Q&A with Lynda Grose: Pioneer in Sustainable Design

By Morgan Furst

Lynda and her daughter. Lynda feels it important to educate the next generation of designer on

When one thinks of the pioneering minds behind sustainable design — Lynda Grose will without a doubt be one of the top three women that come to mind. In 1989, Grose became the head designer of ESPRIT's line. Shortly after, the San Francisco-based Esprit launched their e-collection - arguably the first eco-conscious clothing line marketing by any major manufacturer. And Lynda has been an integral component for the launch of the Sustainable Cotton Project.

Lynda is now Assistant Professor of Fashion Design and Interdisciplinary Studies at California College of Arts (CCA) where she created the first sustainable design course at university back in 1989. She has contributed to a number of sustainable design books and academic texts — including a forthcoming tome called Fashion & Sustainability: Design for Change with fellow educator, Kate Fletcher.

Source4Style sits down with Lynda to talk about environmental standards for the clothing industry, how sustainable design education has changed over the last decade, and what are the next steps that need to be taken in order to get the industry on track with sustainability and prosperity.

Source4Style: Lynda, you were one of the creators behind the ESPRIT E-collection in the
company to take that direction?

**Lynda Grose:** Oh so much was needed from so many people. Doug Tompkins, owner of the company at that time, was a great outdoors person and had seen natural areas being degraded through increased use. He and his friend, Yvon Chouinard, owner of Patagonia, decided to use their businesses for change, and everyone working in those companies at that time was challenged to lessen the impact of the business on the environment.

**Source4Style: So support was coming from higher level leadership?**

**LG:** Very much so. I passed a few ideas by Doug, did research into the impacts our products. I gathered info on other brands that were looking at sustainability and visited Ciba Geigy’s head office with Dan Imhoff, our resident investigative writer and deep ecology thinker, to understand more about dyes and dye systems. All that info was collected along with the resulting design ideas and was then compiled into presentation boards to present to management and eventually the ESPRIT owners. This was alien language at that time - electroplating sludge, farming systems, bi-functional reactive dyes, etc. All of that was outside our usual lexicon. I also had to explain how we might communicate all this technical information and had mock ups of hang tags etc. – as there was no website at the time to communicate those ideas.

**S4S: That must have been such a sudden shift in mindset!**

**LG:** As a designer, I started to look at the product, which at that time was sacrosanct. ESPRIT was going through many changes then, and even though the atmosphere was supportive of sustainability — making changes to the product wasn’t readily accepted…internal PR was critical.

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**S4S: So what happened next?**

**LG:** Susie Tompkins supported a meeting with ESPRIT International and eventually, the owners and CEO of ESPRIT International. Peter Buckley, supported the initiative to see how it would go, and E-collection was launched two years later in 13 countries through ESPRIT stores. And when it was launched, the press response surprised us all! We had editorial coverage in daily newspapers, fashion magazines, environmental magazines, business press, trade publications, trend services, academic papers…we had read the zeitgeist correctly.

E-collection was a small line…so there was no risk to the mainline business…and this set up allowed us to test ideas and experiment to find what was viable for application to the mainline through an initiative called ‘Blue Planet.’

**S4S: That definitely seems the strategy that many brands take – test the waters, observe results, and adjust accordingly. How do you feel the industry has changed through time?**

**LG:** The industry has progressed in terms of collaborative efforts to set industry-wide standards, international reciprocity, etc. There is much more awareness of the issues so more brands are doing more work, which is good. Companies are generally – though not always – applying sustainability across their businesses, rather than in small lines, which can easily be dropped when interest wanes. When sustainability is integral to the business it’s always there and affect daily decisions.

There is more variety of materials as well. When we blended Tencel® and organic cotton for example it was very new and risky to do, and now its readily available in many different weights and weaves.
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S4S: How has the supply chain evolved from the early 90s? I mean – you must have seen things shift from Made in the USA to Made Somewhere Else in the World?

LG: The supply chain is even more globalized now than it was 20 years ago, and managing and implementing change is more of a challenge, nowadays.

S4S: What are companies now focusing their attention on?

LG: The industry in general is asking deeper questions and is far more sophisticated than it used to be in responding to a variety of ecological and social issues...organic cotton is an example...rather than assuming that organic cotton is the pinnacle of sustainability, the leading companies are doing the research first on what the impacts are in each region and developing the appropriate solution that fits...water use in one area may be the issue rather than pesticide use, or labor might be more of an issue...so a variety of strategies are now emerging. Better Cotton Initiative and Sustainable Cotton Project's Cleaner Cotton programs are examples of this.

Companies are also looking at the whole lifecycle of a garment, not just the fiber, and coming to a variety of conclusions about where the greatest impacts lie, including consumer behavior. Kate Fletcher pioneered this way of thinking in her early research, and its also reflected in Levi's LCA research.

