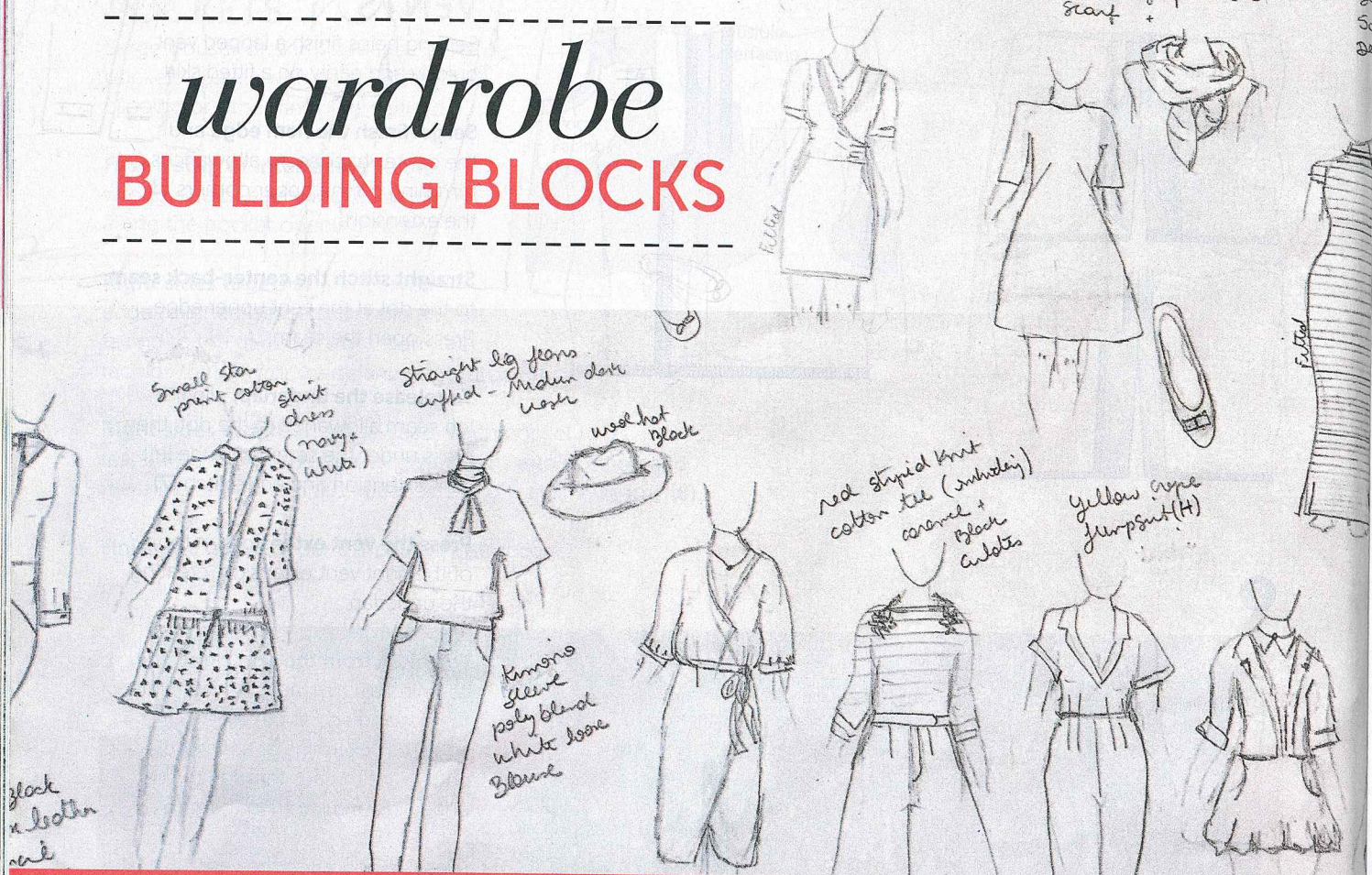


CLOTHES MINDED

BY RACHEL PINHEIRO OF HOUSE OF PINHEIRO

wardrobe BUILDING BLOCKS



When I started sewing, most of my plans were technique-based. I'd see each new project as an opportunity to learn or improve a skill. For my second handmade dress, I managed to pick a pattern with sleeves, Peter Pan collar, exposed zipper, baby hem and (the cherry on top) hand-sewn beaded trim on the waistband. The result wasn't great. I completely ignored the end result of what that pattern style was going to do with my figure. And let's not even talk about my crazy choice of cushion fabric. Although the dress was terrible, I learned two very valuable lessons: Keep aiming high and don't be afraid to learn something new or to sew something unwearable. The second lesson was to be more thoughtful when picking complementary fabrics and patterns.

Many years of experience have helped me define my fabric and pattern choices. During the last three years, I feel I've attained the handmade closet of my dreams. However, I believe it's important to celebrate every stage of sewing accomplishments. Don't look at experienced makers like myself and feel that you haven't got a plan together because you've only made a handful of handmade garments. Every sewist should enjoy their journey at their own pace. Every new seam will be just a bit better than the last. No one can build an amazing handmade closet without failures. And believe me, I've made (and will make) some really bad stuff.

STEP 1 DEVELOPING YOUR PERSONAL STYLE

Going down the rabbit hole of personal style has been a fun journey. I love thinking about fabrics, shapes, moods. I'm a visual person. I need to draw, collect fabric, create inspirational boards and test ideas on a daily basis. When asked how I have created a body of work with such a strong sense of personal style, I tend to say that I pick things that I love. Instead of categorizing what I wear on a recognizable formula, such as classic, modern, etc., I follow three directives.

- ☑ **Does it make me feel powerful in my own skin?**
- ☑ **Is it comfortable to wear?**
- ☑ **Do I know where I'm going when wearing it?**

