

Telling a Story: The Art and Craft of Denim

Alejandra Echeverria

Alejandra Echeverria has worked as a clothing designer for seven years, on collections ranging from high-end to mass-market, for companies including Gap, Textile, Club Monaco, and Catherine Malandrino. Though she has experience with various fabrication methods, her particular focus is on denim. Echeverria has worked on launching or re-launching denim lines for different markets, including the 1969 denim line for Gap.

Abstract

The process of designing and creating a pair of jeans is explained by a fashion designer with experience working for a range of different brands. Her statement compares and contrasts the process of designing for a global mass-market company with designing for a company producing high-end jeans locally.

Keywords: denim, jeans, manufacturing, fashion design.

I can't even remember the number of times I explained to someone that I designed jeans and they looked at me completely puzzled.

“What is there to do?”

“Aren't they already designed?”

Designing a pair of jeans is making all the decisions that will make that pair better than, or different from, another. Through fabric, cut, styling, construction, and wash (or lack thereof), you can create endless versions. The more I've learned about each of those categories, the more specific I can be about crafting what I want.

I've worked as a designer for about seven years now. In this time I helped launch or re-launch a couple of women's denim lines ranging from mass-market to the contemporary

premium market. I initially didn't think it would be very interesting to work with denim. It seemed very specific and I didn't want to be stuck doing just that. What intrigued me about it, though, is how it can tell a story. Looking at an old pair of jeans and how the indigo has worn down is finding little clues to how someone lives their life.

Since I started designing I've worked alongside many denim experts and asked many questions about how things worked and why. I also made a bunch of mistakes. I toured factories, mills, and laundries and watched how each step was done. Sometimes I did these steps myself to better understand them or to show someone exactly what I was looking for.

Working for a mass-market brand I was able to visit big factories, mills, and laundries in different parts of the world and see how each place does things differently and uses different techniques. Some factories are more automated and some do a lot more handwork. Automated machines are great if you're doing a traditional five-pocket jean (two scoop pockets in front, a coin pocket, and two back pockets). But if you're working on a design that has different style details, you're going to need more handwork. Different factories in different regions are better at this, and will come up with different ways to construct the same design, but you can find varying levels of automation anywhere, so the primary consideration (apart from price) is ensuring that the workers are skilled enough to do the job. Seeing and learning the techniques and tools used in different factories taught me a lot about what was possible and what I could modify to create different designs.

Working on smaller, high-end lines, I've done sampling and production more locally. I'm able to have more direct contact with the technicians and work with them to achieve a specific look or a new technique. It's possible to see garments faster and more often, make changes or correct things in the middle of the process, and keep moving forward. There can be more refinement in the production stages and more experimentation in the development stage.

At the beginning of each new season, I'll meet with representatives from different fabric mills and see what they're offering. Sometimes I'm looking for something specific or I'm just looking to be inspired by their new line. There may be a fabric that I'm excited about and I'll start to think about what sorts of fits and washes will work for it. Sometimes I may like certain aspects of a fabric but want to change it to a different shade or get a certain yarn character, finish, or hand feel.

I usually have an idea as to what silhouettes and mood I'm doing for that season and will be thinking of styling details to work with that. Even if it's a traditional five-pocket jean, the proportions will be updated. I'll make sketches to decide the shapes, placement, and angles of all the details and stitching (Figure 1). Simultaneously I'll be deciding on different construction techniques that I think will work to reinforce or flatter. The construction that is the strongest may not be the most comfortable. Sometimes I may need to make or see a mock-up trial to decide on the best option. I'll write down basic measurements and references for how I'd like the fit to be and work with a patternmaker to achieve this.

