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Only Connect

21st century cultural practice, thinking and making across continents.

Abstract

In recent years a number of European and American arts institutions have been trialling projects where students are exposed to short term engagement with craft / artisanal communities in the developing world. These projects raise questions about student expectations of cultural engagement and expose ambiguous ethical parameters. In MA Design; Ceramics Furniture Jewellery at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, we believe that a more considered and longer term view is necessary.

Key issues identified in the day to day experience of our researchers and tutors, are politics, geography, skill, visual language, cultural ownership, economics, industry, endangered craft and luxury consumption.

It is our experience that researchers often join us looking to find new models for craft practice and theory. With current thinking frequently dominated by a set of educational paradigms defining success mainly through the unique artefact or batch production model, it is rare to explore how craft methodologies can provide alternative perspectives.

In the light of the questions raised by the conference statement, it is timely to review a series of projects from the course over the past seven years to identify transferable themes. As with all areas of cultural production the issues raised are not necessarily discrete or indeed easily divorced from each other. For example, de-skilling is a global phenomenon not a disease of western, or should we say first world Art and Design colleges. As colleagues will be aware, Japan is struggling with similar issues.

This paper will examine how these ideas have been embedded in Masters level research projects, looking at different approaches to high craft and conversely artisan communities, commercial imperatives, long distance relationships, intimate conversations and alternative locations within pure and hybrid craft practice, from craft for crafts sake to craft as an industrial catalyst. These include contemporary artefacts realised from a diverse range of sources; Brazilian ceramics; dug earth ware to bourgeois dining, Thai Niello jewellery; using rural and urban production, Guyanese Wai Wai weaving and mass production thinking, silver and gold wrapped furniture from Jaipur, San People and Botswana silver casting NGO projects, Taiwanese re-commercialisation of rural Chinese embroideries, the silk road re-visited through historic Persian enamelling, cross cultural ceramic practice between Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Japan, endangered European silver filigree and traditional Korean high craft furniture informing industrial innovation.

These examples are defined by a moment in time where researchers have begun to explore a new approach to thinking about crafts role and ability to sustain historical practice in a contemporary context.

From a position of local and global relevance sustained through design and a keen interest in the nature of production, this paper will reflect on the critical indicators from daily experience to examine approaches to problem solving when the practice is resident in different locations, different time zones and often involves many hundreds of years of historic cultural capital.

The Context

This paper considers craft and design practice as a new model for sustainable practice. Not just for the individual practitioner and the crafts as disciplines but as a contribution to the wider discourse into sustainable futures. This paper interrogates the development of projects within MA Design by Project, Ceramics, Furniture and Jewellery at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design and the emergence of practice we characterise as 'ethical luxury'. This position is based on an awareness of the particularity of our location, geographically, historically and temporally at Central Saint Martins and an intense respect for the disciplines of craft and design and their foundation in a diversity of cultural practice and in a range of relationships with modernity.

MA Design Ceramics Furniture Jewellery is a 'by project' two year research masters programme which aims to expand methodologies related to design and craft practice to deliver; refined, innovatory and relevant contemporary artefacts. The student profile is strongly international and tends to be older late 20s-50s with a high percentage of industry and practice based professionals rejoining education to reposition career pathways.

Over its seven year history the course has identified a number of continuous research strands linking the work of staff, students and alumni. These issues echo this conferences concern with critical thinking and design practice in relation to artisan, handicraft and fine or courtly crafts projects in different global locations.

The nature of the course allows us a broad based, extensive and ongoing research process. Students establish, a framework that maps the stakeholders / shareholders and constituencies relevant to their project, tracking professional and research encounters and information, later analysing this information in a structured manner. This real world identity is very important as we recognise if a student views their education as being located primarily within an institution, which is geographically, economically and historically located, it risks creating a context rife with assumptions. Real world research helps support strategic thinking for individual projects and establishes market frameworks around cultural identities.

