

# SUSTAINING FASHION'S FADS

There wasn't a word for it when AUT's Associate Professor Joan Farrer began her doctorate on the subject in the mid nineties, but sustainability has been a lasting interest throughout her academic and commercial career in fashion. **By Melanie Cooper**

**T**here are lots in the fashion industry who will tell you it's not as glamorous as it's cracked up to be – the overworked designers, the under fed models, the seasonally in vogue stylists, to name but a few. But, refreshingly, for UK-born Joan Farrer, fashion was as thrilling as it sounded.

In 1978, with a freshly minted BA in woven and printed textiles for fashion, she landed a job with design icon Deryck Healy. She learned about design trends and the latest applications for textiles, made a slew of important industry contacts and four years later, when Healy bowed out, she helped established East Central Studios.

Based in London, East Central Studios (which still operates today) was set up as a textile design, fashion and colour consultancy, which could advise people at every stage of the global production chain, from fibre to fabric to product to retail.

As a consultant, Farrer carried out experimental R&D to create new applications for textiles like lycra and worked on designs for Courtaulds, ICI Fibres, DuPont and other high profile

clients in the UK, Europe, the Far East and the US.

Farrer worked in conceptual design, R&D, manufacture and retail of textiles and clothing with clients dotted around the globe including Arcadia, BHS, Marks and Spencer, British Airways, International Olympic Committee, Grignasco, Zenga, Monsanto, Marubeni Tex, Renown Group, Macys and Ralph Lauren.

Later, while working as a freelance consultant, Farrer carried out retail projects for the likes of Marks and Spencer and the Burton Group (owner of several fashion chains including Top Shop) which saw her predicting colour and fabric trends and consulting on clothing ranges where sales in single items could run into the millions. Other projects included leading the styling for the clothing and lifestyle ranges of Britain's largest retailer, Tesco's.

"I was making a lot of money, travelling all over the world, having a great time. A lot of it was exciting and glamorous but I started wondering about the industry I was working in. What it meant, what impact it was having," says Farrer.

## CHANGING PATTERNS

Farrer took stock and in 1995 began her doctorate studies with the Royal College of Art. Her PhD, *Wool: From Straw to Gold*, was an ecological assessment of the life cycle of a single fibre of wool, following the clothing supply chain from cradle to grave, through to the resulting by-products composed of 100% post consumer textile waste.

The topic of her doctorate has continued to set the tone for her career since then, both as a researcher and as a consultant for business and government.

"I used my PhD to relearn my trade and became reinvented, I moved into research with a capital 'R,'" says Farrer, who was recently appointed as Associate Professor, Design at AUT's School of Art & Design.

"Sustainability, though the term didn't exist like it does today, was something I had already thought a lot about but early in my career it was considered fairly fringe, a bit hippy. Certainly businesses weren't spending a lot of time thinking about it."

But, Farrer says, a series of environmental crises in the 80s and early 90s including Chernobyl, revelations about CFCs and the ozone, and the Exxon Valdez oil spill pushed eco concerns in from the margins and the fashion world took heed.

"Businesses woke up to the inherent risk involved in not knowing what was happening in their own supply chains," says Farrer.

One of the first businesses to face up to that risk was Marks and Spencer, commissioning the Sustainable Textiles Research Project. Farrer carried out a detailed risk assessment of their international supply chain looking at issues like the use of pesticide on crops, carcinogenic dyes, forced labour and fair trade.

Using Farrer's research, Marks and Spencer went on to create its own Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) document setting out a sustainable agenda for management of its people, profits and environment and became the first fashion retailer recognised by the FTSE4Good benchmarking index.