use of the archive are discussed, with their mixed response to the use of historical artefact. For one there was an almost preconceived notion of how the archive could be used, and a purposeful intent behind the adaptation of image with particular techniques and process. More typically, the designers approached the archive anticipating that inspiration would come through the examination of pattern, material, and context of the textiles. There was concern about pre-selected items, and that inspiration might not be stimulated, and relief when it was. Some remnant of archive projects being associated with compulsory undergraduate projects perhaps lingered. This, along with a little trepidation about the relevancy of the archive to current issues, meant that there were significant concerns that needed to be overcome to make the project a success.

However, the benefits of visiting the archive as a group were soon evident as the practitioners bonded over their shared interest, and the collegiate nature of the project became apparent.

An understanding of the importance of seeing and talking about the process of making is discussed as part of the review, and the ‘meta’ quality of reflecting on oneself and one’s practice.

Finally, the legacy of the collaborative project experience is examined, now almost two years after the Exhibition. In qualitative interviews with a sample of the participants, the effects of the project can be assessed through changes to their practice and to their attitudes to the archive. The demands of the outcomes can be seen to have been a possible catalyst for new directions, both in specific techniques and in the beginnings of new phases of work. These are discussed in light of the collaborative nature of the project, and any bearing this might have had on the outcomes.

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The Project begins in the archive

In 2015, the Huguenots of Spitalfields Society (huguenotsfspitalfields.org 2017) announced a Festival to run through the summer months with events to raise awareness of the cultural and economic contribution the Huguenots made to life in England. The Huguenots were Protestants, mainly from France, who fled religious persecution in the 16th and 17th centuries, arriving in England with specialist skills and knowledge but particularly weaving. The area of Spitalfields, just east of the City of London, became the centre of a thriving weave and textile industry, taking the design and innovation of woven silks to new heights. Consequently the fabrics, garments and artefacts known as the ‘Spitalfields Silks’, collections of which are held at both the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Museum of London, have become a topic of intense study by academics and designers.

The Fabric of the City Project (thefabricofthecity.org 2017) an Exhibition and Symposium, was devised to explore a contemporary response to these Spitalfields Silks, through the engagement of current fashion and textile practice. Designers, particularly those whose location or professional connections gave them links to the Spitalfields area, were invited to come together for a group Exhibition, beginning with an introduction to the archive in the Museum of London (Figure 1).

The project was instigated by Gina Pierce, whose research practice focuses on the use of textile archives. The theme of this research led to the formation of three main aims for the Exhibition. Firstly to demonstrate how the archive can have relevance to contemporary design by stimulating design and material innovation, rather than appropriation of historical imagery. Secondly, to explore and to ‘expose’ the working practices of designers to a wider (public) audience, in order to shed some light on the processes involved in designing and making. Thirdly, to reflect on the area of Spitalfields itself, as a component in the success of the textile industry, and of its continued role in creative communities. Each of these aims are part of a larger study, but were addressed in the context of this project. The first two were explored more fully than the third, and the first could be said to be the most satisfactorily fulfilled.