There are also new technologies in dyeing and in bio synthetics, which bring the potential for systemic change.

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S4S: Let's shift gears a bit and talk about what has been lagging.

LG: Gladly. What hasn't changed much is the industry's focus on incremental improvements in the supply chain. And although all improvements are good, when the driving purpose of businesses is to constantly grow, incremental gains are often overshadowed by the increase in conventional production; there's no net gain.

S4S: Right. Sustainability needs to be a net gain as well. Do you see sustainability taking a lion's share of the industry in the future?

LG: Absolutely. I see sustainability as integral to the future of the fashion industry and all industries, given increased human population, increasing wealth, the corresponding rise in material consumption, scarce resources and mounting ethical and moral issues concerning the allocation of those resources.

S4S: What were some of the key drivers leading to that progress or change?

LG: The social landscape has shifted over the last 20 years. There's increased awareness of ecological issues and acceptance that business is dependent upon our ecosystem for materials, processing and disposal of waste.
success of the hybrid car has influenced 'hybrid' strategies towards sustainability. Eco-literacy in K thru 12 schools has been a tremendous driver in yielding a generation of young adults who expect us to do better as a matter of course.

The rise of the Internet has sped up the ability to research and share information. To give you an example, all my research at ESPRIT was by phone, reading materials sent via mail, and in person! It has also democratized how impacts are communicated. Pesticide Action Network's pesticide database on the toxicity and use of chemicals, for example, makes scientific information easily accessible to lay people).

S4S: If you were to approach a company now with ideas vs. when you were approaching ESPRIT – how would your tactics and strategy shift?

LG: I work with several companies on 'sustainability' now, and my approach is continually informed by my experience working at ESPRIT, inside the ‘belly of the beast,’ so to speak. Meeting the company where they are is key, so as not to alienate people, especially business managers, who generally hold the most power to make change. There are some changes though. Twenty years ago, improving impacts in the supply chain was progressive...now it's a baseline. I have companies do their own research in their own supply chain. Getting info online or from a presenter is helpful, but it is abstract and can be uninspiring. Talking and learning from technical experts in your own supply chain is direct, experiential, invigorating and empowering. It’s also generative. When creative people directly confer with technical people they exchange challenges and ideas for solutions that no one can imagine in advance.

What I also do now is to make sure to open up discussions to include new business models that do not depend so much upon pushing an increasing number of units through the supply chain as fast as possible, sometimes referred to as de-coupling business from consumption. Whether these items are organic or not, the model itself is not sustainable.

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S4S: Let's shift gears to educating the next generation of leaders in this industry. You now teach at the California College of the Arts and created the first curriculum on sustainability in fashion. When did you help create that program?

LG: In 1999.

S4S: Can you talk about how your curriculum has evolved or stayed the same over those years?

LG: I was invited by Edward Leaman, then chair of the fashion program at CCA to ‘teach what I did,’ and so I began by educating students about fabric impacts – cotton in particular – and social responsibility, drawing on my direct experiences working at ESPRIT, consulting with Patagonia and working with artisans as a design consultant for Aid to Artisans. I built projects around these real life experiences, to make the curriculum come to life.
referred OKALA in my restructuring, which is an eco-teaching guide for Industrial Designers, developed by Philip White, Louise St. Pierre and Steve Bellette. I added information to make it relevant to fashion and textiles, brought in additional reading materials, additional presentations, but the framework OKALA provided was invaluable. Nowadays, the curriculum also includes consumer behavior.

The biggest change to the undergraduate class has been to split what was a single class combining research and reading and studio, into two separate classes – one as a seminar where reading and research and the basic principles of ecology are covered – and a separate studio class where ideas that bubble up in seminar then have time to be expressed. Both classes are now required for all undergraduate fashion design students at CCA.

S4S: Curricula can become worn and tired. How do you keep it nimble?

LG: The curriculum in these classes is continually adapted to reflect – and to stay slightly ahead of - the changing landscape on sustainability, new materials and developments, new books…And my own thinking which is always evolving through the work I do in my own practice.

The class now includes activities, field trips, a cotton tour and a variety of visiting speakers. Students participate in building new knowledge through primary research projects and ethnography, and information contributed by outside experts. They also develop artifacts that give visual form to new ideas and enter those into competitions. Students are encouraged to add to the international discourse on sustainable fashion, and many of the garments have been published, exhibited, and awarded in competitions. It’s a much richer and lively educational experience now and directly connected to the real world of sustainability and fashion.

S4S: You launched a workshop series this summer. Can you share a bit more about that?

