

# Making leaders/curating maker cultures

by Dr Paul Harper and Professor Alice Kettle

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This workshop addressed two parallel or interrelated strands. Firstly, we set out to explore the underexploited potential of craft makers as leaders and the value of creative maker practices in developing qualities that contribute to good leadership, not just within the contemporary craft world, but in wider work and social contexts. Closely allied to this aim we looked at an area where leadership in relation to craft, manifests itself clearly, in contemporary developments in maker ecologies – networks, clusters and communities of makers and the evolving phenomena of ‘maker spaces’.

In introducing the papers it might be useful to revisit our original thinking, which we had imagined would frame both the submissions and the discussion that took place in the workshop.

We have been part of Craftnet, which is an independent network that promotes leadership and strategic development for contemporary craft. Core group members are individuals who represent a variety of viewpoints from the contemporary craft world. The idea of leadership - what it is; how it works and how it might serve the development of craft is naturally at the heart of what we want to do. The group had been considering developing a research proposal relating to leadership, and we felt that an area that was ripe for further exploration was that of ‘makers as leaders’. When we first discussed the idea of makers as leaders we were focused primarily on the role of artists and craftspeople as leaders within the art/craft world – whether as curators, critics or teachers shaping the discourse around making, or as institutional leaders, creating opportunities, influencing policy etc. Over the last couple of decades we have seen artist-led initiatives become a central part of the arts infrastructure and it is perhaps here that makers as good, creative leaders have been most obviously cultivated and made evident. As we began to clarify our thinking, and with reference to some of the recent literature on Craft (see Sennett, 2008), we began to feel that if we recognise that the skills, values and qualities that are carefully learned and nurtured through creative practice have gained credence within the art world, might we not also assert their usefulness in other leadership situations?

Makers are perhaps not popularly considered the kind of people who typically occupy spheres of leadership. Craft is commonly associated with the romantic idea of the maker - as a narrowly focussed specialist, perhaps somewhat taciturn in nature, deploying their on-going skill through relatively stable practices of production and consumption.

But in this strand we are asserting that while craft making can afford an introspective absorption in, an unselfconscious enjoyment of work is also outwardly directed - an unfolding engagement that forms an organic link between the self and the surrounding material and social environment. Although craft knowledge is internalised by the individual, it also involves shared techniques and standards, and learning. It does not take place in isolation, but within a network of relationships involving teachers,

suppliers, clients, fellow practitioners, other employment, family, friends and the wider society. Craft practice simultaneously promotes more subtle understandings of relational interdependence, empathy, equanimity, humility, and a certain generosity of spirit.

Although writers such as Sennett have drawn attention to this expanded notion of craft, there seems to be limited research on the subject and we are doubtful that it has much currency in the world of business, where there is a well-developed discourse around leadership.

Most of the leadership programmes in the cultural sector (such as Clore Leadership Programme and courses offered by universities such as Goldsmiths) are directed at the leadership of cultural organisations and emphasise the importance of good management skills – leadership is regarded as a function of organisational management. We have also seen the transference of management skills from business to areas of social leadership. This may have led to a tendency to treat arts and cultural organisations as businesses, in the sense that much of the literature drawn on is standard Business/Business School material.

There are some underlying assumptions. Business leaders such as Bill Gates, Elon Musk, and Sheryl Sandberg are cited as exemplars - all heads of major or multinational corporations. In this context, success is ultimately understood in economic terms, and often more specifically in terms of driving change in order for corporations to generate higher earnings (for the benefit of senior managers and shareholders).

The transposition of this discourse into the public sector is well-developed – as seen for instance in the National Health Service and the Department of Education – and we have all witnessed its ascendancy in our universities. We have also seen the extension of this agenda to the cultural sector, and even here it seems to take limited account of practices of creativity and leadership framed by a range of drivers, not just economic competitiveness. These other drivers might include, for example, knowledge sharing, well-being, concern for the environment, and sense of place or community building.

Alongside the dominant discourses on leadership we seem to have seen the rise of a regressive model of leadership in political, business and institutional systems alike; one that seems to favour the cult of the autocratic and didactic ‘strongman’ – Trump, Putin, Erdogan, Modi et al. This then is the context in which we are suggesting that by recognising craft, not as a kind of thing, but as a methodology or way of being, we could make a useful contribution to fostering more nuanced understandings of leadership and different strategies for developing leaders.

Our thesis is that makers might (and indeed, as evidenced here, frequently do) turn out to be uniquely adept creators of communities, organisations, cultures and institutions. This workshop will explore how the skills and sensibilities involved in creative making are perhaps particularly aligned to positive and constructive forms of innovative leadership that can be nurtured within maker-culture, and which might benefit many spheres of human organisation.

The kind of leadership we have in mind can be seen to play a vital role in facilitating creative clusters, or ‘communities’ of makers. As stated in the conference ‘Aims & Themes’ text, a decisive factor concerning the theme of **‘crafting a sustainable Modernity’** and of promoting **‘a maker aesthetics of production and consumption’** are the networks, both physical and digital, that help bring individual makers into constellations of maker groups that together can become mutually supportive maker culture sub-systems

thus establishing maker ecologies. These cultural clusters not only allow for rich social and learning exchanges between participants, but can also signal a vital role for makers in building thriving neighbourhoods as well as helping to develop audiences and consumers, thus supporting maker economies.

