The place to Re

Janina Waldmann gets to know a community initiative in Sydney's inner-west tackling the problem of clothing waste.



There's no denying that Australians have a problem with clothes. From TikTok hauls to hours-long shopping sprees, Australians love to shop. Shopping for new clothes has gone far beyond a necessity and has firmly ingrained itself as a cultural pastime. It's not surprising, then, that Australians are the world's biggest consumer of clothing per capita, buying an average of 56 new clothing items each year, according to the Australian Institute.

The question too few are asking is: where does it all go? It's a question that's been on Bindi Lea's mind for many years. What happens to all the clothes we use and then discard? What does it really mean to throw clothing away?

After COVID-19 put Bindi's dreams of opening an 'ethical Westfield' on hold, she forged ahead with Re Place, an initiative of The Village Project in Summer Hill.

Together with co-founder Leyne Elbourne and a dedicated team of volunteers, Bindi has turned an open-air warehouse in Summer Hill into the Inner West's very own clothing and textile reuse, repurpose and recycling centre.

Bindi explains, "one of the biggest problems people have is that they don't have the time, energy or money to work out how to be socially or environmentally responsible." Especially now, with families tightening budgets across the country, the appeal of fast fashion to clothe rapidly growing children is hard to resist.

Bindi's approach to the solution is simple: make it easy for people to do the right thing.

Finding a reason to 're'

Situated in the Summer Hill Sustainability Hub on Prospect Road in Sydney's Inner West, Re Place is, as the tagline proclaims, the place to Re.

Upon entry, a huge green sign encourages visitors to reconsider their relationship to fashion. It's shaped like Maslow's hierarchy of



needs or a food pyramid and prompts readers to:

- Rethink
- Reduce
- Reuse
- Repair
- Repurpose
- Recycle

Wednesdays through Fridays, the warehouse is a hub of activity, with community members dropping off clothing to be reused, repurposed or recycled.

Once the clothing hits the counter, the volunteer team gets to work. Every donation is weighed in front of the customer, so they know exactly how much textile waste they've diverted from landfill. And while this is a bit of a feel-good exercise for the community, the real work is just about to start.

On Thursdays and Fridays, the team sorts the donations by brand as part of Re Place's other big mission: to hold fast fashion brands accountable for the textile waste they produce. Volunteers spend hours weighing the sorted donations so that brands can be approached with evidence to show precisely how much of their clothing is reused, repurposed or recycled.

Bindi's long-term goal is for every item of clothing in circulation to be fitted with a unique barcode that's scanned along its journey from shop front to end of life. The ensuing data would be presented to brands as a way to highlight their contribution to the textile waste problem.

Recycling textiles is expensive, and currently, Re Place is forced to charge community members to drop off recyclable clothing on a per-kilo basis. Bindi hopes that one day, the fashion brands will pay this fee.

"At the end of the day, fashion brands have locked us into a system where we're all buying fast fashion. And they know what they're doing; they're making stuff that's not going to last."

Once donations are sorted, the team gets ready for the real fun.

Bringing the community together

Saturdays are market day, where the public can browse the racks and take home second-hand clothing for under $20 apiece. There are also bucketloads of freebies on offer, from textiles with minor staining or minuscule holes to clothing that is donated in excess.

"We've got too much activewear, too much kids stuff and too many shoes at the moment, so all that stuff's free", Bindi explains. "We want to keep things in circulation."

Besides, Bindi explains, nothing gives the Re Place team a rush like seeing a family with multiple kids leave the warehouse with clothing for them all at no or low cost. "I get so happy when people take something free; it just makes my heart sing."

It's not just families that benefit. Community is at the heart of the Re Place

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mission, and the team work with various initiatives to give clothes a new life.

Mates on the Move is one such organisation. It supports men leaving prison, and its customers receive free clothing from Re Place. Students at UNSW are another beneficiary of Re Place's community spirit. Uni students can pick up any interview or workwear pieces they need for just $5 a piece from the Re Place warehouse.

For Bindi and the volunteer team, profit is not the goal, but financial sustainability would undoubtedly help keep Re Place moving forward. The local council currently heavily subsidises the warehouse rent, and Bindi estimates she and co-founder Leyne donate approximately 80% of their time.

All of this is to try to make a dent in the enormous amount of textile waste Australians produce yearly.





The cold, hard facts

Upparel, Re Place's textile recycling partner, reports that the average Australian buys 27kg of clothing and textiles annually and discards 23kg of textiles into landfills in the same period. In fact, as a collective, Australians discard 6000kg of clothing and textile waste into landfills every 10 minutes. So it's no wonder we're the world's biggest per capita consumer and polluter of textiles.

Throw-away culture is hardwired into our relationship with fashion.

"Designers and consumers rarely think about end-of-life. And that's the biggest problem really at the end of the day," Bindi explains.

While Bindi is quick to make clear that she holds brands rather than individuals responsible for Australia's textile waste problem, it's clear that a mindset shift among consumers is needed to address the crisis.

Polling by the Australia Institute showed that in 2024, only 4% of Australians took their clothing and textile waste to a dedicated textiles recycling facility like Re Place. In contrast, 64% of those surveyed took clothing they no longer wanted to an op-shop, and while that might seem like a great solution, it comes with plenty of problems.

> *There are currently 150 billion pieces of clothing produced globally each year, enough to clothe every individual on the planet ten times over.*

The National Waste Report 2022 documented that in 2020-2021, approximately 200 kilotonnes of clothing were donated to clothing or collection services. Of that staggering number, only 30-45 kilotonnes were re-sold by op-shops. 35 kilotonnes were landfilled due to poor quality, and nearly 60% of donated clothing was exported, primarily to economically developing countries.

Once exported, some clothing might get sold, but much of it contributes to hazardous landfill situations on the other side of the earth.

The real kicker is this: we don't need it. There are currently 150 billion pieces of clothing produced globally each year, enough to clothe every individual on the planet ten times over.

Bindi and the volunteer team at Re Place are doing what they can to give clothing a new life and metaphorically hold fast fashion brands' feet to the fire regarding accountability.

The impact

A soon-to-be-released report will paint an encouraging picture, and the preliminary statistics from Re Place's past three months of operation give rise to hope.

1156kg of clothing was dropped off by just shy of 200 community members. Of that, 830kg was reused, meaning it was either sold at the Saturday markets, taken to a consignment store, or given away for free. Another 42kgs was repurposed and turned into yarn, and 284kg was recycled into new materials through Upparel.

Re Place's biggest asset is, no doubt, its volunteer team, which ranges in age from 14 to over 70. They're the heart and soul of Re Place, and Bindi is keen to emphasise their contribution.

"You've got to find a group of people around you," Bindi explains. "Without the people around me, I don't know what I would've done."

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