Where Hype Meets Hygge: Introducing Public School and Eileen Fisher’s Up-Cycled Collaboration

The center of the Venn diagram of people wearing Air Jordans and people aspiring to dress like the female lead of a Nancy Meyers movie is, presumably, pretty small. But it exists. Or it’s about to, thanks to a new collaboration between Public School, the downtown New York brand famous for its Jordan collabs and the NBA players that wear them, and Eileen Fisher, the queen of effortless, greige-y, sustainable luxury. “I think people are surprised by the collab, but it isn’t that surprising if you really think about it,” says Public School’s Dao-Yi Chow. “There was for sure crossover in the pure aesthetic.”

For the proof of aesthetic harmony, check out Dwayne Wade’s outfit at the 2016 CFDA Awards. The NBA star was wrapped in a kimono-like jacket that came down past his knees. He wore a white shirt—no tie, no fuss—and cropped black trousers and brogues. Public School has often been branded streetwear, but in truth many of brand’s go-to silhouettes are A-line, away from the body shapes that evoke the layered robes of monks or the clean perfection of traditional Japanese design. So you can see the appeal, to Chow and his PSNY cofounder Maxwell Osborne, of a black cashmere tunic from Eileen Fisher.
Aesthetics aside, the New York designers first became interested in Fisher because of her sustainability practices. Since 2009, Fisher has maintained Renew facilities in Irvington, New York, and Seattle, Washington, where customers can drop off used Eileen Fisher garments to be either mended and resold as vintage or deconstructed and remade into new garments or spun into felt to be used in home goods. The trio first met at a sustainability summit in Copenhagen, with the designers touring Fisher’s New York facility several times before deciding to collaborate.

For Fisher, the idea of teaming up with Public School was obvious. “We’ve been doing the sustainability work for a long time, it’s sort of embedded in our vision. A while ago when we were thinking about our Vision 2020 plans and what we wanted to do next, we realized that even if we meet all of our goals to be a 100 percent sustainable company, we’re just still like a drop in the bucket,” says Fisher. “We have to influence the new designers, we have to change the industry. We just welcome anyone who’s interested, any way we can share what we know. It’s basically a pre-competitive concept. This idea about sustainability should be for everyone.”

For months, she showed off her recycling plant to Chow and Osborne, schooling them in the sorting, felting, and reconstructing processes. The result is a limited—less that 150 pieces of each style—collaboration that will launch in New York tonight. “It was fun looking through the archives and trying to figure out what we could do, what the look was, and how we would want to take the Eileen Fisher customer and our customer, and merge those two,” says Osborne. “It was actually really fun working on it, and I think we tried to challenge ourselves even more than we would normally do.”
Public School x Eileen Fisher pants, $478, resewn from seven pairs of pants

Public School x Eileen Fisher silk top, $378, resewn from five blouses

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Public School x Eileen Fisher merino sweater, $428, resewn from four sweaters
Public School x Eileen Fisher felted hat, $125, uniquely felted from recycled garments

The biggest difference in being more sustainable, according to Chow and Osborne, was rethinking their design process from the ground up. They knew they didn’t want to make anything that felt particularly granola—“we were those designers at one point, thinking recycled means patchwork,” says Osborne—but needed to find new ways to work within the constructs of up-cycling. He describes it as “thinking backwards”; unlike traditional design where there are seemingly unlimited raw materials to dream into reality, up-cycling starts with a finite amount of fabric. Making that into a new, innovative, attractive garment requires both pragmatism and idealism. “I think most designers would really enjoy this process because it’s different, it’s a completely different way of thinking,” Osborne continues.

“People first have to love the product, they have to love the design. If they don’t love it—you can’t just sell them a story, you don’t want them to buy something they’re not going to love and wear,” adds Fisher. “That’s your first job as a designer: create something they will love and want and wear. If you can do that and be sustainable, it’s a win-win-win.”

Still, it’s a process that’s hard to scale—hence the collaboration’s limited quantities. So the goal, then, is also to inspire. Public School has restricted its business to use only dead stock fabrics, and all its many collaborations, from Nike to the NBA, are made in a sustainable manner. For Fisher, the plan is to get more young talents in the door and into sustainability. She says, “I think that idea is something we hope will take off and go further. We love the opportunity to share and show what we’re up to.”