

FASHION | Reclaimed rags



# Decconstructing

Finding a growing group of designers with the environment on their mind, **Rebecca Blackburn** shows us how fashion forward doesn't have to mean frivolous.

fashion



Getting dressed while retaining a sense of style was my biggest eco-lifestyle challenge," New Yorker blogger Jill Danyelle once opined. Danyelle hit the mark – after all, who doesn't wonder if a love of clothes and fashion can be compatible with our ethical principles?

It seems it's human instinct to want to decorate ourselves. Whether it's a Papua New Guinean tribesman with his feather headdress or a New York fashionista with her Manolo Blahnik shoes, adornments play a big role in our cultures.

The problem is not necessarily the clothes per se, but the current model for the fashion industry (pardon the pun). While the biggest environmental impact of clothes occurs when washing them, the other big problem is the sheer number of outfits we buy and the resources that go into making them.

One kilogram of cotton, a fabric used in 40 per cent of textiles, needs 11,000 litres of water to grow, produce and dye. Not to mention the vast amounts of pesticides that are required as well. Even buying organic cotton, which nixes the toxic chemical part, doesn't solve the problem of water use.

But a revival of the Depression era tradition of mending and reusing clothing is providing a solution to the planetary problems of textile manufacture and disposable fashion.

From young designer Carlos Bouman, who made an evening gown out of thousands of used dishcloths and mosquito nets, to mums who just want to save a bit of money, this trend of reconstructing clothes is not just about being green – it's also an opportunity to be creative and original.

### Wear your love for green on your sleeve

## Green Greener Greenest

Buy clothes that are pre-loved or made from organic fabrics.

Grab the sewing machine and update your stuff.

Go as green as you can without buying new clothes.

### Refashioned clothes

One company that's been at the forefront of refashioning clothing for more than a decade is Canadian label Preloved. Popular with starlets like Hilary Duff, Anne Hathaway and Kate Hudson, Preloved's one-off designs are made from old bed sheets, woollen jumpers and men's trousers hand-picked from Toronto's rag houses.

For the past two years the designs have been available in Sydney under the label Handcut. Designer and Australian owner Tanya Greenwood says there has been a lot of interest in her unique clothes because consumers "want to buy something they have an affinity with". Greenwood says that in just one season the company rescued 85,000 woollen jumpers, 52,000 pairs of trousers, 11,000 men's dress shirts and 7,000 trench coats.

Homegrown labels include Kara Smith, a designer based in the Blue Mountains who makes bags, including linings and buckles made entirely from recycled materials, and Queensland based Gladragz, which makes retro wrap skirts. Victorian brand Heidi and Seek also sells funky T-shirts, skirts and tops made from 100 per cent reclaimed fabrics.



Handcut designs: **clockwise from far left:** A cute jumper and skirt, made from vintage woollen jumpers and pants; menswear can be green too, like this re-fashioned flannel shirt; a vintage trenchcoat becomes a skirt, paired with a recycled flannel and wool jumper blouse and jumper/trouser vest; a stylish jumper dress made from four vintage woollen jumpers

ReJenerate founder Jennie Smith says there's a lot of interest in her purses and handbags, made from upholstery offcuts and recycled fabrics. "Customers like to buy things that are unique and original, not the mass-produced stuff," she says. For Smith, making accessories from vintage fabrics is about connecting with her values: "I like fashion but I wanted to feel good about it".

Sydney fashion designer Rachael Cassar, who makes one-off couture gowns using 95 per cent recovered materials, was inspired to make ethical clothing when she learnt about sustainable fashion during her studies. She sources fabrics from quality secondhand clothes, which she unpicks to create flat pieces. For her, using recycled materials is a source of inspiration rather than a limitation. Sustainability is not her only selling point – her gowns have won her a prestigious Italian award for emerging designers. "If it's going to work it doesn't need to look recycled," she says. **G** »



## One-of-a-kind fashion - DIY

Not all of us can afford designer fashion, but there is indeed a cheaper option and that's revamping old shop garments or clothes already in your wardrobe. Not only will you have the satisfaction of making your own clothes, but you can create exactly what you want. And if the idea of refashioning your own clothes brings back memories of sewing bodge-jobs, don't be concerned – there are many online communities, such as Wardrobe Refashion ([www.wardroberefashion.net](http://www.wardroberefashion.net)), devoted to inspiring others to get busy reconfiguring clothes.

