FACTORY TOUR: EILEEN FISHER HELPS MAKE THE ECO-FASHION DREAM OF CIRCULARITY COME TRUE

An inside look at the brand's "Tiny Factory," where a meticulous sorting and record-keeping process transforms old clothes into new ones on a large scale.

There's no occasion quite like the Fourth of July to celebrate all things American. Here at Fashionista, we'll be spending the week examining the fashion industry in our own backyard, from the state of U.S. apparel manufacturing to American-born models on the rise. You can follow all of our coverage here.

It's hard to pinpoint exactly when the idea of a "circular economy" gained critical mass in sustainable fashion circles, but suffice it to say that it went from a little-known concept to a wildly popular one in not much time at all. And understandably so: circularity refers to a process that is inherently regenerative. In the context of fashion, that means designing and using products in such a way that they can be endlessly used and re-used rather than being downgraded or thrown out.
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With the average American tossing 70 pounds of clothing and textiles every year, the idea that all that waste could be turned into new clothing rather than clogging up landfills is an enticing one, especially considering how hard it can be to convince a consumption-driven society to simply consume less. But in spite of the number of brands that have capitalized on the language of circularity and posted clothing donation bins outside their stores, the unfortunate truth is that turning old clothes into new ones isn’t a simple or easy task. In fact, few brands have figured out to do so at scale.

That’s why Eileen Fisher’s Tiny Factory, located in Irvington, New York, is worth taking a close look at. Inside, an elaborate system of organizing, sorting, cataloguing and storing old clothing makes possible the construction of the new pieces that comprise the brand’s upcycled Resewn collection. Though the facility is called the "Tiny Factory," the scale of the endeavor — which involves thousands of garments a year — feels anything but small.

Knowing that Eileen Fisher has become a thought leader in the realm of circular design in fashion, inspiring everyone from fledgling sustainable companies to more mainstream designers like Heron Preston, I jumped at the opportunity to take a behind-the-scenes look at what actually goes down at the Tiny Factory. Scroll on to see what I learned.
Upon arriving at the Tiny Factory facility an hour’s drive north of New York City, I was met by Carmen Gama, a former Parsons student who stayed on at Eileen Fisher after completing a yearlong residency with the brand to learn about sustainability in 2016. Since all of the clothing produced in the Tiny Factory starts as secondhand Eileen Fisher garb sent in by customers, sorting out the clothing is the first step.

"The sorting is the most important part of the whole operation to be scalable, because we want to be able to use as many garments as we can in order to be sustainable," Gama says.

The sorters at the Tiny Factory know the individual textiles the company uses so well that they can often sort them by touch alone — a useful skill for speeding up a process that could be somewhat daunting considering that the brand has collected close to a million garments since it started collecting old clothing in 2009.

"They have to be as knowledgeable as the buying team about the fabrics, the damages, the inconsistencies," says Gama.
Clothing is sorted by season, style and the type of laundering required, before being washed.
Clothing that’s in like-new condition is set aside after washing to be sold through Eileen Fisher’s secondhand program, and garments that are in near-perfect condition are mended to be sold as-is. According to Gama, about 50 percent of the clothing that the brand receives is in perfect condition when received.

A set system of pricing and labels makes prepping vintage Eileen Fisher pieces for resale a quick process.
The Tiny Factory actually has its own mini store on-site, where customers can come shop for vintage Eileen Fisher pieces at accessible prices. The vintage pieces are also sold online.

Clothing that cannot be mended or sold as-is gets catalogued, bundled up and stored in bags sorted by material and color. Part of the genius behind the Tiny Factory system is an extensive database that makes it possible for Eileen Fisher’s designers to know how many of any given item — say, light blue cashmere sweaters — they have on hand. This helps designers like Gama figure out what they have to work with when thinking about the next collection.

"I go into our Excel spreadsheet and find out we have about 2,000 pairs of jeans and go, 'What can I do with them?' I start pulling those garments, and then I use existing Eileen Fisher patterns and rework them."
After sorting and washing comes the process of "laying out."

"Once we figure out what it takes to produce one new pattern after deconstructing the original garment, we lay out all those garments and then you put the pattern on top and then cut," Gama explains.

Gama shows how paneling from multiple pairs of pants come together to make one denim tunic top. As head of the Resewn design team, Gama is in constant communication with designers from Eileen Fisher's main lines. She looks for ways to use the secondhand garments she has on hand to create new pieces that will feel visually connected to the main collection offerings.
Paper patterns are tacked to old garments, which are cut and stacked so that they can be passed along to the seamstresses who will assemble them into new pieces of clothing.

Even small scraps that come out of the cutting process are saved rather than tossed, in case the team can find a way to use them.
"We hoard everything," Gama says. "We don't throw anything out. We keep all our zippers and buttons. The buttons for the Spring 2018 collection currently in the store in Soho were taken from the same shirts we took apart to make them."

In this case, the tiniest scraps are being bundled together to create silk "beads" that can then be made into colorful necklaces. Despite the crafty nature of the work, it's about as far from a one-woman Etsy gig as can be — every single action for a new product like these accessories is timed to see if it's actually feasible to produce on a scale large enough to merit inclusion in a collection.

"We need to know how long it takes to create every step of the operation so that we can know how much it costs to make," Gama explains.
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Seamstresses receive the cut pieces and assemble them into their final form.

Gama runs her hands over a finished piece of fabric made by piecing together numerous similar but not-quite-identical blues. This fabric is destined to become a kimono coat in the brand's Fall 2019 collection.
When the Resewn collection is done, it's sent off to Eileen Fisher stores like this one in Irvington, not far from the factory, where the remade pieces will be sold alongside the main collection.

Overall, what the Eileen Fisher team has accomplished at the Tiny Factory is impressive — but with the right amount of commitment, it's not impossible for other brands to replicate in their own way. If they do, maybe the circular economy will be less of a sustainability pipe dream than a taken-for-granted reality in years to come.