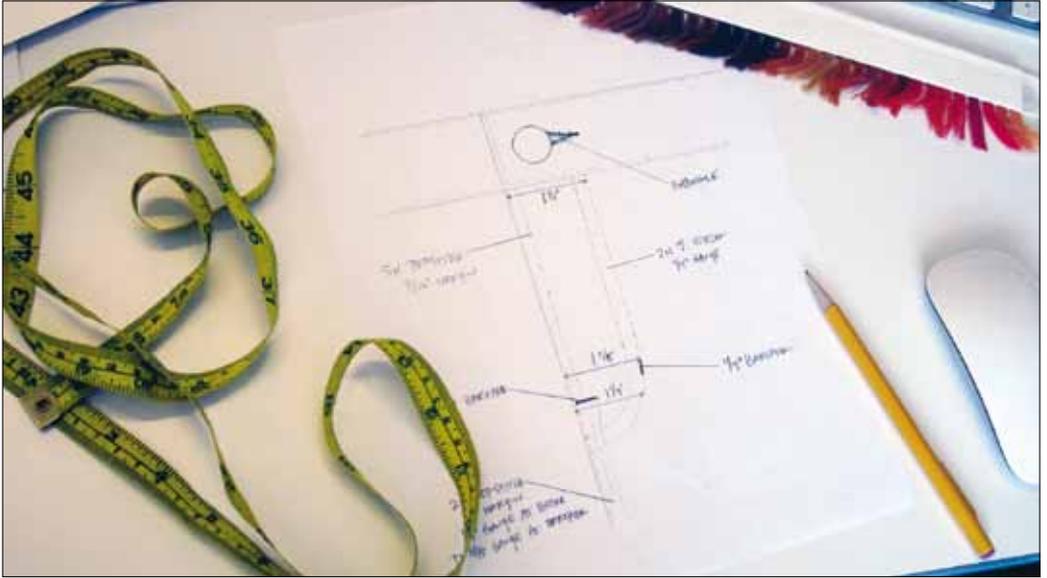


Fig 1 The tools of the trade: Echeverria's drafting table. Photograph: author.

When the sample garment is ready to be sewn, I'll create a guide first. What size and color threads? What should the placement of each stitch be, to accentuate or hide details? I'll work with local sewers on the construction and thread tension to create different effects or approaches that will work for different fabrics, sometimes making examples to pass to the factory for reference. Each factory has a sample room where they make prototypes before they go into bulk production. It's helpful to make samples at the factory and wash house where they are going to be manufactured, so they have the same sensibility, and also know how to duplicate the garment.

When it comes to the wash, the possibilities are endless. It can be based on a vintage jean that I want to duplicate or it can be a completely new look. Do I want to accentuate or hide the fabric characteristics?

Clean and rinsed, or hand-sanded, tacked, twisted, baked, washed, bleached, tinted, ripped, etc. . . . The amount of pressure applied while hand-sanding, the minutes it's washed for, the temperature it's baked at—all make a difference.

Once I get to see a complete first sample, I'll know where I want to make tweaks. I'll fit the sample to make sure it's flattering, that the leg shape is how I want it, and the details are in the right place. I'll also see how the garment reacts to normal wear. If it's going to ease up in certain areas, I'll adjust it accordingly. I may change the design details to create different illusions of fit, to make sure that things are sitting in the right place or to affect the look of the wash. Sometimes I'll work with the patternmaker to try new techniques for a specific fabric or silhouette. I'll make changes to the wash to make sure that the different details are in a good



Fig 2 The finished product.
Photograph: author.

placement and that the intensity and shades are all looking good.

With every sample I get to see, I'll make small adjustments. Once a style goes into a production run, new issues may come up. For example, the shade of the fabric may be slightly different than the original shade sampled and the wash may need to be adjusted and reworked. The technician who's sewing the jeans may be doing something different that needs to be adjusted, or a construction style turns out to not be feasible for a large production run.

The process of making jeans can be very technical, given the way that the fabric,

construction, and wash all interact. It's easy to obsess over every detail of a garment, and there are different ways of executing each idea—you can only decide once you've tried it. I like the fact that I can come up with new versions and improvements on something people use every day. I like thinking about every aspect of a garment and how I want it to be—sometimes fun and playful, sometimes practical and versatile. Either way I strive to improve the quality so that it can withstand heavy wear and live to tell its own story. Once it's passed on to the wearer, it becomes theirs to make their own (Figure 2).