LG: This year we launched the summer Fashion Sustainability Workshop series for working professionals, which brings deep ecology, design practice, and business together. The first session brought Dr. Fritjof Capra, Bob Adams, several local business leaders and Timo Rissanen together for a three-day intensive around the theme of WASTE. It was an invigorating experience for everyone including me! This broad and more formalized support for fashion and sustainability at CCA has been led by the current chair of fashion, Amy Williams.

S4S: How have student's interests increased or changed with the changing landscape?

LG: Student interest has increased exponentially. We now have some students who specifically come to CCA because sustainability is an integral and significant part of the fashion curriculum.

This generation is much more informed and eager to roll up their sleeves and take action.

They might initially be confused when they come into the seminar class as to what sustainability is, and often define it by what they have seen already in the market… organic cotton, recycled polyester and hemp. But they quickly come to understand the complexities and once they have a few tools and confidence, they are excited to engage in real issues, find the gaps in current approaches and contribute for themselves.

S4S: Though sustainability has progressed within company mindset, the industry is still in its early stages of job creation. Talk about what that means for the students you teach that are moving into this landscape? What are some of the tactics and strategies that are needed to be successful?

LG: This is a good question, because the industry is evolving, but ideas are way ahead of changes that are being made and the inertia of big business can be challenging to the best of seasoned managers, let alone recent graduates. And in the meantime, the way we have been teaching fashion design education is based on the old way of doing business…designers are trained and hired to
For young designer graduates looking to work for sustainability, I would use similar tactics to the ones we used at ESPRIT. Understand the company you work for, its culture, its style and its market, and propose ideas that fit with those parameters first. Align yourself with people who have ears to listen within the company, and note how you might influence others who are more skeptical over the long term. Be strategic about how you bring in sustainability ideas. Sometimes not telling anyone is the best. Link arms with like-minded people. You won’t be able to champion an initiative alone.

You could also choose a company from the outset that has an interest in sustainability rather than one that has no interest. This will make your life easier! Understand too, that the logic of all companies at the moment is to sell more and more material goods and that this runs counter to sustainability. Be aware of what you can’t do within this business model. Do what you can. Look for as many different ways and means to advance sustainability as possible. Engaging with technical people in the supply chain within the business as it is, is a good start. Technical experts will appreciate your interest and be great educators.

You might be able to advance sustainability more by working with an NGO or with a government organization or in education, or setting up your own company. There are many skills that designers have that can be put to good use outside of the studio as well as through studio practice. Zero waste pattern cutting is a good example of this. If you are flexible and adaptable there are many opportunities to work to further sustainability.

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**S4S: What about information? What would you suggest are the best reference guides?**

**LG:** In my experience, becoming familiar with the principles of deep ecology is the best touchstone. *The Web of Life* by Fritjof Capra, *Ecology: A Pocket Guide* by Ernest Callenbach, *Thinking in Systems*, by Donella Meadows, are books to hold close to heart. Then curiosity and common sense are the best guides. Ask questions of technical experts, farmers, green chemists, ordinary people, make them your collaborators, and educators...and link their challenges with your creative process. There are many, many ideas that will emerge from this type of engagement, and they come in unexpected ways and places, so be alert and ready to let go of preconceived notions!

**S4S: Where do you see sustainable fashion education heading in the next 5-10 years?**

**LG:** I see a big role for fashion education to incubate new business models that are based on optimizing the energy and resources embodied in each unit. This is qualitatively different from speeding millions of material units through the fashion system. Since the fashion industry is large and global and complex, it’s risk averse to new business models, and colleges can provide a ‘safe’ space to test ideas. Colleges are a greatly underutilized resource in this regard.

I also see academic research – empirical research – becoming increasingly linked to and drawn into practice. This slow knowledge is essential to informing relevant strategies for sustainability and is often too time intensive for businesses to do for themselves.

**S4S: What are some of the biggest trending topics or macro-trends in sustainable design?**
the word ‘consumer'; partnerships and collaboration, fusing deep ecology into the design process.

S4S: All so inspiring. If you had to use three words to highlight what sustainability themes will be important 5-10 years from now? What would they be?

LG: Post growth business.

S4S: Lynda, always a pleasure. Thank you for your time and all of your incredible insights. The Source4Style community is very grateful for your role in setting the tone for sustainable design.

Better Cotton Initiative, California College of the Arts, CCA, closed loop system, Esprit, Esprit Ecolection, Esprit environment, fashion, fashion design, fashion education, Kate Fletcher, Levi Strauss, Lynda Grose, post growth, Source4Style, sustainable design pioneers, sustainability curriculum, Sustainable Cotton Project, sustainable design, sustainable design curriculum, sustainable design schools, Sustainable Fashion Design Incubator, Timo Risannen

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Jenbeck

Great article, great work. I am happy that Lynda is both teaching and working in the trenches. Her dedication makes her a great teacher and a 'mover and a shaker'.

Tlobsenz

Lynda is such an inspiration! She is a beacon for the next generation.

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