"I chose". Case Study of An Inclusive Fashion Design Education Project

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Abstract

A significant portion of the population is excluded from fashion, not by choice, but by design. Most fashion products are not created with disabled individuals in mind, fashion imagery rarely represents them, and physical stores often remain inaccessible due to architectural barriers. The problem extends to fashion education. Most fashion schools don't include design for disability in their curricula, prioritizing market demands over human-centered design and teaching students to cater to industry trends rather than diverse bodies. But what might the industry look like if inclusivity were central to a student's education rather than an afterthought? Is it possible to teach fashion design in a more inclusive way? Two years ago, Milan's IUAD launched a project with the daycare center Il Melograno, whose guests have various physical and cognitive disabilities. Students partnered with these individuals, creating clothes first *for them* and then *with them*. The outcomes of the project were then presented to the public, giving disabled people direct access to and visibility within the fashion world. The next stage will be to launch an inclusive fashion brand. This essay presents a case study of the project from both an educational and a social point of view.

Keywords: Disability; Choice; Autonomy; Adaptive Wear; Education.

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A significant portion of the population is, by design, excluded from fashion. Most fashion products are not created with disabled individuals in mind, fashion imagery rarely represents them, and physical stores are often inaccessible due to architectural barriers. The problem extends to fashion education. Most fashion schools don't include design for disability in their curricula, prioritizing market demands over human-centered design, teaching students to cater to industry trends rather than diverse bodies. But what might the industry look like if inclusivity were central to a student's education? Is it possible to teach fashion design in a more inclusive way? Two years ago, Accademia IUAD launched a project with the daycare center Il Melograno, whose guests have various physical and cognitive disabilities. Students partnered with the guests, creating clothes for and with them, which were then presented to the public; the next stage will be to launch an inclusive fashion brand. This article presents a case study of the project as an example of Design Thinking and co-creation practice.

Fashion and Disability: An Overview

According to the World Health Organization, 16% of the global population lives with a certified disability. Yet, despite this significant demographic, the fashion industry has historically excluded disabled individuals, both in terms of representation and as consumers. My engagement with the intersection between Disability and Fashion began in 2017, following the birth of my son and his disability diagnosis. My interest was sparked not so much by my child's physical and mental impediments but rather by how the fashion and clothing industry as a whole seemed to ignore the existence of people like him, *de facto* refusing to acknowledge disabled individuals both as people and as potential consumers. At that time, inclusive fashion was virtually nonexistent. Tommy Hilfiger had only just launched its Adaptive Clothing line and a handful of smaller brands, mostly targeting older adults, were selling a limited selection of adaptive garments online. These designs often prioritized practicality at the expense of aesthetics, reinforcing the notion that fashion was not meant for disabled bodies. Representations of disability within fashion media were equally scarce; exceptions, such as Aimee Mullins walking for Alexander McQueen in 1998, were isolated rather than indicative of systemic change. Diversity advocates such as Sinéad Burke (Tilting the Lens), Stephanie Thomas (Runway of Dreams), and Ben Barry (Parsons School of Design) have recently contributed to bringing the conversation into broader public and industry discourse, allowing Disability and Fashion to cross paths on multiple occasions. Nonetheless, looking more closely at these developments, one wonders whether the two worlds have actually met or simply brushed shoulders. Generally speaking, disability representation is thought to be inconsistent with prevailing aesthetic preferences in the fashion industry. This reflects and reinforces the widely shared cultural ideals about what kinds of bodies should be adorned, and emulated.[1] In other words, the industry ultimately decides what kind of bodies ought to be considered fashionable, and risk-averse industry leaders mostly regard disability as problematic, "unusual stimuli" that might turn off consumers: the exclusion of diverse bodies ideally maximizes profit and minimizes risk.[2] Moreover, contemporary neoliberalist society values bodies that are self-sufficient and productive, while those who are not perceived as productive are understood as valueless. Dominant narratives have constructed disability as vulnerable, helpless, interdependent and in need of cure, therefore lacking value within a neoliberal capitalist system.[3] By placing the disabled body against a mythical norm of perfection, these ableist narratives thus dictate an understanding of which bodies are valuable and desirable.[4]

In a production-oriented economy that ideally demands people to be functional for economic purposes[5]

1.   Jordan Foster and David Pettinicchio, "A Model Who Looks Like Me," *Journal of Consumer Culture*, Vol. 22, no. 3 (2021): 579–597. https://doi.org/10.1177/14695405211022074

2.   Frédéric C. Godart, and Ashley Mears, "How Do Cultural Producers Make Creative Decisions? Lessons from the Catwalk," *Social Forces*, Vol. 88, no. 2 (2005): 671–692, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40645820.

3.   Philippa Nesbitt, "The Paradox of Visibility: Disability Inclusion in Fashion Media and Runways," *Fashion Studies*, Vol. 5, no.1 (2025), 10.38055/UFN050105.

4.   Mia Mingus, "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link," Leaving Evidence, accessed July 23, 2025, https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/.