Over recent decades in India, a significant number of initiatives have taken place to bring students and student groups into engagement with, and to the 'assistance' of, craft communities from a wide variety of backgrounds, materials and cultural positions.
Professor Jatin Bhatt of Edusign and late of the National Institute of Fashion Technology, New Delhi has directed some of this process and has written extensively

about the subject. Critically as he characterises it, our limitations are defined by the fact we are presently only helpful as designers in relationship to artisan and crafts communities within the '*roles enabled and conceived through design education'.* (Bhatt, 2006.) Bhatt discussed undergraduates seeking a design education. MA Design is a post graduate research community working with designers who are experienced with actual practice knowledge, in the subject area, materially engaged at the outset and able to develop dialogues, share skills or information during the process. This model addresses some of Bhatt's concerns but a question we often ask of an initiative is whether this is welcome in the artisan / craft communities involved. As a discussion on 'gatekeepers' later in this paper will explain, answers are not always straight-forward.

Working at Central Saint Martins, a college that grew from the utopian vision of Arts and Crafts espoused by Lethaby, Morris and their peers, we recognise the position of craft, post industrial revolution and developments in studio practice and industry practice throughout the twentieth century. Beyond United Kingdom (UK) 'studio traditions', global craft and artisan practice is becoming increasingly vulnerable. What Dr Marcus M. Keupp calls *'countries that aim for technology diffusion'* (Keupp. 2009) like China, threaten traditional practice. For example, the survival of India's saris and textile production is threatened as computer scanning enables Chinese automated looms to accurately duplicate historic saris and cheaply reproduce them sometimes in more durable synthetic fibres. These are then sold back into the original niche communities, fatally undercutting handloom weavers and undermining the social structures within the artisan and craft communities. (Crafts Revival Trust, 2005) Within these communities emerging generations of practitioners may reject craft work, which can appear irrelevant, mired both in history and historic structures of class and culture. In comparison employment in information technology industries or industrial units offer the prospect of a more secure 'modern' future. Craft skills and the inter-generational knowledge that go with them, can disappear with frightening speed.

A new wave of cultural practitioners from all parts of the globe, prompted by broader issues around climate change, environment and sustainability are entering education, aware that cultural sustainability is a given. Frequently as a course, we find expressions of interest in cultural sustainability approached through projects within fragile or vulnerable craft and artisan communities. This raises a raft of questions about the ethicality and effectiveness of such engagements, which are too rarely discussed. The educational paradigm simply adds more layers of complexity.

We believe developing projects such as these requires a long-term commitment to a community, a craft process and to incremental change and development. This needs to be made clear at the outset of any project. Otherwise it becomes educational tourism, disingenuous outsourcing, *'we need to get into Africa quickly it's the next area'* or even worse as a *'cheap way of getting my students taught',* to quote a British academic. Perhaps such thinking apes some of the models of pseudo market competitiveness rife within UK educational institutions but it is rarely helpful to the recipients.

Currently the discourse around approaches to design relationships with historical crafts, artisan communities, the hand made and social change comes mainly from Governments, NGOs or engaged private individuals. Nevertheless the questions raised about the relationship of design practice to craft and to art, challenge the very nature of design and craft practice. Consideration and answers need to come from

within the design community, including the design education community. This paper examines a number of the contextual issues that frame practice, within design and craft education and thinking, using examples drawn from projects on MA Design Ceramics, Furniture and Jewellery.

Ethical Luxury

We who live western live styles live in a saturated world of mass 'devalued' luxury. We essentially exist in a world, luxuriously resourced relative to and dependent on the lives of others less fortunate or more vulnerable. We are part of the richest twenty per cent of nations and account for three-quarters of world income (WBDI, 2006).
In MA Design we are not cynical about luxury. We see luxury as a suitable word in the face of the politicised practice around the development of craft and the types of social consumption needed to support long term specific cultural practice. We understand luxury as a way of thinking, not luxury as corporate manufacturing. Over the past three decades there has been a concerted corporate effort to extend the meaning of 'luxury' to mass production artefacts. Companies like Gucci promote an 'age of simulacra' where products provide a surface, which by implication, suggests the sensibility of the wearer will be equally refined. In crafts practice it would be counterintuitive to link artefacts to the seasonality of the fashion cycle. The point is that limited seasonal artisan production can make for exclusivity. The market needs to be considered carefully.

To make a sustainable driver for the economic imperatives of craft and artisan communities, luxury or 'high end' production offers a premium price which allows a negotiation of the disparities between the income needs inherent within cross global production systems. In our world of 'perpetual luxury' we have lost the sense of material awareness, and the people and processes upon which such luxury depends. Luxury has become a normative state, encouraging and perpetuating a cycle of cynical consumption.

