

FROM *MEDIUM TO SHIFT*

The idea for this project, in particular the intention to do fashion design in such a way as to explore possibilities of interaction with architecture, had its roots in work I did as a student at the Academy. This first autoethnographic chapter, therefore, naturally dwells on the transition from my master collection, “Medium,” to the first of the five new collections that will pass the review in the following chapters.

“Medium”

My master collection was a quite typical product of the processes described in great detail by Nicewonger (2011) as characteristic for the educational and aesthetic principles and practices of the Antwerp Academy. One of the basic principles is that inspiration can be found anywhere, in a variety of aesthetic forms that may seem to be completely unrelated, images that can be put together in a personal composition that can serve as the basis for a design concept. It does not really matter whether the concept comes first and the ‘research’ follows, or the other way around. But the task is to find one concept which can be given a form by creating a collection of pieces around it. The purpose is not to interpret or reproduce current trends in a market-oriented way, but to invent new ones that may both capture the spirit of the moment and carry a relevant message. The outcome is not just the product of individual thought processes, but of collaborative reasoning (in the Academy context: with the instructor and to a certain extent with fellow students). Such collaboration requires a common expert discourse with (usually quite vague) key notions such as volume (referring to a set of formal properties that embody and communicate the design concept – often in exaggerated shapes, but also through cuts and patterns), atmosphere (expressing what the imagined world that is being created looks and feels like), and balance (the necessary bridge from the design idea to the functionality of clothes – an aspect that tends to recede into the background in the Academy context). The key to evaluation is the even more intangible notion of authenticity, i.e. the personal – and if at all possible, socially relevant – search for newness which tries to find an equilibrium between the designer’s subject position and intersubjective readings of beauty. And the site for all of this is the body, around which aesthetic material forms have to be produced.

The basic concept for my master collection was, as already mentioned above, paper. The idea did not come to me by looking at earlier examples of experimenting with paper in

fashion design¹, but rather by focusing on the prominent role that paper has in the design process. There are the initial sketches, the drawings, the color studies, the patterns. How far could one take this relation? The formulation of this question was reinforced and transformed by inspiration taken from different sources. One was the art of Thomas Demand, who plays around with interpretations of reality by photographing objects that he first makes out of paper. The perfection of the objects, strangely enough, produces a sense of alienation in the viewer. The pictures are slightly off. Their realism is fake, but not obviously so. What I wanted to do was also to use the flexibility and fragility of paper to introduce slight impurities, laying bare not only the artificiality of the garments, but to a certain extent the artificiality of normal life. Another source supporting the same atmosphere for the collection was a YouTube film by Armando Iannucci² in which a couple visits a house for sale and discovers step by step that everything in it has been made of paper.

Translating this idea of 'paper' into my garments did not only require the use of paper (of different kinds, including tyvek) as such, but also a treatment of fabrics as if they were paper. I pleated, cut, folded, and made manual drawings. Moreover, I integrated Japanese origamic folding techniques as used in Masahiro Chatani's origamic architecture to create unusual shapes and patterns. For print-like effects I was inspired by the crude first strokes of a child's drawings, as well as ink on blotting paper and unwashed chalkboards. (See Images 2, 3, and 4.)

While both materials and techniques/processes were constitutive for the collection, materials took center stage. That is why the collection was called **Medium**.³ It did not only use paper as a medium, but it also used fashion as a medium to explore ways of looking at a garment-filled world.

¹ It was a lucky coincidence that during the second half of my master year, the Antwerp Fashion Museum (MoMu) organized an exhibition around "Paper Fashion", which served as further encouragement. See <http://www.momu.be/tentoonstellingen/archief/2009/>.

² See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nwK3pz1lmJA>

³ The collection won the Grand Prix du Jury L'Oréal Professionnel 2010 at the Festival International de Mode et de Photographie à Hyères.



