A Recent History of the Handmade: From Modern Craft to Post-Craft, from Making to Growing

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Abstract

This article explores the resurgence of hands-on making in the contemporary craft revival, highlighting designers and architects willing to get their hands dirty as a critical riposte to a hands-off world. Rooted in design history, and using concepts of *modern craft* and *post-craft*, it explores concepts of *craft* as a way to think through *low tech*, and vice versa—how to use the *low tech* to think through *craft*. To this end, it identifies three interrelated terrains of historical and contemporary crossover: the technical, the ideological, and the environmental. Finally, it considers how contemporary design's interest in low-tech, craft-based approaches has translated more recently into not just *making*, but *growing* objects and buildings.

Keywords

Arts and Crafts Movement, modern craft, post-craft, sustainability, contemporary design

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"Intellectually inconvenient," "out of fashion," "tedious," and "the salon de refuse."[1] In 1997 British art historian and craft advocate Peter Dormer laid out his position on craft's condition in postindustrial contexts such as the UK. The future looked bleak: Craft's irrelevance in the arts was accompanied by manufacturing obsolescence. Dormer pointed to the production of BMW cars and Nike sports shoes as examples of how "in some areas technology has … replaced craft in efficiency and aesthetics."[2]

A decade later however, craft's status had shifted: The early 2000s saw the seeds of a revival in craft's fortunes in arts and technology, and broader sociocultural, political, and economic spheres. For examples see online craft retailer Etsy, established in 2005, with its self-declared "mission to keep human connection at the heart of commerce"; Richard Sennett's 2008 bestseller *The Craftsman* and its emphasis on craftsmanship's human and societal value; President Obama's 2009 praise for the role of "makers of things" in the nation's progress; or the 2010 launch of *The Great British Bake Off* with its multiple international spin-offs spotlighting manual skills like baking, sewing, and pottery.[3] Furthermore, in 2012 *The Economist* proclaimed an affinity between handmade and digital technologies in the burgeoning third industrial revolution, declaring that "the factory of the future … may look more like … weavers' cottages than Ford's assembly line."[4] If mass production signaled craft's demise as a production technology, the mass customization offered by digital technology could recenter craft in car, sports shoe, and other production sectors.[5]

Craft remains prominent today. Etsy is a global phenomenon, through which you can buy craft-based products and engage in craft-based, low-tech living, from kintsugi repair kits to wicker baskets for sourdough making or mushroom foraging. In 2021 Swedish fast fashion brand H&M launched its "Meet the Makers" campaign to "showcase the skilled artisans all over the world" behind its homeware products, from a family ceramics factory in Portugal to Indian weavers supported by a social initiative for female emancipation.[6] There is also a wide acceptance of craft amongst the arts and creative industries: the Loewe Foundation Craft Prize is in its tenth year, celebrating "excellence, artistic merit, and innovation in modern craftsmanship" with a cash prize and exhibition of the shortlisted in international museums and galleries; while MoMA's 2019 rehang juxtaposed fine art with works in textiles, ceramics, and other craft media for the first time in the museum's history. [7] [8]

Craft's contemporary popularity is the latest in a history of revivals in the UK and other Global North nations at the forefront of industrialization and deindustrialization—from the Arts and Crafts movement at the turn of the twentieth century to a countercultural resurgence in the 1960s

and 1970s.[9] While each revival has manifested differently, they have shared a concern with the loss of craft, recognizing the broader social and political implications of such a loss and the importance of keeping craft alive as a counterpoint to a highly technological, commodified, alienating status quo. Furthermore, as this article argues, such revivals are built on an underrecognized but crucial embrace of the low tech in productive, functional, and aesthetic terms. The aim of this article is to explore the significance of the low tech in craft's contemporary revival and its historical antecedents.

Getting their hands dirty: the contemporary turn to craft

While the contemporary revival is pluralistic and contradictory, it includes a notable willingness among architects, artists, and designers to get their hands dirty—to work materials by hand with manual tools to create objects that testify to their manual production and broader industrial and postindustrial contexts.