5.   Lorraine Thomas, "Disability is Not so Beautiful: A Semiotic Analysis of Advertisements for Rehabilitation Goods," *Dis-*

fashion, as a money-making industry, makes no exception in this demand: it crafts an aspirational model — beautiful, powerful, wealthy, etc. — ultimately based on functionality. As Sinéad Burke wrote in a 2018 *New York Times* article:

> Beauty is being redefined — this is something on which most of us can agree. The era of the white, thin, Eurocentric model as the only embodiment of glamour is gone. The runways have embraced diversity of skin, shape, and age. But for one group, they still lag behind: people with disabilities.[6]

The Paradox of Inclusive Fashion

Increased demand for ethical accountability in fashion has, for instance, helped to elevate sustainability from a "nice to have" to a regulatory concern backed up by the ESG Framework. However inclusion, particularly disability inclusion, despite also being a matter of ethics and accountability, remains far more elusive. Inclusive fashion is often misunderstood. The Oxford Language Dictionary defines inclusion as: the practice or policy of providing equal access to opportunities and resources to people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized, such as those with physical or mental disabilities or those belonging to other minority groups. This means the same access to all opportunities and all resources as everyone else. In this sense, an inclusive fashion industry would be one that equally caters to everyone, regardless of body-type, gender, skin tone, sexual orientation and abilities. However, this concept is antithetical to the one of fashion, as the very idea of something (or someone) being "in fashion" automatically implies that something (or someone) else is not. Even as the industry strives to prove itself more inclusive than it once was, "equal access to opportunities and resources to people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized" usually translates into "some access to some opportunities and resources to some of the people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized." This doesn't make for inclusivity, it perpetuates the decision of who gets to be included as something entirely arbitrary. Although brands have embraced a degree of surface-level inclusivity through more diverse imagery, product design remains largely inaccessible. Most clothing continues to be created for able-bodied consumers, with little regard for those who rely on mobility aids, prosthetics, or assisted dressing.[7] This exclusion is structural. Unlike other underrepresented groups who may be omitted from certain seasonal trends or campaigns, disabled individuals are excluded from the fashion system altogether. While the adaptive fashion market has grown since I began researching this field, it still exists primarily online and, most importantly, it remains focused on function over form. Disabled people are therefore granted (some) access to clothing, but still not to style. Despite increasing media attention to #Diversity and #Inclusion, these terms often function more as buzzwords than as meaningful commitments. Basic inclusive practices, such as extended sizing, are not yet standard across the industry, and the needs of consumers whose bodies or minds fall outside normative frameworks are hardly being addressed in any department besides that of marketing. Ariana Rose Philips, a transgender, disabled model, may indeed have been casted by Moschino, and Sinéad Burke may indeed be wearing custom Gucci, but how many Gucci and Moschino clothes besides the custom-made ones work for Burke and Philips' bodies? Established brands are unlikely to dismantle the very systems that secured their success, especially when it comes to deeply entrenched exclusions. Transformation is likely to come from the next generation; however, as of today, most fashion schools still do not provide training in inclusive design, let alone adaptivewear. Graduate Fashion Weeks and related platforms reveal that emerging designers are already rethinking what fashion can be. What they need now is a structured framework and positive support, especially from the institutions that educate and shape them. This article presents a case study of one such initiative: an Inclusive Fashion Design project developed by Accademia IUAD — Institute for Universal Art and Design (Milan), in partnership with Il Melograno daycare center. Initially based on the empathic

ability Studies Quarterly, Vol. 21, no. 2 (2001). https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v21i2.280

6.   Sinéad Burke, "The Limits of Fashion's Inclusivity," *The New York Times*, September 30, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/30/fashion/disabled-beauty.html.

7.   Sara Kaufman and Anna Zinola, "Designing with the people in mind — notes on disability," *Media Arts Design Education* + (2025), 171–195.

design framework and methodology, the project developed into co-design in its later stage. I joined as a consultant and observer after becoming a faculty member at IUAD. Data for this study were collected through qualitative interviews and field observations. The names of the daycare center participants have been omitted to protect their privacy.