Wardrobe Refashion came into being about three and a half years ago when owner Nichola Prested was looking for ideas to make her lifestyle more sustainable. She was intrigued by the Little Brown Dress project ([www.littlebrowndress.com](http://www.littlebrowndress.com)), where Alex Martin, an American dancer, wore just one brown dress for a whole year. She was also inspired by blogger Jill Danyelle who decided that for a year, half her clothes had to be reused, recycled or reconstructed. Danyelle documented the project on her blog ([www.fiftyrx3.blogspot.com](http://www.fiftyrx3.blogspot.com)), including photos of reconstructions such as a black cocktail dress made from old umbrellas.

Prested didn't want to wear the same dress every day, and she wasn't in the position to wear organic. "When you have children you can't go splurging on \$50 organic T-shirts," she says. Instead, Prested decided to stop buying manufactured clothes for six months – a challenge she found pretty difficult!

Nichola mentioned her challenge on her blog and asked if anyone would like to join in. The response was huge. Wardrobe Refashion now attracts bloggers from around the world who add new posts on projects like making little girls' dresses from men's shirts or transforming old pillowcases into attractive tops.

Recyclopedia ([www.selfpassage.org](http://www.selfpassage.org)), written by Swedish artist and fashion activist Otto von Busch, is another great resource. It's like a cookbook of refashion ideas that comes complete with step-by-step instructions and photos. Vintage fashion lovers will enjoy Sew Retro ([www.sewretro.blogspot.com](http://www.sewretro.blogspot.com)), a fabulous source of ideas and advice for sewing with vintage patterns and fabrics.

Melynda Carver from Colorado, US, is a regular contributor to Sew Retro and Wardrobe Refashion. A sewing enthusiast all her life, she is interested in the quality and beauty of vintage materials and creating 'new' vintage clothes. "Instead of 50 dresses I'd rather five really great dresses made with love," she says.

Whether it's buying a refashioned vintage skirt or revamping an op shop find into the perfect jacket, there are plenty of ways to create stylish fashion without needlessly wasting materials.

### Fashion made from recycled and vintage fabrics

- 🔗 [www.gladragz.com.au](http://www.gladragz.com.au) – Skirts and dresses made from funky retro and vintage fabrics
- 🔗 [www.handcut.com.au](http://www.handcut.com.au) – Reconstructed clothes from recycled materials, also a seller of Kara Smith bags and Terra Plana shoes
- 🔗 [www.heidiandseek.com](http://www.heidiandseek.com) – Affordable upcycled clothing
- 🔗 [www.karasmith.com.au](http://www.karasmith.com.au) – Handbags made from 100 per cent recycled, salvaged and vintage fabrics
- 🔗 [www.mucke.com.au](http://www.mucke.com.au) – Reuses old materials to make clothes
- 🔗 [www.rachaelcassar.com](http://www.rachaelcassar.com) – One-off evening designer dresses
- 🔗 [www.regenerate.com.au](http://www.regenerate.com.au) – Bags and bridal purses that are made from vintage, recycled or salvaged fabrics
- 🔗 [www.slingfings.com.au](http://www.slingfings.com.au) – Clothing and bags made from recycled or reclaimed fabrics

### Make your own clothes

- 🔗 [www.countrygirlcouture.blogspot.com](http://www.countrygirlcouture.blogspot.com) – Vintage sewing
- 🔗 [www.fiftyrx3.blogspot.com](http://www.fiftyrx3.blogspot.com) – Style and sustainability project
- 🔗 [www.selfpassage.org](http://www.selfpassage.org) – Recipes for refashioning old stuff (check out Recyclopedia here)
- 🔗 [www.sewretro.blogspot.com](http://www.sewretro.blogspot.com) – Retro and vintage sewing
- 🔗 [www.wardroberefashion.net](http://www.wardroberefashion.net) – A mix of contemporary, retro and vintage refashioning



**Left** Bag from Australia, made with vintage, recycled and salvaged fabrics, is a fun and sustainable statement  
**Right** Remake one-off evening wear by designer Rachael Cassar, made from vintage, recycled and salvaged fabrics with high fashion