We propose a redefinition of the concept of luxury, which we continually renegotiate and re-define within projects. Although Luxury is a relative concept and often defined by rarity and exclusiveness, we acknowledge a range of additional criteria; cultural diversity and capital, time quotients, material and material provenance, historic knowledge, embedded talent and professional skill, relevance to contemporary context. For example; although rarity and exclusiveness can appear simple, context, location, and provenance frame Kika Alvarenga's high level and fashion forward jewellery collections. Alvarenga uses Tucum, a fine hand spun palm fibre cord made by the Kraho people of Brazil, traditionally, a sustainable staple and an all purpose community product. Alvarenga's design eye focussed on the natural drape, texture and refinement of the Tucum cord. Linked to childhood memories and the contemporary political sensibilities of Aboriginal communities regarding Brazilian history, Alvarenga explores material values to reveal a native view of the dark complexities of modern Brazil. Such an approach can be mapped onto high fashion methodology and the value of a sustainable approach in this context cannot be overstated. There is an important joint interest here. For sustainable design to be enduring it cannot disengage aesthetic awareness in a simplistic exchange for sustainable production.

This issue of luxury also engages with the issue of craft production for tourism. Where the 'haves come face to face with the have nots' as a holiday experience. Such experiences are often encouraged by campaigning organisations, for example; profit making gap year 'charitable projects'. In contrast, the extensive and long term research from the University of Art and Design Helsinki, World Design Research Group makes interesting reading. The publishing concerning Namibia is too extensive for this paper but the difficulties of thinking through a design industry model in the face of development needs start to emerge.

Whilst the National Art Gallery of Namibia (NAGN) seeks new artefacts to act as '*material signs-memorial documents with content' (*Madisa J. 2006*)* for Namibian identity, activists and designers struggle to create a Namibian *'design pride'* (Becker M. H. 2006) to sustain commercial products. This process questions which cultural perspective should be prioritised when manipulating the 'authentic artefact' into commercial products for other cultures? This is where designers are so important in creating a global product but so at risk when at the same time their actions expose un-interrogated cultural perspectives. Karin Le Roux in her paper, *Developing the Namibian craft sector; 1991-2004* discusses indigenous local design language. Having noted the lack of formal education, let alone art & design education she writes;

> *'The inherent creativity and dexterity of almost all producers has been extraordinary. Unfortunately popular commercial images and/or products from women's popular magazines or church bazaars often influence producers who are left alone to their own design preferences'.* (2006)

Setting aside the arguments around the dangers of appropriation, if design interventions in strategic craft development support the origination of genuine new artefacts of cultural heritage; to which heritage might the resulting artefacts belong and is this cultural confusion really problematic? This is a reoccurring question, for example; the re-cutting, re-setting and restaging of the extraordinary Murghal and nineteenth-century gem stones belonging to the Royal Families of India during the 1920s and 1930s by the Parisian firm of Cartier offers an elegant extreme. The resulting artefacts of this stunning destruction of three hundred years of courtly historical artefacts, by their keepers, seamlessly encode the material to the point of invisibility under the burnished patina of the Cartier brand. The undeniable success of this process and the sustained desirability of these very artefacts ninety years later, to the South Asian communities and diasporas alone, is testament to the quality of the design. Historical artefacts from the Murghal Court and Cartier's confections are both culturally valuable today as each history has integrity and authenticity. This raises a question we ask our students; what will be the historic value of their design interventions in crafts in the future?

The intervention of design into areas categorised as 'pure' cultural practices quite understandably engenders anxiety amongst consumer groups, patrons, collectors and cultural anthropologists who want to see the 'preservation' and continuation of historic lifestyles. However, consider Art theorist Peter Osborne's thoughts as he examines texts by Michel de Certeaus and Marc Augé establishing the idea of a 'non-place'. Auge describes the invasion of space by text and "instructions for use" such as *'you are now entering Beaujolais region'* (Osborne P. 2001). If we accept how Art is subject to this experience, where textual statement is integral to the expression of the art object (for an example see Jenny Holzer 'Blue Blue' 2003) then we can recognise similarities when we see them in craft practice. In direct relationship Osborne's interest we might coin the phrase, *'You are now in the world of the*

Rajasthani Palaces'. Consider the confusion of tribal, artisanal and courtly crafts offered under such a heading to a cynical western consumer. If cultural capital is to be manipulated for external tourist consumption, when these communities have been trading for a hundred years or more, then the relationship to design is but one change amongst many.

