espace – l'intérieur dehors / inside out

A project submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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October 2015
Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the project is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Peter Boyd
16/02/2016
In the basement of the Royal Arcade is the Brotherhood of St. Lawrence Op Shop. It is a handy stop for Denise and I, with our studio just five minutes’ walk away.

It is a train wreck of debris in among the racks and reminds me of the Paris flea market, but there are some occasional gems. I’m looking to cut up a tuxedo jacket – black, always black, ideally one that has grosgrain lapels and heavy felted wool, not the thin, slick Hedi Slimane style, but something that has weight to it, preferably something in a size xxx, although that doesn’t exist here at the Brotherhood. We will probably have to go and buy that one retail.

Voilà, perfect, I’ve found it.

Sometimes it begins with a conversation, at other times it’s about finding a path by yourself and then having a huge discussion about whether things are working or not.

The first incision is the hardest. There are no drawings done, everything depends on observation, checking the pockets, checking the vent, checking the garment on the stand, never trying it on. It means turning it inside out, feeling the lining, looking under the lapel, what are the stitches doing there? Has this garment had alterations done? There is still a hanky left in the pocket by the previous owner. As Jack, Denise’s father would say, don’t look in the pockets, you might find a finger or two.

The jacket is dry-cleaned, and I put it back on the stand, inside-out this time. Denise appears, wanders in and grabs a petticoat and wanders off. Whatever.

The jacket is laid flat and an incision is made to separate the back collar, at the point of the stand from the neckline. The sleeves are then cut off to reveal the shoulder pad, the shoulder roll and the other stitch details. It’s the mille feuille effect. I place the jacket back on the stand and look at it from a distance, to get a perspective of what is happening. Black is always good to work with, as all fabric details dissolve into the monochrome of the cloth, and all you are left with is the silhouette.

I make the incision in the back of the neck larger, and sling it over my shoulder to see if it can be carried like a bag. Searching in the disorganised haberdashery area for some herringbone tape, I shout out to Denise if there is any tape, and where is it?

I take the tape and fasten it to the waist of the jacket inside, just at one point, to test if the jacket needs some definition around the waist point, an internal belt. The stay system, LOL! I look at the sleeves and decide that maybe this jacket needs to be lighter. Shirt sleeves are cut into and pinned on, to test the design. There is still a heaviness to the body, and I decide that maybe the canvas and lining need to be replaced.

Denise has finished with the petticoats and comes over. We have a discussion and decide to cut into the garment, take away the outer shell, being careful not to disrupt the pockets, especially the welt.
The digging begins. The proportion is thought about, how to dismantle parts of the front without cutting up the body too much, jigsawing pieces that look like they shouldn't be there. Pinning pieces together and putting it back on to the stand, looking at it in the mirror, the form is taking shape. Underneath, finally, the lining is revealed. A thin layer of tulle is cut, after a pattern has been made and measurements taken. The tulle panel is pinned on to the front of the jacket in place of the wool. It softens the garment and shows the details of stitching underneath.

Yes, this is starting to work. I don't want it too heavy.

The shirt sleeves are measured and also encased in the tulle, and these are re-pinned to find the right position. We both work on the jacket, on different parts, I'm machining, Denise is cutting. With the sleeves in place and the tulle positioned on the front, I can see that the back needs to be lighter too, so a new lining is put in, the vent reassembled and the hem details stitched.

I lift the jacket up, sling it over a shoulder, look in the mirror. I pass it to Denise and she does the same. We put it on the stand and decide it needs a print, possibly a pinstripe around the lapel and the back of the lining, and maybe sticky tape. Yes, we should tape the pockets and the vent.

The jacket returns, we are pleased with the print, but there are a few details to tuck. Back on the machine, and then it is sent to the machinist for the final touches.

The client arrives. We offer her a beverage from the bar-café downstairs. The first fitting (or it could be the final one) is action-packed. We work as a team to pin and fit the jacket, or, if they have already had a fitting, we leave the jacket on a hanger for them to discover, to try it on in privacy while we keep working in our studio. After giving them some space to style it, we come back into the showroom to view the results.

How does it feel? Does it need to be tighter, shorter, fuller, is the waist, shoulder-line, lapel sitting okay? I take the lead: Take it off and I will show you what you can do with the lapel. I sling it onto the client like a shoulder bag — everyone smiles. She then shows us another way to wear the jacket. We encourage her, and sometimes even I am surprised by the variations the clients come up with. A jacket is never finished, even after it leaves our studio. We might even see it again in a year or two.

Denise says something about adding another detail, but I say "No need." She says, "What about the shoulder?" and I say, "It's OK." She disagrees, "No it isn't" and I say "Yes it is, see, it's just not been put on properly."

The jacket is taken away by Denise, stamped with the S!X stamp, crunch-folded in tissue and placed rolled up in a paper bag, S!X style.

Back to the Brotherhood tomorrow.
An ideogram by Professor Leon van Schaik detailing the research trajectory of SIx. Gift of Leon van Schaik. Image, SIx archive, 2013.
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signed

peter boyd
I would like to thank my Senior Supervisor Professor Leon van Schaik and my Second Supervisor Professor SueAnne Ware. I would also like to thank Professor Robyn Healy for her valuable consultations about the research and Dr. Sean Ryan for the many conversations and suggestions.

To the School of Architecture & Design for its research support, and to the many models, photographers, stylists and others that I have worked with at SIX. To Associate Professor Karen Webster for her enthusiasm and knowledge. To Gedemin Peel for the graphic design; stylist Virginia Dowzer; photographers Monty Coles, Sonny Vandevelde, Vince Caliguri, Jack Sarafian, Michelle Tran & Daniel Goodjohn. A thank you to the SIX clients who have been with us on this journey, especially Frances McKenzie and Paul Tonkin, Susan Cohn, Suzie Attiwill, Naomi Crafti, Viviane Elis, and Maz Salt. To Jessie French, Sunny Bhat, Rachel Kirk-Walker, Molly Dockray, and Leah Muddle for modeling for our research seminars.

To all the students I have taught in the Fashion Design program at RMIT over the years. To John Ibrahim, to Shirley Sprynskyj, and to my family. And of course, to Denise.
Shoes painted with a lace imprint.
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Pellegrinis the Melbourne Italian institution, opposite La Chambre de Bonne in Crossley st. Melbourne. Models walked from the building out into the street for onlookers and diners in Pellegrinis

Image: Danielle Good John, SIX archive, 2015
espace – l’intérieur dehors/inside out is a reflective examination of the fashion practice S!X. Its focus is an exploration of the various uses and meanings of space within the practice. This investigation of space, conducted from within the practice by one of the two practitioners, is new to fashion practice research and is a chief contribution to knowledge in the field.

By turning the practice inside out, the research reveals and analyses the physical space that the practice inhabits, the exhibition, runway, and retail spaces in which the practice exhibits, the space of its client, the geographical spaces that it visits, the intellectual and creative space of design and thinking, and the collaborative space between the two designers within the practice. It also investigates the spaces within the tailored garments through which S!X explore the possibilities and traditions of design.
The research in espace – l’intérieur dehors/inside out is presented as a series of étages. Each étage – each layer or level of the research – uncovers and presents a further stage in the practice of S!X, and complements the stagings – the mises-en-scène – of the collaborative text, surface – l’extérieur dedans/outside in.

The document may be read with the making and remaking of a tailored jacket in mind. Each layer opens up for examination a different space in which the practice works. One layer is peeled back to expose another, to reveal the inner construction of the whole, in the same way that S!X use techniques of garment dismantling to shed light on the craft and history of tailoring.

The word ‘étage’, in French, is commonly used to designate the floor of a building. My use of the word is another example of the way in which S!X appropriate French words encountered on our trips to Paris and put them to use. In this case it describes both the ascent and descent through the levels of a garment, as well as the layering of the research contained in this PhD. The ways in which we borrow from the French language is explained at more length in surface – l’extérieur dedans/outside in.

Two other important spatial examples, both encountered in the Paris Metro, are the terms ‘passage interdit’ and ‘arts et métiers’. The first, meaning ‘no entry’, may mean either a misunderstanding of what S!X actually do, or an unexpected path that we decide to take. The second, the name of a Metro stop, means ‘arts and crafts’, and quite simply means the practice of the hand within the space of the S!X workroom.
étage one: rue des archives (prs – october 2013)
This stage traces the use of the archive in the design practice, through case studies of research at Como Historic House for the Gold Room project, and at the Percy Grainger archive at the University of Melbourne. It also deals more generally with the conception of an archive, with the way in which SIX collect and store design references, and with our understanding of the knowledge archived in a garment. The archive is a research space.

étage two: arts and métiers (prs – june 2012)
Arts and métiers selects and discusses three pivotal moments in the practice, three examples of the way in which the reconstruction of the tailored jacket has played a pivotal role in our design thinking and exploration. This stage is an examination of the spaces of the garment.

étage three: passage interdit (prs – june 2013)
Passage interdit warns the reader not to misunderstand the kind of practice that SIX are, with reference to the discussion of sustainability that framed our “greenest dress”, and explains the ways in which SIX’s disassembly and reassembly of garments should properly be understood. Passage interdit sheds light on the space of thinking and creating within the practice.

étage four: espace (prs – october 2014)
Espace then takes us to the outside of the practice, to spaces of collaboration between SIX and our retail spaces, galleries, and the spaces of other design practitioners, including Le Louvre, L’Eclaireur and Schiavello. This stage investigates the public space within which we practice.

entr’acte: espace entre
Entr’acte/ espace takes us to the intimate performance space, the space of fitting, enacted by the designer and the client. This space between practice and client is also where the research in espace – l’intérieur dehors/inside out closes in again on the research in surface – l’extérieur dedans/outside in, the research perspective of the other member of SIX.

community of design
This section identifies the broad design community within which we situate our practice, and discusses the work of designers who are our contemporaries and precedents. The community of design analysed in this stage is not exhaustive, but focuses on designers whose work touches on the themes discussed in the étages above.

conclusion: le dernier cri
The concluding stage recounts the research journey that the PhD has taken, reflects on the shift that the research has made to the practice, and gathers the research together in a single claim making a contribution to knowledge.
espace – l’intérieur dehors/inside out is presented as a collection of étages that explain what it is that the two designers making up the design practice S!X do when designing together. Its focus is on the spaces that are crucial to the designing of garments, including the material spaces within garments but also the spaces that assist in generating design ideas and showcasing projects. Some spaces are real, such as exhibition spaces, others are conceptual, such as the creative space where design happens. The different spaces in which S!X work and exhibit include the show space, the exhibition space, the retail space and the design space. Another space is that made up by the layering of garments, particularly tailored garments, that S!X has repeatedly explored and manipulated over its history as a design practice. Similarly, the concept of an étage is also intended to be interpreted in different ways. Each étage refers to a level of the design practice of S!X that has been uncovered through this PhD research. It is a way of organizing the different spaces.

If the practice of S!X is to be fully understood, however, the research presented in this PhD needs to be read in conjunction with that in surface: l’extérieur dedans/outside in.

It is important to note that the designers of S!X do not want their dissertations to be read as a design biography or a streamlined narrative. The documents are purposely cut into at points, dissected and reassembled, in much the same way as we design and cut into a found garment. They are explorations of spaces and surfaces respectively. The research embedded in this PhD began in 2011 with the intention of reflecting on the designing and making practices of S!X. As the research developed it became clear that S!X do curate carefully the spaces that they inhabit or frequent and that this curatorship is as much a part of the extended design expression as the collections that S!X work on. The invitation offered to S!X by Professor Leon van Schaik to commence PhDs in the practice-based research stream has allowed S!X to analyse the key projects over the 20 years of the practice and to establish through reflection the reasons why S!X design the way they do, the S!X methodology, and the contribution that S!X make to the field of fashion design. The spaces of S!X and their relationship with design underpin this research.

S!X is a collaborative practice, and the separation of our research into the topics of space and surface does not necessarily reflect what we do in the practice. Just as we do when we design, these two works of research are in constant communication with each other. Interestingly, the two topics reflect something of the traditional differentiation of atelier work, between the production of tailored structure, which is traditionally a masculine practice, and the embellishment of surface, which is traditionally female. This is not how S!X work. It is interesting, however, that when we venture outside S!X to teach at an institution such as RMIT, classes involving the teaching of tailoring are mostly taken by men and those involving decoration are frequently the domain of women – not exclusively, but the distinction persists.

The practice of S!X was established in 1993 after Denise Sprynskyj and Peter Boyd graduated from the Bachelor of Fashion program at RMIT University. Over the twenty-two years of the practice S!X have produced collections as a part of the Melbourne Fashion Festival and Australian Fashion Week and exhibited in galleries across Australia as well as in France, Japan and Greece. These projects have
Flinders Lane, early runway shows, the models were friends of SIX. Image, SIX archive, 1994.
given S!X the experience to adjust to a variety of spaces and places. S!X have had numerous buyers in Australia, New Zealand and Singapore, participated in state government initiatives travelling to Milan, Sweden and London, and have had as clients the actress Toni Collette and the musician Michael Stipe of REM. S!X have shown in some key fashion design spaces such as L'Eclaireur in Paris, as a part of the International Shibori Symposium, at the Mitsokoshi showroom in Taipei, and at the exclusive space 10 Corso Como in Milan. S!X have curated the windows of the venerable retail space of Le Louvre and collaborated with architects Lindsay Holland and Rory Hyde to design show spaces at Cose Ipanema and Chiodo in Melbourne. S!X were the first recipients of the New Designer Award in 1997 at the Woolmark Melbourne Fashion Festival and winners of the Victorian Premier’s Design Award for commercial design in 2008.

SIX are based in Melbourne and unlike many experimental fashion design practices that show primarily in gallery spaces, we have continually participated in both commercial and creative fashion events, constantly testing and developing different ways of presenting. We are also what may be called a micro-practice, a small-scale practice in which the designers are involved at each stage of the designing, production, and communication process. Our involvement runs from the initial conception of a garment or collection, to materials sourcing and manufacturing, to dealing with clients and collaborators.

The past and present state of design in Melbourne gives designers the freedom to explore, in a way that is less inhibited by the traditional systems of fashion found in Paris, Milan and New York, where a designer is expected to spend thousands of dollars to stage a commercial show. The Melbourne design environment makes it relatively easy to begin a practice and to make public the work of the practice in a variety of ways. The access to different spaces offered differing scales of practices makes the design environment rich and rewarding. SIX have witnessed the development of these possibilities over the past 20 years, and have participated in unique collaborations with established retailers, and with groups of like-minded designers from differing disciplines, staging events together and sharing spaces.

For SIX, these possibilities of staging and collaboration are important, and they have allowed us access to various spaces, in Melbourne, elsewhere in Australia, and internationally.