Setting the Basis For Intersection

The social and psychological value of clothing is no secret: we dress according to what we wish to communicate, and the simple act of choosing what to wear each day is empowering. However, since the market for adaptive wear is still extremely niche, and most regular fashion brands have so far failed to incorporate adaptive features in their designs, disabled people can only rely on a limited selection of garments, which makes developing a style and communicating through clothes virtually impossible. Additionally, as I learned from my interviews with both the staff and the guests at Il Melograno, clothing is frequently selected and purchased by caregivers — a gesture made with good intentions, but one that risks stripping individuals of the right to choose how they present themselves. This issue is particularly pronounced for people with cognitive disabilities. In the name of comfort or practicality, and because of cultural stereotypes, they are often dressed in clothing that is infantilizing or unflattering. While someone with cognitive issues might indeed have a rather unconventional sense of style, this is not a prerogative exclusive to those with intellectual impairments; many people, regardless of ability, make unique or eccentric fashion choices. Yet while self-expression through clothing is celebrated in non-disabled individuals as a sign of creativity and character, it is often repressed in those perceived as incapable of making such decisions. Once again it is often their caregivers who repress it, usually in the attempt to protect them from potential critics and mockeries, afraid that distinctive and unconventional clothing will make them "stand out" even more than their condition already does. The functional and somewhat plain style proposed by most adaptivewear brands perpetuates this idea. This not only denies disabled individuals a vital form of self-expression but also reinforces stigma and conformity within society. Accademia IUAD — Institute for Universal Art and Design, was founded in Naples in the 60s. More recently, the school opened a campus in Milan, where it occupies a large portion of a historic building located near the central railway station. Another portion of the building is occupied by Il Melograno, a daycare center which accommodates adults with mental and physical disabilities on a semi-residential basis. From a general perspective, a fashion school and an institution for disabled people being next door neighbors is something new to begin with: it naturally positions fashion and disability within the same context, something that society has so far failed to do. The collaboration, sparked by Il Melograno, initially meant to offer an unconventional activity to the daycare center's guests, many of whom had never had any access whatsoever to the fashion world, and not because of a lack of interest. The goal was to break down stereotypes attached to the relationship between fashion and disability while also allowing them to interact with a non-disabled crowd. The school responded positively, eager not just to participate in a socially valuable activity, but also to offer its students a challenging, highly stimulating, and potentially very rewarding opportunity.

The project, which is still ongoing, followed the methodology of Design Thinking[8] in its first phase, and co-creation[9] in its later stage.

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8. Deana McDonagh and Joyce Thomas, "Disability + Relevant Design: Empathic Design Strategies Supporting More Effective New Product Design Outcomes," *The Design Journal*, Vol. 13, no. 2 (2010): 180–98. https://doi.org/10.2752/175470710X12735884220899. Seunghye Cho, "Empathic Design Approaches for the Development of Adaptive Wear," *International Textile and Apparel Association Annual Conference Proceedings*, Vol. 78, no. 1 (2022), doi: https://doi.org/10.31274/itaa.13296.

9. Katherine Townsend and Ania Sadkowska, "Re-Making Fashion Experience: A Model for 'Participatory Research through Clothing Design," *Journal of Arts & Communities*, Vol. 11, no. 1–2 (2020): 13–33. https://doi.org/10.1386/jaac_00012_1.

Academic Year 2●23-2●24: Design Thinking

During the first year, a group of eleven second-year fashion design students was tasked with creating the "dream outfits" for a group of thirteen guests from the daycare center. The group consisted of males and females, between 24 and 65, with moderate-to-severe cognitive impairments. Some of the participants also have diagnosis of complex physical and neurological impairments such as diplegia, hemiplegia, or epilepsy, or genetic conditions such as Down's syndrome. The outfits were to be designed based, as much as possible, on the final wearers' desires; unsurprisingly, they turned out to be very different from any of the garments they owned. When she was interviewed on the project, S., a 24-year-old girl, described the entire experience as "a sequin dress with high heels". S.' diagnosis of spastic diplegia and severe epilepsy, both of which can lead to sudden losses of balance and falls, means that wearing such an outfit recurrently would indeed be impractical; the reasons why she can't wear it on occasions, and indeed doesn't even own it, are much less clear.

The assignment was carried out following the various steps of Design Thinking: empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test. The empathizing step was divided in two stages: initially, the students were invited to take part in a series of mutual acquaintance and contextual inquiry meetings at the daycare center. These sessions were conducted within a precise educational setting, to help both parties overcome the embarrassment of connecting with people they did not know and, as required by some of the participants' conditions, communicating through mediation. Entering the daycare center, observing its spaces and activities, and dismantling stereotypes and cliches, was also a way to symbolically break the wall that separates disabled people from the rest of the world. The second stage consisted of two open atelier meetings focused on games and brainstorming activities. These meetings enabled the students to become better acquainted with the distinctive personalities of the daycare center guests, while also gathering elements that could be useful for creating the outfits. Questions such as "What is your favorite season?" or "What would be your ideal day?" were answered through image research and collages, which enabled responses also from non-verbal participants and later served as moodboards for the designs. Boundary-free answers such as "My ideal day is that of my wedding with Brad Pitt" were met with particular enthusiasm, as they paved the way for unconventional yet specific research.

The students responded well to these meetings. Professor Laura Masciadri, in charge of the project together with Professor Barbara Mazzone, described them as

> More like family gatherings than actual work, though work was indeed getting done. The students would leave the classrooms and enter a space that felt more like a domestic sphere than a professional environment. Here, they were welcomed with enthusiasm by the daycare center guests, who soon enough began to feel like family.