My own definition doesn't fit one traditional fashion-style concept. My clothes could be categorized as gamine one day and girly on the next, but still strongly representative of me. By taking control and sewing my own clothes, I can challenge preconceived concepts and categories and explore my creativity in a structured way. Now I don't need to sew as much as when I started sewing. It may be a week or more before I jump from one project to another. In the meantime, I'll be thinking about construction methods, folding and unfolding fabrics, prewashing and adjusting the fit on the flat patterns in preparation.

STEP 2 DEVELOPING A PROCESS

My sewing plan isn't just an endless list. Having a really long list just makes me feel inadequate to my own high standards. Lists are only to brainstorm ideas: techniques I'm interested in, new patterns that caught my eye, fashion trends I'd like to try, fabrics and books to review,

ready-to-wear inspiration, my own closet favorites and wardrobe gaps. All that information then gets vetted and edited using my style directives.

I like to plan my sewing projects by seasons, based on current color palette obsessions, cuts, prints, places I want to visit, and the like. For each season, I plan a capsule wardrobe concept and a mood board with four to six garments. Sometimes the mood board is full of only inspirational photos, and other times I add specific patterns and fabrics. Having a "collection" gives me focus without restricting my creativity. I allow myself to sew a wild card project every month, if I'm inclined. My plans are always kept handy on my phone for quick reference when I'm out fabric shopping. If I find fabrics in my stash that match a concept, I stack them together and take a picture as reference. I think my phone and my sewing machine are best friends.

So many times in the past, I'd go to a fabric store, get overly excited about the fabric choices, and get home with the wrong yardage or fabrics I found pretty at the store but wouldn't wear. Having your own personal guidelines built into a project plan is a most useful tool when planning a successful handmade collection.

STEP 3 CATEGORIZING YOUR WARDROBE

Another useful tool is categorizing my whole wardrobe, including my sewing plans and what I buy (new or vintage), as individual functioning elements. Everything in my wardrobe is categorized as either a foundation, key or statement piece.

