

american craft inquiry

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our understanding of craft, its
history, scholarship, artists, in-
stitutions, makers, contempo-
rary practices, and its impact
on culture and society.

Inquiry is committed to
presenting research, in the
broadest sense, in order to
cultivate critical discourse and
advocate for craft as an
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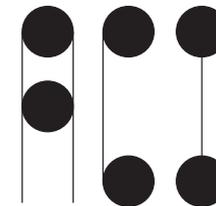


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Civic Crafts and Plug-In Whittling

Otto von Busch

By leaving the studio and using crafts to teach and promote capabilities, as well as taking on systems and structures by hand, we hack into reality itself.

In my studies, my professor, the architect and researcher Peter Ullmark, often reminded me that good inquiry requires concepts that are “sharp”; anything fuzzy will fail to show what you intend to point at. Some theories use elaborate and stringent definitions to make concepts do the work of demarcation, while others bring them into sharp focus by assembling a variety of examples and pointing to similarities. A common way in craft is to show and point, often adding words and body language to pinpoint where the observer should focus.

In this essay, I will point to an idea of what I call “civic crafts,” and I will try to sharpen that concept with words and examples. I would like to argue that much theoretical work is like whittling: You use harder tools to shape a concept, to make it more pointy, for the benefit of those who’ll be using it. As in much practice-based work, the conceptual stick is often crooked, but I will try to make the end of it sharp enough to show my intentions.

This is important, because concepts have a tendency to become more and more blunt with use. Just look at the fate of the word “design,” which today seems to connote not only form and function, but also creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship, as well as a way of thinking. Long gone are the days when “design” referred primarily to a profession. Or look at the word “craft”: It once connoted many forms of the applied arts, (as well as meaning “skill,” or “artfulness”); now, it has been hollowed out, losing its connections to the fine arts and engineering, to primarily suggest what today we call “studio crafts.” And over the last few years, the word has become a marketing term, suggesting magical qualities of local, hand-made authenticity in everything from beer to chocolate to pulled pork. In the glossy magazines, “craft” basically refers to anything coming from the hands of a bearded and tattooed hipster in Brooklyn.

Words are conceptual tools, and much as we do with physical tools, we use them to shape both material models and models of thought. Tools grasp and wrestle with our world, and they add agency and leverage in our everyday lives. At the intersection of psychology and materiality, objects have what is often called “affordances,” small cues about how they should be used, which often (but not always) correspond to how we use them. An armchair, for example, invites me to sit, while a ladder asks me to climb. If I am in a rebellious mood, I may climb on the armchair and sit on the ladder, but that may require some creative thinking or daring gymnastics.

Children challenge affordances all the time, thinking of new uses and trying them out. But most of us get lazy, tired, and less creative over time.

Because they are physical things, affordances also make ethical propositions. For example, the speed bump outside of the school reminds me to drive more slowly – a reminder that also comes on a sign. But the bump does more: As a physical barrier, it compels me to slow down. Similarly, the weight attached to the room key at the hotel reminds me to leave the key at the reception, and the turnstiles on the subway remind me quite forcefully to pay my fee, otherwise I won't get through. All these devices delegate responsibility in my everyday life and shape my behavior.

Some objects have almost utopian connotations. The park bench not only invites me to sit and enjoy the bit of nature we have cultivated in the city, but also celebrates the communal aspect of the park by putting me with others. The bench, as opposed to the chair, not only represents community, but also sometimes forces me to share space with uninvited strangers – testing my openness to community.

But most objects today speak of other values, often orienting us along the ideology of consumerism. The takeout paper cup containing my morning coffee tells me to throw it away and treat it as waste. The battery of my smartphone, which is exhausted after two years and requires special skill to replace, reminds me to buy a new expensive phone every two years. The closed overlock stitch in my garments, using no seam allowance, makes it almost impossible for me to adjust the fit of my garments as my body changes. Many of my everyday objects tell me to keep my hands off. That's a problem, because, as the writer known as Mr. Jalopy wrote in the "owner's manifesto" published in a 2005 issue of *Make*: magazine, "If you can't open [an object], you don't own it."

It may be ironic, then, that so much of the craft we encounter stays within the realm of objects, on shelves at museums, fairs, and in online forums. Such objects are forced to speak the language of consumerism. The handthrown mugs, woven carpets, and embroidered quilts, the turned wooden bowls and whittled spoons – all are objects of consumption. Marked as they are by the hand, they are slightly more expensive and "authentic," which basically means I need to pay the maker a living wage. But the basic affordances of the objects are the same as the mass-produced ones; on a material level, they hardly affect me differently from those I can

get at the strip mall.

Can we imagine crafts that speak of other values, use other affordances, and make us do other things? Can objects support more sustainable practices? Can they help me act in accordance with more civic virtues? Can I use my craft skills not only to produce objects that comment on social issues, but also to promote self-governance, community, and civil dialogue?

