

Chapter 1

The Ins, Outs, and Inside-Outs of This Book

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding how it all began
 - ▶ Defining reconstruction methods
 - ▶ Discovering which method is best for you
 - ▶ Playing with ideas and projects
 - ▶ Figuring out where you're coming from and where you want to go
 - ▶ Checking out some ethically sound eye candy
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Before I knew what reconstructing clothing was, I was doing it. Heck, I was doing it as soon as I knew how to use a pair of scissors and thread a needle! Just as my dolls all had crew cuts, they also had tricked-out reconstructed clothing.

Like most reconstruction creatrixes, my initial impetus for heading down this path was a desire to do things differently. Patterns bored me and made me feel boxed in tight to someone else's rules. Existing clothes that I found at the mall (my only choice for shopping) were always lacking. They were especially lacking the individuality that I was compelled to express. I wasn't a rebellious troublemaker, the opposite in fact. I was a little bit of everything and thus not fully able to be defined or stereotyped. I like to think of my clothing in the same way.

Reconstructed clothing is not limited to a certain style, culture, or peer group. Reconstructed clothing is for each and every individual. It is a mish-mash of styles. It is about dismantling mass-production, both in what we put on our bodies and how we function as a community unit, as well as an individual in that same community.

Sample sales a.k.a. trunk shows!

When I lived in Boston I attempted, in vain, to put together a trunk show. I soon realized that nobody even knew what this was. Because of this experience, I feel that it is important to share this amazing thing with you in hopes that you can produce and/or support them in your own community. Trunk shows, also known as sample sales, can range in size and location but generally involve local clothing and accessory designers gathering to present and sell their creations to the public. Word on the underground design street is that they started as true “sample” sales, a sample being the initial garment that a designer sews together to test out the design prior to

production. This has broadened to designers bringing their entire collections, samples or not. The perks to this are beneficial to not only the designer, but the consumer as well. It provides a means for even the smallest designer to test the waters on selling their work. It also allows for them to clear out their samples and other pieces that aren’t suitable for retail shops for whatever reason. For the consumer, it’s a great way to get good deals (usually half of the retail price) on fantastic stuff. Typically the designers present their work in person, which allows for a direct relationship to form, increasing support for the artist and customization for the consumer.

Reconstructed Clothing Defined

As reconstructed clothing is becoming more widespread, it is also subject to definition. Personally, I think we should all have our *own* personal dictionaries that express our *own* unique use of language. While definitions provide clarity in communication, they also have an inherent tendency towards limitation.



Limitation is blasphemy in the dictionary of the creative mind! Blow it open!

Clothing is a very accessible form of art and self-expression. Think about it. You sculpt and paint yourself every day with the clothing you put on your body. Clothing defines who we are to the outside world, as well as to ourselves. At times there is comfort to be found in dressing in a manner that defines you as part of a commonly-known stereotype. However, on the path of life and self-actualization, shouldn’t you start defining this for your true self?

While not everyone can be their own fashion designer, you can start making more conscious choices. You can start demanding more of what you want to express yourself. You can start supporting local designers in your community over mass-produced mirror images of your neighbor. You can start combining clothes in unique ways. And finally, you can start cutting up those clothes and re-making them into completely unique clothes that work for *you*!

Clothes of a different color

The most common definition of reconstructed clothing is the practice of creating new clothes from existing garments. This can take on a wide variety of extremes. Many of the projects in this book fall into this category of reconstruction.

Some examples of this include the following:

- ✓ Adding a simple hood to a jacket
- ✓ Cutting the sleeves off a T-shirt
- ✓ Shredding your sheets and turning them into a ruffled skirt.
- ✓ Cropping a sweater
- ✓ Creating a couture evening gown from an old duvet cover
- ✓ Cutting the pant legs of your jeans to create “Daisy Dukes”
- ✓ Doing the same thing, with a bit more discretion, to create long shorts/short pants a la *Dirty Dancing*

This is a good method for people of all levels of sewing skill. It is especially helpful for creative types who don’t like to use patterns, like me! It is also helpful for those who have yet to figure out how to make patterns for their own designs.

By starting with an intact garment, the framework is already in place. It is this framework that is often boring for me in creating clothes from flat fabric (the “normal” way). Even with my own patterns, when I have to cut the same shape and sew the same seams repeatedly I feel like my soul is being sucked out of me. My pseudo-mass production limit is 10 pieces. I’m not much of a sweatshop!

Shop therapy!