Foundations are the clothes I pair with my key pieces when I want to look more casual. These garments are usually a bit more generic and offer a starting point, functioning as an outfit basic. Use this type of clothing to introduce new color



palettes, trends, seasonal fabrics or specific trend details. For example, I love wearing turtlenecks during autumn and winter, so I continually introduce new fabric textures and colors, in addition to trying different sewing patterns. Sometimes I will have a turtleneck substitute project, such as a sweater pattern. I usually know how and when I will wear each item.

The **key pieces** are the workhorses of my wardrobe. I try to keep the fabric choices of the highest quality as those garments are meant for longevity, worn over and over again. For key pieces, I try to stay within my favorite neutral colors for maximum wearability. I will often sew key shapes and lengths that cannot be dated easily, such as a pair of tailored

wool trousers or leather circle skirt. For these items, avoid using trends as inspiration.

Statement pieces are one-off items with wow factor. These pieces allow me to explore design concepts and interesting construction methods or use really precious fabric. Or make a labor-intensive couture dress using traditional chita (cheap folk fabric from Brazil) just because I felt this was the perfect birthday party outfit. My statement pieces usually incorporate trends and unusual fabrics.

I don't know anyone that doesn't have a few uniforms, or tried and tested matches. I navigate my different outfit formulas by toning it down (foundation + key piece) or toning it up (key piece + statement). My personal goal is to balance those three elements well to fit within my lifestyle and my desire to create. Using this system, the same sewing pattern is easily adapted to any of the three categories depending of my most immediate needs. I satisfy my creative side by infusing my sewing with a directive to maintain a good wearable closet. I don't intend to only wear handmade. Sewing a really standard basic white knit tee will rarely be on my plans, but identifying where my wardrobe is lacking makes me a conscientious buyer.

STEP 4 PLAYING FAVORITES

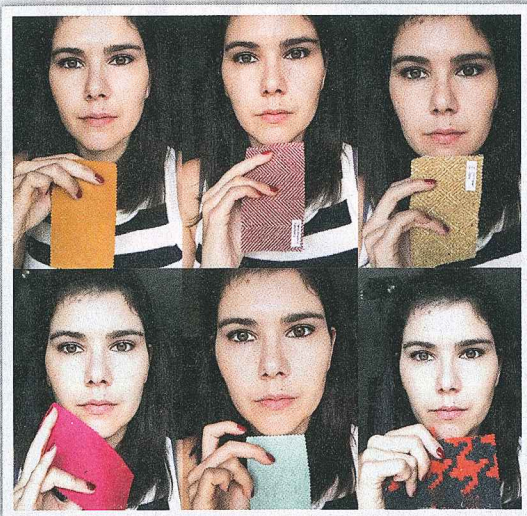
Figuring out what suits your body shape or what colors suit you best is an effort of trial and error. I personally think everyone can wear everything as long as it fits well. Lengthening or shortening a hem can also make a world of difference. It's all about a balance of lines.

Sewing can be a huge commitment of time and money, so begin by examining favorite outfits. Write down why you love wearing them. Visit your favorite stores

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and try different shapes. Make notes of what you like most. If you're feeling more invested, try something I did when looking to identify what ready-to-wear pieces to substitute for handmade. Either take a photograph or sketch each outfit (with shoes and accessories) you wear during two weeks. If you pick a period that represents the majority of your lifestyle, you'll find the results really enlightening. **S**



EMBRACE THE SEWFIE

I'm not one for selfies but I cannot recommend "sewfies" enough — taking a picture of fabric swatches near your face. It's a bit awkward, but this experiment was part of my research to pick coat fabric last fall. My expression aside, what a revelation! Some fabrics will make your eyes really bright and well-rested while other fabrics will make you look dull, resulting in a final outfit that looks a bit "meh". Make sure you take the picture using natural light.

