

The Architectural Review

'Craft contains the critical thinking that could unpack the current state of architecture'

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As making goes mainstream, the search for authenticity accelerates

What do we mean when we talk about craft? Any consensus around words such as 'skill' or 'handmade' is quickly complicated by a complex relationship with technology. The blurring of disciplinary boundaries and the pervasiveness of the digital suggests a more inclusive definition is needed. For me, to consider craft is simply to be interested in making: to understand things, be they chairs or cities, as artefacts that demand asking how they have been made, by whom, and what their making tells us about the societies they have been made for.

If making is universal, cultures of making are culturally constituted. In the UK, craft is enjoying one of the periodic revivals that have defined its existence in industrialised economies from the 19th century onwards. This context is what eminent craft historians including Glenn Adamson, Tanya Harrod and Ned Cooke have called 'modern craft'. In essence, this is a condition of subaltern alterity in which craft continually needs saving: as faster, more efficient, machine-based manufacturing signals the economic, sociocultural and political marginalisation of the handmade (or at least appears to do so), voices emerge to argue for its safeguarding.

As in earlier revivals, much of craft's contemporary currency lies in its difference from a mass-produced capitalist mainstream, one that grows ever more pernicious and pervasive. We live in what Jonathan Crary describes in *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013) as a world of continuous connectivity and consumerism; a throwaway culture in which our insatiable appetite for stuff is fuelled by unrepairable products outsourced to opaque global supply chains that conceal labour conditions detrimental to people and the environment; a digital world in which nearly every facet of our existence is managed through screens and keyboards, homogenising the tactility of our existence.

No wonder we are turning to craft. With its ethical associations of authenticity and trusted provenance, and its offer of a hands-on engagement in a hands-off economy, craft offers a tangible moral compass in uncertain times. Making craft or buying goods from craftspeople enables a meaningful relationship with the material world. At least this is what writers from Matthew Crawford to Peter Korn and Richard Sennett have argued, in a slew of bestsellers that have appeared since the 2008 economic crisis to remind us of the importance of craft. As the sociologist Sennett argued in *The Craftsman* (2008): 'craftsmanship names an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake'. Contemporary craft is underwritten by a historically inherited morality, one welcome when questions of our humanity, integrity and responsibility are ever more urgent.

This symbolically charged construct fuelled two major 'modern craft' revivals of the 19th and 20th centuries, both of which shape craft today. You, dear reader, are indebted to the Arts & Crafts Movement, whose much-discussed legacy includes not only this magazine, but also William Morris's conceptualisation of the moral superiority of the handmade. Inspired by contemporaries Karl Marx and John Ruskin, including the latter's equation of aesthetic imperfection and fulfilling labour, the socialist polymath Morris looked back to the medieval era's craft guild system to position the 'beauty and pleasure' of a 'fast-disappearing' craftwork against the enslaving perfection of capitalist machinery.

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Since the mid noughties we have been in the midst of another revival, which shares much with these earlier moments. Artists who started their careers in the 1970s, such as the ceramicists Alison Britton and Richard Slee, continue to practise and are occasionally rewarded with the attention they deserve. Meanwhile emerging practitioners are challenging historical conceptualisations of craft, such as the disciplinary-crossing furniture and jewellery maker (and architecture graduate) Simone Brewster, and digital experiments of makers including Geoffrey Mann, Gareth Neal and Michael Eden. They are being joined by a bevy of architects, artists and designers consciously choosing to engage with craft's multiple attributes; from the process-based work of Glithero, to the self-build ethos of Assemble and Practice Architecture. Socially and politically infused craft continues in craftivism (craft + activism), and initiatives such as Theaster Gates' Rebuild Foundation in Chicago and the Enzo Mari-inspired Cucula in Berlin, both of which teach making skills to disadvantaged communities.

