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Resurgent Homecraft, Design for Resilience, and the Everyday Practices of Sustainable Living

Abstract

Centred on the home, this paper reports on design research serving the broad social agendas of affordable, sustainable housing and food sovereignty. Intended to inform ecological design, the project has revealed rich sites of values-driven craft and design as the enactment of sustainable living by householders. Practices of self-provisioning through growing, preserving, waste cycling, re-using and re-purposing feature strongly in this exploration of twelve Tasmanian households. Discernible within these settings is a craft-design interface resonant with Christopher Frayling's (2011) call for a renewed 'head-heart-hand' convergence. The project's backdrop is cast through an initial thematic analysis exploring dominant norms in housing and food culture. Invoked, for example, is the global flat-pack kitchen's role in erasing culturally-nuanced food practices and their embedded crafts, along with the rise of 'green counterpart' consumer goods. Insights and examples from the multi-household ethnography follow, emphasising the potential for homecraft to illuminate values, experiential knowledge, skills and practices bound within deliberative sustainable living. Emerging from project participants' responses to generative design tasks is the potential for resilience thinking to productively unify craft and design practice, and connect diverse domains of knowledge with social, material and post-material practices. I close with a call for all new and adapted housing design to make space – both conceptual and material – for resurgent homecraft, irrespective of tenure, as conditional to living more sustainably everyday.

Introduction

At the core of design research serving affordable, sustainable housing and food sovereignty is a profound questioning of how to live – how to shelter, nourish, and bolster the health and well-being of burgeoning populations, equitably, within the finite limits of the biosphere. The potent notion of our times being defined as the 'Anthropocene' recognises that humans have shaped irrevocably the environments in which we live (Moberg and Hauge Simonsen 2011). Craft and design are implicated

deeply in this centuries-long transformation of our planetary living environment and bear great responsibility for how, and how well, we will proceed to live. As Richard Sennett noted, 'the craftsman's [sic] skills, if natural, are never innocent' (2008: 294).

In this paper I explore the craft-design interface relative to post-sustainability discourses that attend to the flaws and limitations of 'sustainable development' as conceived in the 1980s. My critical point of departure aligns with Tony Fry's argument that our way of living, perpetuated by the status quo in design and the logic of capital, is inherently 'de-futuring' (2009). This captures the way humans typically degrade environments and resources, rather than regenerating them for the future of their own and other species. Accepting social and ecological systems as interconnected and increasingly unpredictable, resilience thinking offers a problem-focused framing of this dilemma. Resilience is 'the capacity of a system, be it an individual, a forest, a city or an economy, to deal with change and continue to develop. It is about the capacity to use shocks and disturbances ... to spur renewal and innovative thinking' (Moberg and Hauge Simonsen 2011: 3).

Resilience thinking has come to the fore in recent years, increasingly in connection with climate pattern shifts, major weather events and sea level rise. It also recognises the need for ongoing adaptation given that 'sustainability', as a targeted, steady state, is both elusive and improbable. As to describing this goal, the term 'sustainable' is often pegged with efforts to make current resource use more efficient, and for people to conduct their lives doing things 'less bad', as William McDonough and Michael Braungart underscored in *Cradle to Cradle* (2002). In their subsequent work, *The Upcycle* (2013), we are urged to think beyond sustainability, to perpetual and boundless regenerative cycles that far eclipse current accepted measures such as carbon footprints and product lifecycles.

A 'sustainable' state is achievable in ecological terms when genuine regeneration is achieved, as is observable in functioning ecosystems, and for this

reason I have elected to retain its use in this paper for its broad comprehensibility. The descriptor still serves to convey the *intent* of design conducted according to a cradle-to-cradle ethos, and to describe the intentions of people who are engaged in regenerative practices, such as those involved in the design research project in focus.

