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Proposal for final year dissertation question

Three key words:

Craft - Nature - Reform

To formulate a proposal for the final year dissertation question, I aim to explore three key themes of *craft*, *nature*, and *reform* within the context of surface pattern and textiles design. These words have repeatedly identified as areas of interest within my own reading and creative practice and are central to contemporary discourse on sustainability and design education. In addition, I will employ the works of key theorists, possibly in unrelated fields, who have impressed upon me their ideas and principles.

Craft

Craft as a noun is 'skill, cunning, deceit, art, trade' (Sykes, 1982, p.221). It appears that craft is not recognised as a noble act, but sly and underhand perhaps? Activists such as Sarah Corbett assert that 'craftivism' reflects and reinforces this notion of craft as a skill used to deceive others (Corbett, 2017, p.12), albeit from a non-confrontation aspect. They continue to make their voices heard through the subtlety of 'gentle protest' using handcrafted textiles placed in public locations (Corbett, 2017).

Other related words of interest and with potential to research include 'hand-made', 'make', 'making', 'tools', 'handicraft', 'craftsperson', 'artisan'...

However, we do find *craft* as a verb is 'to make in a skilful manner' originated from the Old English *craft* to mean 'strength' in Old High German *kraft* and Old Norse *kraptr*. *Skill* is a noun meaning 'expertness, practiced ability' and a verb derived from Middle English to mean 'make a difference' (Sykes, 1982, p.221, p.991). The Latin form of *homo faber* may be translated as 'man the fabricator' (Arendt, 1998, p.22) or 'man the maker'.

In *The art of the maker* (1994) Peter Dormer implies that craft knowledge is a technical skill which can be learned by following a set of rules and forming habits...a skill which can be learned, may not be innate, and which can be improved with experience, practice, and repetition. This point is reinforced by Richard Sennet in his seminal work *The Craftsman* (2008). He confirms that 'skill is a trained practice' (p.37). He goes on to signify that 'Craftsmen take pride most in skills that mature...evolve' (p.295).

Kolb's theory of experiential learning (McLeod, S. 2017) may be applied and considered by these hypotheses that skill can be learned. We may also consider the concept of tacit knowledge as discussed by Dormer in *The culture of craft*. 'Craft relies on tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is acquired through experience, and it is the knowledge which enables you to do things' (1997 p.147). Michael Polanyi's work on *The tacit dimension* (2009) will also be essential reading to support the concept and elaborate on the subject of tacit knowledge.

This raises the epistemological question of 'how do we know what we know?' Plato believed that we must struggle with our thoughts and think deeply to work hard at truly understanding them (Johnston, 2006, p.19). Again, to struggle, perhaps to analyse, ruminate and conclude? Maturana and Varela discuss the cognitive processes of thought in great depth in *The tree of knowledge* (1998). Matthew Crawford draws upon many theorists regarding the psychology behind the argument *The case for working with one's hands* (2011). Sartre's 'existentialism' theory might be applied to 'thinking as doing' (Crawford, 2011, p.164).

Since Walter Gropius introduced the Bauhaus Manifesto in the early 20th century, craft education has seen a decline and Crawford stresses the need to re-establish practical skills education since the gradual decrease in teaching of this subject areas in the early 1990's in favour for computer literacy. He has noted that many university graduates have returned to education to learn a 'useful trade' skill (Crawford, 2011, p.12). He also recognises the relation between the development of technology and craft practices and what is learned from each.

Whilst Crawford maintains that individuals enjoy leisure pursuits until they transition into a career, they are however unable to master their craft unless it remains a leisure activity. And Plato's theory that wisdom is to be earned through long and thorough education, for which leisure time is essential: to have time to think and contemplate (Johnston, 2006, p.20). In contemporary society, how can we make this possible for those who must earn a living and wish to maintain a level of autonomy? The question of 'work/life' balance, happiness, wellbeing and Csikszentmihalyi's concept of 'flow' could be considered as a working sub question.