Notable examples include Max Lamb, a British designer who manually explores raw and rough materials including stone, zinc, and cardboard. One of Lamb's earliest projects was 2006's *Pewter Stool*: He used his mother's saucepan to pour local molten pewter into a mold carved directly into a sandy beach on Britain's Cornish coast, creating a stool whose rough edges consciously spoke of their self-described "low-tech" production.[10]

[Figure 1 here]

In 2025 Lamb produced *Crockery* (2025), a collection of clay chairs and stools, with 1882 Ltd., a firm established in the historic ceramics city of Stoke-on-Trent by a family with a long history of pottery production.[11] The roughly hewn forms are indicative of their making; liquid slip is poured into plaster molds hand chiseled by Lamb and 1882's potters, where it dries for several weeks before firing.[12] This high-risk process relies on a close relationship between the designer and 1882's artisans, located in a city once the center of Britain's ceramics industry now combating postindustrial urban decline.[13]

[Figure 2 here]

A significant number of designers engaging in craft do so with sustainability in mind, an understandable impulse given the climate crisis. These include Gareth Neal's *In Pursuit of Carbon Negative* (2010), wherein the furniture designer and a group of students cycled to a woodland outside London, where they lived without electricity for ten days, ate local food, and

slept outside. There they created a furniture collection—a table, set of stools, and pair of candlesticks—made from local ash trees fallen during a storm. Their only tools were rechargeable, solar-powered electric drills and a foot-powered pole lathe.[14] This low-tech, low-carbon experiment resulted in furniture with a pared-down form and finish, material expressing a connection between energy consumption and ornamentation.

[Figure 3 here]

Thomas Thwaites explored the link between sustainability and manual production in *Toaster Project* (2010); the British designer produced a toaster using only "pre-industrial tools and methods" available in the UK, highlighting the ethical and environmental cost of cheap mass-produced electrical goods.[15] The result was a blobby yellow mess that caught fire when Thwaites plugged it in. While the product's nonfunctionality and appearance could be read negatively, it signified the wonderfully human failure of Thwaites's inability to replicate the exploitative efficacy of mass production.[16]

This sustainable turn to craft is accompanied by those continuing its historic philanthropic, community associations.[17] These include architecture collective Assemble, known for their hands-on, materials-led approach, and their Granby Four Streets project. Starting in 2013, Assemble oversaw the community-led DIY regeneration of four streets of derelict Victorian terrace housing in Liverpool, another city experiencing the challenges of postindustrial regeneration.[18] The project included establishing Granby Workshop, a social enterprise that deploys local skills to produce ceramic products for domestic use, such as tiles and fire surrounds, with materials recycled from local industries.[19]

The reasons for the contemporary craft revival are multiple and complex, but arguably many of them rest on a binary, technological framing that views craft as low tech rather than high tech.

Conceptualizations of craft and technology

To say that craft is not high tech is to pit it against two interlinked technological systems: industrial production and digital culture. As anthropologist Timothy Ingold argues, the historical "transition … from the hand-tool to the machine … is rather tantamount to the withdrawal of the producer, in person, from the center to the periphery of the productive process."[20] It is also the increasing "withdrawal" of production technologies from society more generally. The geographical distance, or rather distribution, of mass production and the attendant opacity of its supply chains are increasingly understood as concealing the exploitation of people, places, and

species. This is combined with ever more omnipresent digital technologies flattening our material, bodily, and social existence in the world, further removing us from lived realities near and far.[21]

The contemporary craft revival aligns with broader technological, political, and economic innovations and unravelings—from the launch of the iPhone (2007), which simultaneously connects users globally and disconnects us locally, to the 2007–2008 economic crisis, which exposed neoliberalism's faultlines and inequities, and disasters like Bangladesh's Rana Plaza factory fire (2013), in which over a thousand deaths exposed the human cost of fast fashion.[22] It is not surprising that ethically and environmentally minded creative practitioners are eschewing advanced technologies and turning to craft as a hands-on remedy for the disastrous consequences of a hands-off world.

So if craft is not high tech, it must be low tech? The examples here largely conform to Julia Watson's definition in *Lo-TEK: Design by Radical Indigenism*: "simple, unsophisticated, uncomplicated, and pre-dating the Industrial Revolution… such as crafts and tools."[23] High tech, on the other hand, is "machined complexity … increasingly seen as problematic, inefficient, and expensive … destructive."[24] While Watson's definition is useful, it unwittingly continues a primitivizing framing of craft as "simple" and "unsophisticated"; something particularly notable given her interest in indigenous communities, such as the Inca of Peru and Iraq's Ma'dan people.[25] Nevertheless, it usefully highlights overlooked non-Western making and building cultures rooted in local environmental conditions and material resources. This is part of a wider celebration of indigenous making and ways of relating to nature—illustrated in Potawatomi scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*, an influential book in contemporary design.[26]

Craft as low tech represents an intimacy with, rather than a withdrawal from, production. It is about using local, natural, minimally processed materials in processes based on slow, often sustainable and socially minded, methods of production. But if craft, and the low tech, are to live up to this promise, their relationship must withstand further probing. Where does this equation of craft and low tech, and this opposition of craft and high tech, come from? And does it stand up to scrutiny?