The craft-design interface under scrutiny is that threading through the domestic realm, at the intimate scale of homes, gardens and the communal spaces in between. At the planetary scale, homescapes claim a considerable portion of habitable space and resources, and shape how we live in manifold ways according to their materiality, cultural norms and social mores. Within homescapes, I view 'craft' and 'design' as constitutive of human experience and ability in the embracing manner applied to craft by Sennett (2008), and similarly to design by Nigel Cross (2006). In these 'folk' settings, craft and design are entwined in the making and re-making of artefacts, and the conduct of everyday practices such as cooking and parenting. The entwinement as expressed by Peter Dormer reveals design's presence *within* craft, enacted as 'designing through making' in the case of building, for example, a boat or a house (1994: 92).

The design research project I draw upon, however, illuminates several nodes along the craft-design interface that connect folk design and homecraft with broader design culture and the studio crafts. Three nodes are presented below, derived from and corresponding to each phase of the project conducted in Tasmania, the island state southernmost in Australia. The first phase involved a thematic analysis of dominant norms in Eurocentric housing, kitchen design and food culture. It intersected with a multi-sited ethnography within twelve households representing densities ranging from high density, inner urban through to rural settings, with both owners and renters. The third and final phase engaged householders, who had self-identified as being committed to 'sustainable living', as co-designers in re-visioning the home for self-provisioning and enhanced resilience.

At the first node I implicate flat-pack, commodity design in the progressive erasure of everyday making practices and their skilful embedded crafts, drawing on practice theories and conceptual tools derived from material and visual culture studies. Resurgent homecraft and adaptive strategies understood as values-driven social practice feature at the second node, along with the embrace of social networks

and media to help bridge discontinuities in craft knowledge. The third node profiles the potential of the home to respond to growing ecological literacy, as a 'craft workshop' of sorts in which the making skills and knowledge of self- and community-efficacy are rekindled, and materially and spatially enabled.

Node 1: 'Flat-pack design' and the erasure of embedded crafts

At the first node I argue that professionalised design, in the service of modernity, has overwhelmed both homecraft and studio crafts, undermining the resilience of households in the process. Here, design is shown to have exerted an excessive influence, fulfilling its propensity to produce cultural activity in the manner described by Guy Julier (2008). The flat-pack kitchen, replicated and distributed globally in the example of IKEA retail outlets, symbolises well the dominance of mass design over craft. While the kitchen was traditionally, and remains in many regions, a site of arduous and repetitive labour performed most often by women, its genesis reveals a 'workshop' in which a dialogical relationship existed between its forms and the cultural practices carried out there. Turning to vernacular housing and highly nuanced forms of bread-making as an example, the availability of grains and milling techniques, hearth arrangements and oven typologies all interact in the enabling and reinforcing relationship between kitchen forms, tools and utensils, food traditions and wider cultural practices.

Enfolded within these practices is an immensity of craft skill and tacit knowledge that I term embedded crafts: 'the thousand little everyday moves that add up in sum to a practice' (Sennett 2008: 77). In referring specifically here to tacit knowledge, Sennett pinpointed the conversion of the unspoken and uncodified into habitual, embodied knowledge and practice in which numerous 'granular' crafts are embedded. This embedding is exemplified once again through the practice of bread-making, in which one handles and nurses the dough in response to the weather, shapes and decorates according to tradition or festivity, assesses the oven's optimal readiness via the senses, and finally judges the bread's eventual doneness. Whether rejected as a nostalgic notion or not, the point is that when practices change or cease, so too do the embedded crafts. Obscured by the deservedly maligned white sandwich loaf are a thousand such little everyday moves.

Significant at this node in the craft-design interface is also the logic of the craft kitchen, against the logic of

the flat-pack kitchen. The former kitchen's form, tools and utensils all served to enable a range of practices that assured that the household was fed, washed and clad according to cultural norms. The flat-pack kitchen is instead rooted in the logic of global capital, addressing foremost problems of engineering, modularity, replicability, logistics and distribution. The 'craft' of making is transferred to the consumer who selects and configures a number of modules, determines their colour and finish and completes a two-dimensional to three-dimensional transformation through do-it-yourself assembly.