Images 2 and 3. Examples of manual drawing and blotting, as used in *Medium*

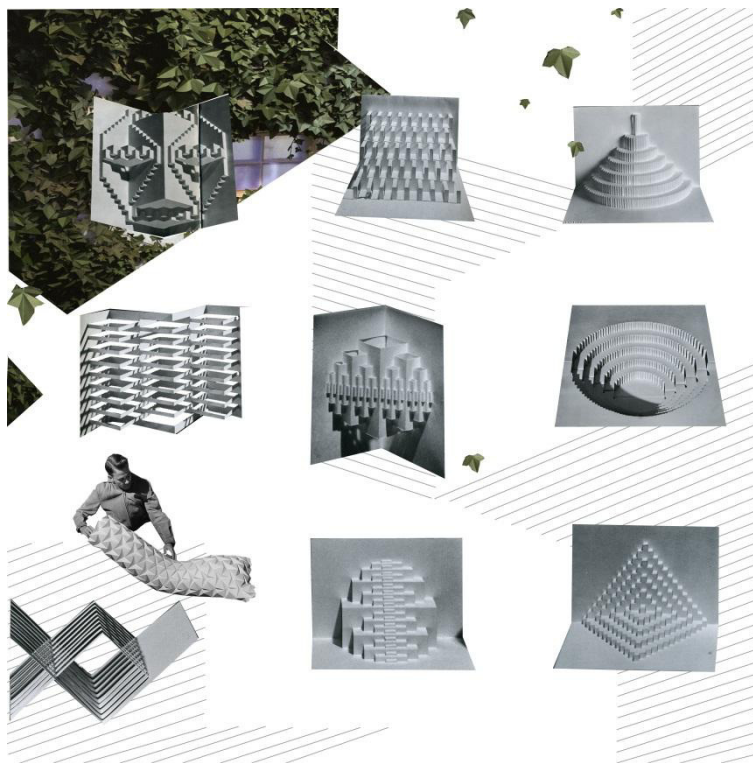


Image 4. Some of the origami folding techniques, as used in *Medium*



Image 5. A typical *Medium* silhouette: Black woolen blazer with cotton pop-up vest attached; dark grey cotton shirt with chalkboard print tucked into light grey cotton trousers with white square pencil print, belted; nude pleated leather shoes.



Images 6, 7, 8, and 9. More *Medium* silhouettes.



Images 10 and 11. Some *Medium* details

“Shift”

With “Medium” behind me, I started to develop the project described above, relating fashion to architecture, which seemed like a natural continuation of the path I had already entered when importing techniques from origamic architecture. In the search for a proper angle to start from, I was first looking for inspiration in modernist architecture (à la Corbusier and Bauhaus), an art form which plays around with simple structural elements to create interesting new forms without aiming at ornament. In a way, an architect has more freedom in the sense that the space around which a building is erected is as it were created by that very structure, so that in principle unlimited variation is possible, within the sole constraints of the availability

of open space and specific materials. It seemed like an interesting question, therefore, to look for ways of translating the same general principle to a different art form, fashion, which must ‘build’ structures (i) with the restrictions of a ‘space’ that is already given in advance, namely the human body, that must be enwrapped, enveloped, enrobed, bedraped – or, simply, clothed, but (ii) also with the extra possibilities that arise from the use of more flexible materials.

I started to look for specific aspects of architectural structure or construction that would lend themselves for such a ‘translation’. This required a shift in perspective (a first reason for calling the new collection “Shift”): I would have to give center stage to structure and technique rather than materials, which had been the focus for “Medium”. The structural principle that I decided to work with as a theme for the new collection was *layering*. What would be carried over from “Medium” were the folding techniques, but in more subtle ways. The question was, then, how to realize forms of layering technically in pleats, folds, and shapes in general. This concept itself, to be given an aesthetic form with flexible materials, evoked an atmosphere of dynamics: layering around a human body in motion involves shifts and changes, sometimes resulting in overlaps, but always carrying the seeds of transformation. Once this concept had taken shape, the label “Shift” was firmly established.