The fourteen designers selected to be invited were from very mixed professional backgrounds, some with combined maker and educational careers; from the commercial sector and fashion houses, and each having a differing specialism. Just over half had some experience of using archive material in their work, and of the sample selected for interview, four out of the six had used it in some way. CUTECIRCUIT are Francesca Rosella and Ryan Genz, who produce wearable technology. They are best known for The HugShirt, Twitter Dress, and Katy Perry’s dress for the Met Ball in 2010. House of Harlot are latex wear specialists, producing fetish wear, lines for high street retailers and design houses including Marc Jacobs. Designer Barley Massey owns Fabrications in Broadway Market, a showcase and sales outlet for contemporary fabric designers with an emphasis on upcycled and sustainable design. Lucy Rainbow is a graduate from The Cass, and was completing her MA at the RCA at the time of the show. Sam Wingate, a tutor at The Cass, is an illustrator/textile designer. Jane Bowler works in mixed media, establishing her studio in 2011, also running workshops and lecturing. Flora Mclean is a milliner, with cult label, House of Flora, and previously Cass lecturer, now Senior Tutor in Accessories at the RCA. Weaver Lisa Bloomer is a Cass graduate, now Senior Lecturer at The Cass and Chelsea, UCA, as well as running her own practice designing and consulting. Karen Coughlan is a knit designer for menswear, for brands including Louis Vuitton and Ed Crutchley, plus lecturing at The Cass, CSM and the RCA. James Hunting is a stitcher with a practice that has encompassed Paris design houses and his own art pieces, and is Textile Course Leader at The Cass. Rebecca Hoyes is a print designer, consultant, previously design manager at Habitat and lecturer at CSM; product designer Rentaro Nishimura has an architectural training, and is a lecturer at The Cass; Alison Willoughby is a textile designer-maker, known for several years as ‘SkirtGirl’. Gina Pierce is an academic, researcher and surface designer. For links to all the practitioners’ websites, please see end of the article.
The objectives of the project, reflecting the aims, are part of ongoing research into the use of textile archives by the author, and are summarised here as addressed in the context of the Exhibition. The first objective was to assess the contribution that archive material can make to contemporary design and processes. The second objective looked at how rendering the creative process more visible to a public audience, supported an understanding of these activities. Thirdly, how the role that the location-Spitalfields- had influenced or strengthened the practice of the designers. Following up the experience of the Exhibition and Symposium, the author commenced a qualitative review to assess the outcomes, and to reflect on how these matched to the original aims and objectives. For this review, interviews with a sample of the makers were conducted; Alison Willoughby, Lisa Bloomer, Rentaro Nishimura, James Hunting, Karen Coughlan and Rebecca Hoyes discussed and reflected on their experiences. A decision to make recorded interviews the basis for this qualitative review was influenced particularly by the work of Eva Magnusson and Jeanne Marecek (Magnusson and Marecek 2015). The qualitative inquiry is able to encompass both a wide ranging study of the background material, and also detail of a practitioner’s own view of a process or project. The researcher as interviewer can here structure a framework for a systematic, but open ended series of questions that allow the practitioner to recall and reflect, while being drawn into descriptive aspects that fulfil the inquiry. This face-to-face interview, with audio recording, is a route to sourcing in depth comment and rumination on individual events, group activities or ongoing processes. According to Magnusson and Marecek, ‘interpretative researchers are interested in people’s ways of making sense of their activities, experiences, and relationships and how they plan and act in accord with these ways of making sense’.
In order to structure the interviews, the researcher’s specific ‘knowledge interest’, an over-arching issue, defines the area, which will then be sectioned into a series of questions. The over-arching issue in the Fabric of the City was a study of How Designers Work with Archive Material, in the most general understanding of those terms. Within the defined research area, prepared, open ended questions were grouped into topics to encourage the respondent to provide a wide ranging and reflective response. Before the interviews, participants were sent details of the process, including a Pilot Study Information Sheet, a Permission Form, and a list of the questions to be discussed. Where possible, the interviewer was in the practitioner’s place of work. This is important, as can be seen in the work of Paul Harper, (Harper 2013) discussed later.

Although the design work that was produced for the Exhibition was already in the public domain, the questionnaires could bring out some evidence pertinent to topics that the participants might be hesitant to reveal if they knew it could be in the public domain. Therefore when the permissions were sought, distinctions were made between material that could be kept anonymous, and that which can be associated with the interviewee.

As well as making an audio recording during the interview, notes were made of any significant body language or reluctance or difficulty with any answers. There was inevitably a different experience with each interviewee, however, the process remained as consistent as possible, in order to gain an equality of process. This sometimes entailed approaching a topic from a different perspective, or using different points of reference, as appropriate. As advised by Magnusson and Marecek, if a question does not “work” for one particular participant, even though it has worked for the others, the topic should not be dropped entirely, but rephrasing tried in several ways (Magnusson and Marecek 2015).