If we study Malcolm McCullough's *Abstracting craft* (1998), he suggests that 'people cannot endure as "consumers" but must actively practice at something' (preface ix). He extolls the virtues of a new era of digitally skilled craftspeople. Again, this raises another question of whether digital skill is recognised as a craft? McCulloch's work discusses this to great extent, however, since his writings were from 1998, we may need extract more recent data regarding digital skills, education, and current employment ratios.

Figure 1. An example of a digitally designed and 3D created fashion garment by designer Iris van Herpen in collaboration with conceptual architectural designer

Daniel Widrig. The piece is fabricated from fine layers of polyamide forms; however, this example demonstrates the capabilities of both technology and digital design skills and illustrates the potential of cross-disciplinary collaborations, which could be appropriated for use in medicine and food manufacture (Braddock and Harris, 2012, p. 198-9).



Fig. 1: Iris van Herpen (2011) '*Crystallization*' Spring/Summer 2011

We may also consider motivation and the Aristotelian understanding of 'happiness' when discussing human purpose *telos* (Greek), the purpose of the *homo faber* or 'craftsperson' and how he/she/they engage with their 'work'. Again, Crawford discusses this in depth. The psychological impact of creating with one's hands, the desire to do something well. We may observe the fragility of the ego and delve into

the psychoanalytical realms of Freud and Lacan by analysis of pride, narcissism, failure, rejection, recognition, self-reliance versus dependence. However, despite these psychological phenomena, engaging with craft does evoke a state of 'flow' and may reinforce our own happiness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). To further understand these perspectives, the works I have previously referenced will be fully focussed upon in research.

We may raise the question of happiness and what is the motivation of the craftsperson, of the artisan? From a totally separate perspective, one might consider a sub question of what are the differences between craft, design, and art?

Craft is not simply 'the production of durable objects' (Arendt, 1998). Arendt, however, is perceived to be highly critical of the role of the *homo faber*. She states 'homo faber, the creator of the human artifice, has always been a destroyer of nature'. (Arendt, 1998, p.139).

As a counterargument, during the early 20th century we recognise Art Nouveau practitioners emphasising the aesthetic of being 'true to the materials', the properties of which would dictate their usage (Sachs, 2007, p.100). Here we see an argument of *homo faber's* sympathetic treatment of his materials, who's natural 'laws' indicated how they might be used.

Nature

This moves us on to *nature*. The etymological root of this word derives from the French *nature*, Latin *natura* and Latin for the word born *natus* (Skeat, 1993, p.302). *Nurture*, 'environmental influences on the development of an organism', *teleology*, 'nature is determined by an end or purpose' (Kahn, 1989, p.341). Also derived from

phusis (Greek), meaning *nature*, but as ‘a process of growth’ (Johnston, 2006, p.29). Therefore, directly translated, the Aristotelian study of Physics also means *nature*. Aristotle considered *nature* as an artist, struggling to realise an idea – experimenting with different *organon* to maintain its survival (Johnston, 2006). This metaphor may be deciphered as the purpose, or *telos* of all species...to adapt, to stay alive. Here we might consider Darwin’s theory of natural selection. An example of adaption is provided by both Lovelock and Papanek is the case of the Peppered moth, which adapted to its sooty environment by changing colour and is now transforming back to its original state due to the Clean Air Act in the UK.

We might then assume that each species holds within it a self-regulating system, which adapts when confronted with change or a stressor. The subject of cybernetics, deriving from the Greek word for ‘steersman’ *kubernetes* (Lovelock, 2000, p.44), is the study of these automatic control systems within living organisms, which have the capacity to develop through a process of trial and error. We may assimilate this to our own development of knowledge and skill as seen in Crawford’s work, or Kolb’s model of experiential learning (McLeod, S. 2017).

In addition to the above mentioned, other key thinkers and designers relating to this area of knowledge in the context of surface pattern and textile design include:

William Morris and his vision of useful/beautiful, the protector of natural and man-made environments and of functionality, initiator of the Arts and Crafts movement (Parry, 1996), Antoni Gaudi, Spanish architect and designer of the Familiar Sagrada Cathedral, Barcelona, member of the Catalan Modernisme movement who aimed to bring us closer to nature through the incorporation of natural elements in his architectural design (Cusso Angles, 2010), the Mingei folk craft movement during

1920's Japan, which took inspiration from the European movements of Arts and Crafts and Art Nouveau. Viollet le Duc (Gothic Revivalist), Walter Benjamin, Veblen, and Ruskin, who called for a return to craftsmanship inspired by the Guilds of the Middle Ages; biologist Ernst Haeckel and botanist Karl Blossfeldt who both crossed disciplinary boundaries as scientists with a creative output.