As had been the case for the collections designed during my earlier years as a student, the development of the basic idea for the collection went hand in hand with the construction of seemingly unrelated images derived from various sources of inspiration. Here are just a few:

- Peter Fischli and David Weiss’s 1987 art film “Der Lauf der Dinge”, representing a causal chain of events with everyday objects.
- Ellsworth Kelly’s art, which is an endless world of ideas, colors, images, details, solutions.
- Katja Mater’s density drawings, a layering of multiple moments in time.
- The folded structure of a type of Japanese water bottle.
- The work of Kees Goudzwaard, which typically results from a twofold procedure where first models are made in paper, which are then translated into oil on canvas, with pieces of paper and tape as stand-ins for color patches and lines, as building blocks for the composition; often a layering of bits of tape and sheets of transparent paper create new color nuances; when looking at this, the layering causes certain shapes to appear and disappear, so that the paintings are constantly in motion even after having been completed.

- The work of Jesus Rafael Soto, with striped backgrounds which partly absorb the superimposed images.

All of these sources of inspiration have in common that processes are emphasized rather than products.

Once the label had been established and the general concept for the collection had taken further shape through the images assembled from a variety of sources, the semantics of the word 'shift' provided even more substance for what it was I was trying to do. The word itself refers to

- transformations and changes of place, position, direction, or form (in a very general sense, and applicable in many very specific areas, such as a phonetic shift in language change, a change of gear in a motor vehicle, a change of the position of the hand on the finger-board in violin playing, etc.)
- successive time periods (as when one group of workers, e.g. a night shift, continues the work of another group)
- slight faults, dislocations, or cracks in the earth's crust

A strong visual impression that was recalled by this last meaning of 'shift' and that would play a decisive role in the shaping of the new collection, was Doris Salcedo's long crack across the turbine hall of the Tate Modern in London.⁴ Strangely enough, the meanings of 'shift' related to clothing (a straight loose dress, or women's sleeveless undergarment) played hardly any role at all.

What is described in the foregoing paragraphs went hand in hand, of course, with sketching and experimentation. The more firmly the idea took shape, however, the more I was confronted with technical difficulties. Not all textiles lend themselves to the creation of layered and folded structures that fit around a human body and that keep their shape when actually used. Such had not been my worries when working on "Medium". Within the Academy context, it did not matter for me as a student whether a silhouette survived more than a few shows and photo sessions. I could use paper. I could use cotton, wool, and linen. And if a fabric did not naturally submit to whatever shape I wanted to give it, a good dose of starch would do the trick. I knew the clothes would never have to be washed anyway. Even though my new designs would have to fit into a doctoral project, I did not want to keep designing unusable garments. The real challenge was to combine artistically innovative design with wearability and durability. Or to quote Steve Jobs: "Design is not just what it looks like and feels like. Design is how it works."

⁴ Doris Salcedo's *Shibboleth*, 9 October 2007 to 6 April 2008, Tate Modern, London.

The technical problems I ran into resulted from my attempt to think too strictly in terms of architectural principles. I gradually realized that I was not an architect, that perhaps I did not fully understand the principles I wanted to apply, and that maybe they were not so simply transferrable to fashion. The solution came during my first confrontations with the world and perspective of real architects. First there was a chance encounter with an architect working for OMA in Rotterdam.⁵ A few weeks later I was an invited speaker at the F(AA)shion Research Lab⁶ in Paris where, on the initiative of Jorge Ayala, the relationship between fashion and architecture was explored for architects in order to find out to what extent architecture itself could be inspired by fashion, rather than – what seems to be more common – the other way around. Both encounters taught me that, indeed, between the two disciplines a very interesting *dialogue* was possible, but that the fruitfulness of the interaction did not depend very much on attempts to compare or attempts to use each other's materials, aesthetic forms, or techniques. Rather, the key seemed to be to think of *complementarity*, thus leaving the essence of each discipline completely intact, respecting their specificity as art forms with their own functionality as added value.



Images 12 and 13. Examples of architectural layering.

(Left: detail of the roof of a barn in Alkmaar, The Netherlands)

(Right: detail of the Spanish Pavillion, Shanghai Expo 2010)

⁵ One of the leading partners of OMA (Office for Metropolitan Architecture) is world-famous architect Rem Koolhaas.

⁶ Organized on 21-31 March 2011 in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, by the London-based Architectural Association (AA) School of Architecture.