If it was the freedom of the design space of Melbourne that initially ignited our design thinking and imagination, it is important to ask whether the emergence of the SIX catalogue of projects, show staging and design style was possible only because of the locale. The relative lack of commercial restrictions certainly made it easier for a young label to establish itself. However the design style of the label made a break with a tradition of local design that was still present in the early 1990s. For example, there has always been an absence of local iconography and the colour palette in our collections associated with designers such as Jenny Kee and Linda Jackson, and more recently Romance was Born. There is also a lack of a concern with youth culture found in the work of more contemporary local designers, such as PAM and Di$COUNT. The SIX silhouette and garment types do not address the specific nature of the Australian climate like our contemporaries Easton and Pearson. We have never developed an interest in subcultural or ethnic looks, or followed a generically international style like most of the rest of our contemporaries.

If there is anything about our style that identifies us as local, it might be the recent use of the Australian flag in the construction of some garments. However the latter is merely one of many flags in our work, and the appearance of the national emblem is primarily an opportunity to look at color and decoration. Although we are aware of its potential provocativeness, it is used mostly as a textile motif. For us the challenge lies in taking these visually and symbolically forceful blocks of colour, and overdyeing and overprinting them to render them more ambiguous and uncertain, to make them less symbolic and more poetic. However, this intervention is not always effective, and a client was once stopped in a gallery in Paris because a section of cloth (the flag) on his trousers was dragging on the floor. This dereliction was seen as an act of desecration.

SIX’s scripted practice, and consequently this PhD, often invokes terms such as ‘archaeology’ and (although this one has been forced upon us to some extent) ‘deconstruction’. We are not unaware that these words are critical to a wide range of discourses, and we are not unaware of what these discourses have to say. However, it would be a serious mistake to think that the practice of SIX involves ‘applying’ theoretical concepts
and methods to design. We are not theorists working in cloth, and to think otherwise is to misunderstand completely what design involves. The words ‘archaeology’ and ‘deconstruction’ are as much design motifs and materials as are the sketches and fabrics that we handle. They are spurs to think creatively, to uncover what is frequently overlooked, to work (de- or re-) constructively in multiple ways. Or to put it another way, these words are another kind of creative space that we inhabit.

For similar reasons, we are not historians of fashion either. Although the teaching of fashion requires detailed knowledge of the history of the tailored jacket, its origins and transformations, its role in the construction of masculinity, its appropriation by women’s dress, and so on, this knowledge is not central to our design practice. When we speak of the knowledge embedded in a tailored jacket, we are mostly referring to design knowledge, to the secrets of the tailor, to the traditional mastery of construction techniques. Of course, this knowledge also includes awareness of what is considered conventional (for example, the placement of sleeves, or the conventions of male attire), but we are not interested, as designers, in delivering a history lesson.

This research has explored the relationships that SIX have with spaces and places, and our geographical space is both local and international, with the border hard to draw. Rather than belong anywhere, our practice explores the different spaces where we happen to find ourselves. Much like our archaeology of the tailored jacket, this research uncovers, identifies and explains the spaces SIX have occupied over the past 20 years of projects.

The reflective research of espace – inside out mirrors the reflective research of surface – outside in. Between every surface there is a space, and what separates one space from another is a surface.
The rich design palette of projects undertaken by S!X has provided several challenges for this research, which has tried to identify and key themes in our design practice, to analyse and reflect on the aspects that make up an original contribution to the field of fashion design, and to explain our working methodology in a way that sheds light on the workings of other fashion and design practices.

The contribution to knowledge in the field of fashion design lies in this identification, analysis and evaluation of S!X’s practice of thinking, doing and making. The research in this PhD concentrates on the spaces that make possible the creation, production, communication and public dissemination of design, and the expression and communication of ideas between the designers. These spaces include the physical spaces that we work, show and exhibit in, the collaborative space between the two designers, which allows a conversation and exchange of ideas and actions to take place, and the spaces between the designer and client, the designer and retailer, and the designer and the wider fashion world. They also include geographical spaces, including local, national and international locations. Finally and importantly, they include the material and historical spaces that garments carry within them, which can provide the designer and investigator information about techniques and traditions.

The method of reflective research in the PhD also borrows from the way S!X explore design, for example in discovering the elements of a tailored jacket, through excavation, cutting away, rearranging, turning upside down and inside out, repeating these steps, and then using the information gathered to prototype a new work. This is that work. The research has also reflected on the place of S!X in the recent development of fashion design, and it makes a contribution to an understanding of this period of design, from the inside. The past 20 years the practice has seen the arrival of various phases and styles of fashion. For designers in the early 90s the DIY movements of the 1970s and 80s with designers such as Zandra Rhodes and Vivienne Westwood were important precedents, examples which we studied in our undergraduate degree at RMIT. We were a part of
the rise in popularity of smaller independent Australian Fashion labels in the mid-90s, as a result of
the introduction of independent runway shows offered by the Melbourne Fashion Festival in 1994
and the establishment of Australian Fashion Week in Sydney in 1995. The opportunities for fashion
designers to show their work at festivals and fashion weeks was also supported by major sponsors
and government funding, both locally and nationally. SIX won the first Melbourne Fashion Festi-
val New Designer Award in 1997, judged by Australian fashion designer Jenny Bannister, fashion
journalist Felicity Allen from the Herald Sun, director of the then Woolmark Melbourne Fashion
Festival Robert Buckingham, and Australian fashion designer Richard Tyler. SIX participated in the
second Australian Fashion Week and saw it grow to include Melbourne. Frequent trips to Europe,
to show and exhibit but also to keep in touch with international developments in design helped us
to create an International profile and form friendships with Anna Piaggi, Bernard Wilhelm, Walter
van Bierendonck, and Joan Burstein, the founder of Browns in London. The purchase of SIX by
the National Gallery of Victoria by Robyn Healy in 1996 was important for the practice, but it also
reflected a boom in the acquisition of young Australian fashion labels by galleries across Australia.
SIX have also been acquired by the National Gallery of Australia and the Powerhouse Museum. We
have watched as the business of fashion has changed in the past 10 years with the introduction
of the internet, online shopping and social media, affecting the way designers communicate their
work. Designers are also now crossing boundaries by designing performances and films, and our
own work has blurred the differences between the design disciplines of interior, textile, industrial
and product design.

This research addresses a way of designing and producing by providing a glimpse into how a
small but influential practice functions in today’s creative climate. SIX may be considered a micro-
practice, without access to the scale of production and retail available to larger practices, but with
an influence on the community of fashion and design far in excess of its size. SIX have pioneered
this mode of micro-practice and made it a legitimate and desirable form of practice, because of its
relative freedom. As a result of this discovery of industry micro-spaces available for design, a new
way of conducting a fashion practice has developed, where we sit comfortably alongside emerging
graduates from RMIT and other more established micro-practitioners.

This research is important because it has enabled the designers of SIX to understand the processes
that they follow when they design, and shed light on the way that the design practice constantly
changes and reinvents itself. This is a form of transferrable knowledge that can be shared with other
design academics, designers and fashion commentators. The research into how design happens is
a way of scripting ideas about design. This script may be useful to others who see themselves only
as makers, and we would argue that you should not prioritize one over the other. Both making and
reflecting on making are equally important to the practice of design, and in fact they are inextrica-
bly tied together.

Through this research the practice has expanded, because it now also engages more closely with
the activity of writing, as a way of communicating design ideas. Because it comes from a designing
and making perspective, this style of writing is different from that of a historian, a theorist or
a fashion commentator. These written ideas are short stage-settings that describe the SIX thinking
and practice methodology. The research is embedded within the practice, and the communication
of the practice itself is its contribution to knowledge.
The two PhD projects undertaken by the practitioners of SIX are among the first internationally by commercially-practicing fashion designers who use both traditional and alternative means for disseminating their work. We negotiate a range of spaces and places, including the runway, the art gallery, the salon, the boutique, and even the classroom studio. We deal with the temporality of the fashion system, its seasons and design processes, in ways that question these imperatives, but without retreating to the safety of the artist’s studio or the academic’s office. Our peers include local and international fashion designers, fashion industry figures, artists and designers in other disciplines, buyers & clients, writers, curators & teachers. The projects discussed in this research aim to illuminate the nature of fashion design thinking, and the places and spaces in which fashion design takes place, from the inside out, and from the outside in.

This focus on the space of fashion design is new to fashion practice research and as such it makes a contribution to knowledge in the field. The research investigates the intellectual, theatrical, material and physical spaces of the practice. In particular, it reveals the space of the archive, the design methodology behind the archaeological excavation of the tailored jacket, the kind of thinking about remaking that lies behind our practice of disassembly and reassembly, the spaces of public practice and dissemination, and the intimate space of the designer-client performance.
Pellegrini’s, the Melbourne institution, opposite La Chambre de Bonne in Crossley Street, Melbourne. Models walked from the building out into the street before invited guests, amused onlookers, and diners at Pellegrini’s.

Image, Daniel Good John, SIX archive, February 2015.
“These practices tend to be interested in questioning the status quo, pushing limits and being experimenters,” Leon van Schaik, SueAnne Ware, Colin Fudge, Geoffrey London

If we are right to regard ourselves as questioners, testers of limits and experimenters, then who does SIX sit beside?

In The Practice of Spatial Thinking: Differentiation Processes, van Schaik and Ware point out that a community of practice involves a group coming together with something in common, and that this commonality can be a link either through the sharing of ideas or through active practice in a shared métier. This sharing of ideas and activities still leaves room for fluidity within the community, where the views or practices of the designers of their relationships with one another may change.

With this in mind, it is possible to see that the SIX community of practice may be divided into different sub-communities, with each slice of the larger community changing in composition and importance depending upon the circumstances in which we find ourselves. This is because SIX understands and articulates what it does differently in different circumstances, and the boundaries of our practice shift and warp, depending on what we happen to be involved in.

At one practice-led research symposium, the panel asked us to situate our practice in relation to the fashion system, and in particular, to reflect on and speak about the scale of the practice. SIX have always maintained that we move easily between different forms of practice in the industry, more so than most fashion practices. We freely take up all kinds of opportunities that present themselves, but we also decide to participate in opportunities when we are ready, and not according to the dictates of the fashion industry calendar. When it comes to runway presentations, we have jumped between Melbourne Spring Fashion Week, the Melbourne Fashion Festival and Australian Fashion Week. But our modes of communication also include showing our work in exhibitions, some of which we have curated, and holding intimate salon shows in-house at la chambre de bonne. We
have participated in exhibitions, trade shows, and symposia nationally and internationally, but our practice is also tested and extended in the design studio classroom.

This way of working within or on the limits of the fashion system allows us to choose what to participate in and how, and the ability to change course quickly is an advantage that comes with having a micro practice. This flexibility in our style of operation is not common in larger practices, which tend to follow fairly rigid models of design, production and communication, but it is less isolated in practices of similar size. In the years in which SIX have been designing, we have seen the emergence of many design practices that swing not only between different ways of producing and communicating fashion, but also between different art and design disciplines, including industrial design, textile design, fine art practice, performance, and music. This interdisciplinary crossing of limits is very different to the product-licensing model of the large fashion brands. What follows is a selection of those practices with which SIX feel an affinity and a sense of community, even if we are not always in sync with their activities.

**making the community**

Within the contemporary Australian design community, there are few designers with whom we overlap, depending upon the context.

An important member of our local design community is Akira Isogawa, who like SIX has strong interest in textile experimentation, as well as his own take on recycling, where he introduces traditional kimono textile combined with shibori fabric manipulation into his designs. Isogawa and SIX have shared both runway and exhibition spaces, as well as collaborating for the Schiavello project, and although his practice is larger than our own, extending to include his own retail spaces, we ‘see’ design in similar ways. We also share an interest in Japanese design – unsurprisingly in his case.

A micro practice with a focus on the artisanal techniques, as well as a practice comprised of RMIT graduates, Material by Product also extends the habitual outlets for fashion design, choosing to show in galleries and to collaborate with dancers, artists and craft practitioners. Material by Product and SIX are frequently considered rivals, although the respective methods of practice and design aesthetics are quite different. Material by Product has an interest in designing systems of sustainability that does not reflect SIX’s own practice of reconstruction. Their process of design conceptualization and realization is relatively painstaking – for SIX, this process seems over-laboured and lacking in spontaneity. But both Material by Product and SIX share common terrain as much as a shared model of practice, and our respective clients are often one and the same.

**crazy community of communication**

The Melbourne design community also comprises small, independent practices that collaborate with or cross the boundaries into other disciplines. A prominent part of this community and a member of our own community of practice is PAM (Perks and Mini). Shauna Toohey of PAM is an RMIT graduate, former student, and – in the very early days – was a SIX house model, that is, a friend who we co-opted for our salon shows. PAM glide between different ways of expressing and communicating what they do, which is not always about design in the narrow sense of the word. For PAM, fashion design meets graphic design, and collaborations and exhibitions sit alongside DJing.

**returning it to the community**

An international extension of the community that includes PAM, Henrik Vibskov, the Norwegian designer once explained to SIX his range of activities, which include DJing at music festivals, showing regularly at prêt-à-porter shows, holding exhibitions, and teaching design. Vibskov is a designer...
who shares his knowledge, like S!X who have taught at RMIT for over 10 years. The sharing of design methods and knowledge is alien to much of the commercial design industry, which jealously holds onto its secrets, or ‘intellectual property’. Like Vibskov, we realize that there is an immense gap between being in the possession of knowledge and being able to put it into practice. But we also get some satisfaction in watching a student make the first steps on their way to becoming a practicing designer.

community of ideas

Susan Cohn, the Melbourne-based jeweler, is part of our community on a number of levels – as a client, as a fellow designer, and as one who shares our sense of questioning, and Cohn is unafraid to challenge any sign of conservatism in her métier. Her relationship with S!X in the role of client is a relationship of equals, with Cohn often setting us a design brief, and her embrace of our aesthetic is enthusiastic – she adopts the S!X look as a sort of design uniform, and her brief to design a bullet-proof vest for her is just an extreme version of this. Like S!X, Cohn is an archivist, and a better archivist of our garments than we are ourselves. Perhaps there is a lesson in this, that it is impossible to collect your own work, that you need someone else to do it for you – that is why we have galleries and museums. Fortunately, Cohn plans to donate her S!X wardrobe to the National Gallery of Victoria.

communauté internationale – Japan

Reflecting upon our projects over the past 20 years, it is clear that the Japanese use of asymmetry in design has been an important influence in shaping our work, particularly in our thinking about cutting directly on the body. It is no coincidence that S!X have worked closely with members of the Japanese design community, who respect the materials that they work with.