Fig. 2: William Morris (1883) *'Strawberry thief' printed cotton*

Despite the romanticism and idealism of the Arts and Crafts movement and unfortunate demise due to unrealistic expectations that the work produced could be afforded by the working man, this movement left a legacy which has remained with us. William Morris' designs continue to be produced as textiles and wallpapers today: His principle aim to reject industrialised processes and produce hand-crafted, functional, useful, and aesthetically beautiful artefacts to adorn the home and within

the common man's financial reach has influenced contemporary designers such as Sir Terence Conran (National Portrait Gallery, 2014). Fig.2. *The Strawberry thief*, one of Morris' most popular designs is currently produced in a range of colours and onto a full range of media including papers, textiles, and artefacts.

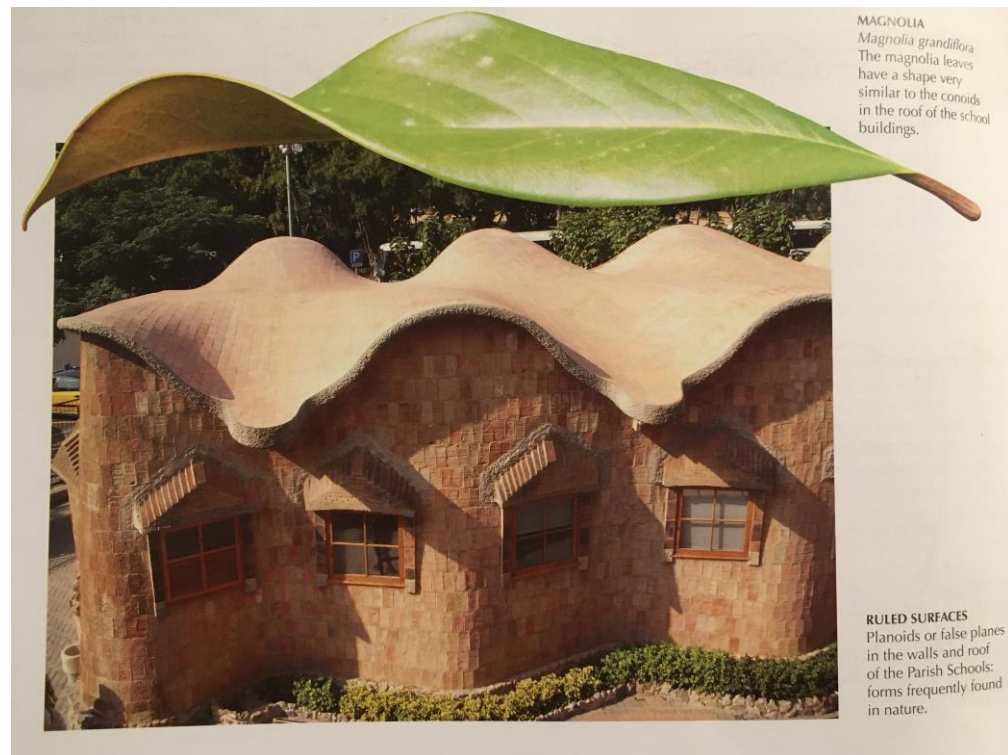


Fig. 3: Jordi Cusó i Angles (2010) *'The parish schools of Sagrada Família and the magnolia leaf'*

The focus of study of this area is on how artists and designers take influence from the natural world, by allowing nature to express itself, by becoming the accomplice of *natura naturans* 'nature doing what nature does', rather than a recorder of *natura naturata* 'nature already created' (Sachs, 2007, p.98). Displayed in Figure 3. is an example of Antoni Gaudí's organic architecture, by studying and replicating the geometry of organisms. Additionally, consider how humans, living in a constant state

of ecological flux and instability due to our own intervention, draw knowledge from nature in order to return to a global equilibrium (Lovelock, 2000).