Once I understood this, the translation of the idea of layering into the collection “Shift” became easy. I no longer had to think about layering as an architectural principle, but as a fashion principle. The consequence was that I could freely develop a material aesthetic form for the dynamics and mobility that had already become such a central part of the concept I had been developing; that would have been much harder if I had kept working within the constraints of an idea associated with more static structures such as buildings – even those that evoke motion (as in Images 12 and 13). I could also start sculpting close to the body, letting my clothes hug it rather than to move expansively outward. And I realized that I had to incorporate that other aspect of the functionality of fashion, namely that clothes have to be adapted to seasons. So I had to choose a season for the first new collection. The choice for a Spring/Summer collection then followed naturally from the basic characteristics of the concept: freely moving dynamic bodies are more readily associated with warm than with cold weather. Now I could also define some other fashion-specific design goals: I wanted to create innovative high-quality daywear, comfortable to move around in, stylish enough for more fancy occasions as well, clean and sober, but also with a touch of the hand, the kind of fine craftsmanship that also distinguishes fashion.



Image 14. Inspiration for *Shift*



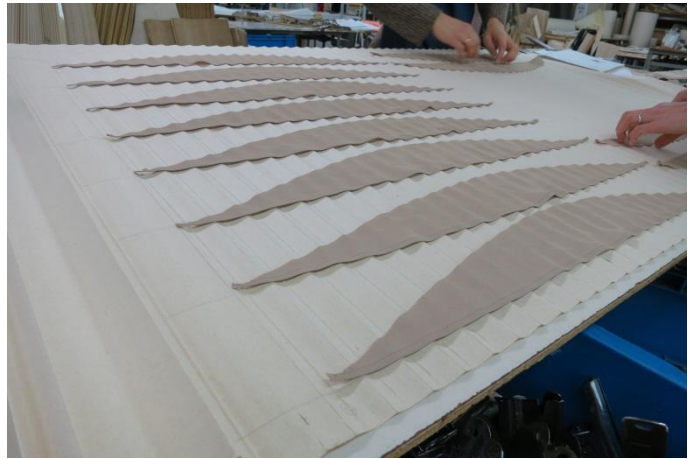
Images 15 and 16. Try-outs for *Shift*

Though the design became easier once this reframing had taken place, this did not mean all problems were solved. Fashion is not only art with its own type of functionality as added value. Fashion is also a highly technical field. The search for a company, for instance, that could actually produce the types of pleats and folds that I wanted to be part of my collection, was not simple. After trying several specialized European companies, I ended up with a Japanese company that was both able and willing to approximate what I wanted. For the folded pieces in the collection, it was necessary to use 100% polyester of a certain weight, and the actual folding requires hand-made paper molds (which take three days to make) that can only be used for a limited number of pieces (about ten) because of the heat-pressing technique. The technique has other restrictions as well: seams are hard to conceal, and the molds cannot be made very wide (maximum 60x90 cm, so that producing the desired shapes requires inventive design). Another property is the transparency of the fabric, which could be seen as a limitation, but which is actually very suitable for the collection, as overlaps and structure become very visible.

The resulting collection, “Shift”⁷, is entirely made of 100% Japanese organic cotton fabrics (except for the folded polyester pieces). One of the pieces is called the ‘Shift dress’, with overlapping (i.e. layered) pleats. The fabric is vegetable dyed. As a result, the color will fade in time – another manifestation of the “Shift” concept. The dress comes in two colors, persimmon and indigo (Japanese *ai*). Another piece, the ‘Trails dress’, is made of a cotton that

⁷ The collection was shown during the 26th Festival de Mode et de Photographie à Hyères, 29 April-1 May 2011.

feels like wool, and it uses inverted pleats oriented towards the body and coming alive when the body moves. The 'Line dress' combines the techniques of the first two.



Images 17, 18, 19 and 20. Clockwise from upper left: close-up of polyester folds; hand-folding; resulting paper molds; heat-pressing installation



Images 21 and 22. Two *Shift* silhouettes with folded polyester.



Images 23, 24, 25, and 26. Clockwise from upper left:
Shift dress; Trails dress; Line dress; Trace dress.