Yohji Yamamoto, in My Dear Bomb, talks about the engagement that the patternmaker has with the cloth:

“The nature of the garment is a product of the union of two spirits, one that teases out an image for the design and one that then grapples with that image. That union of these two spirits takes place only when the patternmaker reacts innocently to what may be appealing and interesting in the various expressions that the fabric takes.”

One such designer is Yoshiko Iwamoto Wada, the writer and shibori practitioner. Her practice covers collaborations with international design houses as well as small-scale artisan communities, and her own work is created not as a series of regular (bi-annual) collections but as a series of art works that appear according to their own time frame. Wada has strongly influenced the way that we think about material, and she is not tied to traditional practices, but experiments with the combination of old techniques and innovative materials.

Yoshiki Hishinuma is another Japanese designer for whom the development of textiles is integral to design. Even though his is a larger (wholesale) business than S!X’s, his hands-on experimentation with materials as well as his investigation of the role of space within the work, such as in inflatable clothing series, are interests that we share.

The fashion historian Kazuko Koike is a third member of the Japanese design community with whom we have shared an affinity, ever since her visit to our studio in 1996, when she noted the similarities between our methods of working, seeking out the peculiarities in garments and reconstructing them in odd ways, and the Japanese practice of wabi sabi. It was Koike who first got us thinking in terms of the ‘re-’ of redesigning.
After the parade of Flags in Barcelona at the PRS, Image SIX archive, 2013.
Other, European designers share a design practice with SIX that has a slightly different focus. Some of these play with garment types and signifiers, reconfiguring clothing in unusual ways to draw attention to the language of clothing. One is Anne Valerie Hash, who plays with dimension and destination, for example, by reconstructing male adult clothing as children’s wear. Hash, like SIX, has also drawn attention to the tailor’s craft in her work, including signifiers of finishing such as waistband tape, or used materials that are conventionally considered inappropriate, adding lace to suiting material. Her outcomes are experimental, not only because their aesthetic is unconventional, but because it is not clear how well the fabric will perform in its new role. It is as if she has abandoned quality-control and other safety nets, and left the garments to their own devices.

Inès Kaag and Desirée Heiss, the designers behind BLESS, met at a fashion competition upon graduation. They can be categorized as fashion designers only with difficulty, because their designing quickly crosses into product design, and their mode of practice is relatively artistic. BLESS are renowned for producing small collections or repertoires of objects, and their production is haphazard, more compulsive than planned. In this respect BLESS follow an ethic that SIX share in practice, choosing to follow one’s interest and instinct rather than respond to a trend or follow the demands of the system.

This community of practice represents a selection of practitioners who work in a minor key, whose practices are relatively small-scale and adaptable. SIX, of course, also recognize, as part of our community, designers who have gone ahead of us, whose experimentation and questioning of the status quo has influenced our own. The extent to which our design thinking is shared with Japanese designers such as Rei Kawakubo and Belgian designers such as Martin Margiela should be evident, although we are not uncritical disciples, and we have other hidden or surprising influences as well. But if a community is determined not by a master-disciple relationship but by a sharing of ideas and practices, then these designers are also an important slice of this community of design.
Rue des archives traces the use of the archive as a research method in the design practice, through case studies of research undertaken at Como Historic House for the Gold Room project, and at the Percy Grainger archive at the University of Melbourne for the Male Order exhibition. It also deals more generally with the conception of an archive, with the way in which SIX collects and stores its design references, and with our understanding of the way in which knowledge is archived in a garment.

What is the archive for SIX? How does it affect the design process? Imagine walking down a street, a street that changes over time. People come and go, buildings are built and fall derelict, the streetscape changes. But some features remain or are given a makeover. Some residents remain, they grow old and mature. So too with the SIX archives, the record of our changing techniques and garment types. Some are lost, sold off or forgotten. Others depart only to return after several years’ absence.

archives dead and living

Many designers who have been working for 10 years or more have extensive archives; they keep samples of everything they have ever produced, and their work is carefully dated and catalogued. Here is SIX’s archive:

Boxes are piled high and racks are brimming with clothes, toiles, samples from past collections, shoes thrown amongst the bags of hangers, and photos of designers, Paris and models sticky taped to the wall. The image is reminiscent of an old photograph of Parisian chiffoniers, Porte d’Ivry: baroque de chiffonier, by Eugene Arget.1

Although the archives of the House of Balenciaga hold more items than the archives of the House of SIX, both treat their past work not as museum pieces but as something to be reworked, as the potential starting point for something new. Sometimes it reminds us of an unresolved design problem and provokes us to rethink, sometimes it becomes new material, to be cut into and reshaped. Nothing is dead
SIX garment archive illustrating the archiving system at SIX. It consists of hung samples, and a chaotic collection of boxes of garments and accessories from the past 20 years.
Image, SIX archive, 2011.
and embalmed, it is merely asleep in a box or stuck on a rack, waiting to be brought back to life. Even though a garment might be years old, a relic of past interests, it can still be revisited and reworked, either as a stimulus or as raw material.

About The Impossible Wardrobe, the performative piece by Tilda Swinton, Galliera Museum director Olivier Saillard says, “the performance is taboo, you can not wear the clothes that we store in our museums. But you can bear them gently in your arms,” playing on the twin meanings of the French word porter which means both to wear and to carry.2 Swinton described the experience of visiting the museum storerooms as like entering a morgue.

SIX’s interest in using the archives of museums and fashion houses as a method and resource for design started with a visit to the Balenciaga archives in Paris in 1996. After this experience we became obsessed with the use of the archive for research, and many of our later collections and pieces have involved research in different archives, including the National Gallery of Victoria, the National Trust, the Percy Grainger Museum and the Powerhouse Museum.

“WHAT IS REAL
CHOSES TO CONCEAL
ITSELF”
HERACLITUS

The Heraclitus quote, a continuous source of inspiration for collections, and a way of explaining the excavation process that doesn’t use the term ‘deconstruction’. Image, Graphic Design Gedemn Peel, SIX archive, 2012.
Detail of a jacket based on the Grainger archive for the exhibition Male Order: Addressing Menswear, curated by Robyn Healy. This image explores the use of an archive and the space within the layers of the jacket, where concealed information is exposed and reaches the surface.
It is also a method that we use in our studio classes, dragging students to examine different archives, looking at clothing, accessories and objects from the past. We set briefs asking them to respond to the archive, and to question what an archive could be. Does it have to be within a museum context? Could it include someone’s personal wardrobe? What does this tell us about our relationship with the past, and with objects from the past? Is the past really past?

“What is real chooses to conceal itself” – Heraclitus

This quotation, which came up many years ago in a philosophical conversation about our design practice, has stuck with me since. It seems to pinpoint what our design method of uncovering surfaces and spaces is all about, but it also communicates how we relate to the past, by uncovering the concealed reality of things.

The use of an archive can play a pivotal role in the design process. Historical garments and objects can be studied to generate designs and also to help us to think differently about historical collections and our relationship with them. The archive is something that designers such as Vivienne Westwood frequent.

Westwood spent many hours studying costumes in the V&A, and McClaren and Westwood’s collection of 1983, for example, was based on an engraving of a pirate. Despite her exactitude, Westwood’s creations are never historical facsimiles. Says Westwood: “I take something from the past that has a sort of vitality that has never been exploited, like the crinoline, and get very intense. In the end you do something original because you overlay your own ideas.”

In ReFusing Fashion, Harold Koda describes Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons’ use of an archive, of what SIX occasionally call our bibliothèque: “The pattern piece of a skirt is extrapolated from a 19th century riding habit, Kawakubo has displaced the radiating darts intended to accommodate the knee of a woman riding side saddle to the hip of her own design. History is plumbed but so radically reconsidered that it is erased.”

Ulrich Baer, in his paper “Deep in the Archive” for Aperture Magazine in 2008, opens by asking: “What belongs in an archive?” His answer: “Everything that someone does not wish to forget and everything that someone believes will hold the key to the future.”

The Australian fashion designer Toni Matecevski is said to have a meticulous collection of every garment he has ever created. These 100 or so garments are pressed, and hung in their individual garment bags and labeled with the name and date of the collection. We are confident that Matecevski references these garments in order to create new designs and improve his techniques. For him the collection is clearly an ordered archive of the past.

Akira Isogawa showed a collection at Australian Fashion Week in April 2015 based on the archive. “The showcase included many reworked pieces from his beloved archives,” reported the Sydney Morning Herald. Again, an ordered and maintained archive is important to Isogawa’s design identity, giving his designs some historical continuity.

SIX also have a collection of past work that dates back to 1995, but it is not maintained in an orderly way like Matecevski’s. Many garments and objects, reminders of certain moments in time, are kept in our studio, haphazardly on racks or shelves. But some are kept in boxes buried at the back of a shed in suburbia. Some follow us to university, to be used as teaching props. Others are housed in the permanent collections of the National Gallery of Victoria and the National Gallery of Australia. Some are in private collections, others are hidden under newer garments, like a repainted canvas or a renovated building, to be rediscovered and reworked like a tabula rasa.
Detail of a hatbox from the archives of The National Trust of Victoria. SiX were interested in the Parisian address and thus with the history of Australian clients ordering exclusive designs from Paris. Image, SiX archive, 2006.
'Fashion House LaBassa', an installation curated by SIX that included pieces from the National Trust Costume collection, the RMIT studio 'Making the Unfinished', and SIX. This image shows SIX in the upstairs room at Labassa surrounded by objects and garments from the costume collection and the studio. Image, SIX archive, 2013.
The archive is not just the preserve of time and memory; it is also a space and a place. Instead of an archive, S!X often refer to the repository of memory as ‘la bibliothèque’. La bibliothèque is a shared, dynamic mental and physical space, made up of garments, postcards, objects, of mementos and memories. The idea of a library, a library of ideas, sometimes gives a better sense of how we use the archive. It is a lot like a library of books to be pulled from the shelves and consulted. It is the kind of library where you can borrow books, but you can also write in the margins, remove the covers, tear out a page, or paste one book inside another. And there is no number system telling us where each book is located.

Aby Warburg, who founded the Warburg Institute in 1866, based on his private collection, was interested in the history of ideas and clever ways to group books and objects together, which he called ‘good neighborliness’. “The book with which one was familiar was not, in most cases, the book one needed. It was the unknown neighbour on the shelf that contained the vital information, even though one might not guess this from its title.”

Books may also be treasured items, granted the permanence of place in our households that the transitory objects of fashion are usually denied. It was for this reason that the Japanese designer Hiroaki Ohya created a series of 21 books that transform into a range of clothes after admiring the old books in a flea market, a collection now safely housed in a museum.

Like Warburg’s institute, our bibliothèque is a scattered and cluttered place, a cabinet of curiosities. Photographs of Australian artist Margaret Olley’s living room in her house in Sydney showed every table top and corner of the room cluttered with invitations to exhibition openings, her own paintings, some sketches, magazines, flowers, vases, china, bookcases brimming with literature on art, theory, Australiana, and ashtrays of all shapes and sizes, some half full of ‘works in progress’. The chaos of la bibliothèque produces some surprising juxtapositions, not unlike the Surrealist works of Schiaparelli, with their unexpected combinations of materials, objects and imagery.

If an archive is a form of material memory, then it can be just as forgetful or neglectful as the latter. Artifacts like memories go missing, sometimes they are lost deliberately. Each archive is personal and particular, and once it is gone an artifact cannot be recovered by someone else, except as their memory.

researching the archive

The Percy Grainger Museum at Melbourne University contains many of Grainger’s musical scores, musical instruments, photographs, books and personal belongings. The museum is a repository of items documenting Grainger’s life, and Grainger himself often referred to a museum as a ‘hoard-house’.

In 1999 for the exhibition Male Order: Addressing Menswear, S!X were introduced to the archive at the Grainger Museum by the exhibition curator Robyn Healy. The archive at first presented itself with many possibilities, and one could have easily been drawn to the garments that Grainger had designed for himself. But the odd, harlequin toweling yet completely functional outfits held little appeal for us. Instead S!X looked to the objects on display and, sifting through documents, musical scores, diaries and instruments, it was these objects that spoke to us. The challenge was to capture the essence of Grainger’s personal history, but without losing S!X’s design identity by adopting Grainger’s. The tailored jacket that was the result (perhaps for the gala performance of a new composition for piano) made more oblique references to his musical profession and his peculiar enthusiasms.
If one was to excavate the layers of the Grainger jacket titled “Remixed Movement Number 6” piece by piece with meticulous incisions you would discover the mille feuille effect of layer upon layer of tulle and canvas, paper and chiffon, delicately folded leaves and strata, much of it printed with musical and written text. Grainger’s own hand-writing is encased within the chest area of the garment, like a hand over the heart, taking an oath to behave himself, or else . . .

The work “Remixed Movement Number 6” is itself now in the permanent collection of the National Gallery of Australia.

Location: 101 Collins Street, upstairs in a storeroom. Archive of the National Trust of Victoria. On a table: black lace, silk taffeta, parasols, hat boxes, gloves, beads, passementerie, the occasional French word attached.

We approach the sorting of garments and objects from an archive much as we sort through tailored jackets, selecting those we might reconfigure with a plan in mind. When Robyn Healy asked us to produce work for the Noble Rot exhibition at Como Historical House, from the onset SIX had a very definite idea of what we were looking for: lace, black, tailored, French. Our brief was to use the archive not in order to select and display items from the collection, but to draw on the archive to create something new, which would be displayed alongside the stained and decayed objects from the National Trust.

This was not a study on pattern-cutting or embellishment. It was more of an investigation of what we might turn inside-out or upside-down, of what we could merge together or graft. Although we borrowed the lace patterns and black palette of Victorian style, the garment pieces that resulted, which could be zipped together in various combinations, were very removed in style and history from the pieces in the archive. The way in which our pieces could be put together and separated was also a reflection on the way odd items from the archive can be thrown together to produce something new and unexpected.

SIX have drawn on various kinds of archives in order to design, from the basements of museums to the bargain bins of opportunity shops. We treat these in similar ways – that is one reason why our reconstruction of found garments is not a concern for sustainability but instead an exploration of the possibilities of the past. We have also visited the imagined archive, the repository that we have never experienced in person but can conjure up through a reading of Dior, or Balenciaga, or Comme des Garçons. These trips down the rue des Archives assist SIX in imaginatively transforming these designers’ methods through our own practice of making and remaking.

For example, everyone is familiar with the jackets from the Christian Dior atelier, or with Yves Saint Laurent’s Le Smoking created in 1966 for his collection titled “Pop Art” and later made famous by photographer Helmut Newton in 1975 French Vogue. These jackets too have been studied by SIX, but only through images. These jackets have never been sighted, only imagined, but that imaginary relationship frees us from the inclination to try to reproduce them. Instead, we prefer to see where they might lead.