I had a really bad breakup in my early twenties. *Really* bad! I found myself in a sea of not knowing who I was without my “boyfriend” and our pre-planned life together all spelled out for me. Ugh, even that sentence alone is just filled with societal definitions, expectations, and limitations! How did I handle it? Shopping! With my girlfriend in tow, or vice versa, I spent a major chunk of my student loan money for the

semester in a single corporate-owned chain store! I walked out with nearly an entire new wardrobe, a virtual replica of the TV sitcom starlet of the times, as well as just about every other mainstream female age 18–35. I needed it. I needed the stability of some sort of definition of who I was, even if it wasn’t truly *me*! Clothing can provide this therapeutic function at times. There’s nothing wrong with that!



Don't be fooled into thinking that starting with an intact garment makes clothing construction any easier! Patterns and instructions are laid out in a certain systematic order, like engineering. For this reason, it is actually much harder to alter a garment after its initial construction is complete. On the flip side, it is a lot more fun!

Mind-altering alterations

Sometimes clothing is just fine in its present form, but it just needs a little something. I usually come across people who just want a little pizzazz and individuality added to their garment. However, this may also be your choice of reconstruction to fix a poor fit, hide away stains or spruce up a worn 'n torn favorite piece.

With my sewing machine in the window front of my boutique, I am often asked that dreaded question, “do you do alterations?” While I like to help my neighbors and friends out with most quick-fix-its, it's not all that exciting to my creative spirit to just take up a regular hem. My compromise has been to do what I call “creative alterations.” These types of interesting alterations are visible and thus take the garment to a new level of style. Some tricks to push it up a notch include:

- ✓ Sewing a hem with contrasting color thread
- ✓ Taking in a seam with the seam placed externally
- ✓ Decorative patching on wear 'n tear
- ✓ Decorative stitching on patches as well as on hems
- ✓ Decorative painting over stains

This type of reconstructing clothing is exciting for all levels of skill and creativity. It is the best way for the novice to get started and get some practice with the basics of reconstruction. There are a lot of no-sew options with this method. For those who don't have a machine, this type of reconstruction can allow for a little bit of hand-sewing to go a long way.



These little reconstruction touches are perfect for those pieces that you are on the fence about cleaning out of your closet!

Lots of clothing is functionally well-made and practical. But it can also be boring, not to mention looking exactly like every other piece that was mass-produced from the same factory! These types of less intense reconstruction techniques serve to elevate your ho-hum hoodie to a truly unique piece of self-expression!

Regretful give-aways

A couple friends of mine have a playful banter back and forth about clothing. They tease each other on who got the hottest new thing off the rack first (all local designer racks mind you!) They also hand things off to each other from time to time. Yay! Hand-me-downs for adults! Recently I did some creative alterations on a zip-up fleece for one of them. It was a beautiful color but huge and boxy and altogether boring! Turns out it was a hand-me-down from the other

woman. A few weeks later she taunted her friend, “how’s that big old fleece working out for you?” She was utterly dismayed to hear about the fantastic new form it had taken. She, herself, could have been the proud new owner of this tricked-out fleece if only she’d remembered about reconstructing. Don’t let this happen to you — always remember the possibilities with creative alterations.

Clothing for cloth

I very rarely use this type of reconstruction, but it is a valuable option. This type involves dismantling the existing garment and salvaging the cloth for other projects. You may choose to do this for a variety of reasons:

- ✓ The fabric is gorgeous but the garment is horrible
- ✓ The garment shape is unable to be maintained due to style or other pitfalls
- ✓ The garment is excessively large
- ✓ The fabric is an *oh so precious* vintage
- ✓ The fabric is of high quality, such as silks
- ✓ The fabric has extensive beadwork or other embellishments that you would like to save
- ✓ The garment has sentimental significance, but the style and fit are not for you

In taking apart existing clothing to make use of the fabric, the skill level needed depends highly on the intended project for it. Because the garment is being transformed first to flat fabric, the use of a flat pattern is appropriate, and thus familiarity with using patterns is helpful. However, there are several projects in this book that make use of flat fabric scraps in this way. Here’s a list to refer to:

- ✓ Renaissance Repairs Pants — Chapter 9
- ✓ Detachable Bustle Skirt — Chapter 9
- ✓ Repetition Editions Jeans — Chapter 10
- ✓ From Flat to Hat — Chapter 11

- ✓ Whip Up a Wine Bag — Chapter 15
- ✓ Freeform and Frill Skirt — Chapter 16
- ✓ Casing Your Cozies Pillowcases — Chapter 18
- ✓ Quintessential Quilt — Chapter 18
- ✓ Sachet Simplicity — Chapter 19
- ✓ Pragmatic Potholders — Chapter 19
- ✓ Put Your Money Where Your Scraps Are Wallet — Chapter 20

What do you do when your heart can't let go of a piece, but it can't bear to watch it hang wastefully in the storage closet? In creating flat fabric from these pieces you can incorporate them into a quilt to curl up with and cherish those memories. I've heard examples of this done with retired work shirts and special occasion dresses.



This type of reconstructing clothing is actually a great way to learn about garment construction. By taking things apart you can figure out how they were put together!