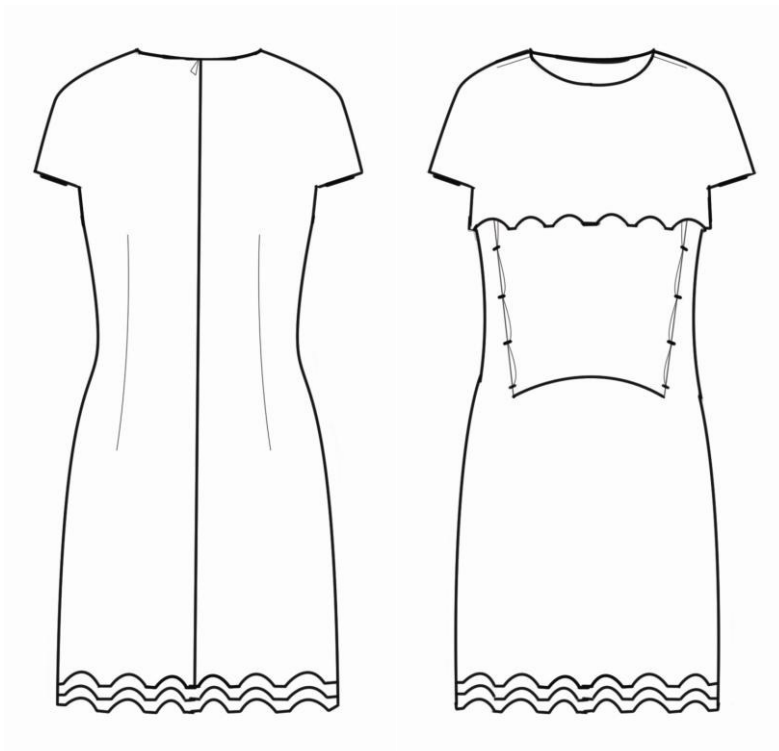
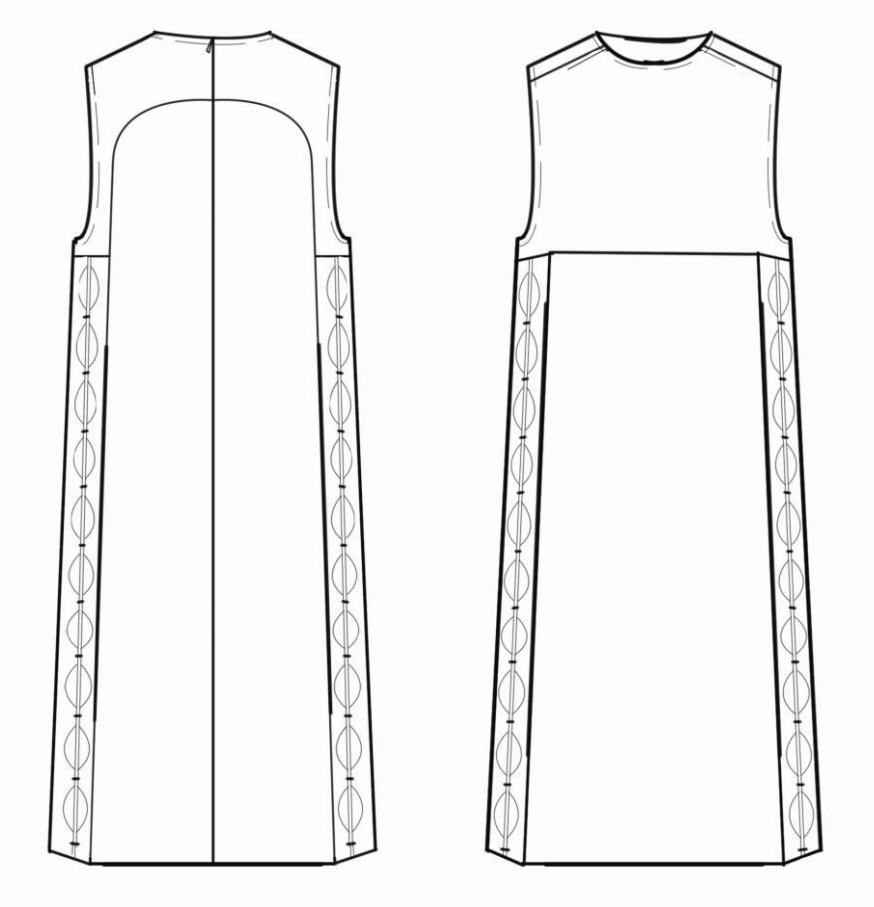
Passing a threshold