Transcripts of the interviews were made as soon as possible afterwards, along with any notes on the respondent’s behaviour, and before proceeding to another interview.

The archive experience

As stated, some of the group had experience of working with archives, but for others it was the first time that they had experienced fabrics and garments of such historic and specialist importance in close proximity. The practitioners were awed by the age, beauty and skill shown in the Silks which demonstrated the priorities of another social age, in the luxury of gold and silver thread, and the labour invested in the hand process. (Figure 1.)

An experience in an archive can take on an atmosphere of reverence, of a certain respect towards seeing history represented as object. The researcher cannot help but be aware of a sense of being near a ‘source’, an original artefact that is part of a chain that leads back into the past, and forward to where we stand now.

The literature cannon has much to guide the researcher, and to shape the relationship with the idea of archive; from Derrida, (1995) we understand it has a publicly recognized authority as keeper of public, private and historical records. So we place a trust in the archive as a teller of the truth, and want to connect with these artefacts, so they can lend us the authority they appear to possess, or that we have endowed them with.

There are examples of many artists but fewer textile designers working with archive material. Reviewing the use of archives by textile designers and artists reveals a range of different approaches to selecting the original object, and to how to approach working with it. A unifying factor is sometimes the motivation for exposing and exploring the hidden, lost and neglected information in our archives, and how that is taken into the public arena. Hal Foster (2004) describes the work of the archival artist is to ‘seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present’ (p.4). There can be a range of motivating factors for the artist behind this drive to reveal, including the notion of information, skill or aesthetic qualities needing to be continued, shared, and revitalised.

However, we have a responsibility to the archive material that will not be one simply of appropriation, as it can have limited application if it is simply a source of design reproduction. Not only are permissions needed, and fees to be paid when reproducing archive imagery, but this route can lead to a creative cul-de-sac.

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The notion of re-interpretation, rather than appropriation, is one of the author’s main themes of study, and became so for The Fabric of the City project. It provided the practitioners with the opportunity to explore the challenge of applying their own innovative techniques to give new perspectives on their own processes.

**Supported group experience**

The participants’ response to the invitation to be part of the project was uniformly positive, but their motivations were varied, as recorded in the interviews. Overall, there was pleasure in the concept of a communal exhibition, and for working with archive material.

At the museum visit, designers who knew of each other because of their work, and in some cases had been in communication on social networks, met for the first time. A disparate group from differing background disciplines and a wide range of professional experience were united by a mutual interest. Speaking about the experience of meeting for the first time, several expressed their pleasure at being part of a group project, instead of their usual position of working alone. The communal visit stimulated sociable banter as the designers shared comments, allowing themselves to be inspired by being with other creatives. There was a light hearted atmosphere as they enjoyed hearing each other’s reactions and started to make new connections with their peers.

At the Museum of London, we were guided through the archive by curator Beatrice Behlen, looking at, and hearing about, her selection of fabrics and garments. Weaver Lisa Bloomer was able to provide additional information on the construction and yarns, so the social aspect interwove with knowledge sharing on process and material. Exchanges between different disciplines can become rare as silo work structures can prevail in some areas, but the value of making connections in a shared space can lead to affirmation of one’s practice and thinking. In the interviews, the designers reflected on how they had discussed minor technical details, recognising their own ‘nerdy’ obsessiveness was not so unusual.

This ability to share observations echoes the methods used in the VARI Project at the Victoria and Albert Museum. In her paper given at The Fabric of the City Symposium 2015 on the VARI Project at the V & A, Lina Hakim (The Fabric of the City Symposium 2015) describes object handling and study sessions in which cross disciplinary experts could exchange information on process, as a practice based research method. The pre-selection of pieces by Beatrice led to a different type of archive experience than the designers would have taken if they had worked independently, choosing for themselves. However, the lack of control over the selection caused some anxiety for Willoughby and Bloomer who struggled initially with the pre-selection, but then relished the freedom the lack of decision making allowed.