The archive, la bibliothèque, is a repository not just of artifacts but of ideas and memories, because the artifacts housed in an archive are themselves not primarily things. They are sources of knowledge and clues about what to do next. The archive may be a formal institution, such as a museum, or a commercial enterprise, such as a retail store. It may be a book, because every archive is in some sense a book of wisdom (or folly). All of these places make up SIX’s larger archive, although we also have our own chaotic bibliothèque. But we also make explicit use of archives, both in our design research and in our teaching. This is ultimately because our practice has a living relationship with the past, just like the rue des Archives in Paris.
A jacket inserted with a tailored mini skirt and closed at the centre front. This garment plays with the way a tailored jacket is worn as it needs to be put on like a teeshirt or when flipped could be worn as a skirt with a jacket flying at the side. It also explores the notion of disassembly.

The metro station in the third arrondissement when translated means ‘arts and crafts’. SIX have used this as inspiration for collections and also studios at RMIT Fashion to assist students in explaining their own métier. Image, Sean Ryan, SIX archive, 2015.
Arts and métiers selects and discusses three pivotal moments in the practice, three examples of the way in which the reconstruction of the tailored jacket has played a pivotal role in our design thinking and exploration.

The tailored jacket, tailoring, what does this mean to S!X, to fashion? I have taught tailoring at RMIT for over 10 years and every year I have the same dialogue with the students when I try to explain to them what it means to me. S!X are not only interested in the past use of tailoring but also how in how contemporary techniques and materials can change a garment, by the way it is designed, cut, machined, hung and worn. Some critics would claim that contemporary designers have lost the knowledge of past techniques and that the traditional craft of tailoring is dying. However, I would say that it is a matter of the tailored jacket's natural evolution, to find new ways of designing and making through the introduction of new ideas or the reshaping of old ones, and merging the materials of traditional tailoring with those taken from disparate design and industrial practices.

For example, the Japanese designers Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons and Junya Watanabe have been able to transform the tailored garment into a soft crushable wearable shell by developing textiles specifically for this function and then introducing pattern-making techniques that resemble alterations and mending.

Through the clever developments of materials, the surface of these jackets can take on the patina of wear, while their construction makes them adaptable to different styles of wearing. The space between the wearer and the garment that Rei Kawakubo famously explored in the 1997 collection “Dress meets Body” resonates with us, not only because it questioned silhouette and body shape, but also because it is an investigation of the layers and spaces of the garment. For the collection, small, padded pillows stuffed with feather down were sewn into amorphic shapes, and these shapes were inserted into pockets within the jackets, dresses or skirts, and the change in shape of the garment seemed to reflect a contorting of the shape of the body. But this latter exploration of body shape and body image is not something that S!X take much interest in.
While walking down the corridor at RMIT, I overheard a conversation between two undergraduates discussing tailoring studios for the following semester: Would they be learning pad-stitching and the traditional techniques taught in the small tailors’ workrooms around the globe, or (more reluctantly) would they be looking at the contemporary versions, the soft tailoring, the destructured forms? From my observations I gathered that they felt more comfortable following suit, that is, learning traditional step-by-step methods. While SIX see the undoubted importance of learning about (and from) traditional methods, and in fact an important aspect of our spatial excavation of the jacket is to uncover and expose the knowledge lodged in carefully crafted tailoring, we feel that teaching students to be comfortable with traditional methods is merely to train technicians, not design thinkers. It is important, of course, to teach students the essentials before showing them how to question them, but this method sometimes prevents them from asking “Why not?” when they start to know their way around the tradition.

We explained our interest in the tailored jacket in the catalogue for the A Matter of Time exhibition at the Tamworth Textile Biennale curated by Suzie Attiwill. This statement is crucial to understanding a great deal of what we do:

“Fashion design takes time and fashion is always of its time. It takes time to create a tailored jacket. This temporality becomes apparent once we submit a garment to archaeological examination and expose the different strata of material and the seams of tacking and stitching that hold these layers together. But fashion is also of its time. Each garment, no matter how time-consuming its creation, is destined to recede from collective memory, or worse to persist there as something old fashioned or dated. SIX propose remembering and reclaiming this twofold temporality of fashion design. This is done not simply by reverently dissecting and displaying discarded and unfashionable garments, since this practice is content to leave them languishing in the past, as historical curios. Instead, we have submitted them to re-cutting and decorative surface treatments, in order to defy and reverse the temporality of fashion.”1

excavate and reconfigure

So what is a tailored jacket?

A tailored jacket is a sleeved garment for the torso, cut from a flat pattern, with two or more pockets, and, in the case of menswear, a lapel. The jacket is usually made up of several strata, including the outer body, an under-structure of canvas, interlining, pad-stitching, shoulder pads, shoulder rolls and linings.

The tailored jacket also comes ready-made with some aesthetic assumptions – that it is a garment of simple clean lines, ideally made to measure rather than bought of the rack.

What happens when we look inside a tailored jacket, when we turn a suit inside-out and outside-in?

The tailored jacket is the garment that carries the most information from the designer and maker about garment construction. It is also the garment that may say the most about their skills as a crafts-person. When tailoring is spoken of it is usually linked to places such as Savile Row, the street in London occupied by tailors who practice the bespoke or the hand-made-to-measure suit. Alexander McQueen, the late designer synonymous with a contemporary take on traditional English tailoring, tells the story of working in Savile Row to learn the techniques of tailoring, and preparing a tailored jacket for a well-known client and scrawling an obscene phrase on the canvas.2 The story may be a fabrication, but secrets of all kinds may be hidden within the inner strata of the garment. For SIX this construction detail of the tailored jacket is crucial to the reconfiguring process, as it gives us the opportunity to rework and redisplay a wide range of those elements listed earlier: canvas and lining, pocket and lapel, and so on.
The jacket, created for the exhibition Male Order: Addressing Menswear, shows the outline of the peaked lapels and the softness of the tulle and gauze.

For example, consider the work “Remixed Movement Number 6”, designed in response to a brief for the show Male Order: Addressing Menswear and discussed in the previous chapter. In this case it is a tuxedo jacket that is excavated, with each layer taken out, leaving a skeletal structure that is then replaced with leaves of musical notation paper and photographs of Grainger’s handwriting, all masked below layers of blush pink and tangerine hand-dyed Shapewell. The pocket bags are revealed, shoulder rolls and facings are cut into, and the shoulders are destructured by replacing the shoulder pads with layers of soft tulle, giving it a mille feuille effect, where both the layers and the spaces between them are on show. The texture of the jacket balances the softness of the cloth and the remnants of structure from the tuxedo. Apart from its response to the exhibition brief, the design intention was not only to show the process of garment construction, but also to use this information as decoration rather than as structure. The structure itself becomes a decorative feature.

This jacket was important for SIX, because it enabled us to develop both the decorative stitch techniques and the layering, excavating and mille feuille techniques that we constantly revisit. In drawing attention to the secret spaces within the jacket, it also gave SIX the opportunity to fill these spaces with memoirs of Grainger, bringing to the surface the kinds of secrets that the pockets of a jacket are so good at concealing.

Robyn Healy, in her curator’s statement, says that, “the jacket’s translucency allows the viewer to experience the inner workings of tailoring, the density and the textural qualities of the various materials; the construction becomes decoration. Like a 17th century costume plate depicting your profession, this jacket filled with the music and writings of Grainger represents both his public and private lives.”

**designing through making**

When we start to dismantle the tailored suit, structural choices are constantly made. For example, do we keep all the weight and the information in the garment or do we add and subtract certain elements? These kinds of questions arise as we cut and explore the garment’s possibilities. To illustrate these kinds of choices requires more than just thinking them through or visualizing them. To see the displacement of structure at work, how it is moved, removed and reconfigured, requires the action of doing and making, testing and re-working, analysis and discussion. There is a level of inquiry as to what will happen and what may not work within the design that can only be answered through actively testing the materials.

In an interview in 2003 for SLAVE magazine we explained the process of reconfiguring:

“There’s a skill base to it. It’s a mathematical equation. There are rights and wrongs to it, though you can push the boundaries of it. To taper something properly there’s a definite skill and formula that you have to understand. That’s what differentiates us from tee shirt labels, jeans labels, whatever. But if you are pitching that, and I’ve said we are living in the generation of no memory, well they don’t even know what a good jacket feels like to put on. They’ve never put on an Yves St. Laurent one, or a Jean Paul Gaultier.”

Often these tests are practiced on jackets created by well-known designers that clients have bought in for reconfiguring. An example is the foiling of a jacket by Yohji Yamamoto, which has been sliced apart at the front between the lapel and the facing, the outer skin of the jacket flipped to reveal the inner workings, and areas highlighted with the addition of silver foil. This is a technique borrowed from the greeting card industry. The Paul Smith jacket is a beautiful specimen of fine tailoring techniques and structural details, which when sliced apart, opens up the archive beneath. A zip is added, and the lapel detail detached from the shoulder line, which suggests a different way to wear the jacket, perhaps slung casually over the shoulder like a bag.

And the question of the authorship of the garment comes into play at this point.
Paper Jacket. This image illustrates the interplay of the real and the surreal, where printed paper replaces the actual stitches and embellishment. SIX have used paper as a fabric, beginning with the use of decoupage from the early 90’s.

Image, SIX archive, 1996.
In a conversation with Professor Leon van Schaik, we were asked how we sourced or selected the tailored jackets that we decide to recycle. Garments are usually chance discoveries, but a process of selection is also involved. Some are discarded due to their lack of appropriate tailored elements, others because of the limitations imposed by their colour or patterning. The textile or materiality also becomes paramount to the final design, as many of these recycled garments are destined to take on a surface embellishment or undergo some other technique towards the end of the construction phase. The sorting process extends to include other garments considered the basics of a wardrobe: the tee shirt, the blouse, the pant, the skirt, the shirt, the knit. Yet the tailored jacket remains key to our interest in excavation and reconfiguration. This sorting process is similar to the rag picking methods of the chiffoniers discussed in the companion dissertation Surface: l’extérieur dedans/outside in.

Tadao Ando, the self-taught Japanese architect, is known for his renovation of the Punta Della Dogana for the Francois Pinault Foundation. He aimed to provoke a dramatic clash between old and new by inserting a space bounded by concrete walls inside the existing structure. This exercise reveals the various layers of the building, bringing a sense of clarity and understanding to our encounter with it instead of covering up or ignoring its history.

Is this the sort of thing that we do when we unpick and excavate a tailored jacket? Are we trying to draw attention to an encounter of past and present? We do aim to keep alive the historical memory of tailoring, of the tailored jacket with its canvas layers, breakline tape, notched collar, pad stitching, basting, shoulder rolls, and shoulder pads. But SIX also choose garment types that have less history to lose, which are considered basics or staples of a wardrobe, such as the business shirt, the tee-shirt, and the tailored pant. These are the types of garments that are recreated season after season with very little shift in the design details, and perhaps in these cases our intervention aims to produce a clash of history rather than draw attention to it.

Tadao Ando speaks of renovation as a form of resuscitation. Can we speak of the jacket in a similar way, as bringing an old garment back to life? In some ways this rings true, because the task that confronts us is almost surgical – the difficulty lies with the right intervention of the hand, knowing when to cut, where to cut, how big to cut, what to keep, what to discard, searching for the balance between the incision that kills and the one that cures.

The shirt shown here is made up of two men’s business shirts, unpicked and sliced up then restitched together. The buttoned front has been displaced and sewn up so that the shirt is put on in a similar way to a tee-shirt. This shirt was created for a male client, whose (female) partner wears it too. In fact this is a common result with many of our garments, although androgyny is never a premise for our designs. On the other hand, SIX has had a long interest in taking men’s garments and recutting them for women, a practice that was first introduced in 1994.

Redefining the gender of garments is central to the SIX design vernacular. Quite often garments, particularly tailored garments, are taken from the male wardrobe and re-configured for women. This process came about partly by chance, partly by opportunity. Denise Sprynskyj’s fourth year collection at RMIT took an interest in the gender of clothing, and this was a further factor. But it also reflects the way in which SIX run our workroom. Because the practice is a micro-practice, there can be no traditional division of labour between men’s work (tailoring) and women’s work (embellishment), and the de-gendering of clothing reflects the de-gendering of workroom practices, even though we retain a strong interest in the history of haute couture.

This example illustrates the reconfiguration of a man’s suit as a women’s wear garment. The garment, commissioned for the book and exhibition 50 years of Japanese Lifestyle: postwar fashion & design by the fashion writer Kazuko Koike, includes a pair of men’s tailored pants turned upside-down. The pants then have a jacket panel inserted at the back to add flare, a pattern construction that pays homage to a Christian Dior skirt with a swing back, dating from the 1950’s. The shift in
Detail of the garment for the exhibition at Utsunomiya, ‘50 years of Japanese Fashion’. The jacket and skirt are part of a series of excavated jackets, showing canvas and stitching details. The skirt is another version of the series based on the Dior swing back skirt.

Tuxedo jacket sliced at the lapel to show the foil lining underneath, over-tacked with stitching details to show the seamlines.

the gender of a garment from masculine to feminine is a feature of S!X's design vocabulary, one that recurs in most collections. But the need to redesign the garment to cross genders also gives us the chance to disassemble the garment in order to reveal its construction details. The critique of gender and the interest in the history of tailoring combine in these design exercises.

This style of cutting is illustrated by these garments. The upside-down trouser skirt first appeared in 1994, this first experimentation with recycling gives a clear idea of how we work with the source garment, gathering information to enable its translation and renewal. The pre-history of our dismantling of masculine tailoring can be seen in our earlier experiments with the reconfiguration possibilities of denim, a material that is less formal and less gendered.

The invitation to exhibit at Utsunomiya Museum of Art was also a turning point in cementing S!X's appreciation of the Japanese aesthetic of display. To quote Bonnie English from her book Japanese Fashion Designers: the work and influence of Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo:

"S!X put Australian avant-garde fashion design on the map with their excavated tailored vintage garments, especially other designers' clothing which were cut up and re-stitched. Reflecting the strong aesthetic influence of both the Belgians and the Japanese, they became immersed in what might be called a re-mix mentality, where centuries old traditional cottage industry materials were combined with contemporary forms and silhouettes."

This statement by English about the practice of recutting expresses a common view of how audiences read our work. We are also told that other designers have trodden this path before S!X, and that the path is a traditional and well-trodden one. What makes our designs any different?