As someone who has hands-on skills, the craftsperson possesses a great civic asset. However, we craftspeople most often keep that asset to ourselves. We keep the act of making within the studio, producing finished objects to be sold or exhibited in still other secluded spaces. In order to engage with the everyday power of objects, a craftsperson needs not only material skills but also a basic systemic knowledge of the relationships objects have with the rest of society, and how they can be put to better use.

One perspective that might be useful to this discussion is known as the "capability approach," which focuses on what individuals are able to do and be, what they are capable of. Many ideas link happiness to material goods, assets, and income level. A capability approach emphasizes the agency of the subject, which makes craftspeople advance on the scale of well-being, even if they earn little or have few assets. They can do more with less, and their capabilities, their agency, also help them build bridges to others. And they can connect without having to buy the experience of community. A musician may have more potential communal assets, for example, than someone who has the money to see virtuosos perform.

Capabilities allow micro-freedoms that emerge beyond the horizon of consumerism and accumulation. For example, if I can repair something, it allows me more agency in the world than if I merely buy a replacement, and this skill can be used in other domains, which increases my overall agency in the world. Yet within the world of crafts, we often forget this essential quality: Craft is a form of agency, not simply a mode of production.

But agency does not happen in a vacuum; it takes place in culture, among values and practices that dominate everyday life, and today, everyday life is shaped by a specific ideal of consumerism: user-friendliness. User-friendliness makes consumption so easy – so frictionless, so practical – that it is, paradoxically, almost the opposite of a capability. It is, instead, a rejection of the inherent value of capability. User-friendliness sells itself as an anti-capability, as if to say, "I am so easy, you need no

skill to use me.” I can just buy new stuff, a few clicks away, and I need no capabilities to do so: I need only money. I don’t even need to go to the store. Someone leaves stuff at my door, and when I am done I just throw it in the garbage, which someone else takes to the dump. My everyday life is programmed to waste, and wasting is made effortless. Craft and repair, on the other hand, are impractical; it requires a great effort to overcome the friction of a non-user-friendly world.

But this friction can help us think of craft in a new, expanded way. We can leverage friction to bring communities together. As anthropologist Tim Ingold explains in his book *Making* (2013), the act of making is not something that is born directly out of some inner vision; it needs some form of material resistance. The material gives response to the maker’s tools, and it is in this tension, between force and resistance, that making becomes a dynamic process of physical uncertainty that differs a great deal from pure thinking, from making up images in one’s mind (which may seem very user-friendly).

In a way, the making of craft is almost opposite to the making we think of in design. Traditionally, a designer puts emphasis on image processing – the sketching, drawing, and rendering – to both aestheticize and facilitate mass production. But, as David Pye posits in *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* (1968), this has implications for how the designer thinks about making. For the designer, all parts and angles fit perfectly together on the drawing table, and it is only when the prototype is made that the unruly materiality is to be subdued and shaped to fit into the mold already projected in the mind of the designer. Indeed, this may be why designers love to work in materials without organic properties – plywood, MDF board, foam board, and plastics: They don’t fight back and can easily be shaped to the aesthetic will of the mastermind.

Craft, on the other hand, seems to seek challenges that acknowledge the living, untamed qualities of physical materials. For example, the whittler must work with the resistant fibers and the uneven properties of wood taken from a specific tree, fibers and properties that speak of the tree’s life in the world. Rather than overpowering the material, the skillful whittler allows for conflicts and tensions in the wood and works with them to find and release the unique qualities hidden within. Compared to the designer, the whittler does not seek the monoculture of the mastermind. The whittler

doesn’t aim to demonstrate dominance over material.

Well, I must be the first to acknowledge this is a quite romantic notion of the violent whittler, cutting away chips from the freshly killed tree. But the basic notion of working *with* the material – embracing its unruliness – helps us frame how crafts can take place in the civic realm and work with the affordances of the built world to foster new, common capabilities. How can this perspective help us foster special craft capabilities in the face of a lazily user-friendly culture?

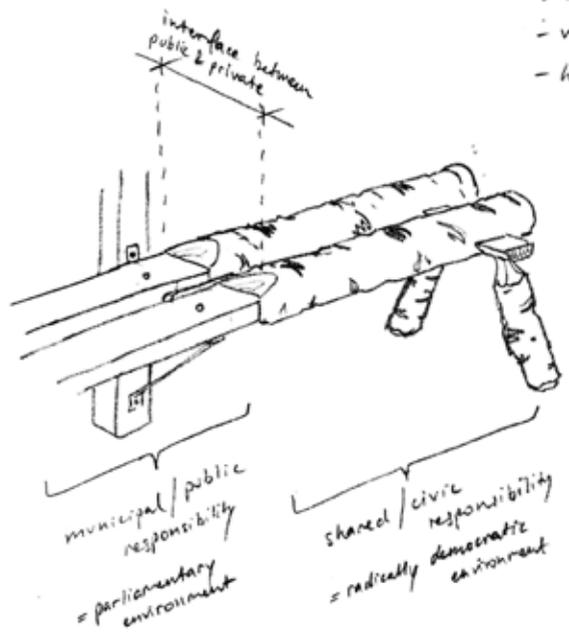
It’s important to see craft as more than resistance against consumerism. We are doomed to consume; it is the fate of organic life, and we need to find ways to do so in sustainable ways. But craft can be a way to question the foundational idea that the user-friendly egocentrism promoted in most consumption is the best way around. If I treat my immediate world like waste, subjecting it to my ephemeral passions and rowdy will, it’s easy for me to start treating the rest of the world in a similar way – as if nature and people are there to serve me and potentially for me to use and dispose of. Craft, on the other hand, may help me foster a more civic-minded approach, to see how the material world has a will of its own, which does not always conform to mine. Craft can help me see value in compromise and collaboration, even when they are challenging. Dealing with other people adds a lot of uncertainty, and I may need social jigs to train me to deal with them.

