

## OUT OF CONTEXT | KURT GRAY

Move to the Center:  
At what point does outdoor  
apparel become logo-wear?



**Cool Glue:** Bonded constructions show up in sweatshirts at Walmart.

The Outdoor Retailer show in August was a new age block party, the Salt City's aisles choked with first timers and lookie-loos, come to see what all the fuss is about. The show, one of the biggest in the U.S., has become increasingly a lifestyle forum with everything from yoga mats to ice axes on display in what can only be described as a street festival atmosphere. The secret has been the relentless selling of exhibit space by show management which fuels a continual cycle of new and different companies as well as goodies to see. The connection between the participants is noticeably moving away from a highly experienced and adrenalin charged one, toward a simple respect for the body and 'outdoor' mentality, so to speak. This shift is visible as outdoor lifestyle apparel, instead of traditional performance clothing, is the dominate touch point among the participants. Innovative, technical apparel still has a tremendous profile at the show, but in an ever more pedestrian environment, it is no longer the number one show theme.

At odds with this is likely the most interesting trait of the OR Show: the expansive presence of fabric vendors, which are unabashedly high-tech. No dichotomy here, the mills and converters from America, Europe and Asia offer an amazing range of synthetic and engineered product. Where

once the industry reached out to Asia for cheap taffeta and poly knits, now those same mills are bringing reams of cost effective modern performance fabrics to the outdoor developers and designers in the United States.

There is no question about the proliferation of the outdoor industry's design and textile excellence; it now rules sporting life across all categories. But rather, how will this expensive aspect hold up as the maturing outdoor market settles into the malls of America? Or, will cotton and cheap fleece, with low duty rates and third world prominence, dictate the sales sheets and development calendars of the brands? When exactly does outdoor apparel become logo-wear?

The other side of the coin, of course, is that mainstream co-ops outdoor. The design vision of the outdoor industry has washed out to the bigger market for years. But the new hyper lightweight ethos of the core, (clothing-as-equipment), outdoor collections often comes off as cheap to middle America. The market effect? Mainstream imitators merely adopt outdoor constructions and styles while using fabrics they find more to their taste, and price point.

The trend is for more outdoor companies to make casual clothing while mid-market brands chase that outdoor look. Inevitably, they will meet in the middle.

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