MA Design embraces the concept of luxury because we identify those things within the mix that add value as a result of collaboration with the producer communities. Too often we see promoters of ethically made 'craft' suggest that the negotiation itself negates offering additional benefits in exchange for premium pricing, as though the promise of 'sustainability' were sufficient exchange. Neither concept is sufficiently considered and when clumsily combined devalue each other. One of the ideas we seek through such engagement are artefacts which become cultural engines of change, bridging craft production and design practice.

By breaking down and examining the complex network of issues around the definition and creation of luxury products it becomes possible to frame, or reframe historical practice though its constituent elements. Research reports, field work blogs, intensive documentation, model making and iterations all help support such decision making during project development. By working across cultures, two, three or even four at one time, it is possible to leverage benefits from different perspectives and can free an indigenous maker from the restrictions of the local market. For example, Maham Chesti's project developed terracotta ceramics in Sri Lanka. Chesti is a Pakistani woman, on a London based course where her project was conceived in relation to the disappearance of markets for terracotta products, such as water vessels, in south Asia. Her practice took place in Sri Lanka through a welcoming production contact she had made during her research. The potters who worked with Chesti were led by a senior woman who had been trained in 'Japanese' Ceramic traditions by a Dutch potter. This potter had in turn learnt Japanese Ceramics themselves informed by Korean traditions of practice. Inevitably, the 'identities' of the final artefacts were far more than the sum of their constituent parts.

Design and Craft Innovation

The identity of 'design' in relation to craft practice is a contested issue. Depending on the text and audience the design community can be seen as saviour, demon, or in some cases as thief. Nevertheless many governmental organisations and non-governmental organisations promote the use of 'trend' forecasting. This is problematic for two reasons; firstly, by using trend forecasts originating from western designers, the initial cultural capital from which those trends were derived is promoted as of value, back to the original owners of such cultural capital but through the trend forecasters aesthetic. If this year, the Inca trail is 'in', then the original cultural capital is only understood to have value after is has been translated into and assimilated by a trend forecaster. Given the time that it takes to travel through the trend forecast system, the research and development, sampling and production, the resulting degradation of the aesthetic leads to products that are often low risk, homogenised and vulnerable low return artefacts. Such homogeneity is boring and reduces the opportunity for alternative outcomes and evolutionary thinking. This is worrying as such flawed products are in direct completion with industrialised manufacture, which draws from the same trend forecast, and which has a greater capacity to respond faster. Whilst this is a logical response to the risk of engaging

with a design led market place, it puts local innovation into a passive and subservient relationship to western trend setting and value systems.

There a second issue associated with this relationship. To offer open access to trend forecasting based on current design industry output effectively denies that this research and development is paid for by someone. It is an ethically ambiguous area. The most ruthless strands of the design industry use this process to circumvent intellectual copyright. However, you pay for what you get and often such use of trend forecasting is similar to dumping surplus farm production; the tail ends of trends and ideas are recycled cheaply into such forecasts. In addition, and similarly to the food dumping analogy, this process inhibits local innovation and development of intellectual capital within host communities.

If agencies subscribe to an open source model, why not an open source model for design? How can designers be expected to develop new and innovatory models that define and redefine practice without engagement? There is a danger that we find ourselves back in a paternalistic model, where the product of our intellect becomes redefined and at best handed out as a charitable gift. Sustainability requires balance and mutual respect. Is it not more sustainable to identify those areas of added value that are particular characteristics of craft in order to justify extra cost? This is where we believe our discourse can make a significant contribution – to provide an argument to bridge the gap between consumer expectations framed by experience of industrialised products and the 'benefits' of craft objects and practitioners.