The definition phase took place in the school. The daycare center guests physically entered the fashion realm that had, so far, systematically closed its doors to them: just like the students had had the opportunity to visit and experience the environment of the daycare center, it was now their turn to see where the students worked and spent most of their time. They were shown textiles, patterns, and sewing machines, and were invited to try on pre-existing garments. Given that most of them had never had the opportunity to select and try on fashionable clothes, this phase was particularly emotional: a genuine and unfiltered fashion experience. In the ideating phase, the guests began to outline their ideal dress and desired outfit. This proved to be rather challenging, for various reasons. On one hand, many found it hard to express and communicate their thoughts. On the other hand, a lifetime of little to no access to fashion and having their clothes chosen for them made it difficult to visualize and describe an ideal outfit. To facilitate their choice, they were presented with a wide range of images and clothes that could be upcycled or adapted. After having received a "brief" from each of the guests, the students worked on a "pitch". In some cases, they proposed a re-styling of pre-existing garments through various techniques (i.e., customization, patchwork, tie-dye, prints), in others, they sketched entirely new clothes. A few of the guests were wearing helmets to protect their heads in case of sudden epileptic seizures, and the students offered to customize them with embroideries and other decorative details. Others had bibs, often decorated like the ones of newborns; the students presented them with more adult alternatives such as

neckerchiefs and bandanas.

Figure 1: Atelier meetings between IUAD students and the guests of daycare center Il Melograno.
Communication was carried out through images and pictures to facilitate non-verbal participants[10]

One of the guests, M., a middle-aged woman with a moderate cognitive impairment, specifically asked for a bridal gown. It's worth noting that, when I interviewed her the following year, M. returned to the idea of wanting a bridal gown, but also broadened the concept: she lamented not having elegant, feminine clothes, and finding it hard to wear anything besides simple shirts and pants because of the spastic plegia that affects her arm. In this sense, the bridal gown is not, as one might think, simply a dress to wear at the wedding that she never had, but rather the embodiment of the ultra-feminine elegance that she had been denied and had, so far, not been able to claim for herself. In the weeks that followed, the students worked on the prototyping phase, occasionally meeting the guests for fittings and to define specific elements such as fabrics, colors, and prints. Fashion design professors assisted with the more complicated creations Professor Barbara Mazzone observed:

> From a strictly didactic point of view, it was a valuable experience for the students to be confronted with physicalities that do not conform to the standard normative size chart they are generally accustomed to. In addition, they were challenged to come up with functional solutions: lengths that didn't compromise practicality, closures that could facilitate putting on the garment, accessories and applications that wouldn't risk endangering those with specific pathologies.

Despite this not being a specific assignment, as a result of the empathic connection that was established students began to reflect and integrate accessibility's features in a natural, spontaneous way.

The testing phase was carried out by means of a fashion shoot during which the daycare center guests modeled their new outfits. The students were involved in styling, hair, and make-up. It was another very emotional stage of the project: as the guests posed in front of the cameras, dressed up in their dream outfits, and with their hair and make-up done, the focus shifted from their pathology allowing them to see themselves differently from what they were used to. The students, on the other hand, witnessed

10. All photos courtesy of IUAD, no copyright or credit required.

firsthand the transformative power of fashion: the simple act of wearing something that you like and that flatters you can entirely change your mood and attitude, redefining both the way you see yourself and how others perceive you. Something that future fashion designers should keep in mind when they start designing collections. The final challenge was to showcase the project to the outside world, once again ideally breaking the wall that too often divides disabled people from the rest of society. The photos taken during the photoshoot were exhibited in an event attended by local press and political institutions, and later published in a catalogue. The exhibition was titled *Come as you are*, like the well-known song from the 1990s band Nirvana. Large-scale prints of backstage images can be seen today in the entrance lobby of IUAD — a constant reminder of how fashion can potentially change not just our physical appearance but also broaden cultural and social perspectives.

Figure 2: Catalogues of the "Come As You Are" exhibition. The concept was designed by the staff of Il Melograno, while catalogues were done by a group of IUAD communication design students

Academic Year 2●24–2●25: Co-Creating

While the first chapter had been focused on encounters — getting to know one another, breaking stereotypes, and redefining beauty as well as the purpose of fashion — the second chapter focused on co-creation, with fashion design students and disabled individuals working side by side. The assignment was again creating a garment for the daycare center guests, this time not a "dream outfit", but beautiful, well-made clothing for everyday wear. The stages of the process mirrored the ones of co-creation as a design practice: insight gathering, co-ideation, co-design (concept development and prototyping), testing. Guests from the daycare center (the same as the previous year plus another two) met a new group of second-year fashion design students. More students were involved than in the previous year. One of them, Benedetta Panuccio, explained her motivation:

> I went to see last year's exhibition. I also spoke with students who had worked on the project. They told me about the challenges, mainly communication and navigating behaviors re-

lated to cognitive issues, but they also said it was unlike anything else they had done. That made me want to be involved.

The guests were invited to choose the student (or pair of students) they wanted to work with: a meaningful moment from a pedagogical standpoint. One of the students, Eleonora Mauri, highlighted the meaningful aspect of "being chosen" as something that instilled a sense of responsibility and commitment. Insight gathering was focused on assessing the guests' needs and emotions and understanding which garment. To facilitate both the choice and communication with non-verbal participants, they were presented with four options: handbag, t-shirt, sweater, trousers. Once the choice was made, the groups collaborated in participatory design sessions to develop the final concept. This involved image research and numerous conversations.