For example, the Spanish-born designer Miguel Adrover has also played with elements of reconfiguring. Adrover takes an iconic piece like the tailored jacket or tuxedo jacket and recuts it. However, the difference seems to us to be that he is overly concerned with conducting a social-political critique through his work. S!X are not unaware of this possibility, or that our work can be read in this way. But we are primarily concerned with investigations of form and technique, leaving it to the wearer to respond to and to read the garment in whatever way they wish.

But we do not retreat into the preservation of centuries-old techniques either. We are happy to acknowledge that we are part of a broader ‘Belgian and Japanese’ aesthetic interest in the collision of old practices and new forms. At the same time, our practice is only partly influenced by this wider community, and our design motivations are usually closer to home.

**the one off – reconfigured pieces / materiality and mixing**

S!X's treatment of cloth, intended to show up or create imperfections and the patina of wear, is a practice we share in common with designers such as Martin Margiela, and this treatment or mistreatment is conducted for aesthetic reasons and as a practical investigation of the relationship between fashion design and time. Barbara Vinken terms the general interest in time and history ‘post-fashion’, which has been popularized through vintage clothing.

Another who works in this way is Carol Christian Poell the Austrian designer who purposely disrupts the normal production processes of textiles, putting leather through wrinkling and crumpling washes to produce seemingly worn or aged clothing.

This concern for material maltreatment and deliberate ageing is part of a wider movement that approaches traditional couture practices with one eye of a sculptor and another of a scientist.
Assembling the garments for Couture to Chaos in the studio at Flinders Lane, showing details of Peter’s grandmother’s chemise re-configured as a blouse and the underpant skirt using a pair of granny knickers. Image, SIX archive, 1995
Foiled tuxedo worn at Australian Fashion Week at Federation Square Melbourne. It illustrates the active role of the wearer, in tearing away the foil from the garment.

Jacket excavation. This sample shows the way the jacket is excavated and ideas lifted to create a print for future garments.
“It’s very simple. I work hard to make the clothes that I want to make, and those who sympathize with my collections wear it. The people who buy my clothes take fashion seriously. They get a kick out of the challenge of wearing something new. Those are the people I design for. I am not interested in the mainstream.”

Watanabe has a scientist’s interest in contemporary textiles and a sculptor’s taste in placing the seam and deciding on a palette. The result is one form of replacement for the older haute couture model.

Some contemporary fashion theorists have already addressed these questions in relation to SIX. Danielle Whitfield from the NGV, writing in The Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion, claims that:

“SIX endeavoured to interrogate the fashion system through an examination of the fundamentals of design. Producing small ranges of men’s and women’s wear, SIX employed demi-couture (a step down from haute couture) techniques in their collections. The term haute couture describes made to measure, very high quality and labour intensive fashion.”

To complicate things, the distinction between dressmaking and haute couture that we habitually make does not necessarily apply in Paris, because the terms ‘dressmaking’ and ‘haute couture’ mean the same thing when applied to the French fashion system. The petit mains employed by the French fashion houses were by definition dressmakers making dresses for the house. In her book The Japanese Revolution in Paris Fashion, Yuniya Kawamura speaks about the French fashion system and the place of the seamstresses as it is recognized by la chambre syndicale. The distinction is in some ways a class distinction, strictly regulated by French institutional bodies. We in SIX work on the assumption that fashion, like many other design practices, is entering a stage where the old modes of practice no longer apply, but where the new modes of practice have not yet become clear. We work in this way simply because it is creatively rewarding and stimulating. There is also a general interest in rediscovering the role of the artisan as a backlash against current fashion systems of production, but the reaction against so-called ‘Fast Fashion’ has not been a catalyst or inspiration for SIX, and our mode of own practice predates the current reaction. We are not interested in ‘Slow Fashion’ either. Our work takes place at different speeds, sometimes as a laborious exploration, and sometimes a painfully slow production (much against our desires), and sometimes as a rapid sketch of an idea, quickly produced.

SIX are not literally a haute couture label of course, because haute couture exists only as a part of the French fashion industry; it has certain rules and regulations about the number of employees in the house, and strict rules about the way garments are made – that is, all by hand. We have been called demi-couture, an odd description, but SIX are not dressmakers either; we operate within the cycles of fashion, by showing collections according to the twice yearly schedule, and by wholesaling the collection to retailers. Yet SIX do not simply conform to the ready-to-wear fashion cycle; we choose when to show our collections and when to skip a cycle, we choose carefully who to sell to, often passing up a wholesale opportunity, and where possible we try to take control of and play with the style of the show, and to experiment with different venues or spaces for communication.

Robyn Healy early on provided a description of deconstruction in relation to SIX’s practice: “Garments are taken apart and we either witness part of this process or the concept of using a found garment in another form. The analysis of a garment from an earlier period of dress and connecting the new garment to its predecessor implies a deconstructionist approach.”

The companion dissertation Surface: L’extérieur dedans/outside in discusses in more detail our relationship to the tag ‘deconstructionist’, but the methods of dismantling and reconstruction, of reforming one garment into the shape of another, and of reconstructing the historical lineage are very much SIX’s.
At a practice-led research symposium in 2011, a question arose as to whether the practice of SIX could be classed as a form of couture. One-off, unique and individual garments traditionally belong in the realm of haute couture, when they are not simply the products of domestic dress-making, and the design practice of SIX seen from this perspective might seem to be unorthodox or even dissident in approach, not conforming to either model. But the intention behind new/old garments not always being finished and the use of recycled elements (in part or entirely) is so that “what is unfinished is allowed to evolve.” In fact the use and recognition of recovered clothes is important to our practice as a challenge to the values of originality and authenticity. SIX practice a form of design with a long history, and we design surrounded by garment archetypes that have a long history themselves, despite their constant evolution. We do not claim to have invented anything. We just hope to have helped some to understand a little of this history and to think about its possibilities.

In finding these challenges important, we acknowledge that we belong to a wider inquiry. We are even following suit, although, unlike the students in the corridor, we try not to follow the mainstream but rather something more turbulent.

the tunnel illuminated

So why recycle? This practice, for SIX, is not directly (or perhaps even indirectly) linked to the issue of sustainability; instead we take apart and remake in search of knowledge about the history of making. When we take a tailored jacket and lift up the surface we expose the history of the craftsmanship of the garment. For example, a tuxedo jacket is made up of different materials, components, and techniques: there is the outer woollen shell, the grosgrain lapels the satin under-collar, the satin-covered buttons, the welt and jet pockets, the internal layers of lining and padding, the shoulder pad and shoulder roll, the handmade button holes, and the pad stitching techniques.

The archive of the tuxedo jacket offers the explorer a host of techniques, both traditional and contemporary. Importantly, it allows us insight into techniques that are no longer practised because the machinery needed is now redundant.

SIX’s interest in recycling whatever comes to hand might also suggest that we are bricoleurs. But we have never been very interested in being resourceful, in making-do. Early on we did have to make do occasionally, for reasons of economy or access, but the opportunity to learn from the materials has always taken priority. We feel closer to Marcel Duchamp and his ready-mades, because to us what really counts is the concept, and we have no preference for cutting a garment in expensive wool or from scraps of denim. It is just that we see the challenge posed by cheap or found materials one that we cannot refuse.

For the Melbourne Fashion Festival in 2007, as a part of the cultural program, SIX took over the Melbourne retailer Chiodo to stage a show, collaborating with architect Rory Hyde to create a light installation and video. The show unveiled a collection that resulted from another collaboration, this time with Chiodo itself. It also won the Victorian Premier’s Design Award for Commercial Fashion Design in 2008.

The judges’ comments read as follows:

“Remake/Remix crucially addressed major design and social issues within the fashion industry relating to over-consumption and over-production. Transforming menswear into women’s wear interrogated conservative notions of gender-specific garments and offered ways to creatively rethink how we consider fashion forms. This collection expressed the amazing possibilities offered by the
recycling and resurrection of obsolete garments.” 13

S!X’s text outlining our approach read:

“Melbourne fashion designers S!X took surplus stock from menswear designer Andrew Chiodo, including jackets, shirts and trousers, and dismantled them, re-cut, re-dyed, re-shaped them in order to produce a collection of women’s wear. The collection was then exhibited at the Tunnel opening, launching the 2007 Melbourne Fashion Festival Cultural program. The pieces were then sold as limited editions at Chiodo. The project continues and develops a long standing practice of S!X, that of remaking and re mixing found garments and in particular of transforming menswear into women’s wear. In this project it developed the practice by replacing anonymous found clothing with the work of another designer and then returning the re-worked garments to the place of origin to be sold by their original designer/retailer. The project is a part of S!X’s understanding of deconstruction, which aims to bring into questions accepted notions of gendered clothing, garment finish, authorship and originality. Remake Remix continues S!X exploration of urgent environmental and social conditions that require the development of sustainable design. It does so by opposing the consumption of the new with the renovation of the old. Whilst remaining within the context of high fashion. Garments otherwise destined for the discount store, opportunity shop or landfill are not only retrieved and reused they have their original exchange value restored to them as high quality, potentially desirable items of fashion. The collaboration with Chiodo on this project for The Tunnel supports the contribution to knowledge as one of collaboration.”

The statement is a precise description of our working methods, although the appeal to sustainability was more of a political posture, an attempt to win hearts as well as minds.

S!X’s exploration of the spaces concealed within the tailored jacket as well as our rediscovery of a place for the remaindered Chiodo garments, is also, sometimes a little unwittingly, an exploration of the spaces and places in the fashion system as well. We are not quite certain where we fit in, although this has never bothered us very much. As well as discovering hidden spaces, we also change places, swapping men’s wear and women’s wear, confusing traditionally allocated garment types. We have also, since 2004, been taking two garments, one each from the male and female wardrobe, and developing a series of hybrid forms that question garment archetypes. What if a jacket was to be put on in a similar way to a tee-shirt? What if the lining of a dustcoat could be separated and pulled to the front, the sleeves tied together at the waist to form a decorative bow?

The practice of our own arts et métiers is not sanctioned by la chambre syndicale, but it is also interested in traditional practices, in a critical way. We also like to take a walk into the archives where knowledge about the construction of the archetypal tailored jacket is stored, and, like inquisitive students, ask annoying questions.
A jacket piece is cut and carefully prepared, with pad stitching and canvas details on display. It is then threaded around the neck with a chain to be worn as a necklace.
"The Tunnel Illuminated", the models lined up showing the runway. The lights were designed by Rory Hyde in collaboration with SIX. Image, SIX archive, 2006.

"The Tunnel Illuminated", detail of the lighting track for the show. A challenging space, it reminded us, of course, of a metro station. Image, SIX archive, 2006.
Winning collection for the Commercial Fashion Category of The Premier’s Design Award. Garments from the retailer Chiodo were reconfigured and then resold in the store. Image, SIX archive, 2006.
Turtle Jacket. This jacket explores the use of knit and insertion. It cuts away the shoulder line and the knit is then inserted. The shape was based on a turtle and its flippers.

The Paul Smith jacket, reconfigured for the runway. We also often recut our own garments from previous collections for redisplay.
Garments with other garments inserted create confusion or choice for the wearer – what to put on first, and how to wear it? An upside-down trouser skirt has been inserted into the centre front of a tailored jacket, creating the effect that the skirt has been flipped and twisted to reveal the waistband tape and pockets. Image, photographer Lucas Dawson, SIX archive, 2003.
A passage interdit image taken in the Paris metro. For SIX it not only means ‘do not enter’, it also encourages us to enter fashion’s restricted zones and no-go areas.
Image, SIX archive, 2015.
Passage interdit warns the reader not to misunderstand the kind of practice that SIX is, with reference to the discussion of sustainability that framed our “greenest dress”, and explains the ways in which SIX’s disassembly and reassembly of garments should properly be understood.

“Is this Australia’s greenest dress?”

This was the headline of an article in the weekend arts section of The Age on 29 October, 2011. The photograph on the cover of the newspaper lift-out was of a recent dress by SIX. The article examines the use of recycling and the discourse of sustainability in contemporary Australian fashion practices. It is written from a fashion commentator’s perspective, and the article includes interviews with practitioners for their take on sustainable design.

SIX are happy to receive acknowledgements of this kind. However, a concern for sustainability has never been a motivating factor for us. Although the use of recycling is a constant feature of SIX’s design practice, we have never seen ourselves as ‘green’ designers. So what is going on with the design of the “greenest dress”? How does it relate to, and why does it get confused with, sustainable design? And where do SIX sit in relation to other contemporary Australian fashion practices, many of whom do proclaim that they embrace sustainability? Where is our place in this contemporary discourse about green design?

This dress is a part of a lineage of garments that relate to square cutting and to the disassembly of the garment. This method of design, which maintains the integrity of the square of cloth with minimal alteration, allows the client to bring back the dress to be disassembled and reconfigured into a further iteration. This reassembly is possible due to the minimal seam lines and shaping through tucks, and to the use of the elastic stay. When dismantled the dress is made up of a series of simple rectangles measuring 200 x 150 cm, a little smaller than a standard-sized flag.
The ‘Greenest Dress’, article from The Age. S!X were interviewed about sustainability. Its title was ‘awarded’ after S!X explained that the dress could be dismantled and reconfigured. Published in The Age – 20 October, 2011.
unfurling quadrants

In other words, our interest in the possibilities offered by this way of designing has to do with our research into the relationship of surface and space, which are also the raveled/unraveled PhD research topics of the two designers. The square of cloth produces space and volume through the simple act of folding and tucking – surface produces space, and when unpicked, space returns to surface. Where our interest in tailored jackets takes us into the kinds of concealed spaces that can be developed through pattern cutting and layering, the “greenest dress” explores the spaces produced by square cutting and folding.

(The fact that this word and its opposite – raveled and unraveled – mean roughly the same thing is an amazing feature of language, but for me it also sums up the tangled nature of the research contained in espace – l’intérieur dehors and surface – l’extérieur dedans.)

Where does S!X as a practice sit in relation to other practices concerned with sustainability? In the previous étage we noted that we use the method of excavation and cutting up in order to reveal and examine certain elements within a garment, whether it is the canvas interlining, the shoulder pads, or the pad stitching. These parts are then rearranged and put back together, in ways that say something about the original construction of the garment. Sustainable practice, in the sense of recycling, upcycling, renewal, renovation, and so on, is not the motivation for these methods of reconstruction. We are not invested in saving discarded clothing from landfill. We are not concerned with extending the longevity of a garment, although we are happy to do so if that happens to be the client’s brief. Our way of working is more interested in exploration and discovery. If S!X ‘sustains’ anything, it is the knowledge of construction techniques, and perhaps the construction memories stored within individual garments, which preserve their own history of cosmetic cuts and tucks.

