

# ***Professor Seaton Baxtor and Fergus Walker***

---

## ***Long Memories and Forgotten Designers: The Contribution of Craft Tradition to Design for Sustainability***

This paper questions whether the practice of traditional craftspeople, specifically boat builders, can help to inform the growing global initiative for design for ecological sustainability.

It is now widely acknowledged that our current capitalist economic system, whose dominant aim seems to be to increase the production and consumption of material goods is almost inescapably devouring the very foundations on which it is built. Such economic growth depends on increasing the exploitation of workers, and the depletion of natural resources and ecosystems in the service of an affluent global minority. Designers have an important share of responsibility for our predicament. As facilitators of product sales, designers perpetuate the consumer's desire for 'more'. Driven by the bottom line approach of corporate clients, employers and shareholders, there is a disproportionate emphasis on aesthetics with only a slowly increasing regard for real need, ethics, and environmental impact. A shift in philosophy within design is urgently required.

Traditional wooden boats are examples of designs which have evolved over centuries to become an integral part of specific cultures, localities and ways of life. Their origins in village communities, and their development over time by generations of craftspeople, can be characterised as 'slow knowledge', an essential component of David Orr's definition of ecological design. A step towards putting ecological design into practice is now manifest in the Slow Movement and the development of the idea of Slow Design.

This paper uses original data from a series of semi structured deep interviews with boat-builders in Britain and Scandinavia and with a sample of Inuit whaling people from Alaska. Some of the interviews were conducted whilst sailing from Dublin to Denmark on the longest replica Viking ship built to date – The Sea Stallion (F.W.). The interviews discuss the craftsperson's relationship to their work, the idea of inherited knowledge and tradition and their 'slow' philosophy. It explores the dialogue which takes place between craftsperson and client (or user) and the place of new technologies and ideas as they might be culturally limited by place or discouraged by tradition. It also considers whether the process of becoming more skilful through repetition and practice, is a key component of the motivation of the craftsperson.

From the perspective of 'slow knowledge' and its essential connection to community and place, and a way of work that requires a considerable investment of time and effort, this paper will speculate on the potential contribution of the skills and practice of the traditional crafts person to the design process and design thinking. It will consider whether the cultural limitations imposed by tradition inform the movement towards establishing a design methodology with self imposed ecological limitations. Visual and audio material will form an important part of the presentation.