

The Clothing Library (Utrecht)

"It looks like a clothing store, it works like a library, but it is actually the huge walk-in closet that you've always wanted. "

(1) Introduction

The Clothing Library is a place in Utrecht where people can borrow unique designer clothing, sustainable fair trade outfits, and fun second hand pieces. It works much like the concept of a normal library but with clothing instead of books. Participants borrow clothes and, after four weeks, they return it, and the next piece of clothing can be borrowed. The Clothing Library will have the returned clothing cleaned and will offer it once again to a new borrower. People become a member and receive a Clothing Library card. There are three types of subscriptions that entitle the member to borrowing either more or less clothing. In addition, the Clothing Library is collaborating with a growing group of designers and offers designer pieces made with discarded clothing. The Clothing Library was founded in 2014 by three female entrepreneurs.

(2) Principles

One of the founders' most important principles to consider is that we, as a society, can do more to share with each other. Our society is characterized by possession. The founders of the Clothing Library want people to become more connected with each other, to exchange, share together, and use what they already possess. Buying second hand is good, but sharing a wardrobe in a city is even more sustainable. It is not always necessary to buy everything new or to produce more; we can also reuse and recycle. Sharing a large wardrobe is the central concept that is shared with different people and organizations. The initiative offers a platform to a growing group of young designers. Therefore, the initiative affords opportunities for designers who do not want to support the current fast-fashion trend and prefer to offer their clothing in a more social and sustainable manner. The three founders all have a different background, therefore, they all have different principles. They want to boost the sharing economy and promote a different way of living. Maud is an idealistic sociologist, Karin is a biologist and aims to create a world that is as sustainable as possible, and Evita is an art manager and wants to offer fashion designers better opportunities and change the current and, in her eyes, outdated retail system.

(3) Design

The idea emerged around the end of March 2014. The system they designed would be ideal for allowing people to share more. They work with the concept that *access to and use of* clothing is more convenient and more sustainable than the *possession* of all types of clothes. The Clothing Library is, essentially, a large wardrobe that people can use. In May 2014, a website about the Clothing Library was posted online and immediately sparked the interest of the media. In late August, a building was located and, in December of that same year, the library opened. The Clothing Library is housed in a building with various other creative entrepreneurs who all have their own unique perspective.

Currently, the Clothing Library is a project co-existing in addition to studies and jobs. It was founded in a short time and is still developing. At the moment, it is a non-profit foundation. The rent and other expenses can be paid, however, it should eventually be possible to earn wages and provide a living, however, this is not yet feasible. To prove that it works, it should operate for several years. .

The Clothing Library utilizes different transaction types. Borrowing clothes is the central concept, but other transaction types are slowly emerging. For instance, workshops are held where knowledge is shared on how people can make, repair, or reshape their own clothes. Also, a clothing swap has already taken place. Additionally, designers are creating new clothes from those that have been discarded.

Clothing is the most widely used transaction means. The clothes from the library are not for sale, only on loan. However, stuffed animals are sold that are made from leftover fabric. The soap that the library uses as detergent can be purchased, and there are books on sustainable fashion offered for sale.

(4) Value Proposition

The concept of the Clothing Library is relatively simple and, therefore, easy to imitate. The founders perceive this as something positive. The significant advantage of this initiative is that Utrecht is a student city with many young people. However, the library still receives customers of all ages. People do not always need to purchase new clothing, and less clothing is being thrown away. The Clothing Library offers young designers who have a unique style a chance to repurpose old fabric remnants and to create new clothes. These clothes can be added to the library and can be loaned to people. The designers receive a percentage of the profits. This ensures a growing brand awareness and the ability to come in contact with potential customers. This is a form of social value creation.

The drive behind the Clothing Library is not financial gain. The founders are keeping prices as low as possible and attempting to keep the concept attractive for the widest possible group of people. The initiative emerged from the idea that people need to share more and that sharing is fun. Instead of stressing the urgency and the negative feelings regarding sustainability, they want to focus on the positive aspects of it.

Other initiatives in the same field are not considered as competitors. A Clothing Library is something a person can do locally. Copying this initiative should only occur in a larger city, otherwise, the minimum number of members will not be reached, and prices will become too expensive. Rent will consequently become unaffordable. Others who are interested in establishing a similar initiative have contacted the Clothing Library and have asked the library to share their experiences. There is also collaboration with other concepts in this area. The Clothing Library has been realized through crowdfunding. When the founders began setting up the Clothing Library, they were still students so they could not invest much. They have built everything themselves with the help of family, friends and people who wanted to contribute. Thus a 'spontaneous' community was born around the initiative. Currently, the founders are exploring options to upscale their concept through subsidies.

Collective value creation primarily plays a role between the designers and the Clothing Library. The Clothing Library offers them an opportunity. They receive materials to make clothes, and they may add them to the collection in the Clothing Library. For the Clothing Library, it is important to have a collection of unique clothes. Lending out clothing makes money, so the Clothing Library creates economic value. The money that is currently earned is sufficient to cover the costs (excluding staff wages). The Clothing Library promotes less clothing being thrown away. This is a form of ecological value creation. Obviously, the sustainable use of clothing is one of the direct values; however, the initiative also changes the way people think about wasting and sharing which subsequently raises sustainability awareness.

(5) Community

The formation of the community began with an ad on the website which gained the attention of the media. This quickly created significant public interest. Many recent graduates and upcoming fashion designers were very enthusiastic. In addition, a number of sustainable brands have associated themselves with the library, and there is also collaboration with a textile collector. Clothing that is no longer worn is brought to the library, and the designers use these to create new clothing. People enlist for a membership and can choose between a punch-card or a subscription. There is now a team of experts available in different fields that support the idea of the founders and are willing to help them. In turn, that team also attracts new people. In this context, a community emerges that is continuously expanding with enthusiastic people and those who share the same vision and believe in the attempt to try things differently in fashion and show that this can be done in a fun, easy, and positive way. The larger the Clothing Library becomes, the more professional and formal it must be addressed. There are contracts with the designers so that each party knows what they can expect from each other. Members sign a contract with the general terms and conditions. Communication runs mainly through social media. Members receive their own newsletter, and there is also a general newsletter to which everyone can enrol.

(6) Results

The most important results are that people "consume" less because they can borrow clothing, and new clothing is repurposed out of clothing that would normally be discarded. A platform is offered to designers who can present their works in a social and sustainable way. The Clothing Library also helps the topic of "sustainable clothing" appear more frequently in the news. People are beginning to discuss this topic which raises awareness and creates opportunity for positive changes to occur. Negative aspects have not yet been discovered.

(7) Conclusion

The drive behind the Clothing Library is wanting to make a change in a positive way. There are three principles of value creation in play: multiple (economic, social, and ecological), shared, and collective. Instead of emphasizing what people should not do, the focus is on setting an example by showing what you can do. Without forcing it, we are creating a solution for many problems related to climate change, but we are also addressing problems in the clothing industry. It is also in the best interest of the founders to make this a fun experience for everyone.

It is important that the clothing collection continues to renew itself. In addition, it is important to pay more attention to the advances of technology in clothing. Perhaps we can create a nationwide catalogue allowing customers to book clothing that is currently located in another city. It would be nice if, in the future, people would consider it normal to borrow clothes instead of buying them.

It is an initiative that fits in the zeitgeist, is relatively easy to copy, and can depend on sympathy from both citizens and businesses. It creates multiple values. The downside is that the margins are so small that it is currently not possible to pay wages. That means the initiative is basically operated by the voluntary energy of the founders. If they stop, the initiative stops, and that would be unfortunate.

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