Technical ideas of craft and technology

Such explorations necessitate turning back to Dormer. While acknowledging that any definition of *craft* or *technology* is "sloppy" and "slippery," he identifies "two dominant definitions" of *craft*.[27] First, there are *studio crafts*—creative disciplines like glass-blowing, pottery, and woodworking.[28] Second, is *craft* as a process in which an individual has "detailed control" over production.[29] Conversely, Dormer describes technology as a "means of making or doing things which have a certain order of magnitude" and which involves multiple, distributed processes over which an individual has little or no control.[30]

Control aligns with another core craft concept, *skill*. Useful here is the British furniture designer, educator, and writer David Pye's 1960s definition of *skill*—even though he avoids the word. Pye distinguishes instead between the "workmanship of risk" and the "workmanship of certainty."[31] In the former, the outcome of a process is continually at threat and requires the "exercise of care, judgement and dexterity."[32] In the latter, pre-planned, automated processes mean little is required of a maker; a mode that Pye argues defines late twentieth-century production.[33] Lamb's cast table and poured slip chairs are both examples of risky, skillful endeavors; the result depends on the ability to manipulate materials and make decisions during production. We might equate their rough and uneven surfaces with unskillful making; rather they are a reminder that skill does not have a defining aesthetic.

Appearance is important because the relationship between craft and technology is not just technical. The production, consumption, and critical mediation of craft objects occur in specific sociocultural, political, and economic contexts. As such, the opposition between craft and technology is also constructed, or rather ideological, the second terrain this article explores.

Ideological ideas of craft and technology

This ideological opposition between craft and technology is evident in the term *modern craft*, coined in the early 2000s.[34] In the words of the editors of the *Journal of Modern Craft* from 2008, the term encompasses "all forms of making that self-consciously set themselves apart from mass production."[35] This is a concept of craft "invented," as Adamson, one of the journal's editors argues, with the advent of industrial revolution, when craft was relegated to the margins of making.[36]

This moment of impending demise is key for craft's repeated revivals in industrial modernity: Amid craft's apparent declining economic, political and technological value, voices championed its cultural, symbolic, and human value. They included those of the Arts and Crafts socialist,

environmentalist, and creative polymath William Morris, who called machine production under industrial capitalism "an evil" that alienated and oppressed workers.[37] Morris instead pursued an updated craft culture based on premodern, medieval modes of manual production, aesthetics, and guild structures.

Morris was not alone in seeing craft as offering a different culture of production. The British art historian John Ruskin, a significant influence on Morris, argued for "affection … right relations between master and operative," which he also equated with premodern craft manufacture.[38] Ruskin argued that you could see such "affection" in an object: he championed the sometimes clumsy, inaccurate, and highly individual work of Gothic craftsmen and Venetian glassblowers, praising a "lovely form" that materialized agency and autonomy in production.[39] He differentiated between this and the "perfect finish" of exploitative industrial culture.[40] Morris made a similar argument, differentiating in his 1884 essay "Work in a Factory as it Might Be" between the "true finish" and "trade finish."[41] This value of human imperfection persists in the rough surfaces of the objects discussed here.

While Morris's and Ruskin's voices have remained influential, different revivals have framed craft and technology in different terms. The 1960s and 1970s craft revival included a countercultural turn to DIY, self-building, and low-energy lifestyles. This was seen in the Drop City commune set up in 1968 in Colorado with its geodesic domes made from upcycled car roofs, or self-sufficiency manuals such as the *Whole Earth Catalog* and *Radical Technology* (1976).[42] All expressed what the British economist Ernst Schumacher called "appropriate technology," and what the social critic and priest Ivan Illich termed "convivial tools."[43] Both Illich and Schumacher championed the low tech: For Schumacher it meant more environmentally responsible resource management, while Illich viewed its accessible and empowering tools as a path to freedom and a means to care for others. In his eyes, these qualities were more likely to reside in craft objects than in the complex technologies of a "hyperindustrial" age.[44]