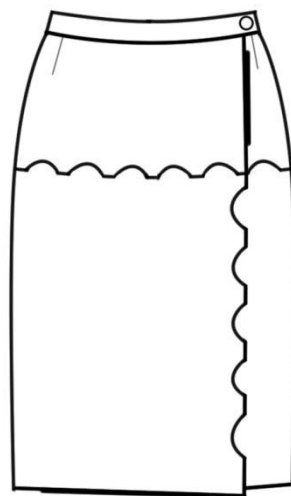
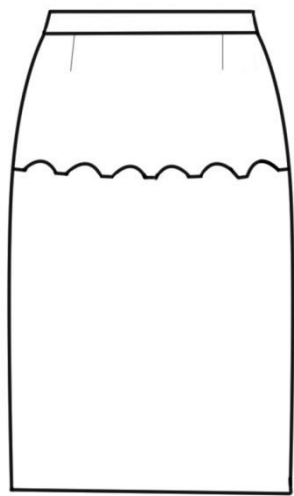
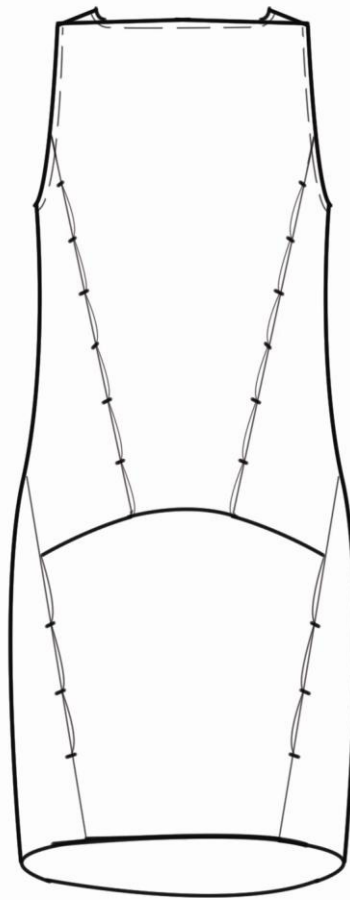
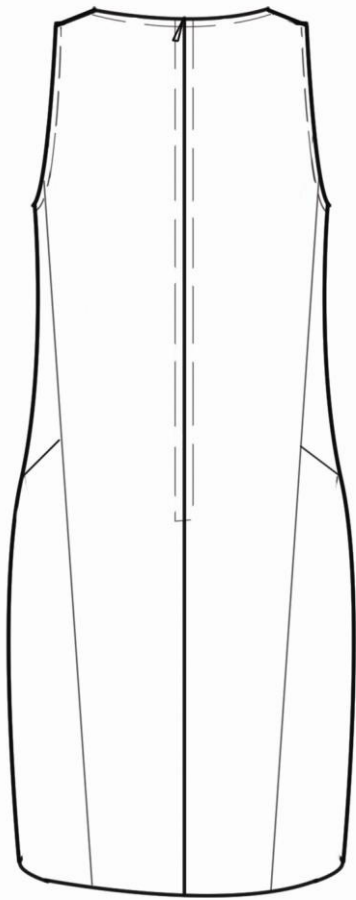
The first conclusion to be drawn from the experiences reflected in the above narrative account is that design is a truly 'emergent' process. It does not move in a linear way from concept to implementation. Rather, design as a creative process moves ahead (or sometimes in circles) in a self-organizing and unpredictable way from (sometimes even purely formal) concepts and sources of inspiration, in interaction with material possibilities and limitations, and with an end result that is more than the sum of its component parts. I will get back to this point in the following chapter.