This interest in the history and knowledge embedded in a garment is manifested in other ways. For example, as a small design practice, S!X do not have access to larger pieces of production machinery, or to equipment that is now obsolete, and so the remaking of found garments is a way for us to have access, to learn from, and to display these large-scale or outdated manufacturing techniques in our own work. Again, it is a way in which we can insert our practice into the history of fashion design while questioning the value of originality and authenticity.

dismantling designing

How do we go about dismantling garments? If a garment is to be pulled apart, a minimal requirement is that it has seams or folds and design lines. Over the past 20 years S!X have undertaken research into garments from the late 1940s and 1950s, especially garments by Balenciaga and Vionnet that are of apparently simple construction. In particular, the Balenciaga coat, discussed in Denise Sprynskyj’s Masters by Research project completed in 2000, has influenced the design of the “greenest dress” because of the way in which it hides its method of construction in full view.

The Balenciaga ‘seamless coat’ conceals the secrets of the making process by camouflaging the cuts and darts in the visual landscape of the cloth. Everything is there on the surface of the flattened piece of cloth, but without instructions as to how the garment is put together. To understand how the deceptively simple coat is constructed, you must first dismantle the garment in order to decode the pattern and extract information. One cannot properly gather this data just by observing a drawing. But once this is done, the garment is seen to be quite simple, although brilliantly simple. This deceptive simplicity and ambiguity is important to the way S!X design. Not only does it allow us to mask the patterns used for certain garments by confronting one with a variety of ways in which it might be put together, it creates an illusion of complication, because the garment is usually quite simple to construct. It is a form of trompe l’oeil – not a Surrealist kind of trick with images, but a design puzzle for anyone wanting to learn about construction.
Wallpaper dress backstage, shot at Melbourne Spring Fashion Week, 2011.
Image, SIX archive, photographer Vince Caliguri for SIX, 2011.
Recutting a knitted cardigan and changing the direction of the button tab. This simple tilt gives the garment a very different character.

Bijoux and Gaiete flags for the old Commonwealth Bank site in Bourke Street, Melbourne.
Image, Concept by SIX, Artwork by Gedemin Peel, SIX archive, 2014.
The Pirate flag recut as a dress, maintaining the creases from the packaging. A kimono pattern has been used with only two seams that zip together, allowing it to be unfurled.

Image, Lucas Dawson, SIX archive, 2011.
In a different way, but for similar reasons, SIX has also had a long interest in shibori, the Japanese method of manipulating a flat piece of cloth to form a 3D structure, by tying, pleating and rippling the fabric.

The methods and garments discussed above are some of the ways in which we build space out of the surface of cloth. More recently, SIX have become interested in leaving the flatness of cloth untouched and suspending it in space. These projects also cross disciplinary boundaries between fashion design, textile design, interior design and fine art practices.

flying the flag

In 2013 SIX spent time looking up, staring at the sky, imagining a quadrant of cloth. When turned from portrait to landscape, we asked, what would it do?

“On Top of the World: Flags for Melbourne”, was an art project consisting of work by 17 artists for Melbourne Now, which opened on 22 November 2013 at the National Gallery of Victoria and on location throughout Melbourne. The project was curated by Stewart Russell from Spacecraft and assisted by John Mathews, an architectural historian. SIX were the only fashion designers included among the various artists. The brief was to design a flag, 3 metres in length, to be flown at a selected Melbourne location until the close of the exhibition. Copies were also to be hung in the great hall at the NGV International.

Aside from the copies that hung in the gallery, the public site chosen for our two flags, gaieté and bijoux, was the former Commonwealth Bank of Australia branch at 219 – 225 Bourke St, an art deco building on the site of much older and long disappeared buildings. It is the historic site of the Victorian Academy of Music, and later, as we discovered through our research, of the Bijou and Gaiety Theatres.

It was serendipity that the site was once home to two theatres with French or French-sounding names, partly because our brief was to design not one but two flags, since the former CBA building has two unused flag poles, a memento of the royal visit in 1954.

But the site was also fortunate, because bijoux in the plural, jewellery, is one of those words regularly found in French Vogue and other luxury fashion magazines, particularly in the expensive advertisements at the front of the magazines. And gaieté, merriment when translated into French, invokes the seasons of défilés (collections), especially those of printemps/été, spring/summer. If we divide the word along these lines, then gai/été, gay summer, might perhaps be the mood of the coming season.

We cut up and remade the names of the original theatres to create our own French fashion language, for reasons discussed in surface: l’extérieur dedans. These words, transposed onto images of Paris Metro signs, carry the memory of the theatres that once occupied the site while allowing us to dream of that vague and imagined place somewhere between Paris and Melbourne in which our design thinking tends to happen.

The quadrant: either portrait or landscape. Hours spent sky gazing, trying to work out how to move from portrait to landscape, from the lay of cloth to the layout of a flag.

For these new projects, the space concealed within a constructed garment was exchanged for the space in public view that surrounds it. The flag project also externalized the imagined geographical space in which we think and create, bringing Paris to Melbourne, to Bourke Street, just down the hill from La Chambre de Bonne.

The flag project was not SIX’s first investigation of the flag, since we had put the national flags of various countries on the runway a couple of years earlier. But this project reversed the idea of putting national symbols on the fashion catwalk. This time, fashion was flown from the national flagpole.
Flags hanging limp. Flags from the collection ‘Flagship’, from France, Australia, Italy & America are cut and reshaped.

Image, SiX archive, 2013.
The same concern for the possibilities of the quadrant led us to develop a proposal for a 2015 exhibition in Florence organized by Polimoda. This project developed the direction taken by flag project, but this time we took our inspiration from a period of history before the existence of national symbols. Our (unpublished) submission for the exhibition read:

“There would have been no Renaissance without the great guilds of artisans and traders, whose coats of arms, stamped on banners and shields, still hang in the palazzi and museums of Florence. The installation proposed for Polimoda in Florence is inspired by the pageantry and symbolism of the guilds and their standards, particularly of the Arte della Lana, the wool guild, but also of the Arte di Calimala, guild of cloth finishers, and the Arte dei Rigattieri, Linaiuoli, Sarti e Venditori di panne-linii, guild of rag-dealers, flax workers, tailors and linen sellers. The flag is the textile support for the signs of these guilds, who are themselves artisans of cloth. What if these same artisans were to create their own flags, to tailor the quadrant of cloth in celebration of their own skills? And what if these banners were to display the wealth and prosperity ushered in by the Renaissance?

“The installation aims to bring the riches of the palazzi out into the street, and to cut and drape the flag in human form. It will deck the streets in banners and flags, large textile pieces, while cutting these flags to human size, in remembrance of the progress made by Renaissance Humanism. They will be overpatched and tailored, combined with prestigious garments such as the tuxedo jacket, and printed with representations of culture and luxury, from the interiors of a Baroque drawing room to the opulence of the chandelier.”

With the Florence proposal, for a public display of square pattern pieces, we come full circle, because the printed representations of baroque interiors are much like the wallpaper design used on the “greenest dress”. The earlier interdisciplinary exploration of the space of fashion and interior design, investigated with the wallpaper print, has now gone inside-out.

There is one last project (really, a family of garments) to discuss, which bring together SIX’s investigation of surface and of space, of flatness and depth, a project that unites the two PhD research topics, Surface and Space.

The exhibition “Cités de Mille Feuilles” brought together the quadrant of cloth and half of a tuxedo jacket, the hybrid garments then hung in the space at the Atopos gallery in Athens like luxurious fabric chandeliers. The half jacket, with all the details of the tuxedo retained – the satin lapels, grosgrain tape and an extra-long sequined bowtie – was attached to a chiffon quadrant of cloth, decorated with the flags of Greece, France, America and Australia, and blended with natural-historical-abstract themes: ivy, stone columns, polka dots, and caraytids. Heavier black borders and industrial eyelets act as anchor points, ready for a patternmaking hook to gather the cloth and drape it over a shoulder or to attach it to a point on the wall.

As well as suggesting a number of ways in which it could be deployed, the materiality and form of the thing raise other questions. Is it primarily a tuxedo jacket, masculine naturally, or does the chiffon quadrant place it in the female wardrobe? Do you wear it like a demi-dinner jacket with a billowing sleeve or a scarf with a bag-like accessory?

This de-structuring of the jacket was less of an excavation, less a digging down, and more a cutting away or a cutting in half, the jacket split in half and fused with the lightweight square of chiffon. Left without its other half, the jacket collapses on the body, it slides to one side, yet it is anchored by a tee-shirt acting as a stay, and by a grosgrain ribbon fastened at the waist. These pieces can be disassembled too, if required with the possibility of either being worn separately or grafted onto other halves.

A later version was realized for a client to wear to the Venice Biennale of Art in May 2015, the quadrant printed this time with the SIX chandelier, a metaphorical merger of Florence and Paris (and Melbourne).
Square hung at Atopos for the exhibition cite de millefeuilles with half jacket piece attached.
Backstage photographer Sonny Vandevelde with designer Peter Boyd on site at La Bassa, Caulfield. Vandevelde shoots backstage at the runways globally. His work with SIX is very open and spontaneous. Image, Sam Wong, SIX archive, 2013.

"Cites de Mille Feuilles" at Atopos CVC, Athens, preparing the flags after the rain in the courtyard.
Image, SIX archive, 2013.
La Chambre de Bonne taken from the point of view of the client. Image, SIX archive, 2012.
Espace takes us to the outside of the practice, to spaces of collaboration between S!X and retail spaces, galleries, and the spaces of other design practitioners, including Le Louvre, L’Eclaireur and Schiavello. This stage investigates the public space within which we practice.

This stage also analyses the motivations behind the decisions that S!X make concerning spaces, and it touches upon the historical sensibility that many of these spaces share.

“In the early showrooms, clothing was hung on racks the way that paintings are hung on walls – each in their own frame, requiring their own space, producing a regular and formal rhythm. More recently, the clarity of that composition has given way to increasing complexity. Clothing and art objects, accessories and curiosities, an entire range of objects that belong to different classes and are made by different procedures, are deployed in variegated modes of display.”

Rei Kawakubo once told the fashion commentator Suzy Menkes: “It is true to say that I ‘design’ the company not just clothes. Creation does not end with just the clothes. New interesting business ideas, revolutionary retail strategies, unexpected collaborations, nurturing of in-house talent, all are examples of Commes des Garçons’ creation.”

Spaces have always been a focus of the practice of S!X. Space is a constant in our thinking and conversation. Of particular importance is the design, showroom and client space, la chambre de bonne, which our practice inhabits. But other spaces include the exhibition space, the runway space, the retail space, the design space, as well as the mental space of imagining and creating. S!X have chosen certain spaces to occupy, or these spaces have chosen us, and these spaces help to generate our design thinking.
The gate at La Chambre de Bonne, the SIX showroom entrance. The gate reminds us of the entrance gates to the couture houses along the avenue Montaigne in Paris.

Le Louvre in Collins Street, Melbourne. This window was a humorous dig at the Australian Public Relations Company, Spin Communications. A game of spin the bottle summed up the chances that smaller designers had of participating in Australian Fashion Week. Image, SIX archive, 1997.

SIX outside Le Louvre after being asked to create the holiday windows. Image, SIX archive, 1996.

Christmas holiday window for Le Louvre. Everything was wrapped in aluminium foil, including a young pig. Image, SIX archive, 1998.
The space of la chambre de bonne will be discussed in more detail in the next étage, which looks at the space of the client. It is also examined in the companion PhD, surface: l’extérieur dedans/outside in, which considers the history and aesthetics of this space.

This étage will focus on our public spaces. Espace, space, is where we find a place, and sometimes where we find ourselves out of place.

the retail space

SIX have sold commercially in a number of retail boutiques over the years, including Claudia Mejia, Andrea Gold, Azzuu, Milly Sleeping, and Cose Ipanema in Melbourne, Belinda in Sydney, and Elle Boutique in Perth. We were also stocked by the revamped Georges department store when it reopened for a brief period in 1998 under a consortium led by British retailer Sir Terence Conran. Surrendering one’s work to a retail space inevitably means giving up most of the control of the display of the work and over client interaction, and as a result these spaces do not have the close relationship with our design practice and thinking of other exhibition spaces, or of the studio space of la chambre de bonne. But there are some retail spaces in which SIX have enjoyed more freedom.

the retail space as exhibition space

Our introduction to the retail side of salon fashion in Melbourne came through Le Louvre, the institution set up by Lillian Wightman at the Paris end of Collins Street, which is now operated out of South Yarra by Georgina Weir, her daughter. Le Louvre was known for its private clientele and the international labels that it stocked, originally quite exclusively. Unlike other retailers along Collins Street at the time, Le Louvre operated like a private club, and appointments were made by society women, men (or their mistresses) to view the latest collections bought back from Paris or Milan, or by daughters wanting to order wedding dresses from Europe. In 1996 SIX approached Georgina Weir with the ambition of asking her to stock our collections. Arriving for the initial meeting was like entering the Lyceum or Athenaeum Club. Denise being too nervous to approach Le Louvre herself, she coerced me to go alone to show the clothing.

The salon doors, all polished brass, opened up into a drawing room with no clothing visible at all. On stepping into the salon I immediately wondered what to do next and whether to make a quick escape. A zebra skin lay covering one part of the parquetry floor, and a huge dresser showed photographs of treasured clients. The clothes were hidden away in large mirrored wardrobes. A small gathering relaxed on the chaise longue and assorted chairs, sipping rosé. It was 4.30pm.

Thus began the relationship with Le Louvre. SIX did not get to stock the store, instead we would prepare the Christmas windows. An installation was put up a week before Christmas and remained there over the holiday break. What this did was expose SIX to potential new clients, not always with a taste for our design, but it was unmatched as publicity. This arrangement went on for 5 years – every December between 1995 and 2000 we would design a window for Georgina, we would set this up just before Christmas for the holiday passers-by.

However, SIX did draw new clients because of the window display at Le Louvre, and not the type of client who would otherwise have stumbled upon us in a retail outlets or knocked on the door of the studio. The clientèle who stared at our work in the window was often not unlike that drawn to an exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria – the display worked much like a gallery cabinet rather than a retail store window.

We were also allowed to explore the contents of the large wardrobe upstairs, where we were able to view the Gallianos, Westwoods and Margielas, Georgina being the first in Melbourne to stock Maison Martin Margiela. She let us study the way that the pieces were assembled and even allowed us to borrow Margiela pieces to style with SIX’s work for the window display. Always referring to us
The ‘Cycle of Decomposition II’ exhibition dealt with the retail space as an exhibition space. It was staged in four of Melbourne’s boutiques for the Melbourne Fashion Festival. In this image the paper dress purchased by the National Gallery of Australia is shown in the window of Le Louvre surrounded by balloons. Image, SIX archive, 2001.
The show at Cose Ipanema in Bourke Street, Melbourne. The model is pictured in front of the wall designed by architect Lindsay Holland. The space was totally reconfigured for the show.