The loss of control engenders a sense of vulnerability, and necessitates or encourages that trust is placed in another’s hands. When that trust is rewarded with outcomes that exceed one’s own expectations, a sense of relief can be inspiring, and can create a bond between the participants. The parameters of this combination of relinquishing control and responding to the archive, provided a framework within which the designers could begin their own methodology for approaching the project.

**Haptic experience**

The archive visit became an immersive experience, as the designers were absorbed into the world of the original weavers and their fabrics, and conversely perhaps, aided by the hindrance of not being able to touch the fabrics. The curator, Beatrice, described the pieces, giving details of their origin and provenance, where known. The narrative provided an absorbing and illuminating insight into the 18th century, giving life to the fabrics and garments.

As Beatrice lifted the fabrics to allow us to see their reverse sider, their construction was exposed, and there was discussion and shared admiration for particular aspects, especially the floats on the underside of the weaves in the brightest and most costly yarns which produce abstracted versions of the traditional florals. The practitioners were forced to speculate on how the fabrics would have felt to touch, the haptic qualities being so intrinsic to the experience of cloth. Reflecting on problems of exhibits in an exhibition being unable to be touched, Mitchell (2012) writes that they become objects of contemplation, and ‘only
half experienced’ (p.9). For Bloomer, the weaver, it was especially difficult, as she uses her sense of touch as much as sight to understand the qualities of the yarn.

During the second archive visit, to the Clothworkers Centre, at the Victoria & Albert Museum, the garments were laid out for the visit, with some written information on the artefacts. A complete garment showing signs of wear and dirt initiated storytelling amongst the group on the provenance of the dress, and the original owner. Here speculation on the lifestyle of the wearer of these pieces led to spirited conjectures. The communal nature of the group visit led to flights of fancy on the party going antics that caused the dirt on the hems and visible signs of sweat on the linen lining, used specifically to absorb the bodily fluids that would have damaged the silk. These exchanges provided Mclean and Coughlan with conceptual methods for their design development, as they decided to use the imagined lifestyle of the owner as the basis of their outcomes. For Bloomer it was the material combination of the silk and the linen in the garment that inspired her to use these as yarns for her outcome.

Although again, touch was denied, an understanding of the garment, combined with imagination, proved the spur to new ideas. Once again the hidden aspects of the garment stimulated ideas; the intimacy of seeing where skin has touched the lining because the sweat stains are still visible giving a very human connection.

Collaborations outside the group

As with so many activities, the enormity of embarking on this project was underestimated, and aspects of the original concept were left unfulfilled, or were unable to be implemented. An awareness of other projects instigated through the study of archive, such as the Awaken Project in Glasgow School of Art (2014) which gives examples of good practice, particularly the use of Creative Practitioner Journals to record designer progress, and encourage reflection. Interim meetings were planned, for sharing of experiences, material practices and experiences. Although these were not fully realised, there was an ongoing community spirit and of sharing of information which continued from the bonhomie of the archive visits. Sennett’s (2012) claim that ‘co-operation enhances the quality of social life’ (p.273) prevailed in intention, if not always realised in reality.

Where meetings could be held, they provided support and affirmation. ‘Talking aloud with others about what this line, this color, or that indication of motion means, activates predictive abilities, not only about the perspectives likely to be taken by others, but also about the relations that may hold among components of a given piece of art or, between a current work and others viewed elsewhere or in the past’ (Brice) (p.133). This discussion helps to put a piece of work under review in a context with comparable production by oneself, and by others, allowing a distance for the practitioner to view objectively, while still being part way through the creative stage.