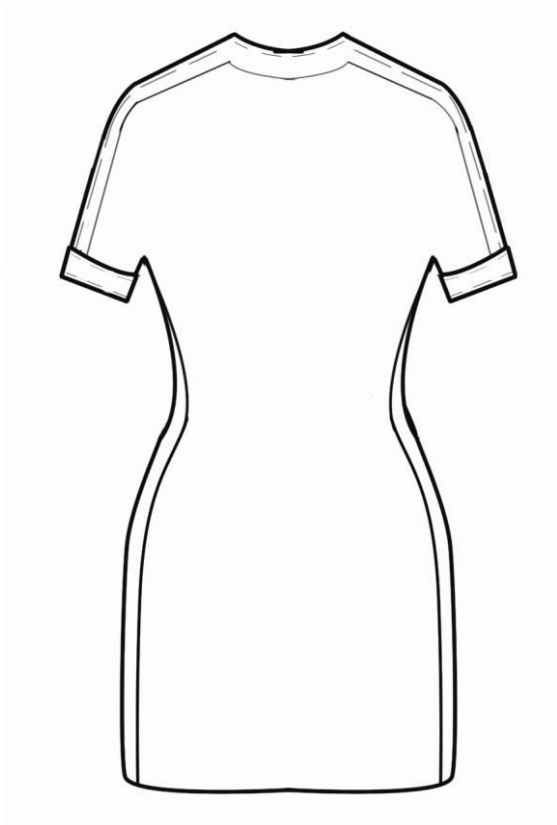
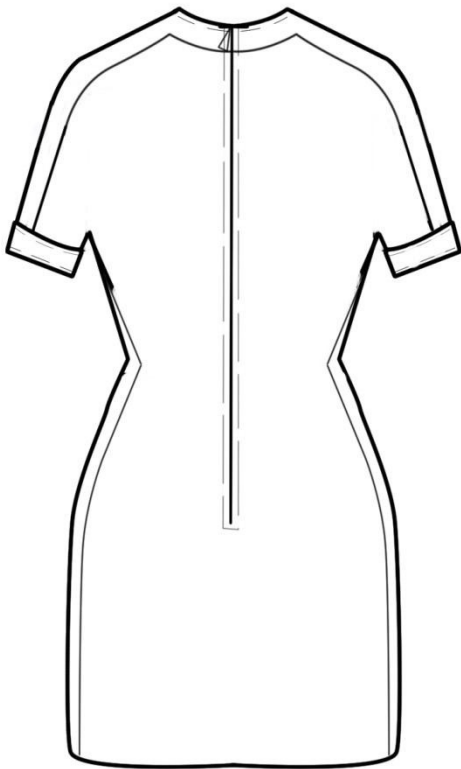
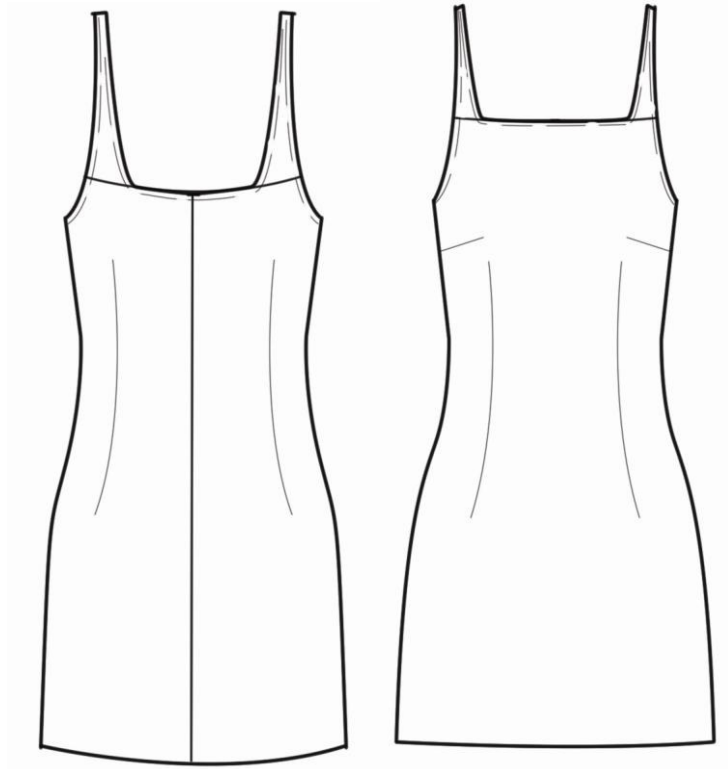
Another conclusion, of more immediate importance since it defines a threshold I needed to pass in order to move ahead with my design work, is that the metaphor of 'building garments,' central as it was to the original formulation of my project, may be a misleading metaphor. One cannot get a direct translation from a design idea to the production of the garment. The first trials in coarse cotton ('toile' in the jargon) are not like the architect's maquette, which allows for a precise calculation of needed materials (in terms of type, quantity, and strength). What intervenes all the time is the material itself, the thread, the fabric, the coloring, the technical equipment. A conclusion to this effect was also reached by Nicewonger (2011) after studying design processes in the education setting of the Antwerp Academy. While the dialogue between practitioners of architecture and of fashion design is demonstrably useful and fruitful, taking the first as a model for the second overshoots the potential of a true form of interaction between the two.