Trash to treasure

There is still yet another form of reconstruction that takes it all to a whole new level. Turning trash into garments is a much more extreme form of reconstructing clothes. Basically, this technique involves recycling non-clothing items, trash, and refashioning it into articles of clothing and accessories.

For a variety of reasons, this particular method is not explored much among the projects of this book. From Garbage to Gorgeous in Chapter 20, is the only project that even remotely comes close to characterizing this method. Even then, its inclusion is debatable since the trash component is textile scraps.

While I have seen found objects and other “trash” items recycled into the decoration of a wearable clothing item or accessory, I have yet to see a fully recycled trash piece that is functionally wearable. Hence the reason why I haven't presented projects of this sort for you in this book. The projects in this book are for wearing, using and re-using as much as possible!

Reconstructed trash pieces fall in a range closer to artwork than clothing. They make statements on recycling, often using small items that we never even think twice about tossing away:

- ✓ Plastic grocery bags
- ✓ Candy wrappers
- ✓ Music cassette tapes
- ✓ Bottle tops
- ✓ Paperclips
- ✓ CAUTION or DANGER tape used by police, firemen, and construction workers
- ✓ Bicycle tire inner tubes

I must say that while these reconstructed pieces are intriguing and often whimsical, their lack in functionality leaves me wanting something more. I'd like to see functional pieces and practical uses of these recycled materials. Accessories and outerwear hold more hope for this, as their need for washing is significantly less than daily wear. I don't mean to discourage you from experimenting with this method, but I do encourage you to make it as viable as you possibly can.

Just Who Do You Think You Are?

This book is written to reach a wide variety of people while still maintaining and honoring my own unique self and my community. In this section I will discuss a bit of my assumptions about who you might be as well. In this, you can read this book in a different light of understanding, taking pleasure in the points that are catered to your special needs, and thus having tolerance for seemingly unnecessary points meant for others. This section holds some specific messages for you that might not apply to every reader of this book. So pay close attention!



You are not a fixed entity! You may move between these groups at different points in your life, or you may be a combination of several at any single point in time!

The dabbler

You are a creative sort. You likely have a career, be it a job or other responsibility, that doesn't necessarily make full use of your creative spirit. Therefore, you spend your extracurricular time doing things that fulfill this part of you. You are a hobbyist. You like to dabble in lots of different activities, or maybe specialize solely in textiles and crafts.

Your sewing skills may be limited, out-of-practice, or nonexistent. In the next few chapters I provide a brief refresher of these skills. I also mention a variety of other options in the “Variations” section of each project. You, in particular, are encouraged to explore the realm of these variations. If there is a new technique, such as silk-screening, that you are learning, I want you to feel free to play with it in these projects even if it is not mentioned. Heck, I don’t know *everything*!

The environmentalist

You are concerned about this planet and the waste we lay upon it. You live consciously. You continue to explore and make changes in your life to diminish waste. You recycle. You purchase products with minimal packaging to avoid even having to recycle it from the start. You are familiar with the terms “living green” and “sustainability.” This is a way of life for you, not just a hip new trend with a cute logo!

You likely know a lot more about the environment than I do. For a variety of reasons, I choose for my education to come from person-to-person sources and thus I am not always on top of the latest goings-on. Therefore I can almost guarantee that the points in this book are incomplete. Forgive me and feel free to inform me about it!

You may be a complete novice to sewing and crafts. For this reason I have included quick reference instructions on basic sewing skills and tools of the trade. I have made reference to a lot of techniques that you may not be familiar with, such as embroidery. I did this not to confuse you, but to open the door of possibility. I am a firm believer in awareness. If you don’t know what you don’t know you are unable to learn it.

The student

You are interested in clothing design as a career path. You may or may not have sewing and design skills yet. You see self-taught designers like myself and wonder “is fashion school necessary?” I am often asked this question and here are my responses (The following statements come only from my own experience. I am certain that there are exceptions):

- ✓ It depends on your philosophy, heart and intent.
- ✓ Personally, I don’t see an absolute need for fashion school. Ages ago, mentoring and apprenticing were the means of learning. Why they aren’t valued just as highly in our society is beyond me.

✓ I've been sewing ever since I could hold a needle. My mom and grandma taught me. What they didn't teach me, I taught myself. I figure things out. And someday, I might just take a pattern-making class to check in on those skills. I might just read that "Complete Book of Sewing" that I received last Christmas.

✓ But is it *necessary*?

Obviously you need to learn certain skills, but school is just one of many ways to do this. I think that the difference (self-taught versus school) is in the comprehension and resulting adaptation of the skill. When one is taught in school, usually things are presented and perceived as *the correct way* with little exception. This applies to any area of study, not just fashion design. Lessons are like a recipe book of step 1, step 2, and so on. You just do it and get graded on how much you adhere to the rules. So within those hard and fast rules, where does the creativity come in?

