PROPERTY • INTERIORS • ARCHITECTURE • GARDENS

House & Home



Part of the furniture
Modernist designer Zeev Aram
At home **Page 2**



Push the boundaries
New York's Upper East Side is expanding
US property **Page 8**

Hold the fort
Fancy being king of your castle?
Hot property **Page 9**



How craft has remade itself

Interiors New techniques have revolutionised production processes – but the principles are the same, writes *Griselda Murray Brown*

A decade ago, it would have been considered eccentric for brands such as Levi's or Louis Vuitton to align themselves with the world of craft – then a byword for provincial pottery and lumpy woollens. However, a wider cultural shift towards an appreciation of provenance – where our food, clothing and belongings come from – has changed craft's image. Nowadays, we lust after "artisan-roasted" coffee and handmade presents from the online marketplace Etsy.

Craft was given intellectual heft by books such as Richard Sennett's *The Craftsman* and Matthew Crawford's *The Case for Working with Your Hands: or Why Office Work Is Bad for Us and Fixing Things Feels Good*. The Victoria and Albert Museum's 2011 exhibition *The Power of Making*, which attracted 2,765 visitors a day (more than the National Portrait Gallery's Lucian Freud retrospective), was a clear signal that craft was no longer a niche interest.

Yet despite our taste for all things "bespoke", British craftsmanship is under threat. When Ravensbourne College, a design school, moved its campus to Greenwich, southeast London, in 2010, it closed its workshops, in effect becoming a digital design college. This year, Buckinghamshire New University announced that its well-regarded furniture BA programme will cease this summer due to high running costs and declining applications.

David Dewing, director of London's Geffrye Museum and a former furniture designer who trained at Ravensbourne, fears for the future of British design. "You're looking to an education that is more computer-based and less about learning by doing," he says. "There is a worry that if you disconnect the design process from the making process too far, you end up with less good stuff."

Since the industrial revolution, designing and making have largely been separate jobs – no factory worker ever sits down at the drawing board. Yet the experts say you cannot design well if you don't know how things are put together. When Sebastian Wrong taught design products at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in London, he took his students to the foundry in the sculpture department to get some hands-on experience. "Some of them had never made anything," he says. "They really just had a desk to work on. But to make a mess and come out the other side with something interesting – that is very worthwhile."



Wrong, who trained as a sculptor, admits that he does not spend as much time in the workshop as he would like. "It's something I will absolutely go back to when I can afford the time because I find it very fulfilling; it's good for my soul."

Architects, too, complain of the increasingly desk-bound nature of their work – a frustration that formed the starting point for *Space Craft*, an absorbing exhibition of objects made by architects at Platform in Habitat on London's King's Road that ends this weekend. Grant Gibson, editor of Crafts Magazine, who curated the show, stresses the importance for these architects of "thinking with your hands". Young design practice FleaFollyArchitects has created "Grimm City", an intricate handmade model of a fantastical metropolis inspired by the Grimm brothers' fairy tales. "It's the most immense, detailed and beautiful model I've seen in years," says Gibson.



▲ Anton Alvarez's thread-wrapping machine uses glue-coated thread to bind furniture parts together without screws or nails — Márta Thisner



◄Textiled glass decanter, £120, and glasses, £50 each, by Silo Studio, geffrye-museum.org.uk

◄ (far left) Simon Hasan's 'boiled leather' mannequin for Fendi

'Everyone who says 3D printing is just pressing a button doesn't really know how it works'

In an age of computer-aided design and shrinking workshop facilities, it is even more important for young designers to know about making. Production models have changed since the economic slowdown: graduates no longer expect to have their designs picked up by a manufacturer. Rather, if they want to realise their ideas, they must do the manufacturing themselves – hence the job description "designer-maker".

For those interested in process and materials, making is not necessarily a chore. Designer Simon Hasan uses a medieval armour-making technique called *cuir bouilli* (or boiled leather) that he discovered while studying at the RCA. "Whatever I turn to, I tend to go quite deep into it, whether it's ropemaking or leatherwork or veneering," he says. "It's about scraping away the layers of dust obscuring something from view." Stockists of

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▲ Red Tip Ton chair by Barber Osgerby, £208, heals.co.uk



► Anton Alvarez's thread-wrapped chair, price on request, antonalvarez.com



◄ 'Vase Family: third generation', by Simon Hasan, price on request, simonhasan.com



► Plumen 002 by Hulger, £19.95, geffrye-museum.org.uk



▲ Sheet chair in steel and leather, price on request, simonhasan.com



▲ Credenza by JiB design studio, price on request, jibds.com



▲ Ercol chair with upholstery and cushions, £450, tamasyngambell.com

his striking chairs, lampshades and leather-wrapped glassware include Mint and SCP in London and the Future Perfect in New York.

Another former RCA student, textile designer Tamasyn Gambell, worked for Paris couture houses, including Louis Vuitton and Sonia Rykiel, before moving to Stockholm to design for H&M. She realised, however, that "having to whack out 100 prints a week just wasn't for me". She moved back to the UK six years ago to start her own business selling hand-printed scarves with bold, geometric designs. Gambell and her two assistants do the screen-printing themselves. "I've always wanted to feel the cloth and really be in control of what I do," she says. She now also sells lampshades and cushions, available from her website (tamasyngambell.com) or at Liberty in London and Design Within Reach across the US.

The current Geffrye Museum exhibition *Useful + Beautiful*, which runs until August 25, provides a snapshot of domestic design today. Some of the pieces are mass-produced, such as Ed Carpenter's playful "Pigeon Light", made by Thorsten Van Elten (available at theo-theo.com). Others are more akin to craft: Silo Studio's delicate drinking glasses have a textured surface, achieved by blowing each glass into a fireproof fabric mould. They are made to order and stocked in London at Marsden Woo and Mint.

Silo Studio adapt industrial processes to craft, their philosophy being "handmade – high tech". Many of the designers in the exhibition experiment with new technologies.



▲ 'Slice' chess set by Simon Hasan, price on request, simonhasan.com

Recent RCA graduate Anton Alvarez (antonalvarez.com) invented a spinning wheel-like contraption to make jointless furniture. Operated by two or three people, it binds lengths of wood together using gluey thread.

Today's most ambitious designer makers, like Alvarez, often have to create not only their own products but the machinery to make them. Joris Laarman has created a "spirographic" bench using the MX3D, the first metal 3D printer of its kind, which was designed by his studio. In effect, it enables him to "draw" stainless steel rods in the air: the results are on show at New York's Friedman Benda gallery in an exhibition called *Bits and Crafts* (until June 14). As that title suggests, digital fabrication is closer to craft than one might assume. Digital printing is unlikely to reach mainstream domestic design soon: it is better suited to prototypes and custom pieces than mass production. Much like craft objects, it requires time and skill.



▲ 'Dandelight', incorporating dandelion seeds, €85, studiodrift.com

"Everyone who says 3D printing is just pressing a button doesn't really know how it works," says Laarman. "It's very hands-on and very elaborate." Digital fabrication is not about replacing people with machines, but about introducing flexibility into manufacturing: products can be customised and "printed" locally, avoiding shipping. Indeed, there is nothing in the definition of craft that is anti-progress; it is "an occupation or trade requiring manual dexterity or skilled artistry". Though its appearance is changing, the principles of craft remain as important as ever.

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