

Although well suited to reasonably-priced furniture from a certain Scandinavian retailer, the flat-pack concept is not something that can be applied to most other consumer products. One new footwear designer disagrees...

FLAT-PACK FOOTWEAR

A German designer has created a new concept for leather shoes that appears to have been influenced more by furniture and craftsmanship than footwear and factories. The 'Creo Shoe Concept', by Jennifer Rieker, is a kind of flat-pack shoe. Rather than taking a trip to the shops and buying a pair of pre-manufactured shoes, Ms Rieker's idea is that the customer will order a Creo modular system on the internet, and make and assemble the shoes, with the help of a local craftsperson. The shoe components are delivered to the customer in a leather envelope, which contains a pair of adaptable rubber soles, a pair of footbeds and a pair of shoelaces. Accompanying the components is a leaflet about the origins of the materials and components. The leather envelope is printed with a cut-out pattern for the other parts that make up the shoe itself. The customer gives this envelope to the local shoemaker to make the inner shoe and afterwards, with the cut bits of leather, the customer can assemble the complete shoe – and there you have it, a flat-pack shoe.

Ms Rieker, who recently graduated from Bauhaus University Weimar, had been working on a research project about renewable and recyclable materials when she had the idea of the Creo 'flat-pack' shoe. "As a typical leather product, shoes and their difficulties came to my interest," she says.

"Therefore I tried to rethink the construction and materiality of footwear. I



Ms Rieker chose the name 'Creo' for her shoe concept because it refers to creation. "It stands for the active, co-creating part of the user in the concept," she says. "On the other hand Creo can be translated as 'I believe' or 'I think' and stands for the belief in a new product culture, with environmental friendly, long lasting and locally produced products."

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was fascinated by the idea of a glue-free and modular system for footwear that only uses recyclable and renewable materials. In addition I got interested in finding an alternative way for producing shoes and make the customers aware about existing production conditions."

When it came to actually creating the shoe, Ms Rieker collaborated with an orthopaedic shoemaker in Weimar to design the base. "Inspired by medieval peasants' boots, I wanted the pattern to be only one piece of leather," she says. The design of the outer shoe was inspired by overshoes, which were once worn to protect the shoes from mud and dirt. "To design the outer sole I made a 3D scan of the adapted last," says Ms Rieker. "Thereafter I applied a clay model onto the last. With this information the outer sole was built with a 3D computer program and later printed out on flexible material with a 3D printer. The footbeds are pre-fabricated parts from a German company with an ecological background."

The Creo Shoe Concept is still in the early planning stages and, as such, there is so far only one pair of Creo shoes in existence. As a key aspect of the project is sustainability, Ms Rieker chose her materials very carefully. The leather used to create the prototypes comes from a tannery in south Germany, which only uses cowhides from the region and veg-tans the leather. "I chose leather because it is durable, breathable, valuable and can tell a story when worn a lot," says Ms Rieker. She claims that the outer sole of the Creo shoe should be made out of a thermoplastic elastomer, with 27% renewably sourced ingredients. In her opinion, this is the best material available for a durable, recyclable and flexible sole and can be recycled. The footbed is made out of cork, latex and jute, which are all renewable materials. Ms Rieker would prefer that the shoe laces were made of hemp, which grows in Germany, uses comparatively less water and is considered a very robust fibre.



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The components of the Creo shoe are assembled, with the help of a local shoemaker, to make the finished product.

The modular construction of the shoes serves mainly to highlight to the consumer the fact that they are wearing something that has been crafted, and should therefore be looked after. "Today more and more customers like to know where their products are from and how they are made," says Ms Rieker. "By integrating the user in the production of their shoe, I wanted to make the process more transparent. The user has an experience that hopefully raises awareness for the difficulty of footwear production."

Ms Rieker says that another reason for the self-assembly shoe is to promote regional economies. In an increasingly global world, it is often the case that a pair of shoes has travelled thousands of miles around the world during the production process before arriving at its destination. "With the integration of the local shoemakers in the production process, the Creo Shoe Concept cultivates regional products and tradition," says Ms Rieker. "The Creo shoe supports small businesses and local craftsmen to establish a sustainable and regional economic system. The interaction between the user and the local craftsman lets the user learn about the shoemaking process. Moreover, the user



The customer gives the inner shoe components and instructions to a local craftsman, then personally finishing the assembly.



The Creo shoe components are made out of sustainable and recyclable materials. The leather used comes from vegetable-tanned cowhide from southern Germany.

becomes aware of the existing problems of mass production, by showing an alternative way to make shoes. In addition, the dialogue between users and the shoemaker should encourage users to take care about and repair their belongings more often.

"Through the process, the user knows exactly where the shoe is made and thereby has the opportunity to value the work of the local craftsmen."

The Creo Shoe Concept was developed by Ms Rieker last year, but in May this year, she announced her intention to apply for a grant for young entrepreneurs from German organisation EXIST Gründerstipendium to found a company. After this, Ms Rieker hopes to work with an associate to develop the concept and make it ready for production.

Whether the flat-pack shoe idea will take off in the footwear industry remains to be seen, especially with the disappearance in recent decades of cobblers and craftsmen. Nevertheless, as an academic exercise the 'Creo Shoe Concept' achieves what it sets out to do: highlighting the importance of finding sustainable ways and means to create a pair of shoes. 🌱



In designing the Creo Shoe Concept, Ms Rieker aimed to tackle the problems of sustainability and ecology within the footwear industry.

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