

Sustainability in Craft and Design

Guest Editor — Kevin Murray

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Editorial - Introduction to Sustainability issue

A few years ago, in Adelaide's JamFactory Craft and Design Centre, the then director Stephen Bowers proposed a 'green thumbprint' to encourage energy-saving in the workshops. It was a perfectly reasonable suggestion. There's no reason why craft and design should be any different to other industries in seeking alternative processes that consume less unrenewable resources and emit less carbon. The sight of smoke billowing from a wood-fired kiln is no longer a comfortable sign of communing with nature. Today, we all have to remember to switch the lights off when we leave the room.

But as many authors in this issue acknowledge, the particular role of craft in sustainability is broader than a series of discrete energy-saving acts. The question is not limited to the immediate environmental impact of craft production. Rather, it extends to the symbolic value of craft as an alternative way of being in the world. An iconic work of sustainability, such as the Lepidoptera chair by Simone LeAmon, not only takes credit for its thrifty use of scrap car upholstery, it also attempts to change our aesthetic of furniture as a sealed unit.



Plate 1: Simone Le Amon, *Lepidoptera*, Chair (designers prototype), 2008, stainless steel, timber, foam, polyester, 110 x 130 x 120 cm.

Photo: Christian Mushenko, collection of the artist.

This issue can be read in the context of recent critical writing about sustainability. The work of Tony Fry (2009) has been critical in expanding the understanding of sustainability away

from purely technological solutions to more expansive ontological approaches. These look to forms of production, including craft, which reflect a more caring relation to materials.

This is the critical difference. Caring is not the same as conserving. A useful complement to Fry's approach can be found in Allan Stoekl's *Bataille's Peak* (2007), which argues that certain energy saving measures can be more a sign of the problem than a solution. Stoekl draws on George Bataille's thinking about the 'problem' of excess production. According to Bataille, traditional societies gathered the surplus resources produced during the year, which they expended in calendar rituals such as festivals or sacrifices. Under capitalism, excess is

channelled back into financial systems and is so re-invested in production. This enables economies to grow, year by year, and thus also expands the amount of energy required to sustain this system. For Stoekl, energy-saving is simply an extension of this deferment. Rather than curb excess, its purpose is to enable the system to keep growing. So how can sustainability be more than reducing resource use? This issue of *craft + design enquiry* reflects an ontological approach that attempts to consider the ways of being that frame our relation to materials. Broader critiques consider factors such as private property, capitalism, consumerism and society of spectacle as promoting the short-term exploitation that leads to longer-term environmental disasters.

While this ontological approach to sustainability is new, it resonates with the birth of modern craft, more than one hundred years ago. As noted in this volume by Peter Hughes and Mary Loveday-Edwards, the Arts and Craft movement positioned the handmade construction of beautiful objects as a moral counterpoint to the looming dominance of the machine in Victorian society. Today, climate change has served to raise parallel concerns about consumerism as an unsustainable basis on which to maintain societies. In positioning craft as an alternative to the rapid turnover of fashion and technology, it maintains its role as a counterpoint to dominant trends in modernity. Hughes extends the line of the Arts & Crafts Movement to the contemporary concept of 'emotionally durable design'. Loveday- Edwards reads the work of contemporary English craft practitioners as a link between the Victorian craft movement and contemporary phenomena such as Transition Towns. Interestingly, she remarks on the changing emphasis on craft, now understood as process rather than product.

Mathew Kiem connects this argument to contemporary sources, including Baudrillard, Bourdieu, Manzini and Fry. His paper takes the form of a call to craft practitioners to respond to the need for sustainability. Kiem considers the object not as an art work in itself but as a thing embedded in the world. Rod Bamford argues a similar logic, with reference to particular initiatives such as the craft response to 'peak clay' in Japan. The focus is not on the object itself, but its role in shaping the lives around it. This point resonates with current projects, such as the Dharpa Djama workshop set up in Gunyangara East Arnhem Land where the Gumatj clan has collaborated with furniture designer-maker Damien Wright to develop a process of using the timber left over from mining operations to make useful objects for the communities. While creating value out of waste is significant in itself, it also promises to strengthen community by facilitating self-reliance, creating employment opportunities, exchanging skill and culture.



Plate 2: Dharpa Djama workshop set up in Gunyangara East Arnhem Land, including (from left to right) Bonhula (Clayton 'Choc') Yunupingu, Djalung (Tony) Yunupingu, Namatuma (Tony), Mununggurr, Nathan Black, Damien Wright and Russell Gurruwiwi.

Ferraro, White, Cox, Bebbington & Wilson consider the situation in Scotland, where they find a craft sector with great capacity for sustainable development. And Sharmilia Wood brings to our attention initiatives in India to make the considerable craft sector there achieve environmental goals, such as the use of water in block printing. These two papers point towards the future of this debate. There is certainly research to be done on the way the sustainable craft mentality is taken up in communities. One of the lessons from the Arts & Crafts movement was how seemingly radical ideas can end up becoming commodities for the wealthy. It required a Bauhaus to transform its ideals into objects for popular consumption. A future challenge is to connect the concept of sustainable craft to products that can help shape our lives.

The aim of *craft + design enquiry* is to encourage research in creative practice. The previous issue was concerned with the role of craft in cultural sustainability. This issue strengthens our appreciation of craft and design as critical in reforming relations to the environment. Good research is essential in turning these ideas into viable practice.

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Bibliography

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