Some of the participants managed smaller informal discussions during the preparative stages, and these discussions led to James Hunting and Karen Coughlan, changing their normal mode of working, and both to organise their own small collaborations with an external embroiderer. James Hunting, whose work is intensely expressive, commissioned a stitcher who works in a contrasting method, to provide cross stitch that was technically rigid, with the instruction that she was not allowed to unpick. He discovered that this made her even more rigid, resulting in an extreme contrast between his own slow, considered approach in which every stitch is an expressive movement. The combination enhances Hunting’s style and has inspired further collaborations.

Coughlan wanted to use the opportunity to explore another medium for the Exhibition, and commissioned the same embroiderer to create a ‘Hogarth baby’ on her exhibit ‘Gin Drinking Gloves’ (Figure 2). A completely new departure for her, she found the experience useful but unsatisfactory, in that it distanced her too much from the making process.
The chance to play
The opportunity to experiment, play and explore different methods and processes was a quality that was raised by several of the participants in the reflective interviews after the Exhibition. This appealed as a strong motivating force for participation, as once designers become professionally engaged with external clients and/or academia, they can find that there are very limited opportunities to follow through with personal projects. To be able to define their own brief allowed participants a freedom to pursue a personal interest, reminding them how important it is to do more of those projects which were described as feeding the soul.

Several of the participants expressed a wish that there were more exhibitions like the Fabric of the City where personal projects could evolve in order to move their own work forward. An opportunity to work outside of commercial restraints in the safety of a communal group was seen as intrinsic to encouraging creativity.

Willoughby used the opportunity to make a change to her regular practice, moving away from the medium of the skirt that had she had become associated with in the public eye. She also collaborated with other makers, Beatrice Mayfield and Mary Ann Chatterton, producing three blankets, described in the programme as ‘layers of running wool, cashmere and silk, worked on technique by technique, multiple running stitch into chevrons, zig-zag needlepunching, pompom making and digital print’ (Figure 3). The blankets represented the transitory life of the migrant, the Huguenots bringing their possessions, a departure of approach for Willoughby who is primarily material and process led, acknowledging that ‘memory and textiles’ has never inspired her work.
Figure 3. ‘Blanket One, Two, Three’ Alison Willoughby

For some, the requirements prompted a new direction, while others continued with familiar processes, but adapted working methods with small shifts of focus. James Hunting, used stitch on the reverse of the fabric, to expose the negative mark of the stitch and integrate it into the fabric, rather than resting on the top as in traditional embroidery. This reflected the anonymous weavers who did not get to see the right side of the fabric until they had finished. He was also interested in exploring the Spitalfields fabrics motifs, giving a continuum with the woven pattern transported to a different time, liking the idea of their gaining a new life in a different medium.

For product designer Rentaro Nishimura, the prospect of the project gave him ideas immediately for a different method of approach to his work. Interestingly, he had not worked with archive material and as an architect, was not familiar with the Spitalfields Silks. He does, however, have experience of applying his ideas to products, so the fabrics inspired him to think about fashion as ‘wearable geometry’. He was equally inspired by meeting and talking with those outside his profession, an opportunity of gaining an understanding of how fashion designers approach would differ from his own.

Designers at work
The communal collaborative project provides the opportunity for designers to work towards a common goal with the support of a collegiate group, but to retain their creative independence. Meeting together provides an arena for sharing, discussing progress and problems, and may not be a familiar situation for designer/makers. The workplace can be a lonely space, if at home, or if it lacks compatible colleagues to share with. It can be out of sight, with limited access to the wider world. The observation of the maker, and their connection to an audience can bring benefits to both parties.

