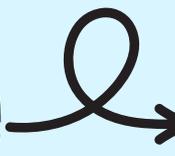


**OVERCONSUMPTION**

# HOW WE LEARNED TO USE OUR HANDS AGAIN



**Re**  **set**

**lessons from  
lockdown**

# HOW WE LEARNED TO USE OUR HANDS AGAIN



Having the time to make and do: how the repair revival can cure consumer waste for climate and human well being

During lockdown, many people found themselves confined to their homes. Suddenly social circles became more separate and physical human interactions were suspended until further notice. People were forced inwards and asked to function as normal within just four walls, alongside the people, family, creatures and objects that make their homes what they are.

At the same time, for those not still compelled to leave the home to go to work in key and front line services, many people found themselves working from home for the first time or on furlough. For these people, the time that they had to themselves grew. Ironically, people had more free time to do whatever they wanted, outside the rigours of work and social commitments, but less physical space to exercise it.

But when left to live their lives within four walls, people's creativity knew no bounds. **Musicians jumped on Zoom**<sup>1</sup> to perform with each other, **ballet dancers**<sup>2</sup> traded their dance studios for their kitchens and front rooms, and **windows suddenly became colourful portals into the lives of millions**,<sup>3</sup> as part of a nation-wide Art Exhibition. When faced with limits and restrictions, human imagination thrived as people chose to do things differently. And when provided with this impromptu abundance of free time, people not only adapted to and found inspiration in their immediate environment: they also sought to transform it by embracing the practical and creative skills of repair.



In the UK, throughout the first lockdown, spending on DIY and home improvements jumped up by 21.6% in just **three months**.<sup>4</sup> Sewing machine sales saw a 127% increase, with both large retailers and smaller shops experiencing a sudden shortage of fabric and **sewing paraphernalia**.<sup>5</sup> While many turned their hands to mending and repairing clothes, others joined the cannon of cottage industrialists sewing masks and personal protective equipment (PPE) for those in the **health and care sectors**.<sup>6</sup> Youtube became a global source of shared skills, and a BBC program called Repair Shop, about mending emotionally important belongings gained huge audiences.

In the eastern German town of Jueterbog, refugees banded together to sew face masks for elderly residents at the **local retirement home**.<sup>7</sup> Some of these refugees had run sewing repair businesses in their home countries, bringing their skills and experience to help their new communities at a time of need.



This human urge to mend, repair and improve is nothing new – it has just been forgotten and gone untrained, buried under an avalanche of mass produced garments, hemmed with injustice, exploitation and emissions. Ten million tonnes of which end up in landfills every year in North America, despite 95% of it being eligible for **re-use or recycling**.<sup>8</sup> The UK sends an eye-watering £140 million worth of good clothing to landfill **each year**.<sup>9</sup> By re-skilling in the art of repair, tonnes of waste can be diverted and millions of pounds can be saved every year.

**“Repairing is crucial to regain true ownership of the products we own.”**

- Ugo Vallauri, co-founder and project lead, The Restart Project

Even for the clothes that are lucky enough to avoid landfill and enter the multi-billion pound second-hand clothing trade, COVID-19 has brought unparalleled turbulence. Second-hand clothes garment retailers and charity shops have been inundated with clothes to sell on due to a combination of retail closures and home-bound citizens looking to create some residential reprieve from clutter. Textile recyclers and exporters too are having to cut their prices to shift excess stock as **COVID-19 restriction measures restricted the movement of goods and dampened demand in end countries**.<sup>10</sup>

And demand in these nations may never pick up again, because many poorer and less developed nations are beginning to stop second-hand clothes imports, as their domestic economies begin to buckle under the sheer weight of Western hand-me-downs. In 2019, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, Burundi and Uganda all outlawed secondhand clothing imports in an effort to **boost their domestic manufacturing capacity**<sup>11</sup> as cheap secondhand clothing consistently undercuts domestically produced garments and threatens to eradicate traditional textile design. All around the world, communities are realising that these practical skills are a vital piece of the puzzle to bring a new economy into existence.

During the Great Depression, citizens were told to ‘repair, reuse, and make do’, and during both World Wars, citizens were asked to ‘make do or do without’ as part of the war effort. In light of the climate crisis, where the choice between systems change or individual behaviour change in richer industrialised nations has long since passed, fostering this human urge to mend, repair and improve, will endow wider society with these practical skills. Call it Home Ecology, since ecology describes the relationship between organisms and their environment and the term itself derives from the Greek *oikos* meaning home. Lockdown provided a crash course on kickstarting the process.

**“A citizen implies some sort of reciprocity and agency – rights and responsibility, while a consumer is passive – you’re not invited to play any part in shaping a product or providing a solution.”**

- Karen Creavin, chief executive at The Active Wellbeing Society



But having the time to make and do will only get society half way there. To radically curtail overconsumption of consumer goods, there must be a right to repair enshrined in law. The UK government recently introduced a raft of ‘right to repair’ laws for washing machines, TV, fridges and other household appliances in a bid to **cut electrical waste**.<sup>12</sup> Last year, the EU Commission also unveiled their action plan for a circular economy, **which will revise key European directives around packing and waste by the end of 2021**.<sup>13</sup>

**“More than 70% of the overall emission linked to electronic products occurs before they have ever been switched on. So we should reuse, repair and prevent unnecessary wastage.”**

- Ugo Vallauri, co-founder and project lead, The Restart Project

But as lockdown has shown this newly formed army of DIYers, it’s not just electrical goods that need to have a right to repair: it’s the clothes, shoes, furniture, walls, windows and roofs that make up homes. To bend the emissions curve, all products bought and “consumed” or used must stand the test of time and should be designed with **longevity and circularity in mind**.<sup>14</sup>

As lockdown caused many people to reclaim these practical skills, many noticed that mending, repairing and improving household items didn’t feel like the arduous and frustrating task that our outsourcing culture has led us to believe. In fact, it made people feel better. There’s ample scientific and neurological research too that shows using our hands practically, be it for mending something old or creating something new, can promote **better mental health**.<sup>15</sup> With pandemic restrictions causing spikes in anxiety and depression throughout society, repairing and creating became a form of therapy that many people could now access.

The lockdown-induced renaissance in sewing, mending, making and doing can also be understood as an **act of resistance**:<sup>16</sup> a protest against the loss of these very skills and a recognition that society cannot allow them to be forgotten once again. Taking ownership of these skills is one way of threading communities together, bringing together groups locally and also cross-culturally online. It’s also an effective way of limiting overconsumption at a personal and household level. These skills also allow us to build the capacity for managing and tending to our own **mental and emotional wellbeing**.<sup>17</sup> Having the time to make and do today will allow society to create a more resilient tomorrow.



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