Multiple Layers of Time

What characterises many of our current conversations around craft practice is the collapsing nature of timelines and a failure to consider what might be meant as craft 'modernity'. Much of the writing and thinking around working with craft and artisan communities is bedevilled by assumptions about time. Considering the concept of 'cultural time', it is interesting to refer again to Osbourne's thoughts on 'cultural form' in Art and *'the transformation of western art under the conditions of an emergent capitalist modernity'* (2001). Osbourne considers a number of ideas which are interesting when applied to the current discussions about how we view time in relation to 'craft' and artisanship. Osborne states,

> *'Modernity is the name for an actually existing socially realised temporal formalism that is constitutive of certain formations of subjectivity. It is in this sense, that it is a distinctively cultural category; the fundamental form of time-consciousness in capitalist societies.'* (2001 p.183)

He then proffers three theses;

> *'1. we live in an emergent global modernity*
> *2. at the same time there are many modernities; but the logic of multiplicity of these modernities is different- has different conceptual shape- from the multiplicity of previous forms* [because]
> *3. global modernity is not fundamentally geo politically about the hegemony of the West but about the hegemony of capital*.' (2001 p.184)

This confusion between what might be modern and what might be modern through the changing structure of capital, which is moving from an economy of barter to a proto-capitalist structure, bedevils thinking about artisanship and sustaining its development. Our notion of 'time' associates activities with historic periods of time, within an assumed desire for a progression to our 'modernity'. Therefore, current

design and craft writers often assume we all exist in a 'post industrial society', but within the developing world many of our current arguments around craft and the exploration of design / craft practice are exposed as assumptions. In a global context, craft operates within a continuum, from pre industrial to post industrial practice. It is this continuum, rather than disconnected frames of reference, which makes approaching 'commonsense' thinking about the relationship of design intervention in craft complex.

We believe there are important opportunities if we are not all in the industrial age. That we are in continuous and parallel historical time zones. There are valuable differences, each age has its own wisdom and that is what makes the preservation and dissemination of implicit craft knowledge(s) important. Neither we, nor the host community can predict what information we all might need to share, or utilise in the future. To sustain cultural 'knowledges', there needs to be recognition of relevance to all the participants, including the consumer.

This fusion of knowledge(s), considered through multi layers of time, allows the valuable differences in each age to be articulated and acknowledged. We look afresh at different models, from different times and places concurrently. Naturally this is not a preservationist position. We believe that almost all craft practices change over time and as they develop bring new opportunities to their communities. However, this perspective is not universally accepted.

Social Change and Gate Keepers

More often than not as a designer the initial conversation with a community is through a gate keeper. Gate keepers can be commercial agents, village elders, landlords, Government departments or NGO's, engaging social hierarchies of gender, caste or class, bureaucracy, state funding (both local and international), all of which bring their own political agendas. Experience has shown gate keepers are powerful catalysts who can either empower or frustrate a project. In our experience a number have been welcoming, until they saw the level of community engagement and innovation emerging from projects. Then suddenly the whole production process goes into reverse and despite previous engagement, meetings and agreements, 'problems' occur. External innovation, despite its potential to bring new income streams can upset jealously guarded power and control structures. In the following examples we leave the students un-named to respect the confidentiality and sensitivity of the situations surrounding their projects.

The development of a collection of Niello jewellery in Thailand provided many surprises. The student worked with a key worker located in a Niello producing village in south of the country who was supported by a charitable Trust, the patron of which was the Queen of Thailand. This created issues for the student, as, in common with many Thai people, the Royal family is highly revered and the Trust and the Queen were one and the same as far as the student was concerned. The project also involved working with a new industrial factory in the capital Bangkok. Although initial south Thailand production sampling went very well, finalising the design work raised a number of issues and cultural anxieties. The key worker in the village did not personally like the designs and was unsure about giving permission. The cost of the sample pieces put into perspective the wages earned by the community for traditional artefacts and it became unclear where and how income was being

allocated. It became clear that it was difficult to confirm to the community why the project might have value. That sample collection made in the village for her Masters was flawed but the subsequent factory collection was successful.

Financial issues and raising funding in the UK for location specific projects outside of Europe can be complex and often run into local corruption issues. For example another South Asian project would have been forced to achieve its not insubstantial goals on just twelve per cent of the allocated. Eighty eight percent would have been required for 'infrastructure overheads and running costs' taken by numerous layers of Government hierarchies and local agents. In this instance the project was relocated to a more viable location and went ahead with aplomb. The student learnt valuable lessons and developed outstanding negotiation skills. Each case is different, these issues are particularly sensitive and it is essential not to adopt a simplistic expectation or a 'them' and 'us' mentality.