Figure 3: IUAD students and guests from the daycare center Il Melograno working together

Over several weeks, the teams met regularly in the school, each group working on their garment. The project's outcomes are, in many ways, surprising. As a result of "designing with" instead of "designing for", once again many designs naturally integrate adaptive features, despite this not being a specific assignment. A sweater for M., a young woman with a large body, features an oversized fit, large sleeves, and a wide collar, making it easy and comfortable to wear. At the same time, the precise pattern, well-cut silhouette, and custom print keep it stylish and intentional, avoiding any slouchy or generic look.

A t-shirt created for R., an elderly woman with Down's syndrome, features her pastel-color drawings on the front and a longer back panel. As Professor Mazzone explained:

> R. is rather short and has a style that could be perceived as childish, nonetheless, she's a grown woman. The cropped front and delicate drawing match her style and size, while the longer back panel keeps her bum covered — as most adult women would prefer.

Figure 4: A sweater created for and customized by M., a woman with a large body and fine-motoric issues. The oversize fit, large sleeves and wide collar make it easy to wear, while the precise pattern and well-cut silhouette keep it stylish and intentional

The widened armholes also make the t-shirt easier to put on.

Figure 5: A t-shirt created for R., an elderly woman with Down syndrome, designed to match both her taste and physical features. The t-shirt features a pastel-color drawing on the front (made by R.) and a longer back panel

Other garments, while not adaptive by design, reflect a unique blend of a non-traditional fashion sense with the professional input of a designer. One example is a minidress created for S., a woman in her forties with a flamboyant style. She requested flashy colors, lace, sequins, and a print of her favorite boy band. This was translated into a lilac velvet dress with lace panels, frills, and subtle sequin details. The adjustable cords on the sides give the dress structure, while the well-cut pattern and high-quality fabrics turn what could have been an over-the-top piece into something elegant and age-appropriate. When she was interviewed on her newly made dress, S.'s reply was as simple as it was meaningful: "I chose." S.' hair is usually gathered in two braids, which are partially covered by her epilepsy helmet. Before being filmed for the interview, she removed her helmet and loosened her hair; as a result, the video shows an adult woman, dressed alluringly, affirming the importance of being able to make a choice. S. also expressed

the desire to learn how to sew and make her own clothes.

Figure 6: S. wearing her lilac velvet minidress

With occasional support from the daycare center's staff, each group explored creative techniques — painting, printing, stenciling — that the guests could use, adapted to their fine motor skills. Benedetta and her partner, B., a non-verbal young man with fine-motor issues, developed a painting technique that involved soaking a piece of string in color; B. would then drag the string on the fabric, creating sinuous designs. Another guest, G., a middle-aged man who used to work as a builder before his cognitive and motor skills were severely compromised by a work-site accident, decorated his custom-made polo shirt with stencils. The gesture of using a roller to paint over the stencil was something his hands remembered from years of working with a mortarboard.

Many of the female guests requested handbags since, despite their age, many of them did not own one; their families or caregivers equipped them primarily with backpacks, which are indeed more practical but not entirely suited to the style and taste of adult women. M., who worked with Edoardo Gaetani, explained to him that her bag had to be cross-body so that she could easily reach inside it with her non-plegic arm. They then decided to decorate the bag with roses that M. could easily draw herself using stencils. Edoardo later commented: "What I would like now is some lessons on specific features such as magnetic buttons or velcro. In this way, I can integrate them into my future collections and make my garments accessible also for people like M".

Eleonora Mauri worked with C., a woman in her early twenties, who was adamant about wanting a Red Handbag. C. also requested flowers as decorations, but she wanted to paint them instead of using stencils. Her physical impediments caused her to make some stains on the bag. This was solved by turning the stains into polka dots. Eleonora and C. bonded interestingly, and spent many loud hours laughing and talking; the student later explained:
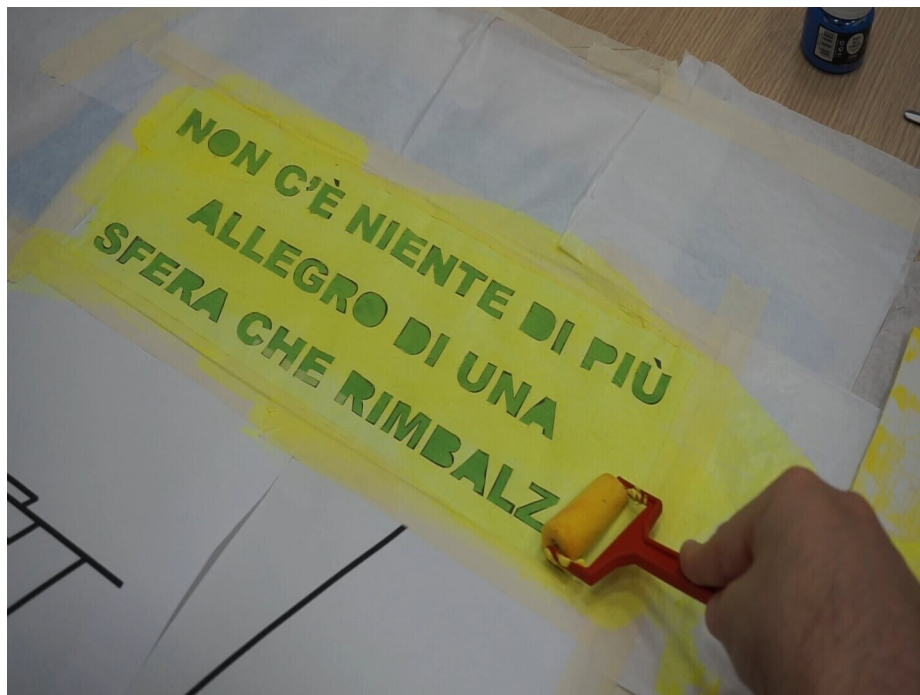
Figure 7: G. painting with a roller. The sentence that was stenciled on his polo shirt (a quote from Pelè) pays homage to his love for football

