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Developing craft practice within and between workshops: an inter-generational comparative study

Note: this is a joint submission.

This paper examines how designer-makers are helping to develop the next generation, through apprenticeships, shorter internships and other forms of engagement. It is based on a collaborative project, involving an established designer-craftsman and an academic researcher and educator with interests in craft businesses, environmentally sustainable innovation and entrepreneurship.

The project comprises an empirical study that compares and contrasts practice and experience in two domains of craft production, ceramics and furniture-making, while also making reference to other areas, such as printing and musical instrument-making. In doing so, we seek to respond to the conference theme of studios and workshops as learning environments and/or modes of learning that encourage independence, personal responsibility and agency. Our study is based on semi-structured interviews with practitioners who span several generations across each domain. These include: Alan Caiger-Smith, who co-founded The Aldermaston Pottery in 1955, and the furniture-maker Philip Koomen, who set up his first workshop in 1975, along with apprentices and interns who have gone on to establish their own businesses, and representatives of organisations who have facilitated these exchanges. The interview evidence is supplemented and contextualised using related documentary and historical sources. We consider the antecedents of English craft furniture-making, tracing the inter-generational influence of Edward Barnsley's Froxfield workshops through the accounts of leading makers such as Alan Peters and Roger Holmes, and relating them to the experiences of our interviewees. Taking a similar genealogical approach, we draw parallels with contemporary developments in studio ceramics, including the role played by Bernard Leach, Hamada Shoji and the designer-makers that they inspired. The argument is framed by a literature review that addresses the nature of workmanship, learning and innovation in craft-based organisations.

The project explores an observed pattern of informal apprenticeships and subsequent start-ups, and considers the factors that have encouraged the proliferation of 'next generation' craft enterprises. In addition to contributing to our understanding of this phenomenon, we draw out the implications for policy and practice. The broader aim is to consider how these models might be promoted and/or adapted in order to support emerging visions of the innovative designer-maker enterprise in a 'post growth' society (e.g. by examining how sustainable forestry principles have been incorporated into furniture-making practice). By comparing practice in different sectors, we hope to address potential constraints and limitations as well as providing insights that may be applicable to related fields, such as values-based social enterprises.