Craft and technology: hybridity and post-craft

The historical arguments of Morris, Illich, and others show how the relationship between craft and technology is neither static nor binary, nor even oppositional. The histories of craft and technology are nuanced and complex and, for example, highly skilled crafts continued and even advanced through the industrial revolution.[45]

However, craft's contemporary hybrid low/high-tech existence complicates the technical and ideological terrains described here. As such, this article argues for the relevance of *post-craft*, a term this author has developed in dialogue with *modern craft*. Just as *modern craft* is useful for thinking about craft in the context of industrial modernity, *post-craft* applies to postindustrial modernity.[46] This is a context in which craft shifts ever more between marginal and mainstream positions, between manual making and technologies of mass production, mass customization, and digitization, a context in which its hybridity comes to the fore.

This hybridity is evident in Thwaites's toaster, handmade with the waste of industrial manufacture. It also evident in digital craft, in objects such as Gareth Neal's *Loopy Chair* (2023). Created together with The New Raw, a firm specializing in sustainable robotic printing, the chair is made from plastic which has been recycled three times (which makes it a much less stable material); the solution was to print the plastic in woven loops rather than 3D printing's conventional layers. Produced with the help of advanced technology, the chair's craft qualities come through in its research basis in craft techniques such as basketry and crochet, in the team's material knowledge and their ability to test and push this evolving technology: control lies in their hands as well as the robotic arm.[47]

[Figure 4 here]

Contemporary production's hybridity can however problematize crafty ideologies. In 2018, IKEA launched SJÄLVSTÄNDIG, a collection of furniture and accessories "inspired by hacking," the more subversive strand of maker culture.[48] It included a tall cream ceramic vase with vertical ridged lines, in which there is a small dent—a thumb print of the factory workers who squeezed each vase as they came out of the mold—a human-shaped hack in mass production's anonymity.

This wobbly indexicality is surely the "social affection" and "lovely form" that Ruskin advocated—and at less than €20 a vase. Economics are key to craft's popularity and integrity. Morris lamented how he had ended up supplying the "swinish luxuries of the rich," as craft's slow, labor-intensive production necessitated a price point out of most people's reach; this was in fact one of the reasons for the movement's demise.[49] On the other hand, the low cost, large scale, and distance of IKEA's production from most consumers also troubles such notions; you never get to meet the maker, only put your finger where theirs once was in what is ultimately a one-way, transactional relationship.

Arguably this existence of craft as a (literally) superficial intervention rather than altered productive reality is an example of "craftwashing," as craft writers Anthea Black and Nicole Burisch have described.[50] Such objects can sow doubts regarding craft's broader existence: Dormer noted that if you cannot tell if something is made by hand or machine, then craft's "special status … collapses."[51] And craft is ultimately fragile: a history of revivals is as much one of disappearance as resurrection. In 2013, Daniel Charny, a designer, educator, and curator of 2011's *The Power of Making*, a hugely popular V&A and Crafts Council exhibition celebrating contemporary making from saddlery to 3D printing, described his uncertainty as to whether the current revival was the start of a craft "renaissance" or rather a "requiem," a last gasp of popularity before being lost forever.[52] Over a decade later, such uncertainty remains: AI looms over the contemporary craft revival, its rapid evolution seemingly threatening the human qualities craft is seen to represent.

Craft's "special status" is knotty given how it depends on the same technological and economic systems it can purport to defy. The designers described here are largely using mainstream energy systems and digital technologies to design and make their objects and share their work online. Susan Luckman has outlined the significant amount of unpaid "self-making" that goes into Etsy's sellers online presence.[53] Such digital technologies seem unescapable for those wishing to make a livelihood through craft, at least in the contemporary design and retail sectors.

Etsy is particularly problematic here, given that its productive relations can be the opposite of those Ruskin called for. In 2022 over twenty-two thousand Etsy vendors went on strike to protest a 30 percent rise in sellers fees. Notably, in 2017 Etsy dropped its B Corp certification and then posted record profits in 2020 and 2021.[54] Because Etsy does not employ the sellers on its site, its makers are unprotected against detrimental losses—or unmanageable increases—in work. They are the precarious creative workers of postindustrial economies.[55] Following Illich, the sociopolitical potential of Etsy's craft objects and lifestyles are empty, mere luxuries for a population too "hooked" onto our "present structure" and its "illusion of progress."[56] In other words, acts such as foraging and baking are mere consumerist performances, not practices that can engender alternative ways of being in the world.