One of the key aims for the project was to show designers at work, in their workplace, emphasising the process, rather than the finished outcome. The process of the making experience in the workshop, the development of the ideas, and, exposing this view to the public visitor were part of the endeavour to shift the focus to the stages before completion of the object. A greater understanding of the methods of the designer/maker can be gained from observation and recording of the preparatory stages, the partial completion, the making in action in the studio or workshop.
Maker David Gates discusses the usual way in which craft is viewed and presented as the finished object in a gallery or in promotional literature. However, to understand the process of materials and making fully, we need to engage with the observation and documentation of the making processes. ‘These various processes are temporally situated, partly improvisory; they have fluidity, even effervescence. These considerations of contingency and ephemerality should become closer to the centre of any inquiry of making and craft practices.’ (p.58) Gates (2013) argues that the ‘small stories’ that the practitioners share between themselves show the process of craft, rather than about craft, allowing for reflection on the current, past and future making processes ‘this reflection occurs in the likeness of small stories as underrepresented, socially enacted as both retrospective and prospective...Stitching, tacking, repairing, improvising: action and idea back and forward across time’ (p.59).

The University photographer, Steve Blunt, was commissioned to visit the designers in their studios to take a series of photographs of their activity. These are a series of images showing the participants in their workshops, some are making the item that will be on show, others at some other task that is connected to their practice. Six of the participants were photographed, fifty photographs of each taken. All the participants provided a photograph of themselves working in some way, except for one. The photographs, along with handling samples were shown alongside the exhibits and on a screen. Visitors to the Exhibition showed great interest in these, and expressed their appreciation of the insight into the making process that they gave.

**Reflections on the Project**

The photographs were used as part of the reflective evaluation in the qualitative interviews with the participants. Using the images as prompts during the interview process has enabled new insights on the activities recorded that would not have arisen without them. When we face ourselves in a photograph, the distance provides objectivity, enabling a potentially more critical, but also possibly, a more analytical view of ourselves; participants believed it really helped to add another dimension to the work. The photographs can be used as an ‘aide memoire’ as part of a retrospective review. Photographs are a trigger for recollection, as Edwards (1992) describes as ‘objects formed specifically to remember, rather than being objects around which remembrance accrues through contextual association’ (p.222).

Sharing the reflection on the outcomes of the work is another step in the building blocks necessary to develop our thought processes, within the security of the collaborative practitioner group. So the reflection becomes a narrative that is more than a description of a process, or series of actions with materials. There is a context for the reflection, as it is now embedded in the experience of the Exhibition, interaction with the audience, and response to the outcomes. The designer, as narrator, makes a selection of the actual events surrounding the process, and this is understood as part of the storytelling process that is common to any recollection. This does not diminish the value of the reflection as a contribution. Gates (2013) again notes that ‘A dominant model of life-storytelling in the crafts is retrospective...The story becomes reified as a thing, rather than as a moment’ (p.62).

In both education and critical recording and analysis of the methods used by practicing designers, there appears to be a paucity of information on textile development as academic research. In the paper on ‘Inspiring Artifacts’, the project in which staff at Glasgow School of Art responded to artefacts in The Archives and Collections Centre (ACC) Glasgow School of Art Archives, Britt and Stephen-Cran (2014) report on a ‘scarcity of literature regarding textile design approaches to archive utilization’ (p.35-68). There is also little writing on the subject of the textile design methodology as a distinct area of specialisation. Britt and Stephen-Cran (2012) reflect that writing on the subject comes from outside the textile and fashion disciplines. While there have been multiple examples of use of archive, there is invariably minimal description of a methodology.

Current research shows that using the data on practitioners’ methods of reflection-in-action can inform the theory of design development. Harper (2013) uses the recording of crafts people at work, and interviews, to open their experiences to review, and make them accessible to researchers. His extensive recordings of practitioners, for example, of weaver Tim Parry-Williams, demonstrate craft in action combined with narrative which becomes a mesmerising combination. Harper argues that this process of observation and
recording of the practitioner in their work location provides illumination on the craft ‘provides a rich source of data about practice so that theory can be generated in a grounded way from practice’. There is little doubt that this can add valuable insight to the study of the designer/maker at work.

