

Design and disability: fashion for wheelchair users

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Susanna's story

My younger sister, Susanna, has cerebral palsy. Her attractive appearance has always enhanced other people's response to her which, given the severity of her disability, could be one of alarm. Choosing what she will wear each day or buying new clothes is one of her few opportunities for self expression. She inspired me to research the contentious area of fashion, which is about desirability and status, and disability, which evokes feelings of unease and images of redundancy and deformity. Fashion and disability seem poles apart, but why should they be?

While most of us regard fashion as a whim, for many disabled people it is a crucial aspect of their lives. The functional aspect of clothing is not always their first priority, and often they are more interested in using fashion and clothing to detract from their disability, assert their identity and confront prejudice. During my research I interviewed a young, paraplegic woman in a wheelchair who told me that when she wore her trendiest outfits people asked her "When will you get better?". Her attractive and sexy appearance was such a challenge to their preconceived ideas that they assumed her disability was temporary.

I met another woman in a wheelchair who was so annoyed by people talking over her head and evading her gaze that she took to wearing a hat with a large brim to ensure that people came down to her eye level when speaking with her. People with the most complex congenital disabilities, perhaps with some degree of learning disability, were most vociferous in their need for suitable and fashionable clothing, which to them was an important symbol of belonging to society. Interestingly these people were keen to acquire pairs of trainers and traditional smart suits, symbols of activity, conformity and employment. And so it could be argued that the need for fashionable clothing increases in direct proportion to the severity of a person's disability.

Designing clothing for disabled people is not a new concept. There have been several worthy books on the subject, but their approach is invariably functional, with the underlying assumption that fashion and disability are incongruous. This attitude is also evident in the few specialist clothing companies that do exist. Again the clothing is mainly functional and sold with all the allure of a medical aid. In direct contrast, most fashion companies sell clothing to people who didn't know they wanted the garment until they saw it looking good in a glossy advertisement, carefully styled in a shop window or worn by someone else. And it is a mistake to think that people with disabilities are any different.



Designing for people with disabilities

Producing a collection of clothing to meet the needs of all disabled people would be impossible. The diversity of needs and requirements is too great, and most people, whatever their disability, would prefer to buy their clothing in the same shop as their contemporaries. My sister buys all her clothes from the usual shops and has now discovered which styles work well on her particular body-shape. But she has always found it difficult to find outdoor clothing that fits well, keeps her warm and is easy to put on and take off. As she sits so still, few winter clothes can keep her warm, and those that do can be very difficult to put on. She sits in a chair which encases her back and supports her scoliosis very closely, and so getting a coat on and off is tricky for her family and care attendants.

She is not unusual, many people with severe congenital disabilities can be seen bundled up in all sorts of bulky and strange clothing combinations. Large blankets, oversize “booties” knitted by a well meaning relative, dustbin liners covering the knees in rain and childish “bobble” hats perched on heads. Such clothes do nothing to enhance the wearer’s self esteem or keep the person comfortably warm and dry, And so it seemed logical that I should base some of my collection on the needs of Susanna and others like her. I also looked at the needs of people in wheelchairs who could dress themselves.

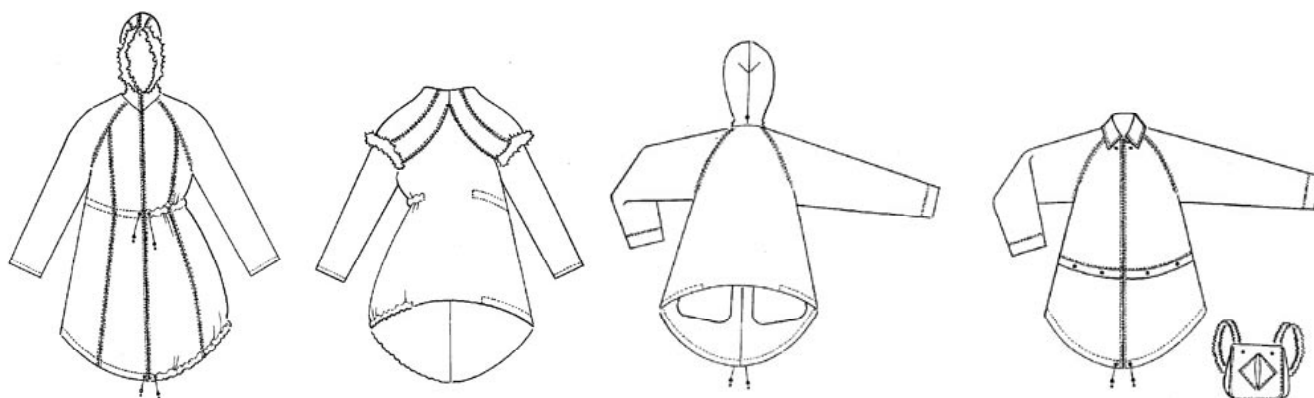
The collection took several months to research. Sample garments were tested by three models including my long suffering sister, who had to put up with me pulling and pushing her into garments to see if they were easy for a care attendant to put on. I was not only concerned with the fit and practical aspects of the garment but always asked the model if they would wear the garment as a fashion item. Quite often the answer was a resounding “No”. The garment in question was often accused of being “Too disabled looking” despite being perfectly functional. I also spent a lot of time sashaying up and down the studio trying the garments on myself, sitting in them, twisting my own body to simulate a scoliosis, moving my arms as if pushing a wheelchair, always asking myself “Is this glamorous enough”, “Is this cute”, “Is this trendy”.