Reform

This brings us to *reform*, which came into English in the 14th century as a verb derived from the old French *reformer* and Latin *reformer* 'to form again'. Early examples include 'to make into a new form', which was bound up in the idea of restoration to a previous and better condition (Williams, 1976, p.262-3).

Other related words of interest and with potential to research include 'revival', 'renaissance', 'revolutionise', 'refashion', 'rebuild', 'remodel' (Kirkpatrick, 1998, p.680).

Key thinkers relating to this area of knowledge include Richard Buckminster Fuller, architect, innovator, James Lovelock, Alastair Fuad-Luke, *Design Activism* (2009), Nicolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design* (1960), Tony Fry's *Design Futuring*, initiates giving the self and the planet a future (2008). Olafur Eliasson, contemporary artist raising global warming awareness through his installation work. Treggiden, Papanek, Chapman, Fletcher, Tham, Puig de la Casa all have written important works on global change, attitudes to design, sustainability. John Thakara implores designers to rise to the challenge of redesign, reformation, transformation, and design better. Again, I mention Antoni Gaudi, as a design innovator who followed his own style and who repurposed and recycled waste ceramics for his architectural work (Cusso Angles, 2010).



Fig. 4. Uyen Tran. (2020) *Tomtex leather alternative*

Figure 4 shows a leather alternative created by Vietnamese designer Uyen Tran made from seafood shells mixed with coffee grounds to create a flexible and biodegradable material. The primary focus of this research is on creating a new tradition by changing our mindset, design methodologies paired with digital and biomaterial innovation.

Socrates believed ‘the unexamined life is not worth living’ (Johnston, 2006, p. 204). Therefore, if philosophy relates to the dissatisfaction of old ideas and an urgency to find new ways of problem solving, then could designers with a propensity for new ideas, innovation, and new ways of working also be philosophers?

The Anthropocene has rendered ‘Mother Earth’ or *Gaia* (Greek) vulnerable and in a state of dangerous flux. Lovelock discusses the demise of our planet in detail with concerning potential consequences of extinction (Lovelock, 2000), despite indication that humans are an adaptable species but not infallible, as Covid has proved (WHO, 2021).

In Hannah Arendt's *The human condition*, she infers that the main threat to civilisation is economic modernisation (the dangers of action), forcing mass migration into towns and cities and ultimately a life of production, consumption, and subjugation (Arendt, 1998, Introduction. xiv). Burke and Ornstein, in *The axe maker's gift*, make a similar claim throughout and both raise awareness of the 'thoughtlessness' of humanity (Arendt, 1998, Introduction. xv). I will refer to the writings of Jonathan Chapman, Freud 'ego' and Lacan 'the mirror stage', to discuss the human desire to consume and Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Victor Papanek discusses human ecology and social change in *Design for the real world* and *The Green Imperative*, which capture significant aspects of the idea of *reform*, with key points regarding education, learning from nature, the responsibility of the designer and new design innovation and will be utilised for my research.

We are now in the midst of the Anthropocene. The world is moving faster than the current design paradigm and we need to ensure that design practitioners adapt to the needs of society.

As a creative practitioner my main consideration will be of materials and sustainability. Organic, non-toxic, non-polluting, and the implementation of manufacturing processes which do not impact the environment. There are a growing number of design contemporaries already working with this ethos, such as the screen print textile designer Tamasyn Gambell, who specialises in re-purposed materials.

Therefore, considering the global concern for a sustainable future, with reference to key thinkers, theorists, and design practitioners from within my field of study and

practice, I propose a range of working questions to act as a starting point, which encompass the three key words interpreted herein.

What are the ways in which traditional craft skills inform contemporary surface pattern design and design education? How are textile artists and designers influenced by, and learn from, the natural world? Could there be a reform of textile design methodologies focussing on sustainability to limit the negative impact on the homeostasis of our planet?

There are numerous sub questions raised from this investigation, including: Can we change our mindset and create a new tradition in design thinking? What is the motivation of the craftsperson? What are the differences between craft, design, and art? What is the aim of mankind?

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