As in the 1970s, organisations play a key role in supporting craft practice. This includes the Crafts Council and the V&A, who between 2007 and 2015 collaborated on a trio of exhibitions that championed craft's importance in the arts and popular culture, and who have recently joined forces to support the BBC's Woman's Hour Craft Prize 2017. The contest builds on craft's mass appeal: think of the millions of viewers of the BBC's skill-based spectacles *The Great British Bake Off*, *The Great British Sewing Bee* and *The Great Pottery Throw Down*; the record numbers of craft beer drinkers (and breweries) in the UK and USA; or those jacking in their desk jobs to transform themselves into Etsy entrepreneurs, handmaking goods to sell to its 26 million buyers worldwide.

Yet there is something different about today's craft revival. For starters, the marginal other-ness of the 'modern craft' construct no longer holds true. In 2013 the Crafts Council successfully argued for craft to be included in the Department of Culture, Media and Sport's definition of the 'creative industries', ensuring its visibility in one of the few sectors still growing in the British economy. Similar state legitimisation occurred in 2011, when former chancellor of the exchequer George Osborne ended his Budget speech calling for 'a Britain carried aloft by the march of the makers', a comment that conflated craft, manufacturing and the technologically inflected 'maker movement' in his bid for innovation-based manufacturing, since echoed by governments from the USA to China.

While Osborne's dreams for UK manufacturing remain unstable, there is some truth in forecasts for craft's future importance. If the technologies of the first and second industrial revolutions challenged craft's economic relevance, its compatibility with the digital technologies of the third and fourth revolutions suggests, as *The Economist* reported in 2012, that tomorrow's factories 'may look more like those weavers' cottages than Ford's assembly line'.

Today's craft revival is also distinct in a less salubrious way; its commodification on scales previously unimaginable. Global coffee-shop chains sell us artisanal sandwiches and handcrafted cappuccinos in post-industrial interiors, while luxury fashion conglomerates are opening up their ateliers and putting their seamstresses on the catwalk.



Source: V&A

Outpour by Alison Britton

Craft writer Jenni Sorkin calls this rise of the 'craftlike', a 'borrowing, pilfering, admiring, and copying' of craft as a process and performance, a capitalisation of the interest in the making that goes into consumer commodities. What Sorkin decries as 'soft theft' is symptomatic of craft's 'post-craft' status, in which craft is no longer marginal but mainstream, and something she notes that craft needs to get used to if it is to stick around. Yet craft's fashionability also makes such appropriations potentially fraudulent, as some brands only pretend to share the values allied with the handmade. It is worth checking whether your craft beer is actually owned by a corporate brewing conglomerate, and whether your handcrafted purchases are manufactured as their marketing suggests. This is what Louis Vuitton found in 2010, when their adverts of artisans making leather luxuries in chiaroscuro settings were banned in the UK by the Advertising Standards Authority for misleading consumers about how many of their products were handmade.

Even if production is craft based, this doesn't necessarily make it a good thing. Think of the Etsy sellers who work 18-hour days to fulfil orders and meet the firm's mission to create 'a human, authentic and community-centric global and local marketplace'. Susan Luckman's *Craft and the Creative Economy* is a criticism of the realities of Etsy labour, where sellers' own claims of autonomy and authenticity are countered by the amount of 'emotional and aesthetic labour' that goes into maintaining their happy crafts persona. Unpacking the compromised authenticity of craft labour at Etsy shows the continuing relevance of historic craft thinkers such as Morris and Ruskin, as does the challenge that the growing corporate giant now faces: in 2013 the firm faced outrage over its decision to allow sellers to outsource production. Etsy highlights the mismatch between the slow and labour-intensive handmade and the fast-paced global economy, a problem of craft economics that has persisted from the 19th century to today.

As these examples of the current popularity of the handmade suggest, the marginalised authenticity on which 'modern craft' rhetoric is based is highly compromised. I'm by no means the first to state this. Since 2014 Adamson has been saying 'goodbye to craft' or, rather, 'goodbye to craft as a cause, or mission'. Craft's popularity means it no longer needs saving; it needs 'no special pleading ... [it] is a pervasive consideration within modern life, not private property to defend'. For Adamson this means the individuals and institutions who champion it need to figure out new ways of talking about craft that match its complex centrality in contemporary culture.