Figure 8: S' first handbag, customized with her own designs

> She was very sure of what she wanted and wasn't at all afraid of making a mistake or of things turning out less than perfect. I am a bit of a perfectionist, and I draw several sketches before actually setting out to make a garment, changing my mind multiple times for fear of not delivering perfect results. C. was constantly telling me that it didn't matter if things were not perfect: she had an idea and wanted to follow it, and when things got smudged or showed some imperfections, she told me not to worry. I found myself thinking of her, of her relaxed attitude and clear vision, while working on my finals.

Benedetta shared a similar insight:

> As fashion design students, we are always focused on accuracy, which is important but can also lead to a very rigid work structure. Working with B. and getting my hands dirty with paint helped me remember the playful aspects of fashion, and of creating in general.

Benedetta is now working on textile manipulation for her graduation project, and I find myself wondering whether the many hours spent "playing" with B. may have partially influenced her decision to experiment instead of walking down more conventional paths. Making-of contents and interviews were filmed throughout the various stages of the project. These will be edited in a video that will be screened during the final event in September and will also help to promote the collaboration between IUAD and Il Melograno to institutions and potential investors.

Building a Brand Identity

While fashion design students were busy creating garments, a group of students from the communication design department worked on creating a brand. This part of the project was also done in collaboration with 6 daycare center guests who were engaged in exploratory and brainstorming sessions. They came up with key concepts and words that could serve as guidelines, and were then asked to share their input through simple drawings and by expressing their preference regarding images, colors, and shapes. One of the guests chose a dull, grey image of a train; when she was asked for the reasons behind her choice, she said that the image reminded her of when, as a young girl, she used to take the subway. This was interpreted as a desire to be part of society in all its aspects, including the more mundane ones, rather than participating only in specific and purposely-constructed settings. Incidentally, putting disabled people in the condition of doing something as everyday as getting dressed autonomously and according to their style, could be a step in that direction. What emerged from the sessions was a general preference for rounded shapes and the colors blue and yellow. From a visual analysis perspective, the rounded shapes could relate to the brainstorming moment itself (sitting in circle, sharing, being all together), while the colors highlight a combination of joy and playfulness (yellow), and introspection (blue). Most guests also preferred an illustration-like style, and "magic" was one of the keywords that emerged from the brainstorming. In this regard, Professor Lara Angonese, who was in charge of the branding phase, commented:

> I had to remind the students that they were not creating a children's brand. Even if many of the guests related to magic and dreamy atmospheres, and had drawn simple, stereotypical images of stars, hearts, and little animals, the goal was, nonetheless, to translate all of that into a clothing brand for adults.

Three different brand identities were presented to the daycare center's guests and staff during a final meeting. Eventually, and perhaps also thanks to Professor Angonese's constant reminder not to indulge in overly simplified and childish representations, the brand that appealed the most to its potential target, while still maintaining some playfulness, is primarily focused on the introspective elements evoked by the color blue. This also indicates a successful example of design thinking, as well as a proper understanding and acknowledgement of the important themes that are central to the project itself, such as the lack of inclusion, discrimination, and a distorted idea of disability. The name that the students chose for the brand is Tuttuno (all in one, as one), which once again evokes the brainstorming moment that saw everyone sitting together, creating "as one". The logo fuses the central letters of the brand "t" and "u"