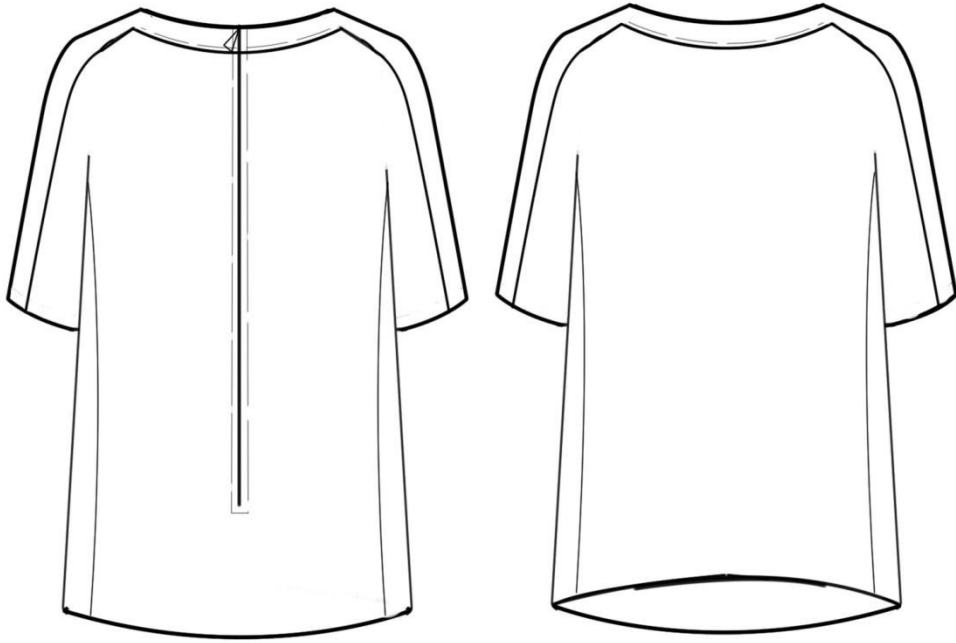
Finally, just as Nicewonger (2011) could point out that anthropologists should not restrict their involvement with fashion to the importing of ethnographic techniques for a better understanding of consumer desires and needs (a very instrumental use to which the techniques indeed tend to be put), and that instead ethnography can be used for a deeper understanding of design processes as such and of the wider human and social context they fit into, I hope to have shown already in this chapter that a form of autoethnography may also contribute to such understanding. The task is to carefully trace the steps that we take, whether as a result of careful reasoning and planning, or in an improvised way under the influence of impressions and influences that guide our insights and aesthetic visions. The outcome is unpredictable, much like the design process itself. But Arthur Koestler already told us that this is what science and art have in common: the merging of influences and ideas, with unpredictable results.

Technical drawings for some of the *Shift* pieces (back on the left, front on the right):









Skirt on display in Opening Ceremony New York (middle)