In the case of the flat-pack kitchen, this homogenising design erases craft on at least two levels. Recalling Dormer's identification of the merging of craftsperson and designer in the making of tools and the workshop itself (1994: 91), craft is first erased by flat-pack design in the making of the kitchen and its tools, granting, however, some persistence of high-end bespoke cabinet-making. Secondly, the modular forms and construction methods of the flat-pack privilege similarly modularised appliances, also distributed to global markets, in turn privileging and homogenising certain food practices over others. This is material agency at work: the power of objects, artefacts and the material environment to co-determine our practices through what Andrew Pickering (2010) terms a 'dance of agency'. Apart from erasing culturally-nuanced embedded crafts, flat-pack logic strengthens dependencies on distant supply chains and infrastructure, with inevitable ecological consequences, as Elizabeth Shove and Dale Southerton (2000) foreshadowed in scrutinising the domestic freezer's path to normalisation.

Resisting the powerful norms symbolised by the flat-pack kitchen are countering ideologies and social practices in which craft is resurgent. The Transition Movement (Hopkins 2008) presents one example, addressing a post-fossil fuel and climatically unstable future from the grassroots, pre-dated by the Slow Food Movement with its triumvirate defence of artisanal food traditions, food sovereignty and ecological production (Petrini 2007). The notion of 'slow' has become more widely emblematic of a range of re-visioned, post-growth ways of living, as Janelle Orsi's *Slow Housing Manifesto* (2011) elaborates. Sustainable living agendas and contemporary conditions of austerity appear now to have merged, resulting in a palpable re-assigning of value to the skills of 'making from scratch', whether of food, textiles or other objects of domestic and community utility.

These countering practices have been reflected swiftly in our material culture, with 'green' and 'eco' artefacts filtering into mainstream markets, creating opportunities and challenges for product design and the studio crafts. Mindful of the accusations of 'green-washing' the public through mere appeals to these labels, material agency offers a frame for further scrutinising the wave of green design targeting the home and kitchen. With implications for craft and design, I draw a firm distinction between artefacts serving as *counterparts* for their non-green versions and those seeking to challenge the status quo or initiate ecologically-aware practices. Claiming a green or eco appellation most often through reduced energy use, material credentials and component recyclability, the former category reifies the status quo; the artefacts endorse current practices such as owning an array of specialised electrical appliances, and assembling meals from packaged, frozen, ready-made components.

In the second category are artefacts arising out of, and inviting or prompting alternate practices as agents of, ecological literacy (Holm et al. 2010). Among such artefacts are those supporting waste minimisation and recycling, composting, 'making from scratch', and the sourcing and storing of non-packaged, bulk and lower embodied energy foods. The subsequent question for design and craft practitioners is how they engage with ecological literacy and account for the material agency of their artefacts, themes I foreground at the third node of the interface.

Node 2: Home-based 'head-heart-hand' adaptations

While this design research set out to explore and strengthen the ability of housing to support local food systems, resurgent homecraft emerged as a theme demanding further focus. It claims, therefore, the second key focus in my discussion of the craft-design interface, and I frame it here as a form of values-driven social practice, integral to householders' broader approaches to living more sustainably. Householders were variously motivated to lower their ecological footprint (in their own parlance) by consuming less, recycling, re-purposing and reducing waste, installing renewable energy sources and conserving water. In some settings food growing was embraced as part of an ecosystem awareness also pursuing biodiversity, land remediation and wildlife habitat.

Householders' homecraft practices observed in the twelve household settings under study can be

represented as a suite of practices, which in turn prompted the crafting of bespoke infrastructure in the service of those practices. A rich site of making was revealed, oriented towards the adaptation of existing domestic environments to better align them with householders' deliberative practices. Within these settings, the practices included growing, seed-saving, preserving and storing food as well as brewing, soap-making, furniture-making, spinning, knitting and sewing, and the making of other decoratively functional household items.