But how are we to deal with the resistance, friction, and uncertainty of our surrounding world? Returning to David Pye, one of his main arguments is that what we usually call craft is a way to balance risk and uncertainty, what he calls “the workmanship of risk.” In an effort to limit risk and heighten certainty, the craftsperson constructs jigs. All tools are self-jigging to some degree. For example, when you cut shapes out of paper with a scissors, you guide the paper between the blades, resting the cut on the side of the blade. When whittling, you use the bevel of the blade to help guide the edge. And you can use the body as a jig, as suggested by Swedish whittler Jögge Sundqvist, who in his workshops teaches 10 whittling grips that allow the maker to be stronger and more accurate when working with headstrong materials – which also makes whittling more enjoyable.

Indeed, it was Sundqvist who reintroduced me to the shaving horse at

1

- where does the "public" stand & end?
- who has the right to the city?
- how can I contribute to many publics & societies?



the civic opportunity of sitting together sharing a quiet time.

2



1. Outline of the civic crafts of a plug-in bench. Sketch by the author.
2. Plug-in bench at the train station of Insjön, Sweden. Greenwood, August 2013. Photo by the author.
3. Plug-in shaving horse, Gothenburg 2013. Photo by the author.

3



a workshop we ran together at Sätergläntan Institute of Crafts, an education center for handicrafts in Insjön, a rural area in central Sweden. (I had not used the shaving horse since my early years in *slöjd* school, and it was bliss to re-experience what a powerful tool – and jig – it is.) In the workshop, our idea was to create a craft intervention in a public space and examine how craft could be an activity that takes place outside its usual spaces, while renegotiating some of the boundaries in public spaces. As a result, we remodeled the benches at the local train station, extending them to make room for more commuters, and possibly also to allow for more interpersonal interactions. By adding parts to the public benches from greenwood, we not only supplemented the sterile consensus-based design of public property with a craft element, but we also signaled a creative and constructive reclamation of space. It was a non-violent contribution where we as craft-citizens plugged into civic life. The very act added affordances on both a material and symbolic level. In a sense, we celebrated the public bench as a public social sculpture – one we don't usually appreciate.

This led me to produce and test a plug-in shaving horse for public benches, with the idea of examining how craft, as a publicly disseminated capability, could promote the act of making as a basis for civic life. Craft capabilities can be a way to celebrate togetherness – not as a political contest of wills, but as a creative way to test out how we can all contribute to the public environment and to civic life. Making together, and using the neutral space of the park bench as a material as well as a social jig, speak of a shared public good.

In this way, the public bench can become a public arena, much like the square in old Athens. Perhaps it could even be a public *agora* of making to promote the very craft of civics: that we meet in and around craft to address our shared social life, contributing new shared affordances, which we can plug into the public realm. Making such affordances can turn politics very concrete: The park bench is a structure of the public realm in miniature, yet with an affordance of asking us to share it, to sit together.

By leaving the studio and using crafts to teach and promote capabilities, as well as taking on systems and structures by hand, we hack into reality itself. We not only craft in a very tangible way, working with the frictions, tension, and resistance of materials, but we also come to touch

the public structures of public governance themselves, making them more concrete. Hacking a park bench is a form of civic do-it-yourself (or do-it-together), a way of crafting a public, and in a palpable way, sharpening the concept of craft to point toward the capabilities that help shape community life.

So, using my plug-in shaving horse and drawknife, the very act of whittling helped me manifest a civic craft: hands-on making, addressing the public realm, sharing a very tangible sense of community, while using the material affordances to materialize it into civic form. As we whittle our concepts, we can make them point toward the kind of crafts we would like to share with the rest of the world. Inquiry into the many practices that “craft” connotes must incorporate both theory and practice; a theoretical craft knife is not much use. Even so, like all civic matters, the knife must be handled with care, as a blade can cut even the best whittler. Be careful, as Rabindranath Tagore once put it: “A mind all logic is like a knife all blade. It makes the hand bleed that uses it.”

Otto von Busch is an associate professor at Parsons School of Design. Many of his projects show how design can mobilize communities through collaborative craft and social activism in the support of social sustainability, peace, and ultimately justice.

Public bench plug-in by Otto von Busch, Elin Gilde Garvin, Helena Hansson, Anne Li Karlsson, Paul Linden, Beth Moen, and Jögge Sundqvist