A fashion school graduate once said to me, "the first thing they teach you in design school is that nothing is original. Everything has been done before." Logically this argument is false. Unfortunately it yields ethical permission to copy. To further compound this, I've heard many students say that their fashion school teaches them to find inspiration and ideas by looking at other clothing. We certainly influence and inspire each other, but to be taught to seek it out and duplicate it in such a way really disturbs me.

This type of "inspiration" prohibits the evolution of fashion as an art form. I believe that clothing can be the most accessible form of art to the masses. Not only that . . . but it is a means of self-expression. Thus it needs to breathe and evolve rather than be stuck in a box of re-visitation and reinterpretation of design.

In the end, make sure you have a means to feed yourself, pay for shelter, and so on. Then follow your heart and create your heart's vision. You will be happy.

The artist-designer

You have made clothing for yourself and for other people. You are well-versed in sewing and clothing construction skills. You may be in fashion school or a fashion school graduate and thus I may have insulted you in the previous section. Whoops! Like I said, I am certain that there are exceptions to what I have been exposed to. No hard feelings, eh?

You are reading this book to learn more about reconstructing clothing. You may be practiced in this and just looking for new ideas to play with. On the other hand, you may work strictly in pattern-drafting and therefore reconstructing clothing is completely new to you.

The patterns in this book are kept intentionally basic. This is done not only to make it easier for the novice, but also so that you can put your own creative spin on it. Whether you have a style all your own that you can incorporate, or you are interested in playing with variations to develop this style, I wholeheartedly encourage this personalization. With your unique clothing construction skills, you can even vary the patterns themselves to suit your own style.



The projects in this book are meant for individual use only, not for mass-production and/or for-profit!

Perusing This Book for Your Best Interest

This book is intentionally set up for easy use. It is most important to me that you leave it with an understanding of individual expression and conscious living. The projects are merely icing on the cake of reconstruction temptation!

Seriously, I hope for you to use this book in whatever way serves you best. In that, my goal of inspiring your individuality is achieved. Whether you choose to read it cover to cover is up to you.

There are a fair bit of anecdotal stories inserted within the text. These stories serve to provide examples from my life of the information being presented. They are “extra” and while not essential to completing the project, they are what drives and feeds me to continue creating this form of art. The people I’ve worked with express much appreciation for these stories and how they can relate to them. It helps to make this process human and well within your reach of success.

In this book I’ve presented some of the basics of taking things apart, washing care and sewing skills. If you are already competent in this, you are well-equipped to jump into the projects. If not, give it a good review and maybe even supplement your knowledge with *Sewing For Dummies* (Wiley).

Amid the project chapters you will find a color photograph insert. This photography was done with much conscious intent and thus I hope for you to pay specific attention to it. The photographs represent many of the projects in this book, including their variations. They serve to demonstrate how to wear some pieces and how to combine them together in fun and functional ways.

Beyond this, it is important for me to share some points with you about how these photos were completed:

- ✓ I used a local photographer, supporting my local artist community.
- ✓ I used local artists' work to accessorize the outfits.
- ✓ I didn't use mannequins because these clothes are made for *real* bodies . . . your bodies!
- ✓ I used real people, actually very intelligent and strong women, rather than models. I must confess here that in deciding this, the possibility of having one model was considered. In researching that option, I found a prevalent underweight trend even among amateur models! As a designer, I can understand the ease of having this clothes-hanger-type frame to drape clothes on and not worry about "real" flaws. But also, as a designer, I feel a responsibility not to promote this unrealistic and unhealthy trend.
- ✓ All locations of the photo shoots are working in "green" ways:
 - **Building Resources** is San Francisco's only source for reusable and recycled building materials, supplied with donations exclusively from the local community. It is a source of inspiration for artists and contractors alike, as well as a place to donate tax deductible material from building and demolition (www.buildingresources.org).
 - **Teacher With The Bus** a.k.a. **DasFrachtgut** is a veggie oil converted school bus, pioneered by Jens-Peter Jungclaussen, with an environmental message that fosters education, entertainment, and sustainability (www.TeacherWithTheBus.com).
 - **Sunset Scavenger Artist-in-Residence Program** uses art to inspire people to recycle more and conserve natural resources. The company provides selected local artists, such as Nome Edonna, with the opportunity to create art using materials they gather from San Francisco's refuse (www.nomeedonna.com and www.sunsetscavenger.com/AIR).
 - San Francisco artists **Marcus Guillard** and **Chris Ray Collins** with visiting artist **Melvin Occasio** (Atlanta) are the innovative creators of **The Pegicorn**, an interactive sculpture made from scraps in their own backyard (www.marcusguillard.com).