Design and craft need to be seen within a delicate balance of the issues around social design and design responsibility. In *'The politics of the artificial'* (1995) Margolin distinguishes design professionalism from charitable, or pro bono assistance., to be sustainable, such practice cannot be free. To take an economic position, in relation to design assistance, risks running counter to the emerging consensus within artisan and craft aid groups that design should be taught and generated within artisan communities, not 'imposed' from outside by design professionals. However we see this position as one element in a range of strategies, for as Bhatt observes of design and craft practice through educational institutions;

> *If the professional design programmes with the best of selected and talented students require 3-4 years of full time education for them to become professionals it is difficult to visualise any significant change through the short bursts of training in the artisans who are far removed from the market context they need to penetrate.* (Bhatt 2008.)

In education, we need to consider who we are working with and what is the purpose of this education. If education is a transformative experience, then, transformation should be a joint process with outside design communities, alongside rigorous academic thinking about the structures of markets, cultural identities, geographical indices, et al., indeed the list is extensive. Essentially, and as espoused by John Thackara in his '*Doors of Perception'* project, this needs to be a '*collaborative approach'.* (Thackara 2005)

If we believe that collaborative practice often leads to innovation; then development or perhaps redevelopment of craft production at the highest level has to be a collaborative process with extraordinary breadth. For example, Gungan Gupta's Silver and Gold Wrapped Throne project 2006 involved support and information from the staff team, which includes cultural specialists, precious metal workers, furniture and product designers and technicians, all supporting the contemporary design thinking. Lending support were the Victoria and Albert museum including Dr. Amin Jaffer, curator of the Indian collections, The National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, the artisan communities of Jaipur, which covered silver work, temple gold leafing, furniture and craftsman production in New Delhi, wood sourcing, and courtly craft production specialists and exporters. All made valuable contributions to realise one artefact.

Gupta's project illustrates the internal tension between the myth of the individual and the embedded knowledge born of collaboration, which is by implication where

craft is vulnerable. As the east adopts or embraces the concept of western individualism this increases the tension. It also makes crafts less desirable within local cultures, redolent as they are with community and collaborative associations. This threatens craft practice from within their own cultures, as they are devalued through westernised perspectives on practice and the implied perfection of the high gloss machine aesthetic.

MA Design operates from within a design tradition that has links to the richness and humanity of the hand made and is familiar with the concept of social change through design education. The embedded and implicit knowledge base of craft communities, in a knowledge economy, means that craft communities are now at risk because they are rarely able to access and consider effectively the uses of such information.
This paper exposes discussions generated by the research and practice of staff and students on MA Design; Ceramics, Furniture, Jewellery. Thinking through these issues, individually and as a group, unpacking and interrogating our findings, has encouraged us to take nothing for granted. All of the models discussed in this paper have elements that need to be resolved but it is important and necessary to try and to risk failure.

Assessments of success and failure are complex and contested; there are a lot of conflicting and sometimes contradictory targets to be met. This is why long term engagements are important. The nature of practice based work however allows everyone to *see touch handle and use* the outcomes and to evaluate them in many different environments. Working with micro production and small producers in developing countries changes the 'rules'. It is important that the 'designer' working from the more secure position evaluates and considers the risk of failure, so that if possible, the impact of failure errs on the side of the designer, not the producer. This level of risk contributes to 'ethical luxury' in this context. Within this model potentially 'passive and subservient' players should, have the opportunity to become proactive and to redefine the context of what is sustainable and global, not one size fits all.

Industrial practice and marketing encourages us to embrace the abstract idea of the 'ideal user'. If Craft practice uses this model within limited criteria, it disengages the designer and the consumer from the harder realities of the commercial market place. This is unsustainable. Sustainable design and craft practice requires considering a broader range of criteria, as sustainable commercial design like any other in the capital market place needs to think deeply about a 'consumer'.

Sustainability, as it is currently understood, as a vaguely ethical position, is of itself insufficient for everyone to embrace. For those of us brought up with the privileges of western cultures, and all of those who aspire to them, the additional benefits of sustaining craft practice will have to be made desirable and explicit to out gun the habits of a lifetime and the iconography of unsustainable privilege. Design has always created desire; we now have to define what this desire might be for Sustainable Futures.

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