Looking from the outside in at ATOPS CVC in Athens, Greece. Image, Sean Ryan, SIX archive, 2013.
as “kids”, it was she who introduced us to Wendy Marshall from Elle Boutique in Perth, who bought our entire collection. On one occasion Georgina gave us two unwanted Joseph Thimister skirts to recycle. We put them in a black garbage bag and headed back to our studio, then in Russell Street. The building at the time was something of a creative hub, housing interior designer Suzie Attiwill, architect Graham Crist, and RMIT Masters students supervised by Tom Kovak. The skirts hung in our studio for a month, and were eventually put back into the black garbage bag and returned to Le Louvre. The next time we saw them was behind glass at the NGV. SIX’s loss was a gain for the NGV’s archives.

The experience of exhibiting at le Louvre opened a discussion for us about the display of fashion design, particularly about the possibilities of using a retail space as an exhibition space and an exhibition space as a retail space. Our brief was free, and this freedom to design the window space without retail pressure gave us room to ‘merchandise’ without selling. For example, one year it contained a silver-foiled papier-maché pig and a broken violin, the following year a dozen empty wine bottles, with labels based on the PR company SPIN Communications – one was called ‘spin the bottle’, an oblique reference to our chances of getting a show at the following Australian Fashion Week, their client at the time.

The Le Louvre experience was also something of a first for Melbourne. Although subsequent design events such as the State of Design or L’Oreal Melbourne Fashion Festival have often included shop-window displays of fashion with artistic pretensions, at the time Melbourne’s store windows were all about commerce, and any creative intervention was simply to help sell the clothing.

The experience of designing the windows at Le Louvre led to the exhibition, the “Cycle of Decomposition II” in 2000, where we exhibited in four windows simultaneously for the cultural program of the Melbourne Fashion Festival: Le Louvre; Azzuu; Cose Ipanema – Cose Plus; and Andrea Gold. The four stockists were willing to let us to dress their windows, in a sort of guerrilla occupation before the term became popular.

The exhibition was an extension of that held in the Paris showroom of Création Baumann, in rue de Grenelle the previous year. There garments were constructed using the furnishing fabrics from Baumann, and these were suspended inside hand sewn plastic balloons. The Baumann space was challenging for its own reasons, because it had to continue to operate as a showroom, while allowing clients to interact with the installation. It was an important moment in SIX’s design development, because it allowed us to develop a way of moving from one end of the globe to the other as a low budget, portable production, All we required were paper, posters, and the garments themselves.

This confusion of different spaces continues to be an important form of design thinking to us. La chambre de bonne is at once a work space, a retail space and an exhibition space; it is a place in which we try out ideas, put them on display to the public, and perhaps make a sale. We have frequently used it as a venue for exhibitions or events during the Melbourne Fashion Festival cultural program. Clients might wander from a rack of garments for sale in one room, to the design table covered in equipment in another, to a temporary exhibition of student work in a third.

We also sometimes allow our space to be occupied by other fashion bodies, and in 2012 the Carlton retail store Milly Sleeping set up a small store within our tiny store, operating three days a week.

In 2006 we were invited by the City of Melbourne to represent Melbourne design at an event called Melbourne a Milano. This was also the last time we met flamboyant fashion commentator Anna Piaggi before her death in 2012. The event was held at 10 Corso Como, established by the publicist Carla Sozzani in 1990. It consists of a hotel called 3 Rooms, attached to a gallery, a restaurant and a fashion boutique, all hidden away behind iron filigree gates. You enter via a leafy courtyard.
"Cites de Mille Feuilles", the space at Atopos. The exhibition took the garments off the body to hang like chandeliers and flags.
Image, SIX archive, 2013.
Installing the wallpaper. SIX have designed this with mobility in mind, so that the space can be easily dismantled and moved.

Image, SIX archive, 2013.
The lawn at Como Historic House, Melbourne, for the exhibition ‘Noble Rot’, painted in a lacework pattern by SIX.

This model of retail interested us because it was quite unlike the larger department stores as well as the more exclusive but still dedicatedly minimalist fashion warehouses of Chiando and Assin. The concealed courtyard entrance was also very different to the strip retailing of our commercial avenues. 10 Corso Como is a contained space, where clients are not pressured to purchase; they can instead while the hours away in the restaurant or the bookstore, and then check into the hotel. Again, the concept resonated with us because of the intimate and immersive experience of a couture salon that was not simply about selling clothing.

Francesca Muscau writes about Gaspare Campari, the founder of the Campari company, who moved both his bar and home to the grand arcade of the Galleria Vittoria Emanuele in Milan. This was a merging of interior and exterior, where one could emerge from home for an aperitif before dinner, while recreating on the outside the “space of the living room where display, eating and socializing were interconnected.” The grandeur of the galleria’s marble and decoration brought something of the building’s exterior into the interior, while the form of public living brought the interior of the private chambers to the exterior. You could see a similar crossing of inside and outside in SIX’s use of baroque wallpaper, which decorates the walls of la chambre, then dresses the garments that venture outside on the bodies of models and clients.

Similarly, in staging shows in retail spaces, we have frequently designed the space in such a way that the difference of inside and outside has been blurred. For a show at Cose Ipanema, we constructed a corrugated wall inside the store to screen off the retail area, the screen made of a low budget material commonly used for greenhouse roofs. For a parade at Chiando, in the windowless and narrow tunnel in the basement, we deployed strip fluorescent lights on the floor like a landing strip. And for our regular shows at la chambre de bonne, the models usually find themselves walking out of the studio space into the public spaces of Van Haus, before heading down the staircase and out into Crossley Street, to provide a clearer view for our gathered audience and some amusement for the occasional passer-by or regular at Pellegrinis café.

the house as retail and exhibition space

The blurring of boundaries between retail, café, exhibition – think of fashion retailers such as Captains of Industry in Melbourne, Dover Street Market in London and Tokyo, and Collette in Paris – is commonplace, although it has its ancestry in the older department store. What we find interesting, however, is the renewed interest in domestic scale, in the creation of intimate spaces for design, exhibition and retail.

La chambre de bonne – the maid’s room – is purposefully intimate, but on a scale much smaller than 10 Corso Como. But we experienced a similar sense of intimacy when our collection was purchased and stocked by Georges. Even though it was a department store, it seemed to possess the intimacy of a small house, where you wandered from room to room, a little like an intruder. But the proximity suited our clothing – SIX and the client got along well in the small and confined space of Georges.

The exhibition held at Atopos Centre for Visual Culture in Athens in 2013, a neo-classical townhouse made up of many small rooms, gave us the opportunity to try and recreate a European version of our own maison in Melbourne, a replica of la chambre, which is itself a replica or memento of a European (French) interior.

Like la chambre, this space is a secret space; it is not a retail store or an exhibition showroom. From the street it blends in with the other buildings. Once you are behind closed doors the courtyard leads you to a series of small rooms off the central square. Basil plants, orange trees and other shrubs are scattered around the courtyard. There is a water pump. The experience is that of a hospitable space, an oasis in the middle of the noisy and often shabby city.
The table in the cabinet of curiosities, showing Akira Isogawa’s wreath, the Maticevski vase, and the works of other artists.
Image, SIX, 2008.
L’Eclaireur / la cabinet of curiosities. The image shows the installation of the work of Australian designer Toni Maticevski. The garment was placed into a vase. The exhibition was part of the International Shibori Symposium in 2008, held in Paris at the Quai Branly. Image, SIX archive, 2008.

L’Eclaireur / la cabinet de curiosités, showing the interior design with the object lamp in the entrance. Image, SIX archive, 2008.
L'Eclairier / cabinet of curiosities. The Australian fashion designer Akira Isogawa's wreath. SIX decided to show this object on a placemat on a table, because it resembled an edible sea anemone, an Asian delicacy.
Image, SIX archive, 2008.
The exhibition rooms are small, and relatively bare, but the small details, the cornices, the shutters and the paned windows, the double French doors, and the chequered floors with the meander-patterned border, all give us clues about how we might design the space. In the end we recreate the wallpapered interior of our maison in the smallest room, the interior print escaping into the other two rooms via the garments that carried the wallpaper print. The flag-garments flown in the courtyard signaled that we were in residence.

the crowded exhibition space

“The Cycle of Decomposition II” exhibition in the store fronts of Le Louvre, Cose Ipanema and Azzuu also gave us the opportunity to think about how we might place our work in an already crowded retail space, and how we might subtly alter the meaning of these spaces.

Recently the spaces we have come to prefer are those that are already inhabited, like a found garment. In a way, we recycle spaces as well. When we dress a space, we try to see it as a client with its own personality and history, not as a store mannequin, the retail equivalent of the blank gallery cube. When we can, we avoid ‘off-the-rack’ white-washed gallery spaces. One such space is L’Eclaireur, a Parisian boutique known for supporting artisanal designers and showing them alongside the more established marques.

In 2008 we over took a small showroom in the L’Eclaireur boutique in rue Hérold called the Cabinet of Curiosities, curating an exhibition of objects based on the practice of shibori from artists around the world. The exhibition coincided with the International Shibori Symposium, held that year in Paris. The space is what the name indicates – a room crammed with furniture, and holding all kinds of oddities from around the globe.

The curatorial motivation behind the work was the intersection of three ideas: the postage of work to an overseas destination for exhibition; the relationship between passive spectatorship and active discovery; and the general assumption that an exhibition space should be pristine, in order better to display its works. The Cabinet of Curiosities, far from being empty and featureless, was filled not only with furniture, such as a huge carved table, chairs, mirrors and a huge chandelier, but also with bizarre curios: a globe, stuffed birds, Roman busts, hunting decoys, the skull of a rhino, and odd pharmacy jars.

We purposely placed the works in strange places amongst the objects, draped around a bust or peeking out of a dresser. Australian fashion designer Akira Isogawa’s undyed and untied shibori wreath lay on a plate in the centre of the table, whilst Australian designer Toni Maticevski’s delicate floral decorated jacket was rolled and placed in a vase. Some of the works were still half-enclosed in their packaging, as if they had just arrived by international post from Australia. The space and the objects showed the layers of process and onlookers had to sift through the layers. The works were barely distinguishable from the usual bric-a-brac, there was minimal signage to differentiate the decorations from the textile works, and the gallery from the retail space. Everything overlapped. The exhibition was another experiment in translation, this time the physical translation of objects from Melbourne to Paris.

Likewise, with the exhibition of work at the National Trust properties of Como and Labassa (the latter included a curatorial exhibition of our student’s work), the methods of display grew from our unexpected encounter with these richly decorated and quite different environments.
SIX and Schiavello, a pop-up exhibition as part of Saturday in Design in Sydney, showing the relationship between the screens designed for the Climate project and the garments of SIX.
Detail of the screen called ‘Recycle Me’. The trompe l’oeil effect is produced through the use of denim cut into and resewn, and then reproduced as a print.
Decorative embedding and zipping for Climate designed by SIX and produced by Schiavello. The small pouch can be zipped off the screen and the two zips hooked together to form a strap for a shoulder bag. The intention of the design was to give the owner the possibility of having a small bag to carry valuables in when away from their desk.

'Cycle of Decomposition', Paris. The balloons were installed in the window at Creation Baumann on the Rue de Grenelle. The intention was to show how the furnishing fabrics of Baumann could be used for garments. Image, SIX archive, 2001.
the interior showroom space

In 2008 SIX were approached by the design firm Schiavello to create a series of sleeves for a new work environment. The project, called Work Climate, also involved three other designers: Akira Isogawa; Giulio Rodolfo; and the architects from Lava. The brief was to design a series of screens to function as detachable work spaces. The challenge for SIX was to find a way to dress the space. Using clothing as inspiration, we worked through several prototypes in developing the screens.

The screens were to serve as personalized yet functional dividers and storage systems. We drew on our knowledge of tailoring, recycling and printing techniques to create screens that resembled garment pieces using fabrications such as suiting and denim, and adding zips and pockets. Some screens were designed to double as portable, detachable carry bags.

As well as venturing into product rather than fashion design, the project also continued our exploration of design spaces, this time in the way that the range investigated the relationship between fashion and interiors, in the mutual influence of the form and material of fashion design and that of its furnished surroundings. On reflection, we decided that the project explored the meaning of interiority, in allowing an anonymous yet internal work space to be given character by a personal yet external wardrobe.

This screen has a central zip, so that the tailored pocket can be zipped off and used as a small pouch to carry an iphone and credit card, etc, to lunch. Another screen, called ‘It’s in the Bag’, pictured here inside-out, is a soft jersey screen based on the tee-shirt that can be stretched on the frame with ease. It carries all the stitching details and finishes of the standard tee-shirt. ‘Recycle Me’ has a trompe l’oeil screen of printed, patched denim, in homage to SIX’s earlier denim collections, and to a standard wardrobe garment.

With the Climate project, we took the space of the body, the space between body and garment, and turned it outside, made it public. The project then became an examination of the space between the body and the interior of a work space, with its furniture and equipment. SIX took a knowledge of one kind of space to explore and understand a different kind of space, and to see whether the one could be translated into the other. In a way, the Climate project reversed the thinking behind our wallpaper designs, which move in the other direction, from interior domestic surfaces to the surface of the body.

This project also took much of the control of our making away from us and delivered it to a commercial arena. It was the first time that we had surrendered control of each phase in the final production of the prototype. Usually we intervene in the production line and employ a technique or add a finish to the prototype. Much like Balenciaga or Vionnet, who both used the stage of pattern construction to hide all the clues that might show how they arrived at the final prototype, we too became involved in the masking and hiding of the production process, which was not our usual practice.

The Schiavello collaboration was not our first project involving an interior design practice, but followed upon an earlier project involving the Swiss furnishing fabric company Création Baumann. Looking for design possibilities beyond the usual bolts of cloth available from textile wholesalers, in 1998 we obtained some fabrics destined for interiors from Baumann, which used washi paper, lasercut bugs that glowed in the dark, and fabrics with string embedded between layers, and produced a collection from these. Then, continuing the window exhibition idea that we had developed through our ventures with Le Louvre, we traveled to Paris in 1999 to stage “Cycle of Decomposition I” in the windows of the Création Baumann Paris showroom, where the garments where displayed encased in transparent plastic balloons inflated by fans.
the exterior urban space

If you didn’t look up you missed them. Sometimes they hung limp and twisted, other times they unfurled and billowed in the breeze. They either flapped in tandem or become tangled and intertwined with each other. In a strange way, the twin flags for the “On Top of the World: Flags for Melbourne” project for Melbourne Now in 2013 reproduced the collaborative dynamics of S!X. Two flags, coming together and flying apart, doing everything or nothing, on show or hardly noticeable – they exhibited all of our different working methods.