In making the corresponding enabling infrastructure, householders sourced (and coveted) materials such as hardwood, stone, ironwork and steel for their potential to be transformed into garden beds, trellises, whimsical chicken coops, drying racks, compost bays, and robust kitchen benches and shelving used for processing and storing produce. Found objects and vessels were also seized for their potential to enable planting and worm-farming. Utility was clearly core to these forms of homecraft; however, goals of convivial place-making and meaning-making were also expressed, along with considerable pride in having wrought positive transformations to their homes.

In sum, these settings evoke Christopher Alexander's (1964) seminal notion of 'fit' between form and context, but the fit is re-cast in the sense that the domestic 'vernacular' is no longer subject to unselfconscious and incremental adaptation. The extent of householders' adaptation and re-valuing of making their own environments conveys a challenge to, and in some cases rejection of, default housing design and norms. This active re-making and expression of values by householders in the project through homecraft as sustainable living I interpret as one model of the renewed 'head-heart-hand' convergence urged by Christopher Frayling (2011). Homecraft arising out of grassroots ecological literacy has the potential to guide and interact productively with the studio crafts and housing design, indeed with all the actors responsible for shaping our material living environments.

The homecraft knowledge and skills required by householders were not in the possession of all, however, with several participants naming a limiting loss of skill between their grandparents' generation and their own. In response, many were actively gaining making skills, and it was here that the role of professional craftspeople, makers and mentors came particularly to the fore. Several of the adapted home environments had arisen from collaborations

between householders as 'folk' designer-makers and professional craftspeople, the latter being especially valued for their ability to produce *enduring* forms of great utility, quality and meaning when thrift and 'making do' otherwise abounded.

Foreshadowed in these domestic collaborations are the fruitful intersections between craft and design, and the activities of sustainability and Transition-style groups. These are networks in which householders are increasingly seeking homecraft knowledge and skills, and engaging in learning opportunities with craftspeople and skilled peers. In the example of my local sustainable living group, manual, low-energy building methods, woodcraft, spinning and knitting have proven popular for their enabling potential. There is recognition among members in these cases that making skills applied to renewable and re-purposed materials are integral to ecologically-aware ways of living. Craft and design practice serving such agendas necessarily become more interdependent because resilience, as I argue in the next section, arises from diverse knowledge and skill domains and an active engagement in practices through which ecological literacy is developed.

Node 3: Integrative craft and design for resilience

Design and making skills – whether rooted in homecraft, studio crafts or workshop crafts – represent a key thread in the manifold knowledge and skills underpinning resilience and adaptability. In conditions of finitude and unpredictable events, individuals and communities depend increasingly upon their adaptive capacity: knowing how to sustain themselves, and how to make and re-make their living environments and livelihoods. In Australia, for example, the significant bushfires and floods of recent years have necessitated such adaptive re-making over time, with skilled, volunteer 'work gangs' being deployed to devastated townships. At this third node of the craft-design interface I propose, then, two strategies for how craft and design might become a more integrative practice in the service of resilience, mobilised by underpinning ecological literacy. The first strategy locates craft and design within a 'shadow network' of actors working to a resilience agenda, while the second draws on the participatory design concept of 'design-after-design', or making space for making in the context of this project.

Derived from the framework of the Stockholm Resilience Centre, shadow networks are identified as a means of activating and applying social–

ecological knowledge to international governance of the environment (Moberg and Hauge Simonsen 2011). Such networks are assembled to apply diverse knowledge and skills, including often marginalised indigenous and folk perspectives, to social–ecological problems at various scales. Transposed to the domestic scale and the households under study, the existence of networks resembling this notion came to light. The networks extended outward from householders as initiators, into several forms of craft and design practice, interconnecting with sustainable living movements, their discourses and prominent actors. The roles identified across the households included joiners, metalsmiths, artists, horticulturalists, permaculture designers, furniture-makers, landscapers, and various teachers, mentors and peers. Participants also referenced the input of broadcasters, activists and writers.