Legacy
The openess of the response allowed designers to expand their usual range of approaches, to pause from the routine methods of production, and to try new directions. The lasting effects of this time out can be seen on the current practice of several of the participants who have made significant changes to their working practices.

Nishimura had been trialling new products using 3D printing, applying his geometric structure to the floral motif, shaped to the body form. His top, in flexible polyurethane components and pivoting rivets, has led to further innovation (Figure 4). The structure of the weaves, when examined in the archive, has continued to drive experimentation with combining the 3D print with fabric fibre. He is now using the 3D printer to perform a stitch function that has both a decorative and functional application. Currently collaborating with international product design companies, his work is confidential, however, the shift in the approach can be dated from seeing the archive fabrics, and the communal information sharing that took place while examining the structures under the microscope at the Museum of London.

Figure 4. ‘Flora’ Rentaro Nishimura

Changes to working methods was a recurring theme in the practitioner’s reflection on the legacy of the project. The opportunity to move away from regular practice, to pause and reappraise their position resulted in significant shifts in direction for four out of the six designers interviewed. For Willoughby a new direction has continued the break away from the skirt, with the project seemingly marking a transitory phase to a new approach, still led by her love of making; Hoyes, similarly, felt it marked a new phase of work, and has undertaken research projects since the Exhibition which explore her interest in the natural dyes she saw used in the archive (Figure 5).
Hunting remarked on changes to both a conceptual and a material led approach. The project made him reassess why he makes, and led him to engage politically so that his pieces have a message behind the decorative element (Figure 6).
The situation of safety provided by the project, from which the practitioners were able to break away from routine design and make tasks, appears to have given them the ability to explore and experiment in a way in which they would not have done otherwise. The support provided by a group of colleagues in a non-competitive, non-commercial environment allowed for the freedom that several compared to their college days, and had not experienced since.

Conclusion
A review of the methods employed in experimentation for the project show an emphasis on a systematic use of learning through investigation, a synthesis of hand process, concept and material technology which characterises practice based research and outcomes. Schropfer (2011) states that ‘The division between materials and theory is no longer valid, if indeed it ever was’ (p.10). Applying this synthesis to archive materials brought in an additional factor for the designers, providing a new impetus to shift the focus of their practice. For some this gave the opportunity to try a different discipline or material, for others it was the trigger to move in a new direction. The combining of their tacit knowledge with the archive artefact meant their experimentation became ‘at once exploratory, move testing, and hypothesis testing… reflection-in-action’ Schon (1995) (p.147). In the safety of a supportive group, without commercial pressures, experiences were shared, and risks necessary for true experimentation could be taken. Both the immersion in the museum visit, and the restrictions of the situation bonded the group together, engendering a collaborative exchange of knowledge, imagining of narratives and inventive use of observed phenomena.

In review, the participants were able to reflect on the legacy of the project, and with the distance of time, they have reported on significant developments on their practice that have had a lasting impact. The project makes an argument for more collaborative type propositions, where a shared situation and outcome bring disparate practitioners together. As designers and makers, giving ourselves time for play is
important for creativity, and playing together in a group allows for spontaneous connections to be made and enjoyed. With an aim for ‘originality, innovation and experimentation’, a project that encourages collaboration gives practitioners the freedom that can inspire ambitious aims.

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**Note**
Further information and images can be found at thefabricofthecity.org

Practitioner websites:
CUTECIRCUIT cutecircuit.com, House of Harlot houseofharlot.com, Barley Massey fabrications1.co.uk, Lucy Rainbow lucyrainbow.net, Lisa Bloomer artsthread.com/profile/lisabloomer, Sam Wingate wingateprint.com, Jane Bowler janebowler.co.uk, Flora McLean houseofflora.com, James Hunting jameshunting.com, Rebecca Hoyes rebeccahoyes.com, Rentaro Nishimura rentaro.co.uk, Alison Willoughby alisonwilloughby.com, Gina Pierce ginapiercedesign.co.uk

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