How Eileen Fisher is building a fashion brand that will last for generations

In honor of Earth Day, Yahoo Lifestyle is spotlighting Eileen Fisher, a company that champions sustainability, with the goal of being a fashion brand that will last for generations to come.

Through a circular design model, Eileen Fisher has rethought the way we buy, consume, reuse, and eventually discard our clothes to create a better future for our planet. We currently live in an era where the average American throws out 70 pounds of clothing and other textiles per year, 86 percent of which ends up in landfills. Eileen Fisher is one of the few fashion companies addressing the issue head on, acting as a leader for sustainable innovation and a model for other companies to follow.

For some labels, green fashion is just the latest trend sweeping the fashion industry. But for Eileen Fisher, it’s an area the company has been invested in since the ’90s. “I think that it’s easy to say this is a sexy story and we want to get it out there … but I feel like as a company, we’re not doing it for that reason. We’re doing this because we believe in changing the earth, caring for the earth, and changing the way that we produce, consume, and think about clothing in our industry. I think that really sets us apart,” Lilah Horowitz, creative lead at Eileen Fisher, told Yahoo Lifestyle.

Compared to companies like Nike, which was criticized for subjecting its factory workers to toxic conditions and using sweatshops beginning in 1996, Eileen Fisher during that time had already begun fortifying its social consciousness programs, with goals that today include sustainability, human rights, and female empowerment.
Fisher’s team has been busy developing new practices for green technology and employing sustainable fabrics like organic cotton, hemp, and Tencel in its collections. “Our environmental vision is holistic,” said Shona Quinn, the company’s sustainability leader. “We believe in paying attention to what happens in the field, the dyehouse and our customers’ washing machines. Our goal is to design out negative impacts — and design in positive change.”

In 2017, Eileen Fisher took a big step toward expanding its green initiative by creating its Tiny Factory, which is solely centered on enacting the company’s sustainable programs. The factory is located in Irvington, N.Y., which is about an hour north of Manhattan — and is also the city Eileen Fisher calls home. The Tiny Factory may be a small operation, employing only 12 people, but it’s mighty. It’s Eileen Fisher’s own David in a Goliath fashion world. This is where the company spearheads its five major sustainable programs: Renewed, Mended, Overdyed, Felted, and Resewn.
The lobby of Eileen Fisher’s Tiny Factory, in Irvington, N.Y. (Photo: Courtesy of Eileen Fisher)

Eileen Fisher’s sustainable programs. (Photo: Courtesy of Eileen Fisher)
Eileen Fisher has created an in-store program where customers can donate old Eileen Fisher clothes. It doesn’t matter whether they’re in great condition, have imperfections, are discolored, or even possess a few holes. The company takes it all back, and it gets sorted in a meticulously organized system at the Tiny Factory. Clothing that is in perfect condition is simply cleaned and resold as part of the Renew program. Items that have small imperfections like a hole are simply mended using special techniques like boro and sashiko and made like “new” again, in a special celebration of their flaws. These items are then sold online at reduced prices.

Clothing that's discolored or faded goes into the Overdyed program. At Eileen Fisher’s recent pop-up shop in the SoHo district of Manhattan, Horowitz showed me some pieces that had been overdyed with a beautiful shade of indigo. They looked like brand-new garments, tailor-made for the spring and summer months. It was impossible to tell the jackets and dresses were previously colored yellow, cream, or white.
Felted is a special program that begins with old, damaged fabrics, layers them together, and reconstructs them into a new felted material that may become a coat, pillow, or a piece of wall art.

Resewn, the last program in the series — and my personal favorite — involves a masterful art that results in one-of-a-kind designs. After the Tiny Factory team deconstructs garments into separate fabrics, they reinvent the pieces into brand-new garments. But as Horowitz points out, “It’s really looking at the garments in their original state and trying to design into that, less thinking about them as textiles.” It’s the truest example of circular design from beginning to end.

Throughout all these programs, Eileen Fisher’s DNA is still present and thriving, fitting seamlessly with the brand’s main collections. But what I love most about the Resewn collection is that the results act somewhat like a quilt, telling a beautiful history of Eileen Fisher’s evolution through the years. For example, one garment from the Resewn collection may include a vintage jacquard fabric from the 1980s sewn with a silk fabric from the early 2000s onto a cotton fabric from 2016.
Three dresses from the ReSewn collection. (Photo: Courtesy of Eileen Fisher)

Just as ReSewn garments tie together different eras of time, the Eileen Fisher brand unites women of all generations: moms and daughters, women both young and old, women of all backgrounds and careers. The brand’s clean, minimalistic clothing caters to women who are 60 and women who are 25 because the designs are timeless, never fleeting or trend-based. As Horowitz says, “Somebody can put their personality onto it rather than create the personality for them. … It’s a beautiful canvas that you can wear just as a canvas or turn it into something else.”

Since 2009, Eileen Fisher has taken back more than 800,000 pieces of clothing and donated $2 million to causes the brand supports. Three percent of what is produced every year is renewed or remade; the company’s goal is eventually to make this 100 percent.

According to the company’s Vision2020 web page, “Our vision is for an industry where human rights and sustainability are not the effect of a particular initiative, but the cause of a business well run. Where social and environmental injustices are not unfortunate outcomes, but reasons to do things differently.”