While the small-scale shadow networks I discerned were not assembled with the same formal purpose intended by the Stockholm Resilience Centre, they present a fruitful zone for craft and design to interact. The approach productively weakens professional design knowledge in my view. It demands more than professional designers commissioning ‘packaged’ craft contributions into projects; it involves working from the grassroots up, for example, from within a sustainable living or Transition-style group. This located form of practice provides an experiential basis for designer-makers, and the opportunity to develop a *lived* ecological literacy well beyond that codified in professional regulations, standards and rating schemes, which, while important, are nonetheless partial. When regenerative practices become the drivers for designing and making, the craft-design interface becomes productively more permeable and flexible.

Applied to housing, food and resilient communities, the challenging of material and spatial norms by householders in the project is a response to design’s ecologically blind legacy of the twentieth century, identified at the first node. I argue that housing design must cease to over-determine and foreclose the everyday practices of householders by normalising flimsy flat-pack kitchens, dispensing with utility rooms and exchanging appliances for practices. Instead, integrative craft and design for resilience rest upon a valuing of what Sennett captured as ‘a positive embrace of the incomplete’ (2008: 430). In this conception, design makes intentional space for homecraft and depends upon studio and workshop crafts as an ecologically literate means of materialising the domestic environment. This was exemplified in the study by woodcraft enabling the transformation of lawn into productive garden beds,

for example, and ‘waste’ hardwood re-materialising as robust kitchen joinery and chicken coops.

Resonant with an embrace of the incomplete is the participatory design tenant of ‘design-after-design’. Such an approach involves the users of the artefacts, systems and environments of design in further adaptation and refinement (Björgvinsson et al. 2012). I came to view the re-making of domestic environments in the study as a form of design-after-design, though of a remediating kind rather than the positive approach advocated by participatory design practitioners. In the role of co-designers of speculative, sustainable living environments in the study’s third phase, householders expressed a strong desire for the home to function more as a *workshop for making*. High demands were placed upon the utility of housing to support targeted practices such as producing and storing food, making and mending personal and domestic items, and establishing systems to maximise the regenerative capacity of the home itself through the cycling of energy, waste and water. There exists enormous potential, I conclude, for ecologically literate craft and design to partner with householders to this end.

Conclusion

This design research and its methodology has provided the opportunity to partner with householders committed to living more sustainably and to explore their practices from the inside out, productively weakening the privilege accorded to professionalised design knowledge, by designers. The resurgent homecraft encountered in these domestic settings has in turn provoked a way of rendering resilience meaningful and tangible at the intimate scale of the home, scaling out in its significance to vast urban homescapes. Befittingly, these householders are now embraced as members of my own shadow network, lending valuable folk knowledge to the project and co-engaging me in their practices and embedded crafts.

At the first node of the craft-design interface my critique of dominant norms demanded an invocation of John Ruskin, who Sennett characterised as one who ‘refuses the present, [and] looks backward in order to look forward’ (2008: 114). Resurgent homecraft has presented a reflexive frame through which to look backward and re-connect making with antecedent practices of sustaining households and cultural practices. Looking forward, the frame positions homecraft as a crucial thread in sustainable living and the adaptive capacity demanded by resilience thinking. Reflecting upon the logic of the

artefacts and environments we design and make, we can ask if we are simply re-making the status quo via counterparts, perhaps exchanging a low embodied energy, 'green' material for a substance implicated in greater waste or harm. I suggest that truly regenerative everyday practices, and their evolving embedded crafts, are bountiful sites of instruction for our practice.

Craft and design merge as interdependent knowledge and skills in the grassroots networks working toward more resilient households and communities. The subsequent remit for ecologically literate designers and makers is twofold: make space for homecraft through realising the regenerative potential of the home, and advocate for enduring artefacts of great utility and meaning as you re-materialise the home as an enabling workshop.

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