



Business & Industry Sustainability

Can Design Students Bring Innovation to Canada's Wool Sector?

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By Tara Klager

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The hallways at [Emily Carr University of Art + Design in Vancouver](#), British Columbia, are jammed with a most eclectic cast of characters.

Along corridors that must make sense to someone—but certainly not a first-time visitor—the bright white walls, concrete floors, colourful installations, art displays, and students combine into a blurring kaleidoscope. Peering through large windows, I see the normal presentation boards and slideshows common to all universities, but there are also rooms with abandoned mannequins stacked in corners, walk-in kilns with racks of fired pottery, and a cavernous space filled with welding equipment. Students gather around work, crowd over schematics, hide themselves away in studio corners. There are inspiration walls, prototype furniture, and some things I can only begin to guess at.

Hélène Day Fraser, Associate Professor at the Ian Gillespie Faculty of Design + Dynamic Media and co-founder of the [Materials Matter Research Centre](#), grins over her shoulder at me. She is rooting through a box, "looking for fasteners." I don't even know what that means, exactly.

"A-ha!" she says, holding two wonky-looking ovals in front of my face. A quick twist and a snap and suddenly, the black, apron-like thing she is wearing is hitched up gracefully on her shoulder, creating a goth Highlander effect. I'm clearly in a place where unorthodox thinking and creative problem solving are cherished.

We are here to talk wool. Specifically, I am here to speak to students about the raw goods—fleeces that have been skirted but are otherwise completely unprocessed. For the next seven weeks, students will get up close and personal with these completely average fleeces gathered from farms in Alberta. The fleeces are laid out, heaped and jumbled, complete with vegetable matter (VM) and a few second cuts dribbling on to the floor.

Students filtering into the room wrinkle their noses at the smell. Unboxed, the natural state of the fleeces is immediately apparent.



I grin back at Hélène. This, I think, is going to be fun.

How did we get here? Emily Carr University of Art + Design is a long way from Alberta. I'm not an alumna; I don't even have a university degree. This is a far cry from the sheep sheds, farmhouse kitchens, and shearing floors I'm used to.

In my world of sheep and shearers, processors and producers, one thing has consistently bubbled to the surface. Most everyone agrees that there is a deep need for more processing across the country. What fewer people are talking about is what we would turn all that freshly processed wool into, if we had it.

That's where I come in.

I didn't grow up with sheep, but I did grow up in a place where some of the largest textile mills in the country kept multiple generations and entire communities employed. I didn't have anything to do with sheep until I was in my forties, but I have been sewing my entire life. I never saw the peak of Canada's textile output—that's my grandmother's generation—but I surely saw the decline. A decline due, in large part, to cheap offshore labour and changing tastes in fashion.

As much as I would like to blame a lack of domestic processing capacity for the Canadian wool industry's woes, it's more than that. At the heart of our problem is a lack of imagination—something I'm hoping these students can help to jumpstart.

Just like any long-term relationship, sometimes we lose sight of the potential of things that are familiar. Human beings have worked with wool for close to ten thousand years. In that time, we've spun it, woven it, felted it, turned it into bedding, insulation, home goods, clothing, carpets, housing, and more. We've used it to build empires. Wool has prompted mass migrations. It has cost lives. It's woven into our history.



While there's a market for local wool in our small but vibrant craft community, there is no industrial use for Canadian wool, no application that could suck up the thousands of pounds of run-of-the-mill, nothing fancy wool that our lamb producers grow as a matter of course in their meat operations. Much of Canadian wool is contaminated with vegetable matter from lackadaisical feeding practices; it's often short and, when compared to the southern hemisphere wool-producing powerhouse nations like Australia and New Zealand, has a reputation for being coarse and undesirable for those next-to-skin fine handcrafts. So, what's to be done? With a growing lamb market, new producers are entering the sector, and sheep flock numbers have been growing. While the average age of farmers in Canada is fifty-six, the average age of sheep producers, according to Gord Schroeder, executive director of the Saskatchewan Sheep Development Board (as quoted in a recent [SaskToday article](#)), is a youthful thirty-five. Sheep farming is a young, growing, and innovative sector. To stay relevant, Canada's wool industry needs to be too.

Back at Emily Carr University, the average age in this room is considerably younger than that. These wrinkled noses belong to third year and post-graduate Industrial Design students. They are, for the most part, unused to considering problems from the perspective of "We have all this... make something useful with it!" I'm presenting them with a problem of over-abundance, a market that needs to be developed. Standing in front of them, I am about to introduce them to a sector most of them are very unfamiliar with, from a province that is known for its—let's call them *robust*—opinions. With Alberta's long-standing dependence on oil and gas revenue, as well as its many generations of agriculture, I'm here to discuss more than wool. I'm here to talk to them about the tremendous benefits that sheep and wool bring to the land through regenerative agriculture, as well as the facts about animal welfare in my industry. As the owner of Canada's only [fibre-specific Animal Welfare Approved sheep farm](#), I have spent years learning and refining my practices, working with veterinarians, veteran farmers, shearers, and others to ensure that our stewardship of the land and our animals is the very best it can be.

Gathering around the table, tentatively at first but with growing excitement and curiosity, the students grope their way through the wool, pulling it apart, feeling the lanolin, assessing the potential. The energy is amazing. The students are asking questions. They want to know about the economic potential of regenerative agriculture. How much wool are we talking about? What do sheep producers need? Where are the bottlenecks? What kinds of products are already out there? What do Albertans need? Is wool really fire-resistant? The next seven weeks will be heady ones, I think.

I wince when I hear someone musing about washing wool in a friend's bathtub. Better to let them figure that part out themselves. It's all part of the learning process.

Now it's time to turn them loose, sit back, and watch the magic happen.

All photos by Tara Klager

About Tara Klager
Tara Klager is a first-generation regenerative fibre farmer raising endangered and heritage breed sheep hard against the Rocky Mountain foothills in Alberta, Canada. With a passion for the land and a firm conviction that her role is to safeguard and steward the amazing place she gets to call home, Tara, and her husband Bob, have worked to build community with a wide range of representation - from LGBTQ2+ to Indigenous organizations to fibre enthusiasts and members of the public. Tara provides a place and framework to encourage discussion and interaction between a variety of groups and people. Whether you're interested in animal husbandry and welfare, endangered sheep breeds, the variety of practices that go into regenerative agriculture and how you might apply them to your own context or fibre and all its possibilities, Tara invites you to the homestead, a world of people, place and permaculture. Welcome to my frontier!

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