Environmental ideas of craft and technology

This problematic reality is one reason why some of those engaging with the handmade are moving more into the third and final terrain proposed here: the environmental. This has already been alluded to: Morris, Schumacher, and Illich all addressed environmental engagements with

craft and the low tech in their texts. Contemporary conceptualizations of low tech include a notable environmentalist impulse, from positioning low tech as less resource intensive to prioritizing human power over fossil fuels.[57] The climate emergency is leading to a new embracing of craft and low tech's environmental possibilities. This includes using materials that are not just responsibly sourced and minimally processed but grown and gathered.

This is a fledgling phenomenon, one that harmonizes with broader ideas of bioregionalism, agroecology, and the more-than-human in design and craft.[58] Examples include *Flat House* (2020), designed and built by Practice Architecture in the British countryside. The structure is made from timber panels filled with hemp grown in the surrounding fields—a hyperlocal production dependent on seasonal, agricultural cycles.[59] Also relevant here is Assemble's *Earth, Lightly* (2025) project "exploring the role of ornamentation" in light earth construction, a method first documented in Germany in the 1930s that uses clay, timber, and agricultural byproducts such as wheat and rice straw and rice husk.[60] The studio describe their use of grown materials as a way to shift "from extractive to generative economies," reflecting a broader interest in design and making that can enhance rather than harm the planet.[61]

[Figure 5 here]

In a similar vein, the chair company Full Grown focuses on planting, growing, and harvesting trees around chair-shaped frames in the British woodland. Planted in 2012 and harvested six years later, the *Gatti Chair* (2018) combines minimally planed and sanded surfaces with rough bark sections that leave much of the chair's tree origins intact. With its combination of a slow coming into being, limited scale of production, and visible championing of its rooted origins, the chair seems to counter the predominance of ultra-processed material goods in our material economy. This turn to crops and their byproducts also manifests another of Ingold's phenomenology-inflected anthropological arguments; namely, that we should understand all materials, and forms, as grown.[62]

[Figure 6 here]

These grown projects suggest an atechnological turn in craft, where it is less the maker or machine that is in control, but rather nature itself, and the skills required are as much land stewardship as tool wielding. This shift also advances the growing more-than-human ethos in design and architecture, wherein Ruskin's "social affection" should consider not just relations between humans, but between humans, plants, and other species. This chimes with what Wall

Kimmerer calls the "honorable harvest" and encourages respect, restraint and reciprocity in working with the earth's materials.[63]

Conclusion

This article has explored the possibilities of considering craft and the low tech together, using three interrelated terrains: the technical, the ideological, and the environmental. It has sought to present thinking around craft and the low tech that take us from modern craft to post-craft, and from making to growing. In doing so, it has highlighted themes of control, aesthetics, and the relations and structures of production, while also problematizing craft and the low tech in ways that avoid simplistic binary conceptualizations. Notable are the different ways that craft's relationship with the low tech has manifested with each craft revival: from the Arts and Crafts focus on high quality, medievalist manufacture to the 1960s and 1970s advocacy for ad hoc self-sufficiency, to today's turn to hands-on intimacy with the local places in which materials, making cultures, and communities are embedded.

Contemporary discussions of craft and technology need to extend their gaze beyond the factory and the studio to look to the forest and the field. This article sought to do so, offering a way of thinking about the low tech that will hopefully prove useful in other sectors and contexts, both historical and contemporary, and beyond the limited, Western focus here.

Image captions

1 Max Lamb, *Pewter Stool*, 2006. Cast pewter.

2 Max Lamb and 1882 ltd, two Crockery chairs, 2025. Slipcast earthenware.

3 Gareth Neal, *In Pursuit of Carbon Negative,* 2010. Furniture collection made using fallen ash.

4 Gareth Neal and The New Raw, *Loopy Chair*, 2023. Digitally woven recycled plastic.

5 Assemble, *Earth, Lightly,* 2025. Construction prototype demonstrating different light earth mixtures including rice husk, rice straw, wheat straw, woodchip, sawdust, and clay.

6 Full Grown, *Gatti Chair*, 2018. Willow grown around a custom frame.

Image credits

1 Max Lamb

2 Photography by Tom Hartford. Courtesy Gallery FUMI.

3-4 Courtesy Gareth Neal

5 Courtesy Assemble

6 Courtesy Full Grown

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