The flags also represented the transition of cloth, moving from the body to an object (a building) in the urban space. In a way, this was a continuation of the Climate project for Schiavello, except now the body was removed completely from the picture. The intimate space of clothing had become completely public, and the body was absent. The printed cloth moved not because of the actions of a body but in response to the gusts of wind.

the teaching space

“Making the Unfinished”, the first design studio run by S!X, and as a studio about S!X, was held in the first semester of 2011 at RMIT University. It was also the first vertical studio run in the Fashion Design program, including both second and third year students.

The title of the studio was a phrase that just occurred to us, but it was exciting because of its paradoxical nature – making the unmade, finishing the unfinished. We wanted to see what the students would make of it.

The aim of the studio was to focus on the S!X methodology of design, as a way of exploring a range of different excavation techniques in relation to the tailored jacket. It brought together all our design concerns, including archival research, garment disassembly and reassembly, and exhibition.

Students are not only our pupils. By responding to S!X’s methodology they also become our critics, and the success or failure of the class tells us a little about the way we think about and communicate ideas.

The students were first encouraged to think about what an archive might be, and about different kinds of archives, from the institutional to the personal. During a visit to the National Gallery of Victoria, they were able to study tailored jackets by Comme des Garçons, Jean-Paul Gaultier, and a S!X acquisition from 1996 called the 3R’s. The information gathered from this visit was then combined with that obtained by examining and dissecting jackets purchased from second hand stores or drawn from wardrobes closer to home. The aim was to develop an appreciation of artisanal practices and unorthodox tailoring techniques, to appreciate the hidden or neglected detail. Some of the works they produced examined questions that S!X had already addressed, such as the gendered differences of men’s wear and women’s wear. Others tried to question the very difference between a garment and an object – between a jacket and a chair, for example. The final outcome of the project was an exhibition held at Von Haus as a part of Melbourne Spring Fashion Week in September 2011.

The exhibition provided the students with a great first-hand experience of participating in both a design exhibition and a commercial fashion festival, but it also allowed us to raise pertinent questions about our own practice, and to see the different ways in which our ideas and methods might be interpreted by a class of students. The teaching space is a place in which we designers, who are also students of the history and practice of fashion design, can test whether our knowledge is valid or valuable.

the imagined space

Just as the use of the French language allows us to travel to an imagined space that helps us to think creatively, the physical space of la chambre de bonne, a vaguely French interior space, also takes us away from mundane reality, but without transporting us to an ideal Paris. The baroque wallpaper
is torn in areas, and the result is to bring the grandeur of a chateau-like interior into a dilapidated and small, boxy nineteenth century room in Melbourne, without giving up the tattered reality of the space in which we work. But the tension and contrast between the two places, the ambiguous nature of the place where we work, is liberating.

If what S!X does may be called deconstruction, then we do not only deconstruct clothing. We also deconstruct our own work place, which is in two places at once, Victorian Melbourne and Rococo Paris, but not completely in either of them.

the show space

“Architecture, like art and fashion, requires an audience, a discourse and a profile in a public sphere.”

Welcome at last to the S!X Show! The word ‘show’ has been part of the S!X vocabulary for 18 years. It is something that we try to participate in yearly, sometimes twice a year. It is a platform for us to make our work public, and for others to critique our work. The show can make a designer or break a designer, or so the media like to claim. It is a theatre to show off ideas, sometimes good ideas, sometimes not so good. The show is something that we have embraced since we were students, and an opportunity to take the audience to another place.

The designer has varied control over the different aspects of the show, depending on the nature of the festival and the parade that they are part of. But it is always important to consider everything that makes up the staging of a show, from the venue, music and lighting to the choreography, models and styling.

S!X have shown in many arenas, from the pre-styled group show, to the intimate gallery show, the studio show, the retail space soirée, and the fashion festival blockbuster. The shows have been viewed by International and national media, by buyers and onlookers, peers and students, and by people we respect in the world of design. The anticipation that is built up for a show is an invitation to imagine, and irrespective of the space and the capital investment in a show, S!X always try to present an experience similar to one you would experience in Paris, or at least one that would make you dream of a Paris experience.

S!X, like many designers including successful commercial ones, are interested in the show as spectacle, as an arena to test ideas. It is not primarily a trade show, a vehicle to sell the latest product, and the difference between the fashion show and the gallery exhibition, for us, is slighter than one might imagine. We like the fact that the show might be over in 10 minutes or less. It is a fleeting moment, like the piece of music that usually accompanies it.

Finally, the show space is a critical space, one where designers can easily crash and burn on the whim of the audience or media. It is where we as designers are allowed to be critical of fashion trends, techniques and processes, and traditional forms and concepts, but where the audience can also be critical, usually with a show of limp applause. The critical space is a space for acceptance, rejection, and the contest of ideas. It is where art confronts commerce, design meets utility, the future opposes the past, and progressive designers get misunderstood by conservative critics.

The design studio, the retail space, the gallery, the house, the showroom, the runway, the street, and the space that exists only in the imagination – all these spaces merge for S!X through the actual practice of design, becoming muddled and confused, collaged and layered. The space between them only really exists in theory and on reflection. What unites and supports them is the space between the two designers and between the designers and the client.
Australian Fashion Week 'Pressed Flowers' collection, worn by Alyssa Sutherland. The reviews were positive, especially that from fashion commentator Tony Glenville. The space was challenging, a very traditional runway format.

Entr’acte/ espace between, is the final stage, and it takes us to the intimate performance space, the space of fitting occupied and enacted by the designer and the client.

La chambre de bonne, SIX’s design space located in Von Haus in Crossley Street, Melbourne, at the top of Bourke Street, is a space that is both intimate and confined. This is a consequence of being a micro-practice, with little need or ability to invest in an industrial-sized workroom. But the domestic scale means that the collaboration between the two designers is necessarily close, physically and mentally. Tables, scissors and stands are all constantly swapped and territory is invaded and surrendered. Storage is at a premium, and the space is cluttered with equipment, fabric rolls, patterns, half-finished garments, photographs, mementos, and bric-a-brac. Although the designers have their own preferred ways of working, the space does not allow any definite division of work.

The client who arrives at la chambre has the privilege of seeing a work space that is ordinarily hidden behind a curtain at the back of a shop or located in another place entirely. Sometimes this can be intimidating, and the intimacy of the space can feel closed. It has the closeness of a dressing room, and is only large enough for two people at a time. (You are welcome to have a glass of wine in the bar downstairs while you wait.)

Samples of clothes are available on a rack – the studio does not generally sell clothes ready-to-wear; most clothes are made-to-measure, except for accessories – and the space is very unlike the showrooms of larger designers and retailers, where everything is racked and priced and the garments precisely spaced and separated according to gender, size, type, and so on. In la chambre, the client cannot browse anonymously and avoid interaction with the ‘sales staff’, who usually happen to be one or both of the designers. The space is a challenge to the conventional style of retail, offering clients an experience more intimately connected to the practice of design, provided they are brave enough to step through the door.
Mary Blume speaks of Balenciaga’s atelier, in which the models showed the clients the collection, after which la vendeuse and the technical assistants did the alterations and fittings. This experience is quite different to that of SIX, where there is no intermediary between designer and client. The distant mystique of the designer of the haute couture salon is replaced by the in-confidence familiarity that presides in the space of la chambre.

“There is an intimacy in the chambre and the client/maker relationship which I adore. I love that the process is fun and open-ended and ongoing and unquestioned. . . I love that the room is dark and the clothing is all black and you cannot see what you are trying on and you pay for a beautiful jacket that you will carry home in a rolled up garbage bag sticky taped.”

This is a comment from one of our clients, which we think captures the nature of the relationship between designer and client, and the role that the space plays in this relationship. The intimacy of the space and its domestic, under-lit atmosphere encourages a relationship that is not necessarily between equals, but one that lets the client participate more closely in the design process. They see SIX at work, listen into conversations about how to solve a design problem that their garment has raised. The space is not lit up like a boutique to frighten off shoplifters, and they do not leave with their purchase in a merchandised and branded carry bag. SIX stamp their brand in ink on a card. Price tickets and receipts are hand-written.

Apart from the casual customer, our clients can be divided into two types. There are the collectors. These are the clients who come back every season to purchase from the collection. Some have been collecting for over 10 years. They are the loyal followers who come to every show, every exhibition, and support every SIX performance. These clients don’t exclusively wear SIX, and it is interesting to note the other designers they choose to collect – generally international designers such as Comme des Garçons and Martin Margiela. Occasionally they purchase final-year collection pieces from our students at RMIT.

Then there are the commissioners. These are the clients who do approach SIX to design to a brief. For example, one client who travels often and does not carry a bag needed a jacket with a range of pockets, to hold passport, jewelry, phone, glasses and notebook. SIX designed a jacket with a zip-in lining, and we referenced a quintessential male archetype garment, the London trench. Upon receiving the final design, the client wore the jacket once and then returned it, claiming that it wasn’t SIX enough and requesting that we “SIX it up”. This kind of negotiation is common for us, so the tailored jacket was then crunch-pleated, and we removed the crisp structure from the canvas under-layer and added decorative pad-stitching to one lapel. She was very pleased.
Clients enter the Chambre and are left to discover the products and the space. Peter & Denise spend time to discuss concepts and issues related to design with them.

Image, SIX archive, 2013.
From the imagined terrace of the café Les Deux Magots, the Paris institution once made famous by literary figures such as Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, now the haunt of fashion commentators such as Catherine Baba and Diane Pernet, one has the perfect opportunity for idle crowd gazing, for mentally reconstructing the fashions of the passers-by. The tables are set side by side one another, front row to the runway on the Boulevard Saint-Germain. Unlike on the rue des Archives, these characters promenade with purchases rather than fossick in drawers and boxes. Lost in the rue des Archives, S!X weave along and through the narrow medieval streets of the historical Marais, deciphering worn street signs, running into dead ends, stopping in damp doorways, climbing rattling staircases, finding solitude to reflect in a sunlit square.

This research began on the rue des Archives, where I got lost in the research, encountered passages that gave no access, and discovered ‘old’ truths and insights about design. The journey allowed me time to sit, metaphorically and actually, in cafés and reflect on the 20 years of S!X’s projects, to try to understand and explain the most important of the many shows, exhibitions, and other ventures. It meant rediscovering the excavation site of the Percy Grainger jacket, reliving the collaboration with Schiavello, and drawing connections between dressing a space and dressing a client. Thinking of the show in the tunnel at Chiodo, and of the Paris metro with its minimal track lighting and narrow passages, other metaphors for research. Occasionally I emerged into the sunlit square of the place des Voges, with a clearer idea about the importance of the square cutting method as a mechanism for the disassembly and reassembly of a garment. The beaten and polished bronze walls of the Arts and Métiers metro station mirrored the tailored jacket and its many faceted surfaces.

As this researcher moves from the rue des Archives to the Boulevard Saint-Germain, I feel that I can parade some of this knowledge to the community seated and watching.

This research set out to tackle what it is that S!X do when they design, and aimed to identify a cluster of projects that highlight why the practice is unique, and how the methodology of its practice can be value to others.
This was done by focusing on the meaning and use of space within the practice as a whole and the
selected projects in particular, using the notion of an étage as a way of identifying and distinguish-
ing some of the constant themes underlying the thinking and creating of SIX.

These themes were united through their reliance on the understanding and manipulation of space.
By turning the practice inside out, the research revealed and analysed these spaces. It investigated
the physical space that the practice inhabits, the exhibition, runway, and retail spaces in which
the practice exhibits, the space of its client, the geographical spaces that it visits, the intellectual
and creative space of design and thinking, and the collaborative space between the two designers
within the practice. It also investigated the spaces within the tailored garments through which SIX
explore the possibilities and traditions of design.

Space, espace. The word, therefore, has a complex meaning for SIX. The space may be physical or
ideal; it may be material or immaterial. It may be a single determinate space or an indefinite space
between multiple places. It may be internal or external, or the space that is produced when the
inside is turned outside or vice versa. It may already be present, as a space in which to work, or it
may open up as a result of our work. Always it is the open and free space in which we are able to
think creatively.

The research no doubt opens new spaces for SIX to investigate, and I look forward to discovering
which rues or boulevards they might be.

I would like to finish with SIX’s own ideogram, as a tribute and playful response to Leon van
Schaik’s ideogram of SIX. Although the conclusion of a piece of writing is not the place to say
anything new, I am afraid that this ideogram also makes a belated contribution to new knowledge,
because it offers a novel interpretation of practice-based research, as SIX understand it.

Our ideogram responds to the tri-polar model of scholarship of the School of Architecture and
Design at RMIT. Our ideogram is not tri-polar but tri-circular – it is a tricycle. Originally it stood for
SIX’s status as beginning researchers, and the three wheels of the trike represented 3 major themes
we were going to explore within our work. Now the trike has reconfigured itself. Having lost con-
trol a few times, and even lost a wheel along the way, practice-based research tells us that three
wheels is not enough. So we have added a spare. Now we have a vehicle fit for those rues and
boulevards.
The gallery at Atopos in Athens, a series of small rooms with interconnecting doors, reminiscent of La Chambre de bonne.

Image, SIX archive, 2013.
notes

community of design

1. Leon van Schaik et al., The Practice of Spatial Thinking: Differentiation Process, p. 182.

étage one

2. Emma Charlton, “Tilda Steps into ‘Impossible Wardrobe’ in Paris.”
7. I thank Leon van Schaik for this reference. See also Christopher D. Johnson, “Mnemosyne: Meandering through Aby Warburg’s Atlas.”
10. See the Grainger Museum, “Publications.” It is also the name of the Grainger Museum newsletter.

étage two

2. It is an old story. For a recent repetition, see Dean Mayo Davies, “David Collins on Alexander McQueen’s Savile Row Return.”
5. Claude Pommereau, ed., Punta della Dogana / Palazzo Grassi / François Pinault Foundation, p. 34.
12. Luc Derycke and Sandra Van de Veire, eds., Belgian Fashion Design, p. 290
13. The comments are printed in poster form: Victorian Premier’s Design Award for Commercial Fashion Design, “Project: Remake/Remix Chiodo: The Tunnel; Practice: S!X.”
étage three

1. The cover was accompanied by an article by Jan Breen Burns, “Style and Sustainability.”

étage four

2. Suzy Menkes, “Fashion’s Purest Visionary.”

entr’acte / espace entre

1. Mary Blume, The Master of Us All: Balenciaga, his Workrooms, his World, p. 36.


English, Bonnie, ed., Griffith University’s Tokyo Vogue, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, Brisbane, 1999.


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