Colour choice was very important. Susanna looks very good in sophisticated colours, black, grey or navy. They give her an air of maturity which can dissuade less perceptive people from talking to her like a toddler! The garments were made in the latest fashion waterproof fabrics in silver, navy, black, grey and cream, and I trimmed some of the hoods with fake fur to draw the attention to the face and away from the wheelchair. It is important to think of glamour and aesthetics. Clothing is so often a compromise between function and aesthetics, as shown by the number of young disabled people in wheelchairs who admitted to wearing trendy Levi jeans despite dire warnings from their occupational therapists that the heavy seams would produce pressure sores.



The collection

All the garments in this collection have certain things in common. They all have raglan sleeves—one of the easiest designs of sleeve to get in and out of. They are also all trapeze line, as this shape can conceal a scoliosis, stoma or loosened stomach muscles.



Key items:

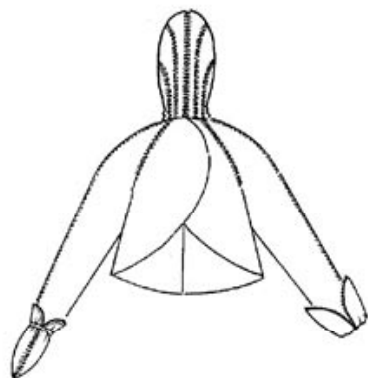
Coat with concealed trousers in the hem.

This coat is designed for people who can dress themselves. It is slightly raised at the back and longer in the front. In the sitting position the back comes down to the seat and the wearer does not have to sit on bulky fabric, but the front falls over the knees. Concealed inside the front hem are waterproof leg protectors that can be unfurled and fastened round the leg.



Pop on coats

The inspiration for these designs came in a sudden downpour. My poor sister was getting soaking and the only way to keep her dry quickly was to put a conventional rain coat on her backwards, like a straight jacket! To protect her legs we put another rain coat over her knees. Consequently, this coat is open at the back so you can just slide it over the wearer's head and then tuck the fabric in round the sides. Concealed in the front hem is an apron which can be unfurled over the legs.



Pop on capes

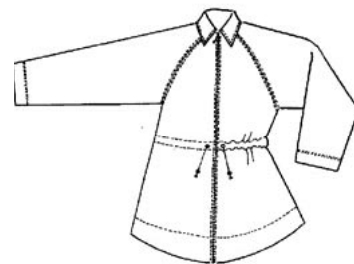
These are very simple and effective for people with very little mobility. The cape is raised at the back and longer at the front which means there is less fabric to tuck down the back of the person. The cape is put on over the wearer's head and the press studs under the arms create the impression of sleeves.

Integral gloves

Many disabled people have very little mobility in their hands, it is hard for a care attendant to wiggle fingers into conventional gloves. These mittens are joined to the coat and can be unzipped and turned back like a cuff when not in use.

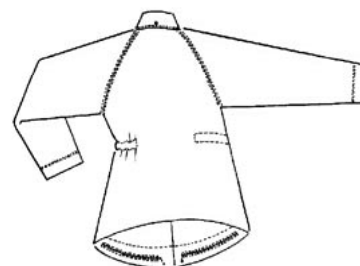
Mac with concealed waterproof trousers

This jacket with drawstring waist has waterproof trousers concealed in the front hem. The trousers are detachable and would be sold in various lengths.



Two part coat with gloves attached

Designed for a very disabled woman this coat can be separated into two parts. People with supportive wheelchairs which encase most of their backs are very difficult to dress. It is much easier to put the coat on in two halves and join them together. The coat also features finger-less gloves which can be unzipped and folded back into cuffs.



Mac in a bag 1

This mac folds up into a little bag which could be hung from the back of a wheelchair or carried by a care attendant. It is made from a breathable lightweight Nylon, and this version, designed for a very disabled person, is split at the back so that it is easy to put on.

Mac in a bag 2

This mac which also folds into a little bag is designed for wheelchair users who can dress themselves. It has a drawstring round the hem for added protection from the rain and to stop the garment catching in the wheels. There is also a detachable cape to stop rain dripping down into the back of the chair.



Parka

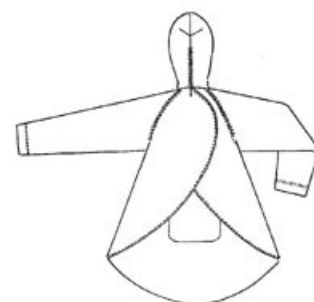
This fleece lined and waterproof coat is raised at the back and longer at the front so that it fits well on someone sitting in a wheelchair. A drawstring round the hem keeps the wearer warm and stops the garment catching in the wheels. Raglan sleeves are easy to put on.

Apron belt

This elasticated belt has a small bag on the front that holds an apron made from waterproof nylon. This can be unrolled over the knees and legs in the rain. The apron is elasticated at the ankles and fastens round the back of the legs with Velcro.

Coat with concealed apron

This waterproof coat with a split back has an apron concealed in the front hem to keep legs dry in heavy rain. The coat is fleece lined for warmth.



Cape

The cape has a raised back so there is less to tuck down the back of a wheelchair. It is designed for someone who is very disabled and is dressed by someone else. Press studs under the arms give the illusion of a more structured garment. Although quite simple it has been very popular and effective in trials.

Leg protectors

It is impossible for many wheelchair users to put on a pair of waterproof trousers over their clothing when it rains. These leg protectors are fleece lined and waterproof and very simple to put on. Worn under a conventional jacket or coat they look like trousers.