When the two strands were initially discussed, we had a sense that there would be significant crossover and we now feel that this was confirmed by the submissions. The presentations that are included in this section of the journal represent a wide range of experience and perspectives, rooted in distinctive situations. It is striking that, whilst they demonstrated awareness of theoretical contexts, they are all based in or refer to real world experiences. All the presentations described case studies that illuminated the two strands, suggested reproducible models, and provoked lively discussion.

For all their diversity, in reviewing and reflecting on our notes, they seem to resolve themselves around common themes and concepts. They share, for instance, a sense of craft production as relational, social and concerned with community making, not simply about making an object. Craft emerges as a methodology for forming and shaping social structures as well as things.

In these papers craft is presented as a means to make good. It is a construct for imaginatively and practically making and remaking place and patterns of living. Our contributors described the actions of making, the mythologies, the conventions and dexterity of applied knowledge, which offer experienced and mobile ways to build cooperative and fluid physical and social relationships. The skills of craft were seen as the practical, problem solving, familiar and familial, readily distributed resources that are instrumental in the creation of relationships. Alongside objectives of making things that function or look good, the needs of communities were resolved through craft: Kath Child of Atelier described co-fixing, mending and making groups as well as things; Craft Readers shared material language to connect with the environment, and the English South Western Craft Guilds, discussed by Nicola Thomas, whose mutuality and collective enterprise became empathetic networks of support and critique.

The initiatives acknowledged ambitious multiple desires where the making objects could 'lead' to environmental and social change. Mostly this was expressed through similar sets of aspirations, seeking openness, encouraging playfulness, transparency, conviviality, generosity, responsibility, integrity, and happiness. Beyond Junk in Birmingham, for example, collected castaway jewellery, inviting expert makers to use it as raw material in a live stream making event of skill sharing, money making and entertainment - a hermeneutic circle with designer interpreting their making as social production. They described the importance of the beautiful and sublime and of material and imaginative change. Amy Twigger Holroyd showed how enabling people to design, make and repair for themselves does not only open up a discussion about production and consumption, but also generates speculation about alternative futures. Similarly, Fabrizio Cocchiarella and Judith van den Boom addressed making practices as a tool for rethinking the social and urban landscape.

Openness can require a relinquishing of established methods and recognising craft as an adaptive process that fixes, transforms and moves on. The agency of material and maker encourages a reciprocity and a dialogue between place and people, observation and action, and also between the singular and synergistic/pluralistic experience of craft. What was suggested was a way of listening to material as instrumental in propagating ways of listening to the world and operating as sentient, responsible citizens. This craft utopianism is tempered by the specific, practical realities of making and the context of making. Thus, craft is realistic and futuristic, utilising analogue, digital and virtual technologies that engage and

create dynamic, fluid, communicative spaces between the local and the global. Leading through craft was described as engaging in multiple ways, whilst being present effectively, responsive and open to change. This ecology of making, which encourages material to adopt new characteristics, is adaptive. It follows that the proximal spaces can be equally shaped and reformed.

The benefits of occupying the edges and borderlands, which craft always does, opens a place beyond established possibilities, one that is not fixed and can be constantly reinvented. Craft is never at the centre stage, it does not lead from the front, but allows unconventional, mutable and decentralised ways of operating. The marginalisation of craft within our visual culture turns out to offer an enabling space for problematic and contested narratives. As it was suggested in our lively discussion, issues of gender, race, and politics could be absorbed and played out through craft in maker spaces and activities. This was persuasively evident in Frau Fibre's sharing of sewing knowledge through her Sewing Rebellion; Susan Melsop's teaching methods that create intense, immersive real world learning experiences for her architecture students and in the empowerment of women artisans in Pakistan through the entrepreneurship of Amneh Shaikh-Farooqui. The distribution of knowledge amounts to the distribution of agency.

In these projects, thinking inside out opens a discourse on diversity that acknowledges being physically, emotionally, imaginatively varied, being female, young or old, and individualistic; definitions which in themselves can and must be constantly negotiated and challenged. Our discussion animatedly circumnavigated the presumptions of craft as submissive, gendered, domesticated and yet it simultaneously owned this rich lexicon of positive, important aspects of our three key starting points; **Livelihoods, Space/Localism, Crafts as communication.**

Sennett suggests that a defining attribute of good leadership is looking outward and beyond instrumental ends, to understand and teach others the value of community. Material knowledge is not about being fixed or solid, but about movement, attentiveness, responsiveness and transformation, which encourages the development of civic skills that invest in patience, care and trust. So as we asked in our concluding session: what constitutes leadership in craft? Clearly, there is no single answer, but craft implies generosity and a sense of obligation – sharing knowledge and experience, learning and growing, responding to context and opportunity, engaging with the politics and the responsibilities/ramifications that are part of a chain of ethical considerations. Craft opens up spaces for the imagination – envisioning alternative futures – imbued with optimism. And who is the leader? The leader is the person who recognises and opens a space for others to enter and make.

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## References

Sennett, R. (2008) *The Craftsman*. London: Allan Lane.