into a single logotype, "tu" (you), ideally placing the target (people with disabilities) at the center of the brand identity. Purposely, the payoff is "Vestiamo la tua unicità" (we dress your uniqueness).
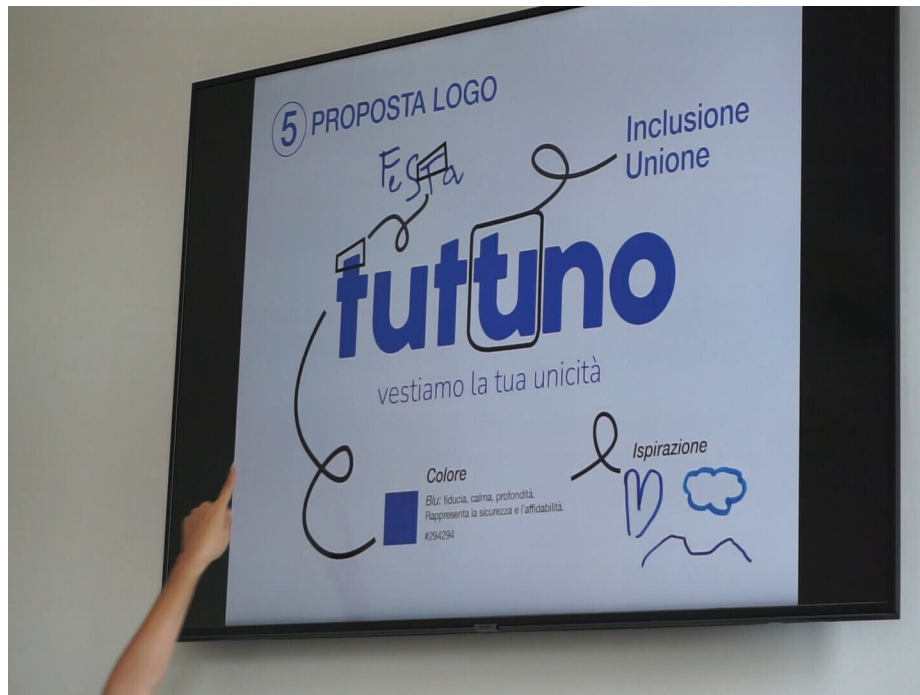

Figure 9: Studio for the creation of the brand identity and logo made by IUAD communication design students. The name chosen for the brand is Tuttuno (all in one, as one)

Having a brand made everything more real. With a label sewn onto them, the garments created this year were elevated from individual creative projects to actual fashion pieces marked by a common signature. The identity of the collaboration has been defined.

Figure 10: M's sweater with the Tuttuno label

The Students' Point of View

Although IUAD immediately responded positively to Il Melograno's proposal of a collaboration, the prospect of partnering young students with a group of disabled adults was, in many ways, met with some concerns. Considering the severe cognitive issues of some of the daycare center guests, the fear was mostly that the students would not manage to create a positive interaction, and also that the project would somehow be "too much" since many of them had never had significant experiences with disabled individuals. These fears and worries were acknowledged. The project was not a mandatory part of the curriculum, and students who participated were warned about difficulties and emotional challenges. Nonetheless, it was also made clear that, despite the potential difficulties, it would be a unique and extremely valuable learning experience. Ultimately, the challenges were way fewer than expected. Despite the occasional communication barrier, which was eventually overcome through mediation and specific strategies, the students and the daycare center's guests were able to engage in a positive and relaxed way, developing spontaneous interactions and new forms of collaboration. When I asked Benedetta Panuccio, the student who had been warned about potential difficulties by her peers, about her experience working with a person with a disability, she simply replied: "It was my first experience working on a commission for a client". Several of the students I interviewed shared a similar approach, while others mentioned it was their first time working on a project as a group. Some did report difficulties, but regarded them as matters of minor importance, addressed only in response to specific questions from my side. None of them felt compelled to center the interview on these difficulties and were instead more interested in discussing practical matters related to production and design. Generally, the students were satisfied with the garments they created. Some perceived having to collaborate also in the realisation of the item as a bit limiting ("the prints came out very simple, if I had done them myself, I could have made them more detailed"); however, others layered the simple prints and decorations done by their disabled partners with meaning, finding ways to integrate them in the designs. New communication means were developed, and everyday interactions such as telling stories, discussing football, sharing opinions on makeup, and playing cards, became meaningful rituals.

Il Melograno

The daycare center Il Melograno focuses most of its educational and rehabilitation projects around two important pillars: autonomy and choice. Many of the activities planned and organised for its guests have the goal of helping them become as independent as possible while also empowering them by allowing them to make their own decisions (whenever it's possible). Personal hygiene and self-care play a crucial role: practices like washing properly, using deodorant, keeping fingernails clean, shaving, and styling one's hair are the first steps towards self-recognition and self-appreciation, regardless of one's physical and cognitive abilities. For this purpose, Sole Brunetti, project manager at Il Melograno, plans on turning the entire bathrooms area into a veritable boudoir:

> It's not just toilets, it's the place where people wash and take care of themselves. It has to be a beautiful space, one that will help both our guests and the staff understand the value of these practices so that they won't feel like just another chore. I want to properly equip it with mirrors, armchairs, and lovely pictures on the walls.

For several years, Brunetti has carried out a "beauty project" with the female guests of the center.

> I took them to the beautician, to the dermatologist, and suggested moisturizing and anti-wrinkle creams. I explained to the families the importance of helping them shave their legs and removing facial hair. I brought make-up and nail polish and gave everyone makeovers and manicures. I also took them to the hairdresser, where they could choose the hair color and haircut they wanted. It wasn't just about looking polished and tidy; it was about allowing them to see themselves differently and choosing how they wanted to be seen. Moreover, it also enabled them to socialize and to explore different settings other than the therapeutic ones.

Brunetti was also the first promoter of the collaboration with IUAD.

> Besides the beauty project, I also took the guests on occasional shopping trips. The idea was for them to buy something that they liked, even if it wasn't what they needed or what they would wear regularly. It was actual retail therapy: having fun and feeling good. From there, I got the idea of doing a photoshoot. I brought dresses, shoes, and makeup, we created outfits, and they posed in front of the camera. It was a fun day for everyone, and the photos came out great. Some of the women looked truly beautiful, and they even carried themselves differently. When the director of the center (Massimo Vicedomini) saw the photos, he suggested contacting IUAD to see if it was possible to initiate some kind of collaboration.

The project with IUAD is based on the same principles of autonomy and personal choice: empowering through fashion.

> Despite their age, our guests seldom get to choose how to dress. Several of them, especially the women, have made it very clear that they are not happy with their clothes. They want dresses, skirts, colors, nice fabrics, and elegant shoes. Wearing them makes them feel good, and it makes them like themselves more. It makes them happy.

Fashion is a powerful industry with a significant influence on shaping societal perceptions and attitudes. The fact that disabled people, a community that has been marginalized and often denied access to various aspects of society, should be included in fashion is simply too important not to happen.

Next steps

The project carried out by IUAD and il Melograno demonstrates the positive impact of Design Thinking and co-creation within the context of fashion education. If embedded in the curriculum, these practices could pave the way for a more inclusive approach to fashion education and to fashion design, and also eventually contrast the systematic exclusion of certain minorities from the fashion system, specifically of people with disabilities. More in general, educating students by means of empathy is bound to

have a positive impact on their future as designers and, arguably, on the fashion system as a whole. At the same time, inviting people with disabilities to conceive and create a garment or outfit that truly matches their taste is a way to give them agency and to contribute to the dismantling of stereotypes which have, so far, kept them at the margins of the fashion realm.

For the academic year 2025–2026, IUAD has the ambitious goal of bringing Tuttuno to market. The idea is to partner with an existing brand and create an "inclusive line" of garments that integrate adaptive features into the design, to be worn by both disabled and non-disabled individuals. Bearing in mind that no two disabilities are the same, it will be impossible to cater to everyone. However, the core of the project will lie in creating garments that can accommodate as many body types, neurodivergencies, and physical disabilities as possible, without ever compromising on style. This will require extensive consultation with disabled people and their caregivers, and, beyond Il Melograno, other institutions will likely need to be involved. Fashion design students will be tasked with the creation of the garments. Potential partners are being discussed, and it has been agreed not to turn to ready-to-wear brands but to focus on the high street in order to make the clothes accessible also in terms of price point. The ideal partner would be one with several brick-and-mortar stores, possibly in the central areas of the city. This is because, besides increasing the visibility of the "inclusive line", bringing the notion of disability within the context of a busy shopping space could potentially contribute to its normalization. It would also respond to the needs of disabled people who, as of today, can purchase adaptive garments almost exclusively online. While integrating adaptivewear in the collections is something that clothing brands should do regardless, it is also true that not everyone is receptive to the ethical value of inclusion beyond marketing purposes. However, a Coherent Market Insights report indicates that the global adaptive clothing market sector is around $18.5 billion in 2025 and could reach $32.1 billion by 2032, with a steady 8.2% CAGR.[11] Given these figures, the school is optimistic about finding a brand that will collaborate and invest. Concurrently, the students who participated in the collaboration with Il Melograno, and who will enter their third and final year of study next year, have been invited to develop a thesis project informed by the knowledge and insights gained during the initiative. The school has committed to supporting them in this endeavor, to foster innovative designs that may ultimately be brought into production and distribution. For my part, I will continue to teach and provide consultation, with the aspiration that my professional experience in the fashion industry, combined with my perspective as the parent of a child with a disability, will help cultivate a deeper understanding of inclusion among the next generation of fashion designers.

Interviews

This essay includes quotes and references from a series of interviews to the people involved in the educational project central to the case study. These people are:

- Prof. Lara Agnonese (date of interview: June 9. 2025)

- Sole Brunetti (date of interview: June 20. 2025)

- Edoardo Gaetani (date of interview: June 9. 2025)

- M. (date of interview: June 4. 2025)

- Eleonora Mauri (date of interview: June 12. 2025)

- Prof. Laura Masciadri (date of interview: June 10. 2025)

- Prof. Barbara Mazzone (date of interview: April 16. 2025, June 17. 2025)

- Benedetta Panuccio (date of interview: June 9. 2025)

- Fabrizia Pulli (date of interview: June 11. 2025)

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11.   "Adaptive Clothing Market Analysis & Forecast," Coherent Market Insights, accessed July 25, 2025.

- S. (date of interview: June 17. 2025)
- S. (date of interview: June 17. 2025)

The insights they provided were crucial for the development of the case study itself.

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