From Gucci to Gap to Stella McCartney, how fashion is trying to be green and what more it needs to do

- Clothes and textile manufacturing is the world's second most polluting industry and US$3 billion of clothing ends up in landfills each year. So what to do?
- Circular Design for Fashion gathers ideas and reflections on fashion's path to sustainability, while throwing up some big red flags

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Fashion designer Stella McCartney (left) and Ellen MacArthur, founder of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation. Its new book, Circular Design for Fashion, contains ideas for reducing fashion's environmental footprint. Photo: Darren Gerrish/Getty Images

Circular Design for Fashion by Ellen MacArthur Foundation

Creative designers give me hope. The imaginative people whose job it is to dream up striking images, fantastic furniture or beautiful clothing solve problems differently from the rest of us.

While most, including businesspeople, politicians and even engineers, typically look to practical, economical solutions, designers consider something else as well, something more human: they think about how things look and how we feel about them.

What's important about this distinction is its potential to offer a new way of tackling our planet's greatest threats. Climate breakdown remains stubbornly resistant to purely pragmatic solutions. Pricing carbon or costing the worth of nature's "ecosystem services", for example, have yet to turn the crisis around. We can't buy or sell our relationship with nature; we have to feel it first.

This idea emerges as an encouraging theme in *Circular Design for Fashion*, a book of reflections from leaders of the fashion industry who want – or say they want – their US$807 billion business to go green.

Among them are some of the world's best-known designers, including Stella McCartney, Gabriela Hearst and Eileen Fisher, and emerging stars, such as Beijing-born Zhang Na and Samuel Guì Yang from Shenzhen. Also here are executives and manufacturing, upcycling and recycling experts from top brands, such as Gap, Adidas, H&M and Gucci.

The book has been assembled and published by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, a charity eponymously launched by the long-distance British sailor. The foundation's aim is to promote a worldwide "circular economy" that sustainably sources all its raw material and leaves no waste behind.

The model is a far cry from today's environmentally devastating clothing and textile industry. Described as the second most polluting industry in the world after oil and gas, clothes and textiles manufacturing releases about 10 per cent of global greenhouse gases.

A fifth of the planet's industrial water pollution comes from it, and huge amounts of fresh water are used in its processes (about 7,000 litres per pair of jeans, says the United Nations).

Disturbingly, a lot of it is for naught; more than US$3 billion worth of clothing ends up in landfills every year as big brands launch their latest lines and buyers try to keep up.

These grim facts are what this book purports to face. The scores of short contributions from designers and executives are intended to answer the industry's central existential question: how can fashion remain fashionable and environmentally responsible at the same time? The result is a collection of ideas and real-life examples that – far from solving the essential dilemma – offer rhinestone glimmers of hope.

Central to these bright spots is the shared idea that "waste is a design flaw". Ridding the industry of its environmental impacts, then, means giving as much design attention to raw materials, supply chains and manufacturing as typically goes into a garment's colour, cut and fit.

“The Jeans Redesign” project is a good example. The project – initiated by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation – challenged industry experts and designers to think about how to make the world’s most popular garment using circular economy principles.

Contributors describe jeans that use more cotton and less polyester without rivets and with zips and buttons that can be easily disassembled for recycling. Some brands – Italy’s Candiani Denim, for example – have successful collections that rely on elastic fibres from renewable rubber trees to put the stretch in their cotton.

These small-scale successes and the upbeat tone of the book are a little infectious. So is its jazzy, bright, colourful design. (The brilliant mauve, embossed cover and cheerfully colourful illustrated pages are, we’re told, produced by a “planet positive printing process”.)

Yet the writers’ self-reverential admiration of “creatives”, as they call themselves (“passionate disrupters on the constant search for reinvention”), soon raises red flags. Self-congratulations in the industry are, by most accounts, premature.

Early in the book, for example, recognition that “doing less bad is important – but it’s not enough” soon gives way to an admission that “transforming how clothes are designed and made cannot always be achieved in one go”. Many of the book’s high-minded ideas are similarly vague in their vaguely celebratory language. The industry’s environmental impacts, meanwhile, appear to be worsening.

While recent efforts by Gap and others to reduce water use and pollution are certainly good news, these changes are – as the saying goes – a drop in the bucket. Industry-wide transformation is sorely needed if the world wants clothes that are truly environmentally clean rather than merely greenwashed.