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Fortunately the last decade has witnessed a surge of such new approaches. Supported by platforms such as *The Journal of Modern Craft*, the Critical Craft Forum and the Center for Craft, Creativity and Design, critics and curators from Ezra Shales to Namita Wiggers and Julia Bryan-Wilson have examined questions centred around what Wilson calls contemporary craft's existence as 'the pivot between art and commerce, between work and leisure, between the past and the future'. Despite the richness of their writing, I'd just add that we are only at the start of seeing works that deal with the problematics of making in a 'post-craft' economy.

The current centrality of the handmade, and its fulcrum-like existence, is an occasion for criticism not just in craft, but other disciplines too. In this magazine, Stephen Parnell recently called for an architectural criticism robust enough to meet the challenges, and opportunities, of the all-pervasive internet. His account of how architectural discourse has shifted in line with the history of the profession echoes the history of practice and criticism in craft too, as do his concerns around the importance of strong contemporary criticism. I'd suggest that craft already contains within itself critical thinking that could not only help unpack its current situation, but that of architecture too.



Source: Kevin C Moore

Mammy table by Simone Brewster

That's because craft is at the core of architecture. This is what architects from Gottfried Semper to Ettore Sottsass (to name just two) have recognised; the former identifying architecture's roots in acts of weaving and braiding textiles; the latter lamenting the problematic relationship between architects and artisans, as well as exploiting the creative possibilities of this. Sottsass was one of any number of architects whose careers have been based on craft, be it through its embrace or active negation. Architecture history is littered with overlooked stories about craft, ones that shed (sometimes unflattering) light on both disciplines.

Using craft to talk about architecture means attending to important if unfashionable concepts. As 20th-century craft writers from Peter Dormer to David Pye recognised, craft is founded on skill. The ability to perform skill, or what the architect-trained Pye called the ‘workmanship of risk’, is hard earned. According to Sennett it takes 10,000 hours to go from novice to master craftsman. Such an investment seems incomprehensible amid today’s emphasis on instantaneity and denigration of expertise. Never mind the demise of craft-based subjects in UK education. According to the 2015 Warwick Commission Report, 2003 to 2013 saw a 50 per cent drop in the numbers pursuing a GCSE in design and technology, and a 25 per cent drop in other craft-related subjects.

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Thinking about craft also offers a different understanding of the architect’s place in the material world. As the anthropologist Tim Ingold argued in *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (2013), when we engage in making, we realise our existence as part of an active material environment. Architects come up with ideas for what to do with materials, but this doesn’t dictate what shape they take. As Ingold more eloquently puts it, ‘even if the maker has a form in mind, it is not this form that creates the work. It is the engagement with materials’. Materials have a role in making buildings just as architects do.

From a craft perspective, deciding which materials to use means considering what kind of making experiences are involved in realising architectural ideas. As Ruskin asked in *Unto This Last* (1860), where is the ‘affection as one man owes to another’ in the production of buildings? Does his equation of machine-like aesthetic perfection with inhumane production conditions hold true in a world of near-infinite formal possibilities and surface finishes? And do small, self-build projects automatically engender authentic labour? As the furore over Zaha Hadid’s comments on labour conditions in Qatar exposed, the question of what relationship architects have with those who make their ideas is complex and controversial. But it is still a question worth asking. What happens when consumers start to question the conditions of those who make their buildings, just as many demand ethical conditions in the manufacturing of clothing, coffee and even smartphones? The challenge for craft now isn’t to argue for its safeguarding, but to ensure that in a ‘post-craft’ economy the moral promises of its earlier existence are maintained.

Yet craft still needs to be fought for. Whatever its future holds, its current fashionability spells an inevitable unfashionability that has unknown ramifications for makers building their careers on an appetite for the handmade. Trend soothsayer Future Laboratory has already predicted the death knell of 'authenticity', the 'artisanal' and 'heritage' in contemporary marketing. This craft revival may be killed off by its own popularity. But in many ways to talk of craft's fashionability, or otherwise, is a distraction. Craft revivals come and go, but in between these moments of fashionability there continues to be those who choose to make and buy handmade goods, and craft continues to be at the core of all stages of creative practice, as well as central to manufacturing, innovation and technology. Thinking about craft today ultimately offers ways of meaningfully thinking through how we make